

Gebremedhin, Thomas, “Deana Lawson’s Portraits of Everyday Black Life,” *WSJ.com*, September 19, 2018



Deana Lawson’s Portraits of Everyday Black Life

The photographer opens up about her creative process and her new book

Thomas Gebremedhin | September 19, 2018



Deana Lawson, 'Coulson Family,' 2008.

PHOTO: FROM DEANA LAWSON: AN APERTURE MONOGRAPH (APERTURE, 2018) © 2018 DEANA LAWSON AND COURTESY RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO, AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK

There is an air of legend surrounding Deana Lawson, and indeed even the artist herself describes her early relationship to photography as “mythological.” Born and raised in Rochester, New York—the birthplace of Kodak, where her mother worked as a secretary—Lawson had a photographer father and an aunt, Sylvia, who was one of the first black female ophthalmologists in Upstate New York. “That whole relationship to sight and seeing—it was the ether that informed my work,” says Lawson, 39.

In 1997, at 18, Lawson began her formal training at Pennsylvania State University, and, in 2002, continued on at the Rhode Island School of Design. Since then, she has emerged as one of the most distinguished photographers of her generation, celebrated for her striking portraits of black people—typically working class—which lend majesty to the mundane moments of everyday life. Themes of sensuality, love and social history thread their way throughout the work as well as more existential underpinnings such as legacy and identity.

Gebremedhin, Thomas, “Deana Lawson’s Portraits of Everyday Black Life,” *WSJ.com*, September 19, 2018



Deana Lawson, 'Mama Goma,' 2014.

PHOTO: FROM DEANA LAWSON: AN APERTURE MONOGRAPH (APERTURE, 2018) © 2018 DEANA LAWSON AND COURTESY RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO, AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK

WSJ. spoke with Lawson by phone ahead of the publication of her first book *Deana Lawson: An Aperture Monograph*—to be released on September 25—and an exhibition at the Gordon Parks Foundation in Pleasantville, New York, which opens on October 19.

WSJ.: When did you first pick up a camera?

Deana Lawson: I first seriously picked up a camera at Penn State, as an undergraduate. It was at that point that I decided I wanted to be an artist first and foremost. That’s also when I took my first photography class. I remember it was hard for my Intro to Photography teacher to think of black photographers for me to look at. Eventually she gave me the names of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson. I recognized something very familiar to my experience and upbringing in Carrie Mae Weems’s work. And the way Lorna Simpson was conceptually dealing with the body...just seemed like something I wanted to engage with. Later I went to RISD, and I was looking at photographers like Katy Grannan, Gregory Crewdson and Philip-Lorca diCorcia and the whole nature of staging.

WSJ.: In an interview with the artist Arthur Jafa—which is included in your new monograph—you say, “When I’m looking for subjects and when I’m photographing someone, it always arrives from this undeniable attraction—like seeing a stranger on the street and the stranger seeing me.” It’s almost like you’re talking about love at first sight. Can you talk more about this attraction?

Gebremedhin, Thomas, “Deana Lawson’s Portraits of Everyday Black Life,” *WSJ.com*, September 19, 2018



Deana Lawson, 'Nicole,' 2016.

PHOTO: FROM DEANA LAWSON: AN APERTURE MONOGRAPH (APERTURE, 2018) © 2018 DEANA LAWSON AND COURTESY RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO, AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK

DL: It is like love at first sight. It's a gut feeling. It's not logical. Sometimes, I'm like, Oh, this person has interesting hair or eyes or whatever, but then there's something else that can't really be explained. In that interview I also talk about time stopping. It's very cinematic when I see someone that I'm drawn to. It feels like a slowing down of time. I have this complete urgency to ask that person [if I can photograph them].

WSJ.: Your subjects are usually strangers, and sometimes they pose nude. What's the conversation like to build the type of trust needed to convince someone to pose for you?

DL: I think it certainly helps that I have samples of my work...so they have a better sense of what I'm working on. Often the response might be “no,” but I'm very thankful for the small percentage that is willing to take that leap and trust me to do it.

WSJ.: Why do you prefer to stage your photographs, to choose the people and the settings and even the poses at times? I'm thinking now of Crewdson or diCorcia.

