



The Black Photographers Rethinking What History Is All About

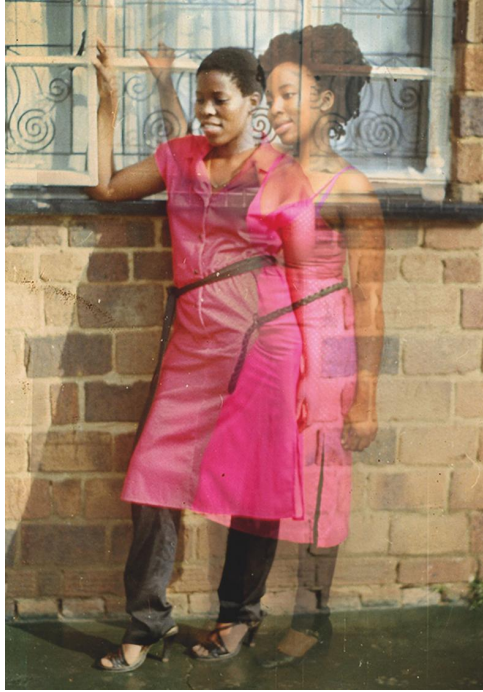
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In these 11 photobooks from Kwame Brathwaite to Deana Lawson, artists envision beauty and poetry, fashion and resistance.



Tyler Mitchell, *Untitled (Twins II)*, New York, 2017, from *The New Black Vanguard* (Aperture, 2019)

Courtesy the artis



(right) Lebohang Kganye,
Re shapa setepe sa lenyalo II, 2013
Courtesy the artist

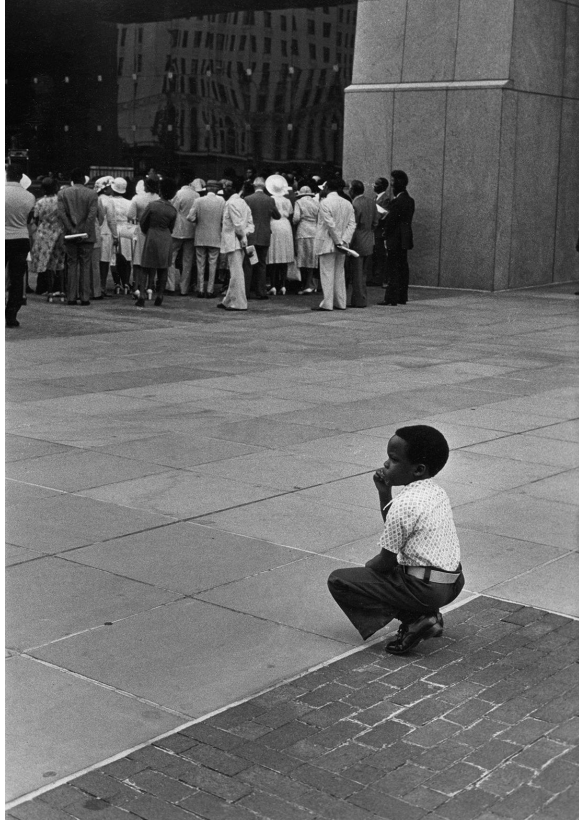


(left) Seydou Keita, *Untitled*, 1952–55
Courtesy the artist and SKPEAC

As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic (2021)

In 1997, Dr. Kenneth Montague founded the Wedge Collection in Toronto in an effort to acquire and exhibit work by artists of African descent. *As We Rise* features over one hundred works from the collection, bringing together artists from Canada, the Caribbean, Great Britain, the US, South America, and Africa in a timely exploration of Black identity on both sides of the Atlantic.

From Jamel Shabazz's definitive street portraits; to Lebohang Kganye's blurring of self, mother, and family history in South Africa; to J. D. 'Okhai Ojeikere's landmark series documenting Nigeria's rich hairstyle traditions, *As We Rise* looks at multifaceted ideas of Black life through the lenses of community, identity, and power. As Teju Cole describes in his preface, "Too often in the larger culture, we see images of Black people in attitudes of despair, pain, or brutal isolation. *As We Rise* gently refuses that. It is not that people are always in an attitude of celebration—no, that would be a reverse but corresponding falsehood—but rather that they are present as human beings, credible, fully engaged in their world."



