

Black Surrealist Nudes

by Ladi'Sasha Jones

Where are the Black nude portraits that are not created as reactive or reductive forms of critique, but are instead working towards the development of their own conceptual ideation and aesthetic frameworks? This question guided an exploration of Black women artists whose portraits of nude Black women subjects extend beyond notions of representation, documentation and racial de/re-construction. Artists who are not fixed on gestural or historical art interventions, but rather the production of Black nude portraiture that function within the deepening of a Black vernacular, revealing an interior code of Black art and cultural thought in relation to the vitality of Black life itself.

Works by artists Pat Davis, Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Renee Cox exemplify this visual politic. Their nude portraiture pushes a critical practice and aesthetic of Afro Surrealist subjectivity, performance and play. Ruminating between the personal and the imaginary, between myth and the hyperreal, their subjects emerge as their own witness, self-defined and fashioned in their own reflection.

In the Photographs and Prints Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Pat Davis has a portfolio collection of eleven black and white nude photographs taken in 1975.¹ Davis' manipulation of light sculpts figures from the abstraction of angles and darkness. Most of her nude figures take shape as they pierce through the enveloping negative space of an all white room or step slightly out of a shadow. Others are outdoors, their bare bodies contrasted by a cityscape or melding with sunrays and the shade of a patio. Within these images, the Black woman's body is not in labor nor in service to the domestic space, but possesses the energies to occupy and transgress public and interior sites with her body and to her own liking.

In a quote lifted from the portfolio cover, Davis states the following about the series, "Using the controlled technique of the camera and the free spirit of the mind, I have tried to interpret the human figure through light, space and time—making a realistic and surrealistic expression of form."

Davis' interpretation of the human form is definitely high spirited and yields a fantastical affect. Many of her subjects appear larger than life as their bodies perform disappearing acts with the sharp contrasts of light and there's an abundance of movement throughout the works. No static posturing. Only vivid and intentional compositions of the body.

¹ The portfolio is a compilation of one series and consists of ten photomechanical prints and one photocopy all measuring 28 x 22 centimeters. The works are under copyright and could not be published for this essay.

Davis, Pat. "Pat Davis Works." Solar Associates: New York, 1976. Photographs and Prints Division, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL.

Space Woman I

A woman stands, legs apart over the camera lens, as if she is taking a step forward. She is in a room with her back to three large windows pouring in sharp light. As she is slightly twisted at an angle, the front of her body is casted in a shadow. Soft touches of the light reveal the bottom of her belly and the tip of her left breast, and contours the curves of her thighs and backside.