DL: I definitely have an impulse to direct or try to get the reality of the situation closer to the dream. Often an idea might come out of waking up from sleep. So I have this idea—how do I get closer to that?

Gebremedhin, Thomas, “Deana Lawson’s Portraits of Everyday Black Life,” *WSJ.com*, September 19, 2018



Deana Lawson, ‘Signs,’ 2016.
PHOTO: FROM DEANA LAWSON: AN APERTURE MONOGRAPH (APERTURE, 2018)
© 2018 DEANA LAWSON AND COURTESY RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO,
AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK

WSJ.: Do you typically have a work figured out and staged in advance?

DL: I really don’t have a prescriptive method. Things happen that I would not have imagined myself—something the subject brings to the image can become key. Or there might be something in the background that I didn’t even notice when I was shooting, but then, when I see it on the negative after the fact, it becomes so much a part of the story. I think it’s about being present and open to allow whatever is to happen to happen.

WSJ.: Let’s talk about the making of a specific work. *Nicole* (2016) is an absolutely beautiful portrait both technically and visually. The subject is sprawled out on this rug. How did this one come together?

DL: With *Nicole* it was important to think about the erotic. Audre Lorde writes about the erotic and the way in which the sensual is linked to relationships. You can see *Nicole*’s child’s toys in the background—it pairs interestingly with this beautiful erotic pose on the carpet. She obviously has a daughter, and you have to consider that when you see her beautiful body. The rug becomes this other formal backdrop. The shapes, the browns and reds, harmonize in a way.

WSJ.: I wonder how the process of selecting people as subjects translates to selecting inanimate objects, like the towel in *Hellshire Beach Towel With Flies* (2013) or the couch tear in *Portal* (2017). Do the same things that draw you to people draw you to these details?

DL: Yeah, and both those examples reference the body even when the body is absent. The towel photo was taken in Jamaica. Moments before, I had taken a picture of a woman reclined on the towel. When she got up, I noticed the imprint and also flies buzzing around. [Taking the photo] was instinctual. I didn’t even think I would use it, but then I saw it on the negative sheet. *Portal* was also a side note to another photo shoot—a failed photo shoot, by the way. I remember I was like, Oh, I have to go back and get a shot of that couch. Of course, it speaks to so many different layers. Even the title *Portal* [makes you think of] *Alice in Wonderland* and the rabbit hole. And it was shot in a juke joint space, so it’s this idea that maybe that portal can be in the everyday. These psycho-spiritual moments can be found in the places where we live; you don’t have to search far. In [Jorge Luis] Borges’s “The Aleph,” he talks about the center of world,

Gebremedhin, Thomas, “Deana Lawson’s Portraits of Everyday Black Life,” *WSJ.com*, September 19, 2018



Deana Lawson, 'Hellshire Beach Towel with Flies,' 2013.

PHOTO: FROM DEANA LAWSON: AN APERTURE MONOGRAPH (APERTURE, 2018) © 2018 DEANA LAWSON AND COURTESY RHONA HOFFMAN GALLERY, CHICAGO, AND SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO., NEW YORK

or the world, being in the basement of some house. It's all connected.

WSJ.: You mention that *Portal* came out of a failed shoot. How do you know when you've failed? What does that look like?

DL: It looks like nothing! I get no feeling from it. Maybe the subject didn't vibe right. I [revise] all the time, but it might not be in the moment. Things take [time.] An image I might have conceived of for two years can take a while to happen.

WSJ.: I imagine the process of selecting works for this monograph, turning a curatorial lens on your own work, was very exciting.

DL: I had a set number of images that I could include, which is good. I like having a set number and seeing what's possible within that limitation. The most important thing is creating the right object. I knew I wanted it to be a very beautiful book that felt like a jewel and mirrored what I felt about the subject. The decisions—the binding, the color, the type—definitely capture the essence of this whole journey and how I want people to feel about the subjects in particular.

WSJ.: Do you still get nervous when presenting work?

DL: Definitely. All the time. The creative process can be kind of lonely and isolating. So when it's time to present it's like, Oh, the audience might have a whole different reaction. Even though I control a lot of how my pictures look, I can't control that. You lose control. That's what unsettles me.