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Taina Cruz, *Rest*. Cast Bronze. Dimensions variable. Image: Julian Blum

#### Artist Profile: Taína Cruz

by [manuel arturo abreu](#),  
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*The latest [in a series](#) of interviews with artists who make work that responds to network culture and digital technologies.*

**manuel arturo abreu:** In your work, I see the synergy or generative friction between digital media and its aesthetics, and the spiritual or mystical drive often associated with folklore or folk culture. Your gallery Kraupa-Tuskany Zeidler says that you render not real people but “avatars, or proxies”—contemporary versions of mythical figures or positionalities. I first came across your practice on Instagram possibly a decade ago, and thought “this is also someone who grew up in New York, steeped in Caribbean ways of moving.”

Your work *God Save You* (2018) was included in the group show "[a retrospective](#)", which I curated. It is this beautiful, massive unstretched canvas of a campesino scene, what looks like a central square surrounded by indigenous houses. A foreshortened foreground shows an indigenous person, a hound with a hare in its mouth, and a cross that reads “God save you.” I’d say you’ve been dealing with spiritual topics in your work for a while. Could you speak to how you came to this set of topics and how your engagement with it has developed over the years?

**Taína Cruz:** Growing up in Harlem and spending time in the Southern Christian Baptist church with my family on my mom’s side in the South, I felt spirit moving in the city. I also spent a lot of time in the woods in North Carolina, which would feel damp and thick, with red clay forming for centuries. I understood what it meant even when I would actively try to ignore it during rebellious stages. It was something I could sense, even if I didn’t have the words for it. Now spirit has developed in a way that feels inherent to the work I’m excited to create.



Installation view, "re:rospective" at Pfizer Pharmaceutical Factory, Brooklyn, New York 2018. Pictured: Taina Cruz, *God Save You* (2018), acrylic on unstretched canvas with sound.

The painting you mentioned definitely stirred a lot of meaning because it was made when I was studying sculpture; I wasn't making paintings primarily at that time. I paired that painting with an atmospheric recording of wolves howling above it to transport the viewers more fully into the multiple layers I was thinking about. I enjoy working in layers. An awareness that the visible world doesn't have to be the only layer. There's always something underneath and surrounding it pressing in.

I was thinking about atmosphere. The cross that reads "God save you" felt both sincere and ominous. I'm interested in that tension. The figures have somewhat changed in meaning over time, but they sometimes still fit within being sincere, sincere about the spirit. Not ironic. Not detached. There is a real relationship there. I'm interested in the frequency that hums beneath the image, the vibration I feel before I fully understand what I'm looking at.

**maa:** You studied computer science when you were younger, and across the range of mediums you work in, technology is an ongoing theme, location, and resource. How do you explore the use of the internet and digital technology to explore themes of religion, spirituality, mythology, and collective memory? How do you respond to the legacies of your biological and spiritual families, and the aesthetic legacy of the Bronx, as you move through this technoscape?

**TC:** I studied computer science at a time when it was "trendy," or maybe when the money was being pointed towards investing in children from low income backgrounds so teens could have a computer and code. I did a few summer internships, one for inner city kids and another for girls who were otherwise not present in the conversation around technology. So I experienced technology from the side of marginalized groups. I learned about collaboration, abstraction, understanding systems in the computer, and then on the hour long commute back home uptown, it would be extra loud how those systems existed outside the screen too.

When I was younger it felt more open. I was making characters online, finding glitch art communities (DeviantArt, Minecraft, dump.fm); learning from people who were sharing things freely. It felt accessible and experimental. Endless, especially as my time on the screen expanded from sixty-minute sessions at the library to having my own laptop for school and homework in middle school.

Now it feels more controlled, more privatized. You can feel the monopoly of it. It leaves a kind of filmy cast of bleakness, like the magic show is over. And that shift makes me more aware of how my relationship with the computer is changing.

