



Veronica De Jesus MATRIX 268 OCTOBER 25–FEBRUARY 26, 2017
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

MATRIX 268 features 239 drawings by the Los Angeles–based artist Veronica De Jesus (b. 1970), who from 2004 until 2016 made portraits of artists, writers, and diverse cultural figures to mark their passing. The first subjects of her *Memorial Drawings* were the beloved chef Julia Child and the Nobel Prize–winning Polish poet Czesław Miłosz, whose deaths (both in 2004) moved De Jesus greatly. De Jesus grew familiar with both through working at Dog Eared Books in the Mission District of San Francisco; she recalls that people frequently came in inquiring about Child’s cookbooks, and Miłosz’s work was recommended by a colleague at the store. In this sense, the people that De Jesus portrays are not only individuals whose lives have touched her; they are also extensions of people she has come to know through her community and friends, and of conversations she has had with those around her about loss and mourning. De Jesus has stated that part of her motivation for the *Memorial Drawings* relates to her abiding interest in creating “a place where people can have conversations,” through which remembrance and recognition can build.[1]

Eventually De Jesus expanded the project to include a wide range of people, many of whom she knew personally, such as Irene Pijoan, an influential artist friend of hers when she studied at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI). Over the years, the list of personalities she has honored with her tender, diminutive portraits grew to include celebrities such as Michael Jackson, Roger Ebert, and Václav Havel as well as lesser-known members of various local communities, such as Luce Depestre, who created literacy programs in Haiti; Mission District community organizer Eric Quezada; and Campbell Soup factory employee Robert Thiereff. When one looks at the series in its entirety, the types of people De Jesus was drawn to commemorate begin to crystallize into categories, some of which are more distinct than others: literary figures; artists; musicians and composers; community members, leaders, and activists; and celebrities and cultural icons. Collectively, the range of people she has gathered into one distinct body of work levels social hierarchies and speaks to the fact that every life is equally valuable and worthy of reflection and tribute.

Each portrait contains identifying markers that characterize and humanize the person depicted, revealing De Jesus’s thoughtful approach. The earlier drawings are predominately rendered in a simple, black-and-white ink palette, often with descriptive text. For instance, in the drawing of Oscar Grant, who was fatally shot in 2009 by a BART police officer in Oakland, De Jesus adds touching descriptive details about him: “A son, a friend, a community member of Oakland, CA . . . a father to his daughter Tatiana . . . Oscar worked as a butcher at Joe’s Market Place in Oakland’s Dimond District.” Added details like these help to convey multidimensional aspects of an individual’s life. In her drawing of Grant, De Jesus shows him lifting up his young daughter—a moving reminder of another life that was drastically affected by his tragic killing.

Over the twelve years that De Jesus worked on the *Memorial Drawings* project, her style has varied and evolved. At a certain point, around 2008, her application of color became more frequent, and the complexity of her compositions increased with the addition of layering and meticulous details. For instance, De Jesus recalls that in thinking about how to portray George Kuchar, the legendary filmmaker who taught at SFAI from 1971 until his death in 2011, it became important to her to allude to “his many different worlds.”[2] These various views into his life are collaged together

in a colorful drawing that shows Kuchar, his actors, and scenes from his films all densely superimposed and bursting forth from a monitor, while lettering scrawled across the surface calls out the titles of some of his works. While a majority of De Jesus’s drawings are precise and tightly controlled, some are more loose and expressive, made with washes and watercolor, such as her drawing of leftist writer and activist John Ross, who lived in Mexico and died in 2011. De Jesus shows Ross in a close-up, three-quarters view adorned with his signature black beret and diamond-patterned scarf, exuding a wry, knowing look.

De Jesus’s process is highly intuitive, and her research on people often guides how she visually describes her subjects. After deciding to make a drawing of someone, she reads their obituary and other articles she is able to locate and, in some cases, studies their work. She then looks for images of the person online and in newspapers or other media outlets. On rare occasions, she will come across pictures to use in unexpected places, such as on a friend’s refrigerator. These found images and the information she gleans inform her compositions.

Xerox copies of the portraits have accumulated over the years in the window of Dog Eared Books on Valencia Street, where the window serves as a kind of community board for loss and remembrance. Indeed, community is at the heart of much of De Jesus’s practice. For most of her adult life De Jesus has taught art at various organizations for people with disabilities. In 1998, she was inspired to learn braille at the LightHouse for the Blind in San Francisco, which led to her teaching drawing there for those who are visually impaired. She also worked at the National Institute for Adults with Disabilities (NIAD) in Richmond, where she again taught painting and drawing. In 2011, De Jesus moved to Los Angeles, and since living there she has taught and developed the art program at United Cerebral Palsy of Los Angeles, Ventura and Santa Barbara Counties (UCPLA).

With all of her interest in the many communities that surround her and form the larger social body, an overriding sense of empathy and generosity distinguishes De Jesus’s artistic practice. De Jesus has cumulatively produced a perceptive and endearing body of work that encourages each of us to reflect on those many individuals whose work and lives have affected us, and who have passed through our own local communities and greater cultural spheres. In essence, the *Memorial Drawings* exemplify a humanist project, not unlike the great contributions of the many activists, artists, musicians, writers, icons, and citizens De Jesus canonizes. Over the course of the many years she has devoted to making this poignant series and the hundreds of drawings it comprises, De Jesus has revealed herself to be “a champion of humanity and dignity,” just as she inscribed onto her portrait of the renowned intellectual Edward Said.

Apsara DiQuinzio
CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR

FOOTNOTES
1 Conversation with the author, September 7, 2017.
2 Ibid.



Biography

Born in Cleveland, Ohio, in 1970, Veronica De Jesus received her BFA from the San Francisco Art Institute in 1998 and her MFA from the University of California, Berkeley in 2003. De Jesus's work has been featured in one- and two-person exhibitions at 836M, San Francisco; Last Projects, Los Angeles; 2nd Floor Project Space, San Francisco; Royal Nonesuch, Oakland; Michael Rosenthal, San Francisco; and Eleanor Harwood Gallery, San Francisco. A forthcoming solo exhibition will be held at Anglim Gilbert Gallery, San Francisco. De Jesus has also been included in group shows at the Contemporary Jewish Museum, San Francisco, and Samson Projects, Boston. She was a Headlands Center for the Arts Fellow and a recipient of the Eisner Award at UC Berkeley. The *Memorial Drawings* have been featured in an artist book produced by Alone Publications in 2011, and *People Are a Light to Love, Memorial Drawings*, 2004–2016 was published in 2017 by Rite Editions.

VERONICA DE JESUS / MATRIX 268 IS ORGANIZED BY APSARA DIQUINZIO, CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR, WITH MATTHEW COLEMAN, CURATORIAL ASSISTANT. THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES.

FRONT
George Kuchar, 2011; mixed media on paper; 10¹/₁₆ × 13³/₁₆ in.

BACK
Michael Jackson, 2009; color pens on paper; 8¹/₂ × 5¹/₂ in.

ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT
Czesław Miłosz, 2004; ink on paper; 8¹/₂ × 5¹/₄ in.

Oscar Grant, 2009; ink on paper; 8¹/₂ × 5¹/₂ in.

Julia Child, 2004; ink on paper; 8¹/₂ × 5¹/₁₆ in.

RIGHT
Luce Depestre, 2011; color pens and colored pencil on paper; 8¹/₂ × 5¹/₂ in.



Works in the Exhibition

Memorial Drawings

2004–16

239 drawings

Various media (ink, graphite, colored pencil, marker, and watercolor on paper)

Various dimensions

Courtesy of the artist