

GARAGE



THE HUMAN FUTURE

RIHANNA BY DEANA LAWSON

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Working This Destiny

RIHANNA IS AN INIMITABLE PORTRAIT SUBJECT, BUT UNDER DEANA LAWSON'S EMPATHIC GAZE EVEN MERE MORTALS TAKE ON AN INDISPUTABLE REGALITY. IN THE FOLLOWING CONVERSATION WITH ARTIST ARTHUR Jafa, LAWSON REFLECTS ON HOW SHE CAME TO HER MEDIUM AND THE PROCESS OF TAKING PICTURES BEYOND THE SURFACE.

ARTHUR Jafa: *Where were you born and where did you grow up? What's your origin story?*

DEANA LAWSON: I'm from Rochester, New York, a working-class environment on the east side of the city. My grandmother and my great-grandmother on my mother's side are from Rochester, and my grandfather came from Sanford, Florida. But the fact that my great-grandmother is from upstate, actually closer to Niagara Falls, always had this mythology that our family must have been part of the Underground Railroad. On another mythological note, I've often told the story about how my paternal grandmother was a domestic housekeeper for George Eastman. My aunt said that one day, my grandmother was cleaning the home, and she overheard Eastman ask his nurse where his heart was located, and then the morning after he had committed suicide through a shot in his chest.

AJ: *To be a photographer who grew up in Rochester—that doesn't seem arbitrary.*

DL: I agree. My mother worked at Kodak for 39 years as an administrative assistant. When she initially went to Kodak to apply for a job, she applied to be a factory worker. The man who was interviewing her said, "You don't look like a factory worker; you look like you belong in an office." That's how she got her administrative job, which paid very well and offered a tremendous amount of security for our family.

AJ: *Was your family working class, middle class, mixed?*

DL: The economic background is mixed. I was closest to my mother's side, which is lower income to working class, and is a very large extended-family clan. I witnessed female bravado at its finest on her side. I would characterize them as rough, honest, sharply dressed, quick to fight with their hands, generous with love and acceptance, loud talking, cigarette smoking, homes kept clean, churchgoing—but they would go out on the weekends. The volume turns down when we go to my father's side, where there is a higher ratio of middle-class income—more middle class aspiring

to be upper class. On his side, I have a cousin Valentina who was a dancer in the Garth Fagan Dance company, and I was so taken by her name, *Valentina*, and her profession as a dancer that as a 10-year-old, she was damn near exotic to me. And then my father's sister, Aunt Sylvia, was one of the first black female ophthalmologists in upstate New York. Three of her siblings (two of my uncles and one aunt) have albinism and were born legally blind. It was because of her siblings that Aunt Sylvia knew from the age of five that she wanted to help people "see"—so much so that she played with operating on the eyes of her baby dolls. Later she would be one of the first to perform and perfect intricate cornea transplants, giving "sight" to people as young as two weeks old. So, I would say my mom's side helped me identify what beauty was in the everyday, which I took as the norm, while my father's side deposited seeds of a wider world to be explored.

AJ: *How much of this were you aware of coming up? Do you think it had an impact on your psychology of who you are, your sense of yourself?*



Deana Lawson, Nikki's Kitchen, 2015,
courtesy Sikkema Jenkins & Co. and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago, © Deana Lawson

DL: I wasn't aware of it in an analytical way growing up, but I was aware on a subliminal level. More than anything, I was aware by age 12 that I needed to leave Rochester. Distance, time, and new knowledge were the keys to understanding the significance of my familial background in Rochester and how that would play out in my pictures. That and my dad's pictures—hundreds of his photographs, placed carefully in family albums, that I would return to again and again to see and resee images of my family in their glory and in the everyday. One picture that has stayed with me is of my twin sister and me at around five years old when my sister broke her thumb. Dana was running back and forth getting snacks out of the kitchen and fell and jammed her thumb in, way down. My dad said when he saw it, it was just a little stub. So she had to be rushed to the hospital. I remember when she got her cast, and we were sitting on the stoop—I don't know if I actually remember the moment, or if my memory is of the picture—

AJ: *You have the memory of the memory.*

DL: Right [laughs]. I was sitting on the stoop, holding my sister's arm with the cast, and we both had these frowns on our faces. Even though the injury didn't happen to me, it was so deeply felt, observing her go through that pain. You could even see in my expression in the picture that I was so concerned. I wanted to do something to comfort her. But either way, he took this picture. We're both dressed exactly alike. We both have the same frowns on our head. That picture kind of pierced me. I think that was, like, the beginning of identifying with another person, or trying to understand another human being's pain, in a way, through looking at myself.

