

Deana Lawson, *Eternity*, 2018
Gallery Statement (Sikkema Jenkins & Co.)

Deana refers to “Eternity” as the linchpin of this body of work – a representation of the “Mitochondrial Eve”. The Mitochondrial Eve refers to mitochondrial DNA, which is passed down the matrilineal line from generation to generation. The term also refers to a theoretical common ancestor (incidentally, an African woman!) that we all share, the primitive and ultimate symbol of maternity, femininity, fertility. Across all cultures we can trace gods and goddesses who represent these virtues, and icons and art objects meant to illustrate, pray for, and celebrate them. As in all of Deana’s portraiture, her sitters are meant to be seen as royalty – and as a corrective to a Western art history that has misrepresented and largely ignored the portrayal of black bodies as powerful, regal, elemental.

The sitter’s powerful sensuality is amplified and complicated by the domestic setting, which as always is carefully calibrated by Deana. The home belongs to the woman who babysits Deana’s children – the purple wall reminded her of a paint color that was on the walls of her own childhood bedroom. The clock is an antique that Deana purchased years ago and has brought with her on her international travels, hoping to find just the right photograph to place it in. The garments the sitter wears were purchased and altered by Deana – she shopped for a “midnight blue”-colored underwear set, and made the beaded tassels herself. The total artwork – approaching and having a series of conversations with the model, selecting and arranging the setting, making the picture – separates this sensual feminine image from most we find in art history, as this is an image of a woman created by and in collaboration with another woman. A kind of shared self-portrait.

In the New York Times, Arthur Lubow writes, “Best known for her staged portraits of nude black women in colorfully cluttered settings, Ms. Lawson says 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.”

An integral part of Deana’s practice is traveling internationally, and spending time with the local population for days or weeks before inviting members of the local community to collaborate with her to make a photograph. The subject of “Eternity”, however, was spotted on the A train in New York City. Deana was transfixed by her, and remembers the rest of the passengers stealing looks her way. Deana felt too shy and intimidated to speak to her, but decided that if the woman happened to get off at Deana’s home stop, she would approach her. It felt like fate when the two women got off at the same stop, and Deana approached her re a portrait – the woman said that she had been approached many times with a similar request and had said no, but never by a black female photographer.

Mention and illustration of “Eternity” in this recent NY Times piece:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/11/arts/design/deana-lawson-photography-underground-museum.html>

See more about the artist and her work here:

Hyperallergic: “Deana Lawson’s Iconoclastic Portraits”, 2018

<https://hyperallergic.com/432562/deana-lawson-sikkema-jenkins-and-co-2018/>



LAWSON, DEANA

Born 1979 in Rochester, NY;
lives in Brooklyn, NY

While sight is the sense usually linked with photography, in Deana Lawson's work, touch, as a means by which intimacy is expressed, plays an equally important role. Lawson's subjects often present themselves in poses of embrace and interconnection—familial, erotic, performative. Her own "touch" is evident throughout her photographs, which are carefully staged, often based on compositional drawings. Lawson frequently works with people she has encountered in her daily life. These images evolve out of a relationship—a reciprocal, even collaborative process of working with her subjects. In this way, the surfaces of her large, lusciously colored prints, which she has imagined as "sweating, like skin," become an intimate interface of connectivity between the viewer and the subject.

Guided by the model of the family album—that careful construction of memory and self-presentation—Lawson has grounded her work and her choice of subjects in her experiences of African American family and community. Lawson envisions her photographs as "visual testimonies" of her subjects' lives. While a sharp eye for the communicative power of pose and gesture generates her photographs' expressive punch, she is also closely attuned to material culture and domestic space as a means of representing Black aesthetics. This attention to the visual and material textures of cultural identity extends through Lawson's use of found photographs, which she sometimes enlarges and shows alongside her own. While Lawson follows in the visual tradition of documentary practice, she simultaneously offers resistant counterimages to the ethnographic

and colonial violence that photographers have enacted on Black bodies. For an ongoing series begun in 2013, Lawson travels to sites along transatlantic slave-trade routes, including New Orleans, Haiti, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, to produce linked images of diasporic Black cultures. Her subjects may be separated geographically, but, through her work, they come together, almost close enough to touch, building what she calls a "mythological sense of family."

—NR

The Key, 2016. Digital photograph,
dimensions variable

