

DAVID
KORDANSKY
GALLERY

JON HENRY

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Jon Henry is a visual artist working with photography and text. His work is notable for its cultural activism and its reflections on family, sociopolitical issues, grief, trauma, and healing within the African American community. His projects include studies of athletes from various sports and their associated representations. Exhibitions include solo shows at Pool Art Center, Drury University, Springfield, Missouri (2019); Image Gallery, James Madison University, Harrisonburg, Virginia (2018); and NURTUREart, Brooklyn (2017). Group shows include Examining The American Dream, The Photographic Center North West, Seattle (2020); Uproot, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn (2017); and On Freedom, Aperture Foundation, New York (2017). He was recently named winner of the Arnold Newman Prize for New Directions in Photographic Portraiture and has also won the Film Photo Prize for Continuing Film Project sponsored by Kodak. Henry (b. Queens, New York) lives and works in Brooklyn.

JON HENRY

Born, Queens, NY
lives and works in Brooklyn, NY

EDUCATION

2010 - 2011 New York Film Academy Photography Program, New York, NY
2006 - 2009 CUNY Queens College, Queens, NY

SELECTED SOLO / TWO PERSON EXHIBITIONS

(* Indicates a publication)

- 2020 *Stranger Fruit*, Big Day Film Collective, Collingswood, NJ
Francis Lewis Gallery, St. George's Church, NY
- 2019 Pool Art Center Gallery, Drury University, MO
- 2018 *Stranger Fruit*, New Image Gallery, James Madison University, VA
Stranger Fruit, BRIC, Brooklyn, NY
Stranger Fruit, NARS Foundation, Brooklyn, NY
ShopKeepers Gallery, Washington, DC
- 2017 *Stranger Fruit*, NURTUREart, Brooklyn NY

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

(* Indicates a publication)

- 2020 *Examining The American Dream*, The Photographic Center North West,
Seattle, WA
En Foco Fellowship Exhibition, En Foco, Bronx, NY (Digital)
Distinction, The Photographic Center North West Seattle, WA
- 2019 *LensCulture Emerging Talent*, Galerie Joseph, Paris, France
WeRise LA, Los Angeles, CA

DAVID KORDANSKY GALLERY

- 2018 *Strength in Practice*, curated by Joy Davis, Gallery CA/Waller Gallery, Baltimore, MD
- 2017 *Imagined Communities: Nationalism & Violence*, Rubber Factory, Manhattan, NY
Spectrum Art, Miami, FL
Uproot, curated by Gabriel de Guzman, Smack Mellon, Brooklyn, NY
Open(C)all: Truth, BRIC Arts, Brooklyn, NY
Three Minutes Exhibition, curated by Oscar J Rivera, Hamilton Landmark Galleries, New York, NY
Multiple Sides of the Bed, Minka, Brooklyn, NY
Photoville, organized by NYFA Photography Faculty, Brooklyn, NY
No Church In The Wild, El Barrio's Art Space PS108, New York, NY
Labs New Artists, Red Hook Labs, Brooklyn, NY
On Freedom, curated by For Freedoms, Aperture Foundation, New York, NY
Arts to End Violence, Ron Taylor Gallery, Brooklyn, NY
Intricacies of Love: Closing Reception Pop Up, Bronx Art Space Annex, New York, NY
- 2013 *RAW Artists presents: Expressions*, Mi-5 Gallery, New York, NY
- 2011 *NYFA Graduating Class Exhibition*, New York Film Academy, New York, NY
- 2008 Queens Treasures, Francis Lewis Gallery, Queens, NY

AWARDS

- 2020 Arnold Newman Prize for New Directions in Photographic Portraiture
1st Place PCNW DISTINCTION
En Foco Fellowship
Film Photo Prize: Continuing Film Project
- 2019 LensCulture: Emerging Talents
- 2017 BRIC Best in Show at Open (C)all Truth
Smack Mellon Hot Picks
Lucie Foundation Shortlist (x2) for Emerging Artist Grant

SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

(* Indicates non-periodical book, catalog, or other publication)