AJ: *As a photographer, these things would seem super relevant. It's almost like that famous Diane Arbus picture of the two twins. It's really interesting to talk about two black women, and one of them is a photographer. How do you feel about that question of destiny?*

DL: I believe in destiny, and I know I was destined to be an artist with a camera. It all adds up: my grandmother who worked for George Eastman, my mother who was a secretary at Kodak, my aunt who helps people "see," my father who was the family photographer...how could it not be destiny? When my sister got sick, I had to win for both of us. Know what I mean? We were extremely popular in Rochester when we were growing up. Everybody knew us as "the twins." Deana-Dana. Even the way people would say "Deana-Dana," it was like one name, not two. We are identical, so people had a hard time distinguishing one from the other. When we went to Penn State, everyone had this hope or dream for the both of us. Everybody knew we were about to do something. And then, when she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis and had to go back home—she dropped out of college—I just had to figure out, What the hell am I going to do without my other half?

AJ: *Tell me about that impulse to do the kind of photos that you do.*

DL: In some ways, I feel like it's about generations. My mom is very conservative. She has a very particular idea of what a lady is and who she should be. I would say she's even conservative in comparison to my aunts and other women in her generation. So, I think just me deciding to do what I'm going to

do anyway is a part of the teenage rebelliousness of going against my mom.

AJ: *Yeah, but you're not a teenager anymore.*

DL: Someone said that I'm ruthless when it comes to what I want. Maybe that's part of it: I have an image in mind that I have to make. It burns so deeply that I have to make it, and I don't care what people are going to think.

AJ: *So much of it also comes down to value, making value. Who gets to be valued? Who's worthy of even being documented? Who doesn't have value in society's eyes? Black people internalize all this stuff. Like, some of us have more value than some other people. It's a very problematic formulation.*

DL: When I'm going out to make work, usually I'm choosing people that come from a lower- or working-class situation. My choice feels natural because it's a reflection of the people and forces I grew up around in Rochester. I'm choosing people around the neighborhood: near public transportation, in beauty supply shops, fried-chicken spots, nightclubs, Family Dollar, churches, et cetera. It's about value. It's about using a figure or a body to represent something higher than we would normally associate it with.

AJ: *What do you mean by "higher"?*

DL: On a transcendental plane. I feel a lot of the figures that I use, I want them to be a pivotal point, or like a vehicle or a vessel for something else. Diane Arbus was always keen on this idea of what the photograph is and what it does. What you see in the photograph is one thing; the specifics or what it references or what it's symbolic of is greater than that. She said the subject is always more complex than the picture. She said, "What it's of is always more remarkable than what it is." I learn a lot from people I meet. I recently met a beautiful woman on the A train. She entered the train; her figure was just phenomenal. When she walked by me and sat down, everyone looked at her. But beyond her figure, her entire disposition and demeanor was breathtaking—I know when I need to ask someone to photograph them, because it feels like time stops for a minute, like a movie. So whenever I get that feeling of time stopping, I know, You'd better go ask them right now.

I tried not to stare at her directly, but I couldn't help myself. I made an internal pact with myself that if she got off at my stop I would ask her. Utica Avenue came up, and she got up. I'm like, DING-DING! This is a good sign. So she got off the train, and I ran up behind, and I slowed down as I approached her, and I went up the stairs...I waited until we got all the way up the stairs, and I'm like, "Hi, I'm a photographer."

