

Pull Up! Curator Nicole J. Caruth Discusses “The Grace Jones Project”

A visual tribute to one of the greatest figures of our time, ladies and gentlemen: Miss Grace Jones.

by [Miss Rosen](#) May 10th, 2016



Photo: Gerard Gaskin, Baby (painted black) at the Tony, Andrea, and Eric Ball, Brooklyn, NY, 2000. Archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist.

“I can't run out of different ideas. I am different. When can I run out of me?” observed the one and only **Grace Jones**. The Jamaican legend has made her name as a singer, songwriter, supermodel, actress, record producer bar none. Making herself known on the covers of *Vogue*, *Elle*, and *Stern* magazines, photographed by no less than Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin, and working with the likes of Yves St. Laurent and

Claude Montana, Miss Grace Jones defined and defied an era like no one before or since as her records regularly made the Top 40. “I don't think 'pop' should mean that you had no talent,” she revealed.

Jones also maintained, “I don't collaborate. You're born alone, you die alone, you get on stage alone.” And if you've ever seen her on stage you realize, she's right. There's no room for anyone else: all eyes are on her. It is in her sheer luminosity and avant garde edge that she inspires generations of visual artists all around the world. [The Grace Jones Project](#), on view at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, now through September 18, presents more than 20 works in photography, video, installation, and video by artists including Rashayla Marie Brown, Gerard Gaskin, Heather Hart, Lyle Ashton Harris, Simone Leigh, Wangechi Mutu, Narcissister, Harold Offeh, Jacolby Satterwhite, Xaviera Simmons, Cauleen Smith, and Mickalene Thomas. The exhibition also includes forty Grace Jones album covers and a selection of music videos that have made Jones a cultural icon that we continue to celebrate today. Curator [Nicole J. Caruth](#) speaks with Crave Online about one of our faves.



Xaviera Simmons, *Warm Leatherette*, 2009. Color photograph. Courtesy of the artist and David Castillo Gallery.

What was the inspiration for *The Grace Jones Project*?

Nicole J. Caruth: About fifteen years ago, when I was an undergraduate student at San Francisco State University, I took a performance art course with the art historian Judith Bettelheim, whose syllabus included Carolee Schneeman, Miriam Schapiro, Josephine Baker, Urban Bush Women, and Grace Jones. Prior to this my knowledge of Jones was limited to movies like *A View to a Kill*. Judith introduced me to Jones' music. I'll never forget the day we watched Jones perform "La Vie En Rose" in the video "A One Man Show," directed by Jean-Paul Goude. I was in awe of her beauty and power. I think this was the initial inspiration. Year later in graduate school, I presented a hypothetical Grace Jones exhibition to my peers. I wasn't taking the proposal seriously at the time, but my professor, the curator and New Museum founder Marcia Tucker, approached me after class and encouraged me to move forward with the idea. I suppose I've been thinking about the project ever since.

How did the idea take form and develop into an exhibition of work?

Over the years, this exhibition has looked many different ways in my head. At one point, it was historical, featuring costumes and archival photographs, which is a common curatorial approach to

singers and fashion designers. Instead, I decided to focus on contemporary artists who Grace Jones has influenced and inspired, and artists who address black bodies and queer identity in ways that recall aspects of Jones' oeuvre. The MoAD exhibition is part of my larger vision. I hope it travels to other venues where the exhibition can expand and evolve.



Gerard Gaskin, Backstage at the Evisu Ball, Manhattan, 2010. Archival inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist.

Please speak about the way in which Grace Jones is a figure worthy of artistic study, exploration, and representation.

A quote from the exhibition: “Grace Jones is everything I ever wanted to be as an artist. She is an experimental, progressive, avant garde shapeshifter who fully embodies herself and the complexities of the world around her. No one has caught up to the fire that is Grace Jones.” –Xaviera Simmons

What is it about Grace Jones that speaks to us today?

In reading and listening to Prince tributes these past few days, I've been thinking about how some of the things that made him and icon are also true for Grace Jones: She's an incredible performer and singer who defied heteronormative gender conventions. She was radical in the 80s—and she's radical now.



Harold Offeh, Covers: Arabesque, After Grace Jones, 1978, 2008-2009. Video. Courtesy of the artist.

Why do you think the cover of “Island Life” has become such an emblematic image?

It's spellbinding. Simultaneously elegant and powerful, the image embodies Grace Jones' stage presence and personas. And yet it's an illusion, an exaggeration of the actual photograph. I can't think of another image quite like it from that era.