- 2020 O'neal, Lonnae, "Every Mother's Son," *National Geographic*, October 2020, pp. 6-13
Smithson, Aline, "The Arnold Newman Prize For New Directions In Photographic Portraiture" *lenscratch.com*, September 27, 2020
Tschinkel, Arielle, "In Honor of Juneteenth, This Photography Initiative Is Supporting Black Storytelling Through Images," *ApartmentTherapy.com*, June 17, 2020
Wrigley, James, "Jon Henry's Strange Fruit: The Women Who Must Endure the Senseless Loss And Carry On," *ThenThereWasUs.co.uk*, April 6, 2020
Winters, Michael, "How many pietàs?," *Sojourn-Arts.com*, June 15, 2020
"Q & A. Jon Henry On His Series 'Stranger Fruit'," *IntrepidCamera.co.uk*, June, 2020
- 2019 Tsomondo, Dzana, "Jon Henry Reimagines The Pietà In Photographs of Black Mothers and Sons," *PDNOnline.com*, January 11, 2019
- 2018 "New Work In A New Format," *ArtinadPlaces.com*, April 29, 2018
- 2017 Manning, Emily, "10 Fresh Photographers to Discover In New York," *I-D.Vice.com*, July 20, 2017
Phillips, Thavma, "UPROOT: Diversity and Discourse at Smack Mellon," *ArteFuse.com*, December 12, 2017
"Stranger Fruit – Jon Henry Reinterprets the Pietà to Denounce Police Violence Against Black Men," *FotoRoom.com*
"Photographer of The Week #179: Jon Henry," *BeCapricious.com*, August 2, 2017

photograph

FOCUS ON: JON HENRY



Jon Henry, *Untitled #17, South Side, Chicago*. Courtesy the artist

Jon Henry is the recipient of the 2020 Arnold Newman Prize for New Directions in Photographic Portraiture for his series *Stranger Fruit*, portraits of Black mothers holding their sons in poses that suggest the pietà. Selections from the series are on view at the Griffin Museum of Photography through October 23. Born and raised in Queens, NY, Henry says the idea for the series, which he began in 2014, first came to him after the murder of Sean Bell in 2006 by police, on the morning before his wedding in Jamaica, Queens. "It felt like it could have been me or any of my friends," he says, adding, "I'm 38, and to this day, my mother tells me to be careful; she still worries." The religious iconography comes naturally to Henry, who was raised in St. George's Episcopal Church in Flushing, Queens, where he had a photo studio and worked as a sexton. The church is the setting for the first photograph in the series.

On the occasion of Henry's exhibition, I spoke with artist and writer Qiana Mestrich about *Stranger Fruit*. Mestrich's critical writing has been published in photo journals including *En Foco's Nueva Luz*, *Light Work's Contact Sheet*, and *SPE's exposure*. Mestrich is the founder of *Dodge & Burn: Decolonizing Photography History* (est. 2007), an arts initiative that aims to decolonize the medium by advocating for Black, Indigenous, and other photographers of color. A graduate of the ICP-Bard College MFA in Advanced Photographic Practice, Mestrich is adjunct faculty in photography and social media at the Fashion Institute of Technology (SUNY).

Jean Dykstra: Qiana, when did you first see images from *Stranger Fruit*, and what was your initial response?

Qiana Mestrich: I first saw the photographs a couple of years ago, probably following, unfortunately, the murder of Tamir Rice [the 12-year-old Black boy killed by police in Cleveland in 2014]. Having studied art history, I immediately got the reference to the Christian iconography of the Madonna and the pietà, Michelangelo's especially. But also being a historian of photography, I was immediately brought to Renee Cox's image, *Yo Mama's Pieta* [1996]. As much as her work is known, I still feel like it's not as known as it should be. Renee was on the forefront of many issues in her work early on, dealing with family and motherhood and different types of family structures, and Jon's work definitely reminded me of Renee's in that sense.

JD: It's great that Renee Cox resonated with you. She does fly under the radar a bit, but he has said she was an influence for this series.

QM: I'm sure – I don't know how he could have made those images without knowing her images.

JD: It can be easy to look at *Stranger Fruit* and think that it's so timely. But it's not, unfortunately.