AJ: *When you see somebody, time stops. I think it's the first time I've ever heard a woman photographer describe that dynamic.*

DL: Yes...there are moments when my rhythm of time ruptures. I've learned that these moments must be linked to my intuition. And I listen to it. Many of my lifelong friendships and relationships began with the same feeling. I had a similar moment in undergraduate school. A student had asked to take pictures of me freshman year, and when I met up with her, she was still in the midst of photographing another young woman. I remember watching her, and I was turned on by the image of her making photographs of someone else. That day I went to

the campus pharmacy and bought a disposable black-and-white camera. I thought I was about to take some artsy pictures. This little camera was the beginning—I began taking pictures of me and my friends and my sister. I still have those pictures to this day. My impulse was not to photograph at the park; I was interested in my friends. So I began asking friends in our clique if I could photograph them and other attractive black women on campus. I was already trying to do a setup even before I had the right equipment to do it properly. I made up my own makeshift studio using laundry baskets lined with foil and strong incandescent lightbulbs, and then I put a white nylon cloth over the front, trying to imitate a softbox because I didn't have money for the real thing. It would always burn and start smoking, because the bulbs were super hot, and often my subject would alert me to it. But I just liked the idea of, Okay, I'm going to have the subject do this. I bought particular shoes from thrift shops. The thrift shop to this day is still a part of my process.

AJ: *Who influenced you? It could be anything. Filmmakers, painters, sculptors, dancers, musicians...*

DL: I remember this one line I took out of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), of course, where she says about the women: "They wash themselves with orange-colored Lifebuoy soap, dust themselves with Cashmere Bouquet talc, clean their teeth with salt on a piece of rag, soften their skin with Jergens Lotion." After I read that, I realized I was familiar with the scent of a woman who wears Jergens lotion, or the kind of woman who wears Jean Naté After Bath Splash... I wanted to make a picture of what that woman smelled like. I wanted to make a picture of the women who would wear deep plum lipstick in New York City. Toni Morrison brought out the olfactory sense in writing, Jorge Luis Borges and just his writing of "The Aleph" (1945), and the center of the world is pinpointed in the basement. Or, in *The Matrix* (1999), the oracle was the black woman in the kitchen smoking a cigarette and making cookies. Like, that's where the shit is—the knowledge. That's the site of another dimension, maybe, but we don't know it. That information has been distorted. But if black folks really knew that, we'd just be on a different plane.

AJ: *I'm curious about when you went to places like Haiti or the Congo. When you see these rituals that just seem so different, whether it be Jouvèrt (Jouvert, 2013) or the people, like the voodoo and the stuff that looks like Santeria maybe (Danto Sacrifice, 2012). What's your connection to these geographical spaces? What draws you to a particular location?*

DL: My desire to travel came from my father. Travel is equivalent to movement, and movement is freedom. I started reading Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse* (1938), and I was fascinated by her travelogues in New Orleans, Jamaica, and Haiti. Around the same time I saw Maya Deren's *Divine Horsemen* (1985). I think it was a kind of nostalgia that comes from what Zora wrote about, and her whole ethnographic yet personal sort of position, and me wanting to adopt a little bit of that, but not fully. I wanted a little bit of the ethnography in the work. That also stems from looking at *National Geographic* in the orthodontist's office and being captivated by images I was seeing of Africa or Southeast Asia. In some ways, it's a maybe naive ambition just to say, "I want to go there and I want to see that." But then, too, as an adult, it's also about this subtext of black power and ancient kingdoms of

Africa, and wanting to go there as a photographer, to think about that in my images and use it in this greater narrative about black Americans and West Indians. What I'm trying to do is create this metanarrative that's about family, but also going across time and space, using the legends and lore of the marvelous parts of Africa in my work—to reactivate that.

AJ: *Reinvigorate.*

DL: Yes. Reinvigorate it. So yeah, going to the Congo. Congo is one of the wealthiest countries in the world in terms of natural resources. The land itself is extremely fertile and laden with jewels. And if the land is that wealthy, then the people must also be wealthy in knowledge and spirit. I said to myself, I want to go there; Congo is clearly the place that I want to represent for the Adam and Eve figures—the garden. If I have my version of the Creation story (*The Garden*, 2015), this is where it's going to begin, right here, and this is how the people will look, beautiful and brown...this is how humanity began.

AJ: *What's the first successful photo that you think you made?*

DL: I know very clearly what that photo is—a picture I made in 2001. I found these two-and-a-half-inch vintage heels from a thrift shop. I put the model in a lilac-colored dress and these heels, and we went on these tattered steps, and I asked her to slant to the side to look as if the heels were bending, and I photographed the calves and the feet from the back. That was the image that got me into grad school at the Rhode Island School of Design. There was history and suffering in those feet, as seen through the slant in the heels. It was that picture where I knew that there was much to be explored. Just that gesture of those heels broken down, but still classy and sophisticated, was kind of like the theater, or the ideal-slash-reality, and the pain that I wanted to express through the body. All of those elements are present in my work to this day.

