ARTIST ELDZIER CORTOR TO RECEIVE ART INSTITUTE’S LEGENDS AND LEGACY AWARD

Special Exhibition Will Highlight the Painter and Printmaker Who Grew Up in Chicago and Created Memorable Images of the Lives of African Americans

CHICAGO – Eldzier Cortor, the painter and printmaker whose iconic images of African American life have made him one of the country’s most revered artists, will be honored by the Art Institute of Chicago in February when he receives the museum’s Legends and Legacy Award and his work is showcased in the special exhibition Eldzier Cortor Coming Home: Recent Gifts to the Art Institute.

On Feb. 20, 2015, the museum’s Leadership Advisory Committee (LAC) will salute the 99-year-old Cortor with its Legends and Legacy Award, which celebrates living African American artists who, through their lifelong accomplishments and exceptional career in the visual arts, have influenced the next generation of artists. Previous honorees include Elizabeth Catlett, Margaret Burroughs, and Ed Clark. The award ceremony, with Cortor and his family in attendance, will take place from 6 to 9 p.m. in the Art Institute’s Fullerton Hall and is open to the public. Attendees also will have the opportunity to preview the exhibition of Cortor’s recent gifts, which opens to the public on Feb. 21 and continues through May 31, 2015. To purchase tickets to the award event, visit http://artic.edu/legends.
Leadership Advisory Committee Co-Chairman Todd C. Brown said, “The Leadership Advisory Committee is thrilled to honor this favorite son of Chicago for his seven-decade career depicting the lives of African Americans and for his contribution to founding the South Side Community Arts Center. His enduring images, especially his beautiful and iconic black women, inspire us today and will continue to do so for generations to come.”

Cortor was born in Virginia in 1916, but his family moved to Chicago the following year, joining the Great Migration of African Americans from the South who were seeking greater economic opportunities in Northern cities. Growing up on the city’s South Side, he was interested in art from an early age. The Chicago Defender comic strip “Bungleton Green,” which featured another transplant from the South, was a favorite, and the young Cortor would copy the strips in near identical detail.

With dreams of becoming a cartoonist, Cortor took evening classes at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago before enrolling full time in 1937. Kathleen Blakshear, an instructor at the SAIC, introduced him to the sculptures in the African Collection at Chicago’s Field Museum, whose cylindrical bodies would inspire the elongated style of his figural works. Another influential teacher was painter and photographer Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, with whom Cortor studied at the Institute of Design, now the Illinois Institute of Technology.

Cortor became a professional artist when he received an appointment to the Works Project Administration’s Federal Art Project, where he became an easel painter. Through the WPA, he received artist supplies and wages that enabled him to paint in his own studio. The experience also gave him the opportunity to meet many other WPA artists, including the older Archibald Motley, who encouraged Cortor in his work.

During his time working with the Federal Art Project from 1938 to 1943, Cortor focused on depicting African American social life on Chicago’s South Side, particularly in the Bronzeville area. In 1941, he became one of the co-founders of the South Side Community Arts Center, the first
African American art museum in the world. The SSCAC was home to a stellar group of artists, including Motley, Gordon Parks, Margaret Burroughs, Charles White, and Elizabeth Catlett, as well as poet Gwendolyn Brooks. It is still in operation today.

Later, funded by two Rosenwald Grants, Cortor lived and painted among the Gullah people – formerly enslaved Africans – on the Sea Islands off South Carolina and Georgia. He was fascinated by the Gullah’s deep cultural connection to their African roots, which fostered his decision to depict Woman as the archetypal image of all people. Eventually, this focus evolved to combine Woman and Dance in idealized, sculptural forms.

By 1946, Cortor had moved to New York and was studying printmaking at Columbia University. He received national recognition that year when one of his female figures was published in Life magazine. A Guggenheim fellowship followed, enabling him to travel to Cuba, Jamaica, and Haiti in 1949.

Cortor settled in New York and has remained active as an artist for more than 50 years. He continues to remember his roots in Chicago, however. In 2012, he made an extraordinary gift to the Art Institute: one painting, 30 prints, and several printing matrices – the physical surfaces that transfer ink to paper. A selection of these items – many on display for the first time – will be included in the Art Institute’s upcoming exhibition.

As a printmaker, Cortor primarily worked with intaglio printmaking processes, but he produced several woodblock prints in the mid-1950s with Japanese printmaker Jun’ichiro Sekino, a leading member of the Sosaku Hanga, or Creative Prints, movement. Five works from this period will be on display, demonstrating the highly original hybrid of Western and Japanese techniques that resulted from Cortor and Sekino’s collaboration.

“It’s exciting to be able to show the full breadth of Cortor’s work in printmaking,” said Mark Pascale, Janet and Craig Duchossois Curator of Prints and Drawings at the Art Institute. “Cortor is a dedicated draftsman. He started making prints as a way of having more than one original but soon became hooked by the unlimited possibilities of change offered by intaglio methods, and printmaking became a major vehicle for his expression. The exhibition features examples from his very early experiments with woodblock printing in the 1950s, all the way until he stopped making prints in the 1990s.”
Also on view are some of Cortor’s experimental prints made in Manhattan at Robert Blackburn’s Printmaking Workshop, where he worked between 1955 and 1998. Some of these bear the title *Abattoir*, which means “slaughterhouse.” Although Cortor was familiar with Chicago’s notorious meatpacking industry, his works allude to the harsh environment he found during his time in Haiti after several friends were killed by François “Papa Doc” Duvalier’s dictatorial regime.

Douglas Druick, president and Eloise W. Martin director of the Art Institute, said: “Bringing together examples of Cortor’s work throughout his remarkable career, this exhibition celebrates not only the artist’s tireless innovation but also his tremendous generosity in sharing his work with the museum and its visitors.”

To watch a video about Eldzier Cortor’s life and work, please visit [http://youtu.be/swgRExLcT5E](http://youtu.be/swgRExLcT5E).

Images:
Eldzier Cortor portrait by Hudson Lines.


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