Ming Smith, *What's It All About?*, Harlem, New York, 1976
Courtesy the artist and Aperture

Ming Smith: An Aperture Monograph (2020)

Ming Smith's poetic and experimental images are icons of twentieth-century African American life. Smith began experimenting with photography as early as kindergarten, when she made pictures of her classmates with her parents' Brownie camera. She went on to attend Howard University, Washington, DC, where she continued her practice, and eventually moved to New York in the 1970s. Smith supported herself by modeling for agencies like Wilhelmina, and around the same time, joined the Kamoinge Workshop. In 1975, Smith became the first Black woman photographer to have work acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Throughout her career, Smith has photographed various forms of Black community and creativity—from mothers and children having an ordinary day in Harlem, to her photographic tribute to playwright August Wilson, to the majestic performance style of Sun Ra. Her trademark lyricism, distinctively blurred silhouettes, and dynamic street scenes established Smith as one of the greatest

artist-photographers working today. As Yxta Maya Murray writes, “Smith brings her passion and intellect to a remarkable body of photography that belongs in the canon for its wealth of ideas and its preservation of Black women’s lives during an age, much like today, when nothing could be taken for granted.”



Carrie Mae Weems, *While Sitting upon the Ruins of Your Remains, I Pondered the Course of History*, 2016–17
Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

To Make Their Own Way in the World: The Enduring Legacy of the Zealy Daguerreotypes (2020)

To Make Their Own Way in the World is a profound consideration of some of the most challenging images in the history of photography: fifteen daguerreotypes of Alfred, Delia, Drana, Fassena, Jack, Jem, and Renty—men and women of African descent who were enslaved in South Carolina.

Photographed by Joseph T. Zealy for Harvard University professor Louis Agassiz in 1850, the images were rediscovered at Harvard’s Peabody Museum in 1976.

Throughout the volume, essays by prominent scholars explore topics such as the identities and experiences of those depicted in the daguerreotypes, the close relationship between photography and

race in the nineteenth century, and visual narratives of slavery and its lasting effects, as well as the ways contemporary artists have used the daguerreotypes to critique institutional racism today. With over two hundred illustrations, including new photography by Carrie Mae Weems, this book frames the Zealy daguerreotypes as works of urgent engagement.

To Make Their Own Way in the World is firmly grounded in events still shaping American lives today. Instead of supporting Agassiz's pseudoscientific notions about white supremacy and racial hierarchies (as was their original intent), the daguerreotypes now provoke wide-ranging interpretations and raise critical questions about representation and identity. "At this moment and in these divided states of America, perhaps more than at any time since their rediscovery in 1976," Molly Rogers writes, "the daguerreotypes of Jem, Alfred, Delia, Renty, George Fassena, Drana, and Jack command our attention, demanding that we look closely, listen intently, and speak out—however difficult this may be—giving voice to all that we have learned."



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Darkroom Mirror* (_2070386), 2017
Courtesy the artist and DOCUMENT, Chicago, team (gallery inc.), New York, and Vielmetter, Los Angeles

Paul Mpagi Sepuya (2020)

Paul Mpagi Sepuya's studio portraits challenge and deconstruct traditional portraiture by way of collage, layering, fragmentation, and mirror imagery, all through the perspective of a Black, queer

gaze. Although the creation of artist books has been a long-standing part of his practice, this 2020 volume is the first widely released publication of Sepuya's work.

For Sepuya, photography is a tactile and communal enterprise, with his multilayered scenes coming together through groups of the artist's friends, fellow artists, collaborators, and himself. Moving away from the slick artifice of contemporary portraiture, Sepuya's frames are filled with the human elements of picture-taking, from fingerprints and smudges to dust on mirrored surfaces. Sepuya pushes this even further by directly inviting us to look inside the studio setting—while also considering the construction of subjectivity.



(right) Nadine Ijewere,
The Art of Renaissance, 2017
Courtesy the artist

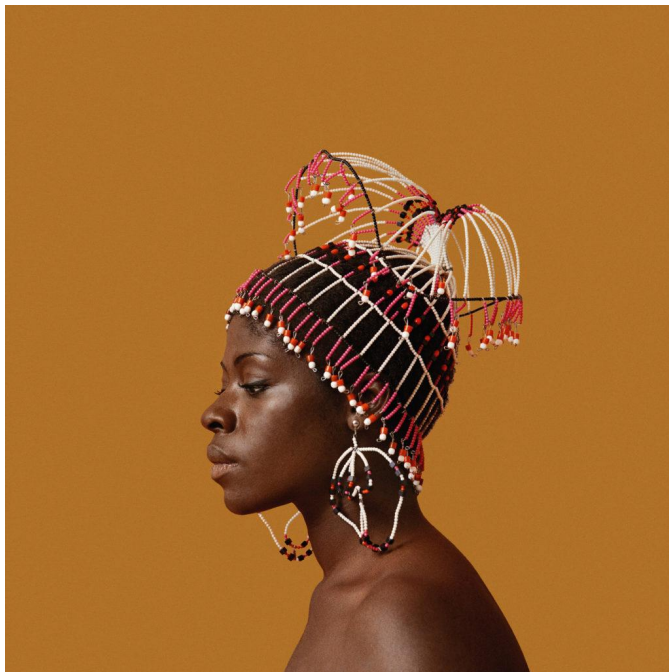


(left) Ruth Ossai, *Miu Miu Babes*, 2018
Courtesy the artist

The New Black Vanguard: Photography between Art and Fashion (2019)

In *The New Black Vanguard*, curator and critic Antwaun Sargent addresses a radical transformation taking place in fashion and art today. The book highlights the work of fifteen contemporary Black photographers rethinking the possibilities of representation—including Tyler Mitchell, the first Black photographer to shoot a cover story for *Vogue*; Campbell Addy and Jamal Nxedlana, who have founded digital platforms celebrating Black photographers; and Nadine Ijewere, whose early series title *The Misrepresentation of Representation* says it all.

