

The New York Times

A Hidden Grandeur Is Revealed

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

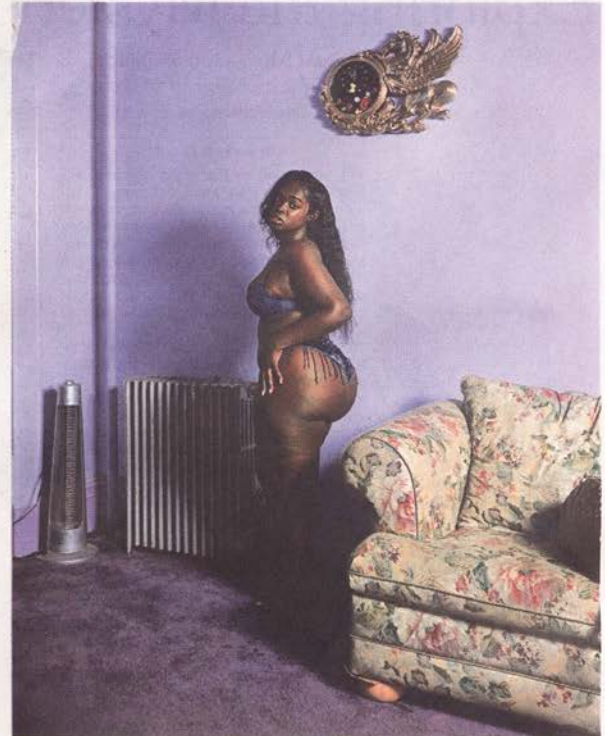
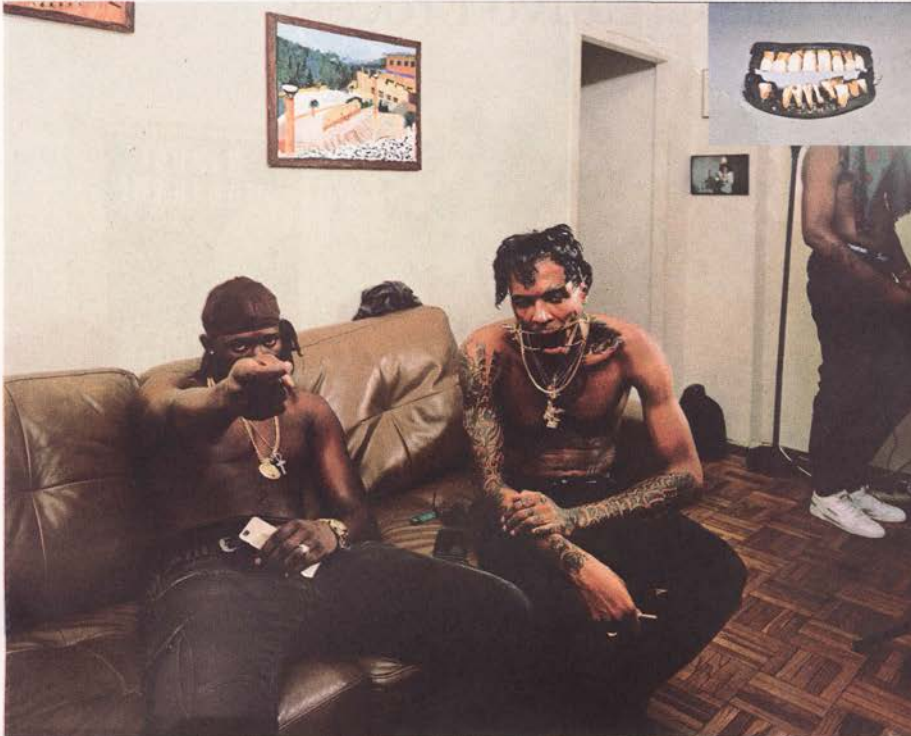
By ARTHUR LUBOW

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.