AJ: *Do you work in series or individually?*

DL: I work from image to image. I've always had limitations in terms of thinking on the grander scale of a series. I tend to think from one picture to the next, or one note to the next note. I'll make one picture, and then I will think about what needs to come next, or what's missing from the picture I made last.

AJ: *But when you go back and look at your work, when you line your work up, when you put them up in your studio, do you pay attention to the arc as it appears when you look back at it?*

DL: Definitely. If I photograph a nude body or a seminude body now, that's different than when I photographed a nude body in 2010.

AJ: *How so?*

DL: Why am I still fascinated with the nude body? Why am I still doing this? Is this an easy win with the nude body, a female nude body here? I took my first nude back in 2005. I remember Ashanti, the nude on the bed with no sheet on the mattress. I was so thrilled. It was actually similar to the woman with the heels bent over. There was something about that mattress with no covering, that paisley print, kind of feminine pattern, with this classical

body. She wasn't traditionally beautiful, but she was gorgeous. The classical painting reference. I felt like, Damn, I did it.

When I don't get what I want, it's abject failure. There's moments where I felt I had this opportunity to make a really amazing photograph that I let slide, which still haunt me to this day. For example, I was in Jamaica, and I went up to Mooretown, a historic Maroons settlement. There was a healer who I wanted to film, but it didn't work out. While I was waiting for her, this woman appeared out of the bushes like a phantom. She was an older woman. She had on a fuchsia button-up shirt and a jean skirt that went down to her ankles, and her zipper was unzipped, and she was just dancing, coming out of the stream from the back. You could tell she was a little off-kilter. But I should have photographed her. I took a picture of her from a distance, but I actually should have taken that moment to pose her against a tree and take a real picture of her, and she would have let me—I know she would have. I didn't because I was so focused on trying to get the healer that I wasn't open enough to improvise at that moment to get something else that was waiting for me.

AJ: *Do you think you work more like a painter or like a film director?*

DL: Formally, people might identify painterly aspects in the work, which is definitely true. I think a lot of people who know me, they know that one of my greatest friends and partners in my life, Aaron Gilbert, definitely inspired my work early on. I think looking at how he made paintings and looking at the work he was looking at over his shoulder—painters like George Tooker, Fra Angelico, these highly stylized setups, very meticulous sort of figurative paintings that I was really seduced by. Most importantly, I was influenced by the way in which Aaron thought about and represented the esoteric within the family unit. He used our own figures, that of himself, our son, Judah, and me, to depict the uncanny and the profound. That was quite meaningful to me, to see myself and my family as vessels in Aaron's paintings. That line of making and thinking inevitably found its way into my handling of subjects—as vessels in front of my camera. I was maybe a little jealous of that medium in a way. I guess maybe my whole style of setting up, especially with color photography, goes back to watching Aaron. Especially with color, I wanted the palette to either intentionally be in harmony or disharmony, in a way that, say, a painting would be. Other painters, like Otto Dix and Balthus—those two painters in particular I feel had a perversity in how they represented sexuality, which I was interested in, in the same way that Kara Walker's cutout figures represent a violent perversity. What do you think is the difference between photography and painting?

AJ: *Photography ostensibly starts out with a perfectly registered, almost mechanical reproduction of the real, at least optically speaking. And painting doesn't start with that. Painting starts from ground zero, in a sense, and it builds up the rendering. But it comes down to discrepancy—disjunctions or gaps in between the thing as you understand it and the thing as it's being proposed or rendered. This idea of discrepancy, with regards to black people, is even deeper. Black people, African peoples, were abducted. We were abducted from Africa. And when we stepped off the slave ship, our agency, our capacity to be self-determined was radically circumscribed. So we find ourselves in these complicated relationships regarding the dynamic between subjects and*

objects—things being viewed and things that view. Being seen versus being a seer. Initially, when Africans step off those ships they have the same battery of cultural verification and affirmation that most people have. But a defining experience for black people during slavery is the separating of folks from their children, from their partners, from their families. So, very quickly, Africans become a new kind of people, black people. We create culture in free fall, but we also create kinship in free fall. This fundamental discrepancy—DuBois calls it double consciousness. It's like two consciousnesses in the same head. The space in between creates a kind of cognitive depth perception, an ability to see the thing from two vantages simultaneously, which gives one's understanding of a thing depth and body and dimensionality. It becomes embodied in the individuals.