Jon Henry, *Untitled #13*, Groveland Park, IL. Courtesy the artist



Jon Henry, *Untitled #36, North Minneapolis, MN.* Courtesy the artist

QM: It's not. Certainly in photography, there's a history of lynching photographs, lynching cartes de visite – this whole culture that was created around lynching as a photographic event. And so I see his work as part of that visual conversation. In terms of the lynching photographs, certainly someone would have been there to collect the bodies of these Black people who were lynched, possibly mothers would have been there to collect the bodies of their sons. You could almost look at his work within that same visual narrative of this horrific violence against Black bodies that is so prevalent throughout the history of the medium

JD: I was formulating a question about images of violence and Black bodies, when I came across this quote from Imani Perry [the Hughes-Rogers Professor of African American Studies at Princeton University]: "... the question, for me, is both how do we acknowledge the social reality of deep inequality, of mass incarceration, of death of innocent Black youth, and also recognize that it's important to assert and reassert the full humanity and beauty of their lives, and also to offer them a vision of their lives that is meaningful." The issue I was thinking through has to do with how these painful images are received. There is so much beauty and tenderness in them, but their essential subject is violence against Black bodies.

QM: There's definitely both the tragedy and the beauty in these images. I didn't realize at first that in part of the series you see just the mother, isolated – they're also quite beautiful and speak volumes about an interior mental and spiritual state of Black motherhood and Black single motherhood as well. Having grown up with a single Black mother as a single child, and having seen my mother be the sole parent and witnessed the struggle but also I also saw how much power she had to summon forth to keep going and the strength in that. So I think these portraits of the mothers are just as important. You get a completely different sense of the work when you see these in context with the pietà images. You get a much more complex sense of these women in their domestic environments, and then you see the images of them with their sons. It's interesting – the posing of the images, with the sons being shirtless, is a very specific choice.

JD: How do you read that choice?

QM: It's clearly, for me, a reference to flesh. They're also barefoot, so for me it's essentially again a reference to the historical act of lynching. The title of the series, of course, is a reference to the song that Billie Holiday made popular – *Strange Fruit*. I would say it's a historical reference to have them shirtless and barefoot, but then they're wearing denim, which is a fairly modern clothing, so there's this shift in time. There's a way that the images work in terms of shifting back and forth from history to present time.



Jon Henry, *Untitled #9*, Newburgh, NY. Courtesy the artist

JD: If the images are quoting the pietà, then the son is a stand-in for Jesus, so in that sense you can read the Black body as the embodiment of Jesus, or of a body made in God's image, so that the composition is tragic but there's a sacred and beautiful aspect to it as well, an insistence that the Black body is a cherished body.

QM: I was raised Buddhist, so I still baffle over not just the iconography but the constructs of Christianity. This person died for us, for our sins – that was always something I struggled with, placing so much importance on the fact that someone was crucified for the sake of our lives, our humanity

JD: It is certainly a violent iconography and a brutal act at the center of a religion. One of the other things I really appreciate about this series is that Henry is very intentional about making the images all over the country and in all sort of settings. That really resonates with me in terms of suggesting that this is a phenomenon that crosses geographical and economic boundaries.

QM: Right, and the portraits of the mothers with really young sons are really interesting as well, and especially painful. But again, for me, that speaks to not just lynchings but the inequality of medical treatment that Black women and Black mothers receive, or don't receive. It really speaks to the frailty of Black motherhood in that sense, when we see these young babies in their arms. The precariousness of being a Black mother and having Black children at any stage, not just teenage boys. The locations are



Jon Henry, *Untitled #5*, Parkchester, NY. Courtesy the artist

great – there’s one of a mother in front of the capitol, in Montgomery, AL, in front of an official government building. And she’s specifically sitting on the brick road that leads up to the steps – it’s very powerful.

JD: Were there other specific images that stood out for you?

QM: I really loved *Untitled #35, Minneapolis, MN*, with the mother in the snow, and you can see footsteps in the snow as well. I just instantly start visualizing stories, and you see the trees in the background, and the footprint of those trees on the image is really interesting as well. They’re really gorgeous. As much as his images are formally staged, there’s an informal element to them as well, so they function as formal portraits but also as candid documentary images as well.