A selection of Ms. Lawson's photographs
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A Hidden Grandeur Is Revealed in Portraits



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 opens Saturday at the Underground Museum, an exhibition space in Los Angeles dedicated to African-American culture; much of the work was displayed this year in a show at the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh. And last month, the Aperture Foundation published a handsome monograph that showcases 40 of her images, with an introductory essay by Zadie Smith.

"Museums and the art world in general are very sensitive to the fact that certain voices and individuals have been excluded, and there is a desire to correct for that," said Dan Leers, curator of photography at the Carnegie, accounting for the attention Ms. Lawson's work is receiving. "But I don't think it's just that. Her ability to get people to drop their guard is stunning. It is very hard to get a real portrait of someone with a camera. And there is this lineage that she is aware of and is so easy to find in her pictures. Her work absolutely merits its place in the galleries alongside anything else."

In constructing scenes that combine the clarity of observed life with the startling strangeness of dreams, Ms. Lawson draws on the pioneering work of Jeff Wall; and, like Philip-Lorca diCorcia in his "Hustlers" series of the early '90s, she places her models in environments that appear to be their own but are actually chosen, and sometimes decorated, by the photographer. Ms. Lawson is as attentive to furniture as she is to faces and bodies.

"The plastic on the couch — it's furniture you could see walking down Fulton Street in Brooklyn, and in Jamaica, and in Accra," she said, indicating the décor in one new picture. "It looks a little like luxury, but it is a cheaper material."

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 choir of her family's nontraditional African-American church, which worshipped on Saturday, celebrated Hanukkah not Christmas, and regarded Jesus Christ as a prophet rather than a divinity.

The product of a middle-class family, Ms. Lawson is both insider and outsider in the environments she depicts. One arresting photograph, "Nation," portrays two young tattooed, shirtless men. One points his finger at the viewer like a pistol, the other is adorned with a bizarre mouth ornament — a contraption 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 posed the two men in a bor-

rowed apartment on the Lower East Side, and incorporated the mouth guard (which came to her in a dream) and the appropriated image of the first president's false teeth. "It became a metaphor for torture and maybe slavery," she said. "There's this idea of the real — but you scratch it like a record."

She readily acknowledged that there is an erotic 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 women she chooses to photograph are typically larger and more voluptuous than the slender Ms. Lawson. "I wish I was bigger," 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, "Eternity," she followed a woman as callipygian as the Venus of Willendorf, who disembarked at Ms. Lawson's home subway station in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn.

"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 scantily clad subject's sultry expression is as self-composed as the welcoming smile of the massively proportioned "Coney Island Bather," who was photographed about three-quarters of a century ago by Lisette Model.

It is surprising how still surprising it is to see photographs that present plus-size women as desirable. Unusual, too, are Ms. Lawson's photographs of half-dressed

women and men that include small children (usually not their own) and toys. "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, 3, with her former husband, Aaron Gilbert, a painter. She says that watching Mr. Gilbert work — the painstaking process, the attention to color, his use of family as a metaphor for spiritual connection — has deeply informed her photography.

"I wanted 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 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 Beckwith, 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 exploration 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 naïve nostalgia 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 quixotic quest was not a lost cause, because she is inventing the tableaux she photographs. In a small town an hour outside of Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in 2015, she persuaded a man and woman to pose nude for her in a luxuriantly green setting. She titled the photograph, "The Garden." Like Adam and Eve before the Fall, they are unashamed 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 leopard-patterned bodysuits, elaborate hairdos and proud stares, she believes that you can discern the image of these African ancestors, if only you look hard enough.

Above left, "Nation," 2018, with an image of George Washington's dentures. The artist collaged the image into her photograph. Above right, "Eternity," 2017. Below, Deana Lawson and her daughter, Grace, in 2017.

Deana Lawson: Planes
 Saturday through Feb. 17 at the Underground Museum, Los Angeles; theunderground-museum.org.