

“As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic”

By Charles Campbell

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Xavier Simmons, *Denver*, 2008

A Black woman in a loosely draped green gown stands in the middle of a fast-flowing river. Her hands hold a slender fly-fishing rod. Behind her, the roots of a fallen tree emerge out of the riverbank. A young fir obscures a house nestled in the trees. The woman appears completely at ease, existing in a space of her own; dressed for comfort, and with a demeanour to match, she feels completely at home. It is what lurks outside the frame of the photograph, however, that gives the image its gravity. This photograph of a river echoes another (albeit very different) genre of nature portraiture: pictures featuring white men in hip waders and camo vests, with jocular grinning faces holding largemouth bass. The endless circulation of colonial nature portraiture imprints the world of white masculinity on our subconscious, conflicting with her certain presence. How does she stand there with such tranquility and poise? What happens when she exits the frame?

The relationship between what happens within the frame and what presses in from beyond its borders, so brilliantly evoked by Xaviera Simmons's *Denver* (2008), emerges repeatedly in "As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic." Curated by Elliott Ramsey, the hundred-plus images in the exhibition highlights a tremendous range of Black life seen through the eyes of Black photographers. In almost all cases, the subjects of the photographs are aware of the photographer, and the confidence and ease on display speaks of the familiarity and trust between those in front of and behind the camera. The exhibition is a vehicle for Aperture's recent publication of the same name, showcasing Dr. Kenneth Montague's Wedge Collection.

In her *Dear Sarah* (2016) series, Ayana V. Jackson explores the story of Aina, an enslaved young girl who was "gifted" by King Ghezo of Dahomey to Queen Victoria, and forcibly renamed as "Sarah" in the mid-19th century. Jackson herself poses as Sarah in opulent white silk and lace. The resulting photographs are suspended from the gallery's ceiling as life-size prints on poly silk. The fluidity and grace of the large-scale silk format pays homage to Aina and her agency, despite the abusive powers that dominated her life.

In Anique Jordan's *94 Chestnut at the Crossroads* (2016) series, the construction hoarding around Toronto's demolished British Methodist Episcopal Church is the stage for a Black figure clad in a voluminous black dress, hat, and veil. For over 100 years, the church at 94 Chestnut Street was an important space for Toronto's Black communities. A new courthouse is currently under construction on the church's former grounds. Signs from Haitian Vodou mark both the ground and plywood boards, while the figure faces the four cardinal directions. Here, Jordan references the continuity and change in Black spiritual traditions amid the erasure emblemized by the desecration of what was once a centre of Black spiritual life in Toronto.

Ruddy Roye's *Nigga Beach* series (2010–2019) presents a set of mostly twilight portraits of Black beachgoers on one of Montego Bay's few free beaches. Why are these pictures of Black people enjoying themselves on their own shores so counter to dominant images of who gets to occupy pristine white sand? Delineating "Nigga Beach" as a space of community and leisure, Roye also forces us to consider the de facto exclusion of the near-white only enclaves that increasingly dominate Caribbean coastlines. Other artists also take up images of the Black body at rest. Rashid Johnson's *The Reader* (2008) presents an image of total refusal. A figure in a white robe reclines in a deck chair, with a drink in one hand and a book that completely obscures his face in the other. It's a clear statement to viewers that this moment is not for them. These quiet, personal images in the exhibition seem less about revealing the subject's interiority than protecting it.

One of the delights of the exhibition is the subtle repetition of gestures and formal elements across the photographs. The right hand of Johnson's *The Reader* mirrors the position of a hand in *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* (2006), an adjacent photograph by Mickalene Thomas. The subject of the latter image faces the viewer with a direct, penetrating gaze, while the former completely obscures the subject's face. Lush vegetation surrounds *The Reader*, while a single towering houseplant creeps into the right side of *Afro Goddess*'s frame. Ramsey's curation cultivates a sense of connection and continuity throughout the exhibition, and takes us from photographs that reclaim Black narratives to expressions of Black joy. Along the way, we move through interior domestic spaces, explorations of family and community, documentary photography, and necessary, direct political engagement.

Voyeuristic spectacles of violence, suffering, inequity, and abjection are (thankfully) left outside the frame. But still, they press in. Vanley Burke's *Boy with Flag, Winford, in Handsworth Park* (1970) features the iconic image of a young Winford Fagan standing confidently with his bicycle. His hand rests on his hip, while the Union Jack is mounted on the handlebar. In a 2015 *Guardian* interview, Fagan reveals how he built the photographed bike as a child, and

identifies Burke as a family friend. Fagan also speaks of the racist white nationalism of '70s England, and his run-ins with skinheads. The Union Jack on the handlebars stands for both this lurking threat and Fagan's claim to belonging. For Fagan, the carefree image of a youth on his bicycle is actually a moment of respite from the threat of violence. In the safe company of an older family friend, and with the means for a quick getaway, he can finally relax and smile.

"As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic" is about that moment of the boy with his bike. The exhibition offers a space of familiarity and rest. A space where we write our own narratives, and where our interior lives as Black people are not under threat. The final section of the exhibition illustrates what's possible in such a space. It's the early days of New York hip-hop and rude boys in the photographs of Jamel Shabazz, the exuberant scenes of Toronto's Black queer parties shot by Tayo Yannick Anton, the teasing and shifting sexuality of Elliott Jerome Brown Jr.'s *Devin in Red Socks* (2016), and the arresting gaze of James Barnor's *Drum Cover Girl Erlin Ibreck, Kilburn, London* (1966).

How do we hold that space?

"As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic" ran from 24 February to 21 May, 2023 at The Polygon Gallery, North Vancouver.