JD: Henry has spoken about the importance of having images of Black bodies in works of art created by a Black artist, being shown in galleries and museums. But he also talked about the importance of having the images in other spaces, in public art projects – phone booths, for instance – that make them accessible to a wider audience.

QM: It’s also that as a non-white photographer, it’s something that we think about, in terms of who our audience is. As Ming Smith has said, we don’t necessarily have the privilege of making images just for the sake of making images. There’s no immedi-



Jon Henry, *Untitled #35*, North Minneapolis, MN. Courtesy the artist

ate market for our work, and we have to make the work simply because we have to make the work, but we also have to consider multiple audiences. And so he's making this work not just for a gallery but to insert his voice into the history of the medium, which historically has not included Black photographers – even though there have been Black photographers since the creation of the medium. But those voices have not traditionally been valued. So there's always this thought of having to make work for multiple audiences and multiple reasons.

JD: In a talk Henry gave recently, he ended with a call to action: what are you going to do? I think that challenge is somewhat inherent in these photographs.

QM: Right – it's like, what's next? What will you do now, after seeing these images?



THE ARNOLD NEWMAN PRIZE FOR NEW DIRECTIONS IN PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITURE



©Jon Henry, Untitled 13, Groveland Park, IL

The Arnold Newman Prize for New Directions in Photographic Portraiture is a \$20,000 prize awarded annually to a photographer whose work demonstrates a compelling new vision in photographic portraiture. In addition to the winner, the jury selects three finalists each year who are invited to participate in an exhibit at the Griffin Museum of Photography. The Prize is generously funded by the Arnold & Augusta Newman Foundation and proudly administered by Maine Media Workshops + College. The Griffin Museum of Photography hosts the annual exhibition of work by the winner and three finalists each October.

The recipient of the 2020 The Arnold Newman Prize for New Directions in Photographic Portraiture is Jon Henry. Henry's award-winning work entitled *Stranger Fruit* was created in response to the senseless murders of black men across the nation by police violence. According to his artist statement, "Even with smart phones and dash cams recording the actions, more lives get cut short due to unnecessary and excessive violence."

The finalists this year include *The Talk* by Michael Darough, *Solar Portraits* by Rubén Salgado Escudero, and *Buttons for Eyes* by Priya Kambli.

Smithson, Aline, "THE ARNOLD NEWMAN PRIZE FOR NEW DIRECTIONS IN PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITURE,"
LenScratch.com, September 27, 2020

Selected by a jury of world-renowned photographers Makeda Best (Richard L. Menschel Curator of Photography at Harvard University), Aline Smithson (Los Angeles based visual artist, educator, and editor), and Dan Winters (award-winning portrait photographer, illustrator, filmmaker, and writer), each juror brought to the selection process a unique perspective guided by distinguished insight, analysis, and integrity.

"Arnold Newman had a profound influence on photographers in the latter half of the 20th Century," noted Maine Media President Michael Mansfield. "That his legacy continues to shape conversations around photography, to support new generations of image makers – portraiture in the 21st century – is truly inspiring."

Jon Henry is a visual artist working with photography and text, from Queens NY (resides in Brooklyn). His work reflects on family, sociopolitical issues, grief, trauma and healing within the African American community. His work has been published both nationally and internationally and exhibited in numerous galleries including Aperture Foundation, Smack Mellon, and BRIC among others. Known foremost for the cultural activism in his work, his projects include studies of athletes from different sports and their representations. He was recently named one of LensCulture's Emerging Artists for 2019, an En Foco Fellow for 2020 and he has also won the Film Photo Prize for Continuing Film Project sponsored by Kodak



©Jon Henry, Untitled 19, Magnificent Mile, IL

Stranger Fruit

Stranger Fruit was created in response to the senseless murders of black men across the nation by police violence. Even with smart phones and dash cams recording the actions, more lives get cut short due to unnecessary and excessive violence.

Who is next? Me? My brother? My friends? How do we protect these men?

Lost in the furor of media coverage, lawsuits and protests is the plight of the mother. Who, regardless of the legal outcome, must carry on without her child.