From the role of the Black body in media; to cross-pollination between art, fashion, and culture; to the institutional barriers that have historically been an impediment to Black photographers, *The New Black Vanguard* opens up critical conversations while simultaneously proposing a brilliantly reenvisioned future. "Often in this culture, when we think about the work of Black artists, we almost never think about, How do we celebrate young Black artists? And I wanted to change that," Sargent states. "I wanted to say that what was happening right now with these very young artists is significant. It has shifted our culture, it has shifted how we think about photography, and it has shifted who gets to shoot images."



Kwame Brathwaite, *Sikolo Brathwaite wearing a headpiece designed by Carolee Prince, African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS), Harlem, ca. 1968*
Courtesy the artist and Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles

Kwame Brathwaite: Black Is Beautiful (2019)

Kwame Brathwaite's photographs from the '50s and '60s transformed how we define Blackness. Using his photography to popularize the slogan "Black Is Beautiful," Brathwaite challenged mainstream beauty standards of the time that excluded women of color. Born in Brooklyn and part of the second-wave Harlem Renaissance, Brathwaite and his brother Elombe Brath founded the African Jazz-Art Society & Studios (AJASS) and the Grandassa Models. AJASS was a collective of artists, playwrights, designers, and dancers; Grandassa Models was a modeling agency for Black women.

Working with these two organizations, Brathwaite organized fashion shows featuring clothing designed by the models themselves, created stunning portraits of jazz luminaries, and captured behind-the-scenes photographs of the Black arts community, including Max Roach, Abbey Lincoln, and Miles Davis.

Until recent years, Brathwaite has been under-recognized. This is the first-ever monograph of his work. "To 'Think Black' meant not only being politically conscious and concerned with issues facing the Black community," writes Tanisha C. Ford, "but also reflecting that awareness of self through dress and self-presentation . . . [They] were the woke set of their generation."



Deana Lawson, *Sons of Cush*, 2016
Courtesy the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Deana Lawson: An Aperture Monograph (2018)

Over the last decade, Deana Lawson has created a visionary language to describe identities through intimate portraiture and striking accounts of ceremonies and rituals. Using medium- and large-format cameras, Lawson works with models throughout the US, Caribbean, and Africa to construct arresting, highly structured, and deliberately theatrical scenes. Signature to Lawson's work is an exquisite range

of color and attention to detail—from the bedding and furniture in her domestic interiors, to the lush plants and Edenic gardens that serve as dramatic backdrops.

Aperture published the artist's landmark first publication, *Deana Lawson: An Aperture Monograph*, in 2018. In 2020, Lawson became the first photographer to be awarded the Hugo Boss Prize. One of the most compelling photographers of her generation, Lawson's images portray the personal and the powerful. "Outside a Deana Lawson portrait you might be working three jobs, just keeping your head above water, struggling," writes Zadie Smith. "But inside her frame you are beautiful, imperious, unbroken, unfallen."



Zanele Muholi, *Zithulele*, Worcester, South Africa, 2016. Courtesy the artist and Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town/Johannesburg, and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York

Zanele Muholi: Somnyama Ngonyama, Hail the Dark Lioness (2018)

Zanele Muholi first gained recognition for their 2006 series *Faces and Phases*, documenting the LGBTI+ community, creating ambitiously bold portraits in an attempt to build a visual history and

remedy Black queer erasure. Muholi then started to turn the camera inward, beginning a series of evocative self-portraits brought together in this 2018 monograph.

Using props and materials found in their immediate environment, Muholi crafts starkly contrasted frames that directly respond to contemporary and historical racisms—while also providing a platform for self-discovery. “I am producing this photographic document to encourage individuals in my community to be brave enough to occupy spaces—brave enough to create without the fear of being vilified,” Muholi states. “To teach people about our history, to rethink what history is all about, to reclaim it for ourselves—to encourage people to use artistic tools such as cameras as weapons to fight back.” One of the most powerful visual activists of our time, Muholi’s self-portraits remain radical statements of identity, race, and resistance.