I am thinking about the internet now as something cybernetic, in the sense of feedback loops. Systems responding to systems. We put things into it, and it reshapes how we see. That feels similar to artmaking. When I work I enjoy thinking about the exchange between the body, the image, and the viewer. Something circulates and comes back different. There's something spiritual in that for me, in the way we're constantly dealing with invisible forces, sending and receiving signals inside systems larger than ourselves. And as I'm moving through this technoscape, I'm responding to my biological and spiritual families and to the aesthetic legacy of the Bronx at the same time. It's all inside the loop.



Taina Cruz, *Motor Hound*, 2023. Rotary motor, rubber dog head, tennis ball

**maa:** You will sometimes source an image from the internet and digitally manipulate it before using it as a source image for a work. To me, the distortion of forms here has less to do with, say, disfigured elegance in an Ingres or Cubist frameworks around painting the materiality of time, and more to do with the impact of advanced technology on human consciousness. What does your still and moving image archive look like, and how do you engage it? Could you discuss a bit about your workflow and its significance?

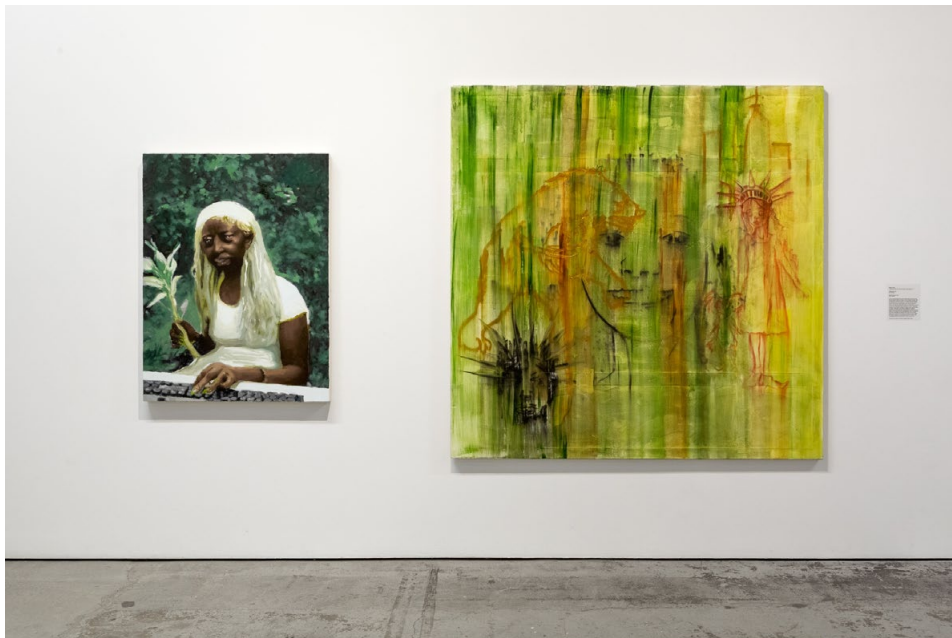
**TC:** I definitely used to be inspired by images I found interesting on blogs like Tumblr, or saved images from when I was a preteen moving through different digital art blogs. I already knew how to digitally manipulate photos in school. My life with the computer started early because I had a desktop at home, and my school gave us laptops for homework. Along with that came digital tech classes, which provided instruction on Photoshop and other programs. What began as something to game on and find community through virtual worlds slowly became a tool for changing how I see.

My still and moving image archive is layered and a little chaotic. It holds screenshots, saved folders from years ago; fragments from blogs that probably don't even exist

anymore. It's not a pristine archive. It's sedimented. Distortion for me feels like adding pressure. We're consuming images at an accelerated pace now, and I'm interested in what that pressure does to the body and to memory.

Describing my workflow feels harder now because I've been unlearning some of my older ways of starting. Lately it begins more with listening. I spend time in silence, either at home or in the studio. I'll joke around with my dog, and then something shifts and it's time to work. For larger projects I build small maquettes of the space. I set up DIY theatrical lighting in the studio to test how things might feel atmospherically before they exist at scale.