I set out to photograph mothers with their sons in their environment, reenacting what it must feel like to endure this pain. The mothers in the photographs have not lost their sons, but understand the reality, that this could happen to their family. The mother is also photographed in isolation, reflecting on the absence. When the trials are over, the protesters have gone home and the news cameras gone, it is the mother left. Left to mourn, to survive.

The title of the project is a reference to the song "Strange Fruit." Instead of black bodies hanging from the Poplar Tree, these fruits of our families, our communities, are being killed in the street



©Jon Henry, Untitled 24, Birmingham, AL

SOJOURN ARTS

How many pietàs? / June 15, 2020



Untitled #33, Jersey City, NJ. © Jon Henry.

In *Breathe: A Letter to My Sons*, Imani Perry writes, “We wail and cry, how many pietàs?” And a couple pages later: “As a Black mother, when I read about one of those children whose life has been snatched, at first blush I think, ‘That could have been my child.’ But I have demanded of myself that I turn away from such egotism. The truth is that is not my child. My children are here, and they stand with me, to honor their dead.”

Photographer Jon Henry and his portrait subjects have chosen to contemplate what Imani Perry demanded she turn herself from: "That could have been my child." Jon Henry has made dozens of photographs showing mothers holding their Black sons, not standing, but cradled, or draped over the mother's legs, as if dead. In his words, these images were, "created in response to the senseless murders of Black men across the nation by police violence." This ongoing project, which he calls *Stranger Fruit*, started in 2014, but has recently found new audiences after the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The images are arresting, direct and formal compositions made in informal locations. The poses vary, but all are reminiscent of a pietà.

A pietà is a traditional Christian image showing Mary the mother of Jesus holding the dead body of Jesus. By far, the most famous pietà is Michelangelo's sculpture which sits in St. Peter's at the Vatican. (It's worth noting that Michelangelo's Pietà is also an ethnically-specific image and was also made to directly appeal to his time and place.) By utilizing the pietà motif, Jon Henry is drawing connections between the dead Christ and murdered Black men. He's drawing connections between Mary's sorrow and the sorrow of Black mothers who fear for the safety of their sons. These images are working on multiple levels. They are telling what artist Steve Prince calls a poly-narrative, referencing Mary and Jesus, but also clearly referencing living people in America today. The focus here is on the contemporary situation.



Michelangelo's Pietà, 1498-1499. St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican



Untitled #10, Flushing, NY ©Jon Henry

What do these photographs want from me?

I think these images want me to see these people and respect them. These images request my compassion for all mothers and fathers who feel, "It could've been my child." These are real people in front of our gaze.



Untitled #29, North Miami, FL ©Jon Henry

The idea from Genesis 1 that people have been created “in the image of God” is familiar to most Christians. Because all people are made in the image of God, all people have equal and great worth. It’s a terrible sin when we fail to recognize the image of God in individuals. Like in so many other areas of American life, African-Americans have experienced disproportionate consequences of this failure.

Jesus is the perfect, unblemished image of God. That image wasn’t blurred by his suffering. In Christ’s suffering he was still the perfect image of God. In Jon Henry’s photographs, the men and boys pictured are posed in the image of the Jesus who suffered. This should help us see the image of God in them. Can we see the image of God in them? Can we see the image of God in other people that look like them? Our increasing ability to see the image of God in every person is a mark of Christian maturity.



Jon Henry, *Untitled #35*, North Minneapolis, MN. Courtesy the artist

And we also must remember what Imani Perry wants us to remember:

“...yes, there is terror, but there is also incredible beauty. And there’s a way in which the repetition of the narrative of the terror almost evacuates the full humanity of their lives, and my life, and also the incredible beauty. And so the question, for me, is both how do we acknowledge the social reality of deep inequality, of mass incarceration, of death of innocent black youth, and also recognize that it’s important to assert and reassert the full humanity and beauty of their lives, and also to offer them a vision of their lives that is meaningful — and a kind of witness that I think actually speaks to the entirety of the human experience.” - Imani Perry, on *On Being*, Sept. 26, 2019

Wrigley, James, "Jon Henry's Strange Fruit: The Women Who Must Endure the Senseless Loss And Carry On,"
ThenThereWasUs.co.uk, April 6, 2020

THEN THERE WAS US

Jon Henry's Strange Fruit: The Women Who Must Endure the Senseless Loss And Carry



The interpretation of the classic Pietà; a son lay bare across the lap of his mother, a throat exposed, a real body with real skin, the gentle protective hand that rests on her sons shoulder, a family carrying the weight of loss. Created in a response to the senseless murders of black men across the nation by police violence, Jon Henry set out to photograph mothers with their sons in their environment, reenacting what it must feel like to endure this pain.

