

ARTFORUM





Deana Lawson, *Nation*, 2018,
ink-jet prints, 55 1/2 x 67 1/2".



BEST OF 2018

DEANA LAWSON

Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

HELEN MOLESWORTH

IT'S BEEN QUITE A YEAR—talk about the personal being political—and I'll be as glad to see the back of 2018 as anyone. But there were some good moments, and one of them has been haunting me: *Nation*, an image from Deana Lawson's exhibition at Sikkema Jenkins & Co. in New York.

I was introduced to Lawson's work by the late artist Noah Davis. Davis hung Lawson's *Dirty South*, 2010, a moody photograph of an old car in a pitch-black nocturnal landscape, in the back room of the Underground Museum, the exhibition space he cofounded in Los Angeles. (It remains there today.) Later, Lawson's work was included in Davis's now-legendary "Non-Fiction," an exhibition I installed after he died in 2015. In the wake of that show, I acquired two photographs for

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the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, where they were quickly included in two separate collection installations. All this familiarity, and still I was not prepared for the intensity of my response to *Nation*.

The picture bears all the hallmarks of what is quickly becoming a "classic" Lawson image. Its subjects are black people, two of whom gaze directly toward the viewer. Access is granted to a domestic interior as marked by class as any photograph by Tina Barney. As is the case with almost all of Lawson's images, despite the feeling of "authenticity" and "truth" connoted through its direct address, the picture is heavily stage-directed. Lawson frequently works with subjects she encounters as strangers and asks to take their picture. She often brings accoutrements to the shoot—clothing, accessories, decorative objects—to shape the image to her liking. In the case of *Nation*, she arrived with a bag of bling and some orthodontic headgear that she had spray-painted gold. The man on the right volunteered to put on the mouth guard. He had also chosen, much to Lawson's surprise, to get his hair done that morning in an almost-pompadour that anachronistically evoked the early days of rock and roll. Everything else about this sinewy guy, with his chains and tattoos, reads as heterosexual, and the same is true of his two friends. But here he is, holding either a blunt or a cigarette in one hand (a bright-green lighter is lying on the sofa next to him), his other arm resting effortlessly across his own body, with hair that incongruously evokes the whacked-out polymorphous sexuality of Little Richard. As his eyes roll perilously close to the tops of their

sockets, his mouth is held open by a contraption that manages to be as futuristic as it is medieval. The parquet floor, so common to post-World War II apartments, tilts up toward the back of the picture, while the arm of the man on the left breaks the plane of the figures and propels the tension of the picture out into the space of the viewer. This spatial wobble is steadied by Lawson's inclusion of a postcard-like digital print, tucked into the upper right-hand corner of the frame. The postcard quickly performs the work of reminding us that this is "art," and, as such, it's flat and not "real." On the other hand, a postcard tucked into the edge of a frame is a display rarely, if ever, found in art galleries and museums. This gesture is the province of domestic mementos—school photos, prayer cards, pictures of departed loved ones. In a way, the faux postcard falls into the last of these categories, but it also serves as the clue that unravels this mysterious picture. It is an image of President George Washington's dentures, the last surviving complete set, which, I learned as a result of my encounter with *Nation*, is on permanent view, and one of the most popular tourist attractions, at Mount Vernon.

It turns out that Washington suffered from terrible dental problems for his entire adult life and by the time of his inauguration as our nation's first president possessed only one remaining original tooth. As a result, he had many sets of dentures, and the ones shown here are fabricated from human teeth. The purchasing of human teeth for dental use was relatively common among the European aristocracy (a class, it should be noted, that Washington had just led a revolution

Deana Lawson, *Dirty South*, 2010.
ink-jet print, 24 x 29 1/2".



to overthrow). A quick Google search for "Washington false teeth" will lead one to a slew of articles, including a *New York Times* piece by Michael Beschloss, the presidential historian familiar to all Rachel Maddow addicts. Written six years into the Obama presidency, it is, to my ear, a breathtaking account, or should I say a breath-sucking-in account, that includes a devastating parenthesis: "Folklore notwithstanding, Washington's false teeth were not wooden. He obtained them instead from horses, donkeys, cows—and human beings. (According to his account books, in 1784, emulating some of his affluent friends, he bought nine teeth from unidentified 'Negroes'—perhaps enslaved African-Americans at his beloved Mount Vernon; the price was 122 shillings.)"

Did he say *Beloved*?

I can't.

To be clear, I only read that after my haunting had begun. What had been dogging me since I first saw the picture was a lie I was taught in elementary school. You know, the one about how George Washington could not tell a lie, and how he chopped down a cherry tree, and how he was such a fucking Goody Two-shoes that he told somebody he'd done it, and that's why he was able to lead our great nation into being, because he was a man among men, not a king. And the story didn't stop there. No doubt some nice teacher lady went on to say "any of us" (as she swings her arm wide toward a class of kids circa 1972 at P.S. 219 in Flushing, Queens) could be president too, because Washington's inherited wealth and status

aren't what made him special; instead, he signaled the beginning of a meritocracy, in which hard work and speaking the truth and being on the right side of history were the things that made you—one, me, us—American. It hadn't occurred to me in the intervening forty-some years that Washington had spoken any and all truths he ever uttered by placing his tongue up against the teeth of slaves, persons barred from the new experiment in meritocracy by virtue of their having been born with melanated skin.

And what of these three possible progeny of ancestors who once resided at Mount Vernon? What to make of a man who chooses to hold his mouth open with the most fantastical grill? To render himself both speechless and vulnerable? To drape himself in gold, a standard of currency long since abandoned? What to make of a *Nation* whose exceptionalism was made possible through slaves? What to make of a *Nation* whose version of the truth had at its center, at its origin, in the very mouth of its founding father, the unspeakable? I can't answer any of those questions head-on and still keep my wits about me. So instead I think about Deana Lawson, a photographer who carries props around in her purse, looking for people to make pictures with, pictures that condense these contradictions with the pressure it takes to turn coal into diamonds. □

HELEN MOLESWORTH IS A CURATOR AND WRITER. SHE IS CURRENTLY AT WORK ON A BOOK ABOUT WHAT ART DOES. HER MOST RECENT EXHIBITION, "ONE DAY AT A TIME: MANNY FARBER AND TERMITE ART," IS ON VIEW AT LA MOCA THROUGH MARCH 11, 2019.