

office

When the Children Come Home to Philadelphia

Text by Ayesha Le Breton / Photos courtesy of the Institute of Contemporary Art

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Philadelphia-raised, David Antonio Cruz, returns home for his first institutional solo exhibition. *When the Children Come Home* marks a pivotal milestone spanning two decades of his deeply personal artistic practice, exploring the visibility and intersectionality of queer individuals and communities.

Through December 17, more than 20 paintings and drawings, pieces old and new, comprise the walls of the Institute of Contemporary Art. Among the works expect intimate portraits, each a celebration of the intimate connections that foster shared and individual experiences of queer worldbuilding.

Curated by Monique Long, the show is a reflection of how the city has informed Cruz's visual language and embraces systems of belonging and homecomings. The scope, in part, expands upon a decade-long dialogue and friendship between Long and the artist, who grew up mere blocks from each other in North Philly but only met in New York.

"That conversation evolved into talking about the ways in which we're born and raised, you know, affects the way we make and how we make," shares Long. "When the ICA approached me and invited me to do this project, I did have a lot of ideas, but to work with David Antonio, in our hometown, seemed like the obvious choice, and neither of us had worked in Philadelphia. So it just seemed like a proper homecoming, and in a way to sort of see the ideas manifest in a project together."

Together, Long and Cruz have created an exhibition that speaks to the artist's ongoing commitment to community, home and joy. Monumental portraits for which Cruz is best known, offer an extensive representation of highlights and landmark moments in his career. Signifying an importation transformation in the artist's practice, Puerto Rican Pieta 2006 is concurrently one of the first and last pieces encountered in the exhibition. The painting reinterprets Catholic iconography with tender yet forceful imagery of him and his mother. Intimacy and profound love take shape in details like their intertwined hands over Cruz's heart and the way their clothing blends into each other.

Decadent chandeliers, custom wallpaper and bespoke fabric hold space for the "Project Room." Cruz conceptualized the beginning of the exhibition as a passage to pause and reflect through the layers of his work. There's a sense of performance in the decor, the walls are topographical in their nods to the northern parts of the city, shadows echo throughout, and interplay with the displayed works. There lies an affectionate oil on canvas of Cruz and his childhood best friend. Conversations unfold between his art and his personal history in Philadelphia.

"I find this moment becomes about celebrating with them as much as it is about my work," shares Cruz.

Queer peers are depicted alongside their chosen families. Cruz paints an extension of their worlds, nesting his subjects in furniture created to hold and support. In thinking about the support systems that hold him up, the artist sought to create art as a historical marker. He documents community making visible queer worldbuilding and people of color in art historical canons that historically excluded them.

"It's almost a thank you to the community in a way for that support in that sense of survival."

When The Children Come Home will be on view through December 17, 2023.