Since its creation in 1499, Michelangelo's Pietà has inspired emotion, faith, and imitation. Look closely at the marble and it will seem like flesh, the complicated folds of drapery, a head thrown back with a neck exposed to us with incred-

Wrigley, James, "Jon Henry's Strange Fruit: The Women Who Must Endure the Senseless Loss And Carry On,"
ThenThereWasUs.co.uk, April 6, 2020

ible vulnerability, a foot hangs in midair, Mary, her left hand open and pointing delicately forward, as if to comprehend his death, the death of her son. Pietà means pity or compassion and represents Mary sorrowfully contemplating the dead body of her son which she holds on her lap. It is important to remember how this sculpture is made, in a messy, loud process much like the emotional trauma suffered by the loss of a mother's child. "Lost in the furore of media coverage, lawsuits and protests is the plight of the mother. Who, regardless of the legal outcome, must carry on without her child."

"When the trials are over, the protesters have gone home and the news cameras gone, it is the mother left. Left to mourn, to survive."

A visual artist working with photography and text, from Queens NY, Jon Henry Known foremost for the cultural activism in his work, reflects on family, socio-political issues, grief, trauma and healing within the African American community. Created in a response to the senseless murders of black men across the nation by police violence, Jon Henry set out to photograph mother's with their sons in their environment, reenacting what it must feel like to endure this pain. "The mother's in the photographs have not lost their sons, but understand the reality, that this could happen to their family, The mother is also photographed in isolation, reflecting on the absence. When the trials are over, the protesters have gone home and the news cameras gone, it is the mother left. Left to mourn, to survive."





Jon Henry reinterprets the classic Pietà; a son lay bare across the lap of his mother, a throat exposed, a real body with real skin, the gentle protective hand that rests on her sons shoulder, a family carrying the weight of loss. These images, accompanied with quotes describing their thoughts and focusing on the mother son relationship depict and examine the tragedy and the nature of a mother's suffering, although their sons are alive in Henry's series, these mother's share their constant state of precarity and the precious existence of their children. The title of the project is a reference to the song "Strange Fruit." That instead of black bodies hanging from the Poplar Tree, these fruits of families, and communities, are being killed in the streets. *"I was interested in taking portraits of the mother's looking away from camera, as a way for the viewer to try to get into their mind. In some of the images there is an obvious presence missing. In some there is none, but it is a connection to the mother's who have lost their sons. What does normal look like after the tragedy?"*

Wrigley, James, "Jon Henry's Strange Fruit: The Women Who Must Endure the Senseless Loss And Carry On,"
ThenThereWasUs.co.uk, April 6, 2020



How do these families process everyday activities after these horrible events? I direct these images based on the environment that the families live/work near."

The powerful images from this series have been exhibited across New York City's pay-phones through Art in Ad Places a campaign replacing outdoor advertising with artwork. "I've been interested in public installation ever since seeing the work of Felix Gonzalez Torres. The work is fine art and gets exhibited in galleries, but that is not the sole audience for the work. I wanted to be able to reach people who do not enter those spaces and share it publicly. The feedback was positive from those who reached out, but it was not important to hear from everyone. I was more interested in passerbys encountering this work on such a scale to give them some pause. It is definitely a departure from how the black body is viewed in a public space (ie advertising or other)."

"It's mentally taxing. I wish we didn't have to speak about this constantly but until necessary changes are made."

Stranger Fruit and the themes and stories covered in Henry's work are not new, to the shame of our modern society loss of life continues, as does the exploration of Henry's work, "It's mentally taxing. I wish we didn't have to speak about this constantly but until necessary changes are made, we will continue. It is great that the work is being shared widely during this time, but the larger issues remain. This issue must be addressed honestly and proactively. We cannot wait."