

CURBED

Coco Fusco's Best View of the City Was From a Birthday Boat Ride

MAY 23, 2022

As told to Diana Budds



Photo-Illustration: Curbed; Photo: Geandy Pavón

New York's "21 Questions" is back with an eye on creative New Yorkers. Coco Fusco is an interdisciplinary artist, a writer, and a professor at the Cooper Union. For nearly 30 years, her work has offered sharp commentary on the power dynamics and politics of cultural representation, war, race, and gender, like the 1992 performance *The Couple in the Cage: Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West*, a reenactment of world's-fair ethnographic exhibits that critiques museums, performed in collaboration with Guillermo Gómez-Peña. Her film *Your Eyes Will Be an Empty Word* — an elegiac video in which Fusco rows a boat around Hart Island and throws flowers into Long Island Sound to honor the people buried in the potter's field — is part of the 2022 Whitney Biennial.

Name: Coco Fusco

Age: 61

Neighborhood: Bedford-Stuyvesant

Occupation: Artist

What's hanging above your couch?

It's something I like very much: a poster by Hélio Oiticica that was used to promote a book by a friend of mine, Irene Small.

What's the first job you had in New York?

I was born here and grew up here, so my first job was babysitting. My first desk job was as a fact-checker for *The American Lawyer* magazine, and that was pretty horrific. I lasted less than a year. Steve Brill was the editor, and it was a very toxic, repressive environment. I talked to lawyers all day long and discovered how aggressive and argumentative they can be.

What color are you always drawn to?

Let's put it this way: I'm sensitive to the symbolic resonance of colors. There are colors I like but I wouldn't wear, and there are colors I would work with to generate a particular mood. I'm not going to tell you that I love blue. It's not my thing.

I'm working on a video that's based on a story of someone who was imprisoned as a teenager in Cuba for writing a poem in the 1970s. At the prison, there's a cement factory, and everything in the prison is cement: the walls, the ground, everything. How do you create a world in the video that resembles that sort of starkness and grayness? But gray isn't my favorite color.

What work of art or artifact are you most surprised you own?

Most of what I have on my walls are images that have been gifted to me by other artists. Sometimes it's an exchange because I've written for them (I give them an essay; they give me an artwork). Sometimes they've been given to me for my birthday. That's the majority of what I have. The other things on my walls come from research for my curatorial projects. I imagine most of my research might seem strange or obscure to people who are outside the art world or have little exposure to foreign cultures. I would prefer not to subject my home to an exoticizing interpretive paradigm.

Which New Yorker would you want to hang out with?

My son! He's a teenager, and teenagers in general are not interested in their parents. I get to hang out with him a lot less than when he was younger.

What's the last thing you made with your hands?

The kind of art practice that I have is not something that you do with your hands, unless you consider tapping on a computer. I think the question is modeled on an antiquated notion of art-making as being hands-on. This week, I had a lot of writing to do, I had two editing sessions on a film I'm working on, I have three cats to take care of, I cook, I try to keep my house neat, and that's it.

Is there one thing you own multiple versions of?

I have many, many books. I had to stop buying books. On a couple occasions, I have made the mistake of buying the same book twice because I thought I didn't have it. I don't remember any of the specific books, but I'll discover this mistake when I have to pack and move.

Which New York City museum do you always go back to?

I'm more driven by what the exhibition is than the museum it's in. If the museum has something I want to see, then I'll go. If there isn't anything I want to see, I'm not going to go. I like to see art, and I enjoy it, but it's also something I feel like I need to do because I am an artist. It helps me orient my interests and understand what is happening in art. It also helps me to teach because it gives me a broader frame of reference. I go to the Whitney, MoMA, the Met, the Brooklyn Museum, and sometimes smaller entities like Dia or the Morgan Library, depending on what's on.

What do you always have next to your computer?

A legal pad. I write things down a lot: lists, outlines of essays. I have a stack of legal pads on my desk.

