A Hidden Grandeur Is Revealed

Deana Lawson's portraits create life scenes that contain the strangeness of dreams.

By ARTHUR LUBOW

The furniture may be covered in plastic and the wall paint peeling, but when the photographer Deana Lawson poses her African-American subjects in humble rooms, she sees the survivors of a history of slavery and colonization who stand proudly amid the shards of vanished empires. “They are displaced kings and queens of the diaspora,” said Ms. Lawson, 39, surveying some of the large prints in her studio in the semi-industrial Gowanus section of Brooklyn. “There's something beautiful and powerful that hasn't been taken away.”

Best known for her staged portraits of nude black women in colorfully cluttered settings, Ms. Lawson said that her images often come to her in dreams. On a conscious level, though, she is composing an alternate mythology to the disparaging images of black people that persist culturally, seeking out what’s extraordinary in ordinary lives. What's more, she is part of a broader movement that recognizes the attractiveness of bodies that don't conform to the conventional standards of beauty, whether prescribed by race or gender.

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She grew up with such furniture in Rochester, a city that was the headquarters for Kodak. She believes her career was predestined. Her grandmother worked in the household of George Eastman, who founded Kodak, and her mother held an administrative position in the company. An identical twin, Ms. Lawson in her youth was often confused with her sister, Dana, until, when they were both first-year students at Pennsylvania State University, Dana was found to have multiple sclerosis, a disease that over time affected her mind as well as her body.

Along with conjuring up a legend-inspiring African past, Ms. Lawson’s photographs express her personal history. Right down to her color choices for walls and clothing. For example, an icy blue that she favors was worn on top of a dark brown vestment in the tabernacle chair of her family’s nontraditional African-American church, which worshipped on Saturday, celebrated Hannukah not Christmas, and regarded Jesus Christ as a prophet rather than a divinity.

The portrait of a middle-class family, Ms. Lawson in both insider and outsider in the environment she depicts. One arresting photograph, “Notors,” portrays two young tattooed, thirties men. One points his finger at the viewer like a pliers, the other is adorned with a bizarre mouth ornament — a corruption used in dental surgery that Ms. Lawson spray-painted gold. In a corner of the print, she collaged a photograph of George Washington’s dentures, which are said to contain teeth of his slaves. “I was going to go to Mount Vernon and photograph the dentures but I couldn’t get access,” she said. “And now I’m very glad about that.” Instead, she nixed the two men in a hallowed room on the Lower East Side, and incorporated the mouth guard (which came together in a dream) and the appropriately sized drawing of the first president’s false teeth. “It became a metaphor for torture and may be slavery,” she said. “There’s this idea of the real — but you scratch it like a record.”

She readily acknowledged that there is an eroding component of the picture: “This is what a woman might desire,” she said. “Part of my attraction is physical, to the opposite sex. But I’m Deana Lawson. Other women might find it repulsive.” She seeks a comparable sensuality in her pictures of African-American women, whom she regards as reflections of herself. “It’s almost like posing in a mirror,” she said. A distorting mirror, the woman chooses to photograph are typically larger and more voluptuous than the slender Ms. Lawson. “I wish I was big,” she admitted with a smile. “When I was a teenager, I was so jealous of friends who had a big butt.”

To obtain her 2017 photograph, “Elternheit,” she followed a woman as calligrapher at the Vrouw van Wilhelmina, where she worked as at Ms. Lawson’s home studio in Brooklyn, New York. For “If you didn’t look twice at her on the A train, you would have been blind,” she said. “It’s her body, but it’s something else, too.” In the picture, the scantly clad subject’s sultry expression is as self-composed as the welcome smile of the massively proportioned “Coney Island Barber,” who was photographed about three-quarters of a century ago by Lissie Model.

It is surprising how little she is able to see photographs that present plus-size women as desirable. Moreover, too, are Ms. Lawson’s photographs of half-dressed women and men that include small children curiously not of their own and says. “When a woman sees a man with a baby, it’s a primal thing,” she said. “That he could make a baby adds to the attraction.” In contemporary culture, physical attractiveness isn’t typically presented as a package of fertility and a lure to procreation.

Ms. Lawson is raising a son, Judah, 16, and a daughter, Grace, 5, with her former husband, Austria, a painter. She says that watching Mr. Gilbert work — the pain-taking process, the attention to color, his use of form as a metaphor for spiritual connection — has deeply informed her photography.

“I want to have the same kind of weight he could have in my pictures,” she says. The two are still close. Sometimes Ms. Lawson will describe to him a dreamlike image she’s trying to capture, and he will make a sketch a that she can then use to persuade her prospective models to collaborate.

“What’s fascinating to me about Deana is that she does this Diane Arbus-like shift, so that many of the subjects in her photographs feel slightly uncanny,” said Naomi Rockwell, a senior curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago. “They seem to be almost superhuman. There’s almost an imaginary narrative that spins around the subjects.”

Her explorations of the African-American experience has led Ms. Lawson to the Caribbean, South Africa, Ethiopia, Ghana and the Democratic Republic of Congo. Searching in Africa for an indigenous culture not deformed by the ongoing legacy of colonialism, she was disappointed.

“I have this naive message for this time period, but it’s impossible to find,” she said.

“European co-option is a higher value system — to wear certain labels, to drive a certain kind of car.”

Her passion quest was not a lost cause, because she is inventing the tabernacle she photographed. In a small town an hour outside of Khartoum, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in 2015, she persuaded a man and woman to pose nude for her in a hurriedly arranged setting. She titled the photographs, “The Garden.” Like Adam and Eve before the Fall, they are unabashed of their nakedness and secure in their freedom.

It is a condition that doesn’t exist, a state that may never have been known outside the Bible. But for Ms. Lawson, the prelapsarian couple represents not so much a lost paradise as a living vision. When you regard her subjects, with their log-patterned bodysuits, elaborate hairdos and proud stances. She believes that you can discern the image of these African ancestors, if only you look hard enough.
