

## ARTFORUM

### Deana Lawson

SIKKEMA JENKINS & CO.

In her highly acclaimed 2007 book *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Saidiya Hartman observes that the black diaspora has, out of necessity, mythologized a shared past: a Mother Africa. When one's ancestors, as well as the stories they carried, have been violently effaced, speculation and lore are all that remain. "Slavery," she writes, "made your mother into a myth, banished your father's name, exiled your siblings to the far corners of the earth."

For her first solo show at Sikkema Jenkins, Deana Lawson exhibited two landscapes and eight portraits that explore what a shared black identity might look like and what spaces it might inhabit. The portraits, taken during her travels throughout Africa and the Caribbean as well as to predominantly black communities in the United States, seem at first glance disarmingly straightforward, resembling family snapshots of a second order: not records of major occasions to be enlarged and given the gold-frame treatment (as the works on view were), but pictures of everyday moments destined for shoeboxes or scrapbooks. Lawson captures her subjects in living rooms, kitchens, and bedrooms, holding deliberate and sometimes gendered poses. Men thrust their hands forward with bravado, while women seductively clutch round hips. Take *Eternity*, 2017, in which a young woman poses in shimmering, beaded lingerie. In *Seagulls in Kitchen*, 2017, a man gingerly wraps his arms around his girlfriend's waist as if for a prom picture, here transferred from dance floor to linoleum floor.

The banal nature of the backdrops and the figures' sentimental postures belie the level of Lawson's involvement in the photographic process. There is nothing self-directed about the way her subjects perform for the camera; rather, each image is the product of meticulous artistic intervention. Lawson stages each scenario, sometimes even manufacturing relationships. *Woman with Child*, 2017, for instance, appears to capture a mother cradling her baby, but in fact the infant is not hers. The lovers in *Seagulls in Kitchen* are not a real couple. Only with close examination does it become possible to discern hints of Lawson's direction in small, triumphant flourishes: The color of the rubber bands wrapped around the man's wrists in *Seagulls in Kitchen* matches the milky yellow of his companion's hoop earrings; the wood grain of a picture frame in the living room of *Soweto Queen*, 2017, echoes the pattern of the window drapes with canny precision.

Photography's capacity to blend truth with fiction was evident in Lawson's landscapes, too. For these, she used found images to construct two allegorical sites that have historically been imagined and fantasized as black. The first was a grainy shot of a Jamaican jungle suggestively titled *The Bush*, 2013, evoking primitivist fantasies of lush and teeming forests, while the second featured a print of the Messier 81 galaxy, folded so its astral expanse resembled bird's wings—a fluttering, Afrofuturist mecca. There have been many homelands invented for the African diaspora, from the African continent itself to the farthest reaches of the cosmos. But Lawson showed that anywhere, even the most ordinary domestic interiors, can be a point of interaction and interconnection that creates community and collective memory. Myth, Hartman says, is the "threshold of history." Lawson prompts us to see that threshold piled high with photographs.

—Hannah Stamler



Deana Lawson, *Seagulls in Kitchen*, 2017, inkjet print, 71 1/4 x 56 3/4".