Painting, drawing, 3D modeling, and video feel intuitive, almost like extensions of perception. My relationship with physical sculpture calls for a more scheduled, structured process. But across all mediums, a big part of my workflow is knowing when to stop.



Installation view, "Code Switch: Distributing Blackness, Reprogramming Internet Art " at Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, Detroit, 2025. Pictured Left: Taína Cruz, *rentaroot.com* (2025), Oil on Canvas; Right: Liberty.exe (2025), Oil on Canvas; etc. Courtesy of Timothy Johnson.

**maa:** You're a fan of horror, and my understanding of the reception of your work is that many who are at the beginning of their engagement with it are drawn to horror, its industry and tropes, as a means to delve deeper into your practice. I think this has great value as a "gateway," but I also recognize in the trajectory of your practice a sustained engagement with the shadow, with the ambivalence or "darkness" of the trickster figure, and with the idea that the filter of consciousness is a hallucination. Could you discuss this nexus of topics a bit?

**TC:** When I talk about horror I feel like I have to start with the mood, the way it feels in my body. I don't really watch horror movies, my dad didn't have any horror DVDs. I joke to myself that maybe the heightened sensory feeling of being a child, of everything I was picking up on, was already enough. I didn't need to add more. So when people enter the work through horror, I understand it, but for me it's coming from lived atmosphere.

It's the steam in the boiler room in a basement in the Bronx. That damp metallic heat. Police sirens separating family. The shadows that felt like they were saying something while you're standing there watching adults try to regulate themselves verbally and physically. It's that feeling of being small but hyper-aware. Your body buzzing a little.

Not because something jumped out at you, but because something was always slightly off.

The work doesn't sit inside horror, but it borrows its language. I'm not trying to stamp the work with it. The dynamic of "horror" just shows up because it holds tension well. For me it's always braided with humor, with beauty, with honesty. It lets me stay with uncertainty. I'm interested in that moment right before something shifts, when you feel it in your stomach or your skin but nothing has technically happened yet.

I get really curious why the work lands with horror, because I am definitely not in the studio going 'let me make a painting that fits this genre.' A lot of what I'm touching on in the studio would be lingering feelings. Not something that shocks me, that I would want to shock others with. More like a presence. A haunting that isn't necessarily scary. Just something that comes back when you're alone and your guard drops from performing being human 24/7.

The jester, trickster feels important too. This is a figure that destabilizes order and moves across all storytelling, analogue and digital, across all time. The idea that consciousness itself might be a kind of hallucination resonates with me because it flattens hierarchy. If perception is unstable, then the painting doesn't have to resolve anything. It can lean into that instability.

The darkness in the work doesn't feel dark to me. It never really did. It feels exploratory. It feels like how I remember gaining consciousness, noticing light and shadow at the same time. I stopped thinking of them as opposites. They feel more like collaborators.



Taina Cruz, *Two Hounds Wait Patiently*, 2025. Oil on canvas. Image Courtesy of Julian Blum.

**maa:** That makes sense. I think of the ambivalence of the trickster figure, a connection with the margins and the work of shadows that makes a Legba or Anansi so powerful. Let's talk about a specific idiom or set of icons in your work, the dog or hound. One thinks of Kerberos or the Island Arawak 'soul-dog' Opiyelguwobiran. What is your connection to this trope? Could you walk us through the process and concept for a specific work using the canine, for example, *two hounds wait patiently* (2025) and [Motor Hound](#) (2023)?

**TC:** Dogs appear in my work as figures of attention and waiting. I feel a strong connection to them because they represent what it feels like to have a companion, while also carrying the awareness that those connections are temporary. It's hard not to relate that to the isolating feeling of figuring out belonging, whether in real life or in digital spaces. I've learned a lot from dogs. I think it's important to be in dialogue with animals. I'm drawn to how present dogs are as animals, how they seem to sense things before we do, and how they can hold a quiet feeling of vigilance or loneliness without needing to dramatize it. In *Two Hounds Wait Patiently* (2025), the dogs act almost like witnesses in the scene, holding a stillness that creates a subtle tension in the atmosphere. In *Motor Hound* (2023), the dog appears in a looping GIF where a motorized arm moves a hound's head toward a tennis ball. I was thinking about repetition and instinct, the dog is a small machine of attention; illiciting a feeling somewhere between familiar and unease.