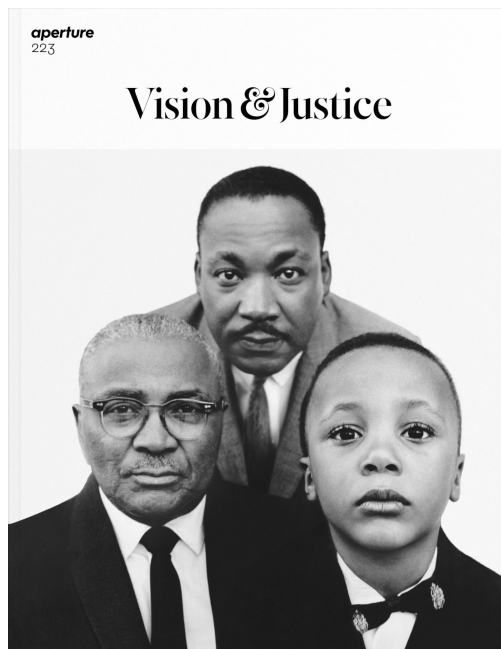
Lyle Ashton Harris, *Iké Udé and Lyle*, Los Angeles, 1995
Courtesy the artist

Lyle Ashton Harris: *Today I Shall Judge Nothing That Occurs* (2017)

In the late 1980s and '90s, a radical cultural scene emerged in cities across the globe, finding expression in the galleries, nightclubs, and bedrooms of New York, London, Los Angeles, and Rome. As a young artist experimenting with different mediums at the time, Lyle Ashton Harris began obsessively photographing his friends, lovers, and individuals who were, or would become, figures of influence, including Nan Goldin, Stuart Hall, bell hooks, Catherine Opie, and Marlon Riggs. Harris’s photographs

offer a raw, authentic portrait of the cultural and political communities that defined an era and continue to resonate to this day.

In this 2017 volume, the artist's archive of 35 mm Ektachrome images is presented alongside personal journal entries and recollections from artistic and cultural figures. It offers a unique document of what Harris has described as "ephemeral moments and emblematic figures shot in the '80s and '90s, against a backdrop of seismic shifts in the art world, the emergence of multiculturalism, the second wave of AIDS activism, and incipient globalization." Together, Harris's photographs and journals not only sketch his personal history and journey as an artist, but also provide an intimate look into this groundbreaking period of art and culture.



Richard Avedon, *Martin Luther King, Jr., civil rights leader, with his father, Martin Luther King, Baptist minister, and his son, Martin Luther King III, Atlanta, Georgia, March 22, 1963*
Courtesy The Richard Avedon Foundation



Awol Erizku, *Untitled (forces of Nature #1), 2014*
Courtesy the artist and Condé Nast/Vogue.com

Aperture 223: "Vision & Justice" (Summer 2016)

In 2016, art historian, curator, and writer Sarah Elizabeth Lewis guest edited *Aperture's* summer issue, "Vision & Justice," a monumental edition of the magazine that sparked a national conversation on the

role of photography in constructions of citizenship, race, and justice. The issue features a wide span of photographic projects by artists such as Awol Erizku, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Lyle Ashton Harris, Deana Lawson, Jamel Shabazz, Hank Willis Thomas, Carrie Mae Weems, and Deborah Willis; alongside essays by some of the most influential voices in American culture, including Vince Aletti, Teju Cole, and Claudia Rankine. “Understanding the relationship of race and the quest for full citizenship in this country requires an advanced state of visual literacy, particularly during periods of turmoil,” writes Lewis, “but America’s progress would require pictures because of the images they conjure in one’s imagination.”

In 2019, Aperture worked with Lewis to create a free civic curriculum to accompany the issue, featuring thirty-one texts on topics ranging from civic space and memorials to the intersections of race, technology, and justice. Taking its conceptual inspiration from Frederick Douglass’s landmark Civil War speech “Pictures and Progress” (1861)—about the transformative power of pictures to create a new vision for the nation—the curriculum addresses both the historical roots and contemporary realities of visual literacy for race and justice in American civic life.



Mickalene Thomas, *Le leçon d'amour*, 2008
Courtesy the artist and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Muse by Mickalene Thomas (2015)

Mickalene Thomas’s large-scale, multitextured tableaux of domestic interiors and portraits subvert the male gaze and assert new definitions of beauty. Thomas first began to photograph herself and her

mother as a student at Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut—which became a pivotal experience in her creative expression as an artist.

Since then, throughout her practice, Thomas's images have functioned as personal acts of deconstruction and reappropriation. Many of her photographs draw from a wide range of cultural icons, from 1970s "Black Is Beautiful" images of women, to Édouard Manet's odalique figures, to the *mise-en-scène* studio portraiture of James Van Der Zee and Malick Sidibé. Perhaps of greatest importance, however, Thomas's collection of portraits and staged scenes reflect a very personal community of inspiration—a collection of muses that includes herself, her mother, her friends and lovers—emphasizing the communal and social aspects of art-making and creativity that pervade her work.