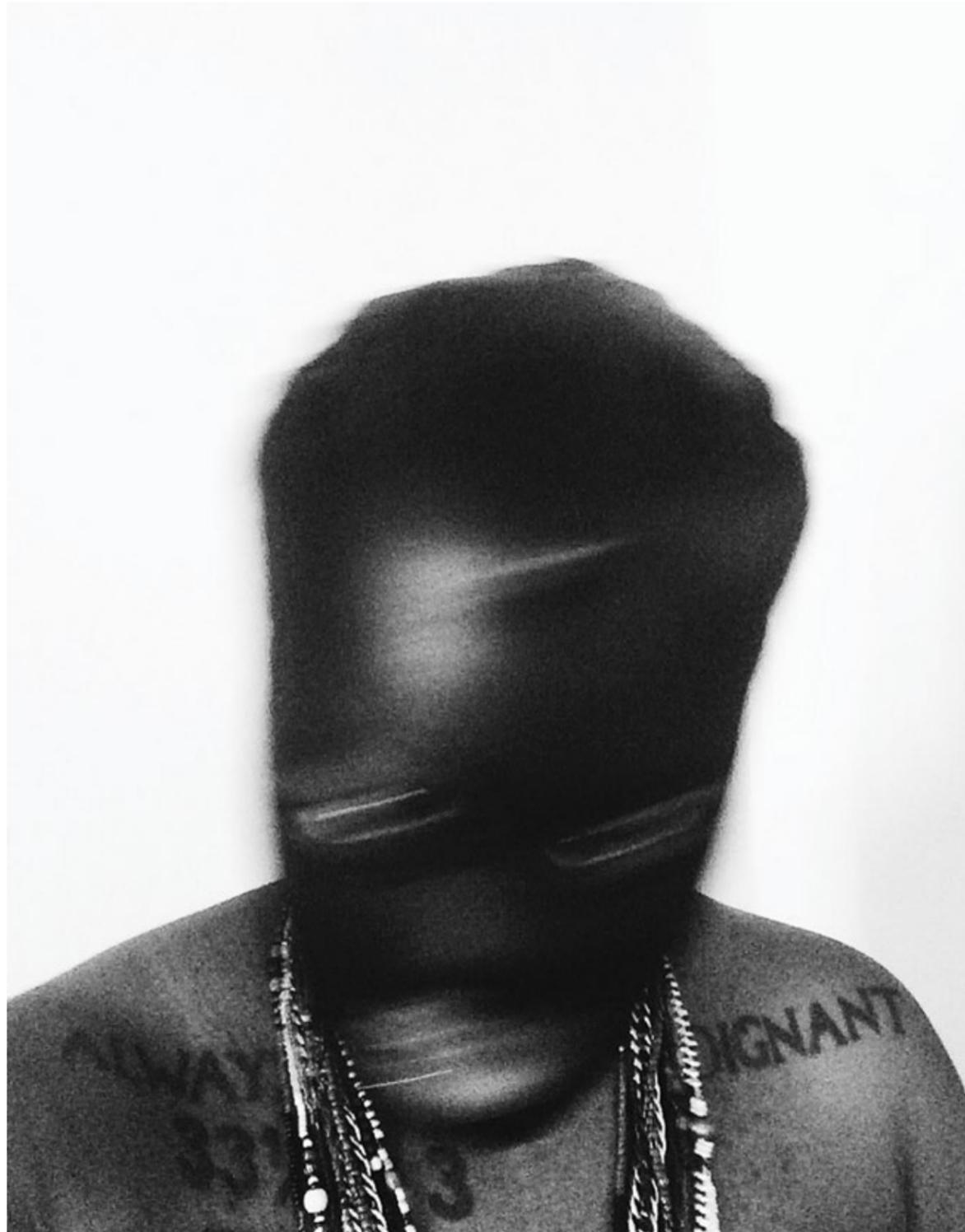
Persuasion

Arms crossed and resting on the top of her belly, a woman stands tall, and frontward facing the camera lens. She wears a waist bead, several bracelets on both wrists, and a head band with a jewel pendant resting at the center of her forehead. Looking ahead, the woman is straight faced with an ecstatic back-light light creating a halo around her silhouette.

Yesterday

A woman is bending over on the edge of a building roof with her left hand clasped around her left ankle and the other resting on her right leg. Her hair is in double strand twists and falls just past her earlobe. Her belly and breast are in the shadow of her hunched body and her gaze is directed down at her feet. The frame looks onto her left side with the tops of tenement buildings filling the backdrop to the right of her. The arc of her lower back just inches away from the skyline.

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LEFT Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *Se Te Subió El Santo*, 2016, #1
digital C print, edition 1/10, 8 × 10 in
courtesy of the artist



RIGHT Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *Se Te Subió El Santo*, 2016, #11
digital C print, edition 1/10, 8 × 10 in
courtesy of the artist



*Se Te Subió El Santo? (Are you in a trance?)*² is a series of thirteen self-portraits taken by artist Tiona Nekkia McClodden in 2016. The images are pictorially framed as headshots, capturing the artist from the chest up wearing black and white leather masks. Illustrating a multitude of gestures and expressions, the photographs reveal the artist engaging with the familiars of her body, BDSM and sexual play. Topless, McClodden stares directly into the camera, holding a gaze with the viewer, through intimate and declarative postures of pointing, smiling and sticking out her tongue.

² The title of this work is pulled from a phrase referenced in *Ana Mendieta, the Iowa Years: A Critical Study, 1969 Through 1977* by Julia Ann Herzberg (The Graduate Center, CUNY, 1998). McClodden was in residence at the Center for Afrofuturist Studies in Iowa City, Iowa.

On her site, the artist has the following statement about the work, “My intention was to render a self-portrait that presented a full self, implicit of my gender, race, sexuality, and spirituality while collapsing and challenging each identity as well.”³ A full self. Comprehending the plurality of self-identity and pushing against its compartmentalization. Asserting a political encounter and presentation of the whole subject.

A more visceral abjection of her personhood is explicated through the masks. Worn as a device that evokes both the spiritual and sexual narratives embodied in McClodden’s portraits, the masks signify rites of transference. The black mask is a denotation of revelation and the white mask alludes to possession. Demonstrating the methodical and sensual orders that are present in the tease between restraint and release, control and possession. In the portraits, she is also adorned in a chain and series of elekes that symbolize the spirit of the Orishas and indicates McClodden as an initiate of the Santeria tradition. Through this series, McClodden is highlighting the shared space that exists between the rituals of the erotic and the spiritual. Her self-portraits disrupt the outsider spectacle of Black sexuality and inserts a subjective discipline of the erotic along with a pruriency for Black flesh and the incorporeal being.

³ McClodden, Tiona. “*Se te subió el santo? (Are you in a trance?): Artist Statement*”. tionam.com: 2016.

“My intention was to render a self-portrait that presented a full self, implicit of my gender, race, sexuality, and spirituality while collapsing and challenging each identity as well.”

Tiona Nekkia McClodden, *Se Te Subió El Santo*, 2016, #III
digital C print, edition 1/10, 8 × 10 in
courtesy of the artist



left to right (pg 52-55) Renee Cox, *Uprising*, 2001
five gelatin silver prints,
5 1/2 x 6 3/4 in; 5 1/2 x 7 3/8 in; 5 1/2 x 7 3/8 in; 5 1/2 x 6 3/4 in; 5 1/2 x 7 3/8 in
courtesy of the artist



Regularly working with her own nude body and religious iconography, the polyptych *Uprising* by photographer Renee Cox can be read as a subversion of the resurrection narrative within Christian scripture. Within this piece, the artist appears suspended amidst an all black backdrop. Carefully articulated posturing brings to life the illusion and desired perception of the artist afloat. Moving through the five portraits that make up the work, there is a progression in the artist's composure. She goes from a state of disassociated leisure, completely reposed, to a full confrontal with the viewer. Lifting to directly face and interact with the camera in the final frame. Hinting towards the invocation of the return, to rise again.

These images by Cox are meditative works achieved from her own concerns around realist and self composition. Balancing a satirical and perceptual treatment of the nude form.



These three artists are working in an Afro Surrealist expressionism that is queer, feminine and transgressive. Their construction of the Black nude form is executed within the veils and interiority of a Black critical culture relating to their own traditions in portraiture and figuration. Their nude photographs are also performative and referential nodes of Black spirituality, looking at episodic modes of elevation and transfiguration. Their subjects are arresting, even within the mundanity of their settings. The nudity of their Black subjects does not overtake the artists' commitment to form and execution of composition wherein the utility and presence of their nakedness is deliberate and determined. These works are self-affirming, not representational nor reformist. They are realized in pursuit of themselves—their own pleasure, fantasies and extended personas, providing new meaning to the spectacular cultures of the Black body.



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