DL: I'm captivated by this idea of double consciousness, or this complicated relationship you talked about of being seen and seeing. When I'm looking for subjects and when I'm photographing someone, it always arrives from this undeniable attraction—like seeing a stranger on the street and the stranger seeing me. There are so many times that I've photographed someone and they said that they almost looked different, or they almost didn't recognize themselves—like, they look different in my picture. I'm shooting with a large-format or medium-format camera, sharp lenses, not, you know, a broken lens or out-of-focus lens or whatever, like, say, Sally Mann. But still, something happens, I think, in that space.

AJ: *You're talking about getting at something that's there but not necessarily available, or latent but not necessarily on the surface. It's like black people are inherently scarred by our circumstances, and you're trying to take photographs of them that look past that, like an X-ray looks past surface scars. Photography has to be preoccupied with the things that typically fall outside of the seen and get at the things that are unseen, even though, in fact, you are trying to make a picture of those things—which is almost a kind of contradiction in terms. How much of that for you is intuitive and how much is that a formalized approach or methodology?*

DL: I think me going and searching and having my equipment, a few props, and driving around, that's the intention, and then it just so happens I might meet someone who has this house that kind of fits the image I have, but even goes beyond it in a way that I could have never imagined. It's a combination of intention, intuition, and dream, and then a matter-of-fact camera, the very real lights, going through all this stuff like searching for people, model releases. But then, once you actually stumble upon something, a house that seems like it was from another time, or a figure who has this amazing quality, it just comes together.

AJ: *You were looking for an image you hadn't yet seen.*

DL: I did a photo shoot for *Sons of Cush* (2016) in Flint, Michigan, two years ago, and it was terrible. I found a baby. I found a man. It was an uncle and a niece. And I had bought this little yellow dress, but it didn't work. The lighting was off. The man didn't have the vibe. So then I bought another dress. I brought it to the Congo, I brought this little dress everywhere, and I never did a photo shoot. Finally, I came out to L.A., and I worked with an assistant, who said he knew someone who had just had a baby girl. He called his friend, and

he told me, "Yes, it's a girl." I said, "How old is she? Because the dress is for a baby three months old; she can't be bigger than three months." That was my framework. The baby had to be three months or younger. He was like, "Oh, she was just born two months ago." I was like, "Perfect." We had already done scouting for the house earlier. I wasn't even tied to this particular location, but at the end of the day it really ended up being the only place we could do it, and I'm glad we did. Because there are certain things on the wall, there are certain pictures, the foil on the door, that I would have never imagined. I also wanted to do a photo shoot of some guy with money, but I ended up putting two separate photo shoots together. So, I thought, Instead of doing the two separate portraits, have the guy with the money on the periphery, and then have him be connected to this familial relationship between the guy and his daughter. There's certain things that happened on this picture. First of all, the guy with the daughter is just so beautiful. I showed this picture to my cousin and she was like, "Yo, he is the one right there." So there's just straight-up passion and desire. And I realized it's rare to look at desire and sensuality in pictures through the gaze of a heterosexual black woman. Back in the day, if my high school friends and I had seen this picture, we would say, "Damn, he's fine!"

AJ: You said it was a yellow dress. Right?

DL: Yes, the first photo shoot, I brought a yellow dress, and then—

AJ: That's distinctively a blue dress in the picture.

DL: Yes, it's a blue dress. I brought a different dress for this one. I'm just giving you an example of how many times it might take for me to get to the final image.

AJ: That's the kind of thing you imagine a painter would say—that they imagined this picture and they made it happen. It doesn't really sound like something you would typically associate with photography, which, by virtue of how it's been constructed, how we've come to understand it, is inherently a document.
One photograph I'm fixated on is the couch. That couch is the truth.

DL: I'm so happy that you just said that.

AJ: I've seen this couch before.

DL: It's called *Portal* (2017).

AJ: I mean, is that a picture of a couch with a hole in it, or a hole with a couch around it?