Where is the best view of the city?

My 60th birthday fell during the first months of the pandemic, and nobody wanted to meet up, and they couldn't be in an enclosed space. All my dreams of having had a big celebration were kind of made impossible, so I decided to rent a sailboat to sail around Manhattan. It was a beautiful evening ride with my son and two close friends and their children. Because of the pandemic, there was virtually no commerce on the water, so the sea was completely still and quiet. It was an extraordinary evening. And the view of the city was amazing.

Which building or object do you want to redesign every time you see it?

There are buildings I think are eyesores, or just not where I would want to live, even if I think they're interesting-looking. All the glass buildings along the West Side Highway that are part of the hedge-fund-billionaire expansion of the West Village, Tribeca, and downtown — I would never want to live so exposed or be in a glass house like that. It looks pretty from the outside, but I can't imagine trying to inhabit a space like that.

What's one thing you would change about your field?

The polarization of wealth in the art world. I don't think it's more grotesquely polarized than the rest of the American economy, but the fact that New York has become unbearably expensive and there are oppressively low salaries for entry-level arts professionals makes for a really hostile work environment for young people. It's a major deterrent to diversifying the field. It's economically very undemocratic and unsustainable for people who are not independently wealthy.

If you could live anywhere in New York City, where would it be?

I would've liked to be in Soho or Tribeca in the late '60s and 1970s, when it was all inhabited by artists who were not interested or focused on selling artwork but on making work for each other. It was a really fertile period for the avant-garde.

What would you hoard if it stopped being produced?

Books and films. I survived the pandemic because I could read a lot of books and watch a lot of films.

What do you do to get out of a creative rut?

Sometimes I look at art or I see a play or performance. Sometimes it's exercise, and I'll go to a dance class or the gym. I try to break it up, eat, breathe, sleep well, see other things to get stimulated, and get back to work. Last week, I saw Camille Norment's sound installations at the Dia Art Foundation. I thought they were very elegant and very beautiful.

Where was your first NYC apartment, and how much was the rent?

The first place I lived outside of home was an apartment on Bank Street I shared with somebody who had a rent-controlled lease, so it was really cheap. I think the rent was like \$500 a month, and we split it fifty-fifty. I left it in 1987 and found an apartment in what is now East Williamsburg. It was like \$475, or something like that, a month. I had a lot of space for that much money, and that meant that I didn't have to work full time. I worked three days a week, and the rest of the time I pursued my interests.

Where in the city do you go to be alone?

I have a lot of privacy at home because it's just me and my son. I do spend a lot of time alone, so it's not like I have to struggle to find solitude.

What's the worst piece of career advice you've ever gotten?

It's hard to say what the worst is, but maybe I can say the most inappropriate. I'm the child of immigrants. My mother was widowed when I was a child. She really put a lot of emphasis on stability, respectability, and financial security. She wanted me to be a lawyer or a doctor — one of these very conventional things. And she really didn't support my interest in the arts. She would say that if I stayed in the arts that I was just "gonna end up unemployed, drinking cappuccinos on the Lower East Side." That's a literal phrase she used once that I never forgot. I didn't end up unemployed, and I don't live on the Lower East Side now 'cause it's too expensive!

What have you given away to someone that you wish you could get back?

I've wasted time on people that I shouldn't have.

What's your favorite NYC restaurant and regular order?

I don't eat out very much. I don't make a lot of money, and I don't want to spend it on restaurants unless I absolutely have to.

What descriptive phrase do you want on your obit headline?

I get a lot of questions, when I do public talks, about, "Well, what about the audience and what do you want the audience to think?" and "What do you want people to think of you?" And I'm like, *Look, I'm not an authoritarian ruler. I cannot control what people think about me or what I do. They will do what they will do. They will think what they will think.* After I'm dead, I won't be able to respond. I can say a lot of things and then some New York Times journalist will come and make mincemeat out of it — you know what I mean? So why waste my time?