Taina Cruz, Curved wall maquette, Gesso and cardboard. 2025

**maa:** You mentioned recently returning to sculpture. For example, you've got some sculptures [in this year's Whitney Biennial](#). In the past, you've also made sculptures, moving image works, and text-based online works. Could you walk us through what it looks like for you to work on a medium that isn't painting? For example, how do you draw upon your image archive? What gestures or processes of fabrication interest you? Do they connect to themes of spirituality, the city, the uncanny, and if so, how?

**TC:** When I first began painting more rigorously, I naturally found myself pulling from an image archive I had already been building for years on my computer across various platforms. I've always collected or reposted digital images that resonated with my interests, and it trained me to notice very quickly what holds my attention and what doesn't. That instinct tends to guide how an image develops.

More recently the work has shifted away from that. I am much less interested in digging through folders of images now. Letting the work meet an audience and hearing how people respond has become more interesting to me. When the work moves into sculpture or video it's usually because the idea wants it to behave differently. Fabrication for me is pretty direct, I like working with various materials and seeing what they do, keeping that process open.

For me, painting and sculpture have never felt separate. I love both mediums, and the work naturally moves between them depending on what the image or form needs. Even in painting I'm often thinking about what is occupying the space, almost as if I'm building it. Being an artist for me is about following the mediums that bring a sense of joy, frustration and curiosity and letting them speak to each other.

**Age (if you'd like to share):** I was born in 1998

**Location:** NYC

**How/when did you begin working creatively with technology?**

I began working creatively with technology around eight years old. I would go with my dad to his school's library and spend hours playing on pixel canvases and dressing up models and their bedrooms on online girl games.

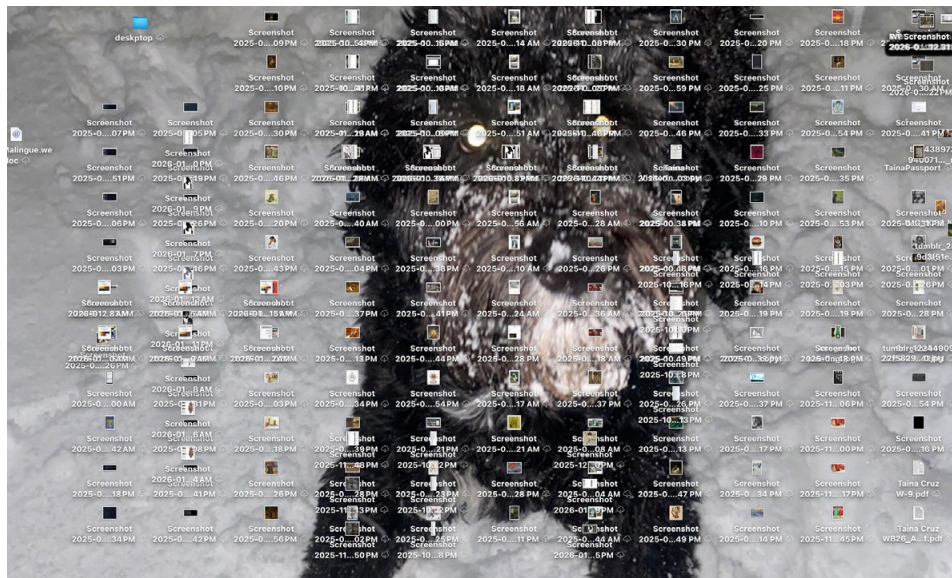
**What did you study at school or elsewhere?**

I studied interdisciplinary sculpture and critical theory.

**What do you do for a living or what occupations have you held previously?**

I make art for a living.

**What does your desktop or workspace look like? (Pics or screenshots please!)**



**Tags**

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