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 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.

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 drawings grew—and evolved. At a certain point, around 2008, her application of color became more frequent, and the drawings became more complex. She describes her subjects. After deciding to make a drawing of someone, she reads their obituary and looks for images or other articles she is able to locate and, in some cases, studies their work. She then seeks 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 gains inform her compositions.

Xeroxed 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 been involved artist 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 delicate and striking 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 is inscribed onto her portrait of the renowned intellectual Edward Said.

Apsara DiQuinzio
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art and Philipp C. Watts 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 1993 and an 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; and Elion 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.

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