DL: I love the way your mind works. It's interesting how I came to this picture. I went out thinking that I was going to shoot this portrait of a couple. I was in Rochester for Christmas, and I'd met this couple during Thanksgiving, and when I came back I said, "I want to take a picture of you guys." So, me and my cousin, we went to some clubs, and I ended up meeting Larry, and I know Larry owns a club called S&Ps. I called Larry and I said, "Can I do this shoot at your club?" He was like, "Cool, that's fine. But it's going to be on New Year's Eve, you only have a certain amount of time." I came back. I had a couple. We did this shoot, but it came out so terrible. But one thing I kept remembering when I was organizing the space and putting up the backdrop was this couch. I kept looking at it. Then

the models arrive, and I'm doing the photo shoot, and then it was done, it was over, and then I went back home. I woke up on New Year's Day and I'm like, "Oh my God, I've got to go get that picture of that couch." So I called Larry again. This was the third time I had to call him to arrange a shoot. When I came back to the club, people were looking at me, and they're having a drink at two o'clock in the afternoon, and they were like, "Why is she photographing that couch over and over and over again?" When I came back to New York I thought, Thank God that couple led me to that club, because otherwise I would never have found the portal. The portal to me is like Alice in Wonderland, the rabbit hole, but in the juke joint.

AJ: It's a picture that exists on a kind of nexus of spatial temporality. Because it's a picture that makes it explicit that people have sat in it. For all of that big-ass hole in it, it doesn't look like anything that's in the junkyard either. You know what I mean? So it's a picture of a seat that also is going to be sat on. Associatively, at least in my mind, it's entangled with those couches that black people always have in their living rooms that are never lived on, that still have that pebbly plastic on them.

DL: Yes.

AJ: My aunt had one just like that. And no one ever went in. I think it's a class thing. But it's something so ubiquitous to black people to have this furniture in their house that nobody ever used. It was almost vacuum-filled in some sort of cryogenic, almost spatial-temporal suspension. This couch is the absolute opposite of that. It's a thing that because of its over-use signifies in a really profound and distinct way. I've wondered about your working relationship with your friend Dana; how essential is that to your methodology and what you get?

DL: Yes, that's my best friend, Dana Brown, who I've known since third grade, and travel with on photo road trips. When it comes to photographing a subject, I'm more quiet and demure, and I'm trying to figure stuff out. Dana is more pragmatic. With the image *Nikki's Kitchen* (2015), for instance, we had arrived, and I had this bodysuit, and I asked Nikki to try on the bodysuit. She went upstairs, she came back down, she didn't have it on. She said, "I'm not wearing this; it's too small; I'm wearing what I have on." In my mind, the whole photo shoot was centered around this leopard bodysuit in the kitchen. I had no idea what to do or say in that moment. But I gave Dana a look from across the room, and she understood, because we've known each other for so long. I mumbled to her, "Can you figure out how to have her put this bodysuit on?" So Nikki came back down, and Dana was like, "Okay, you should put this on, because we're going to cut out the feet," and dah-da-dah, dah-da-dah, but it was the way she said it—Dana's father was a preacher, so Dana kind of talks like a preacher; she's got this voice to her. And Nikki listened and it worked! I don't think I could have negotiated that in that situation.

AJ: That's a functional thing. I'm more interested in psychologically.

DL: This might not even be connected to the photography, but I think it is. Every time I see her, there's that space of us just talking about everything. To me, my photo road trips are always characterized by this space between the picture and us driving in the car, talking about life, about

relationships, about men, about our kids. Then after the photo shoot, we get ready to go out, to go look for people. Psychologically, it's a space of comfort. I feel like some of the weight is off me when I have her with me, and it's not just about having an extra person to carry the equipment or something.

AJ: The term I use for that is "bearing witness." It's bearing witness to observe something, but it also means there's a certain weight, there's a certain pressure. Or collectively bearing witness is bearing a weight of sorts. What is the exact nature of that weight? I don't think there's a single great photographer that I can think of who's judged totally on the merit of the content of their work, and not their style. Your work, I think, is a perfect example of this, in the sense that there is a lot of specificity not just in the things you're attracted to, but in how you render the things that you're attracted to. Like, how you handle the figure in space is really specific. Mostly you have a single figure or two figures in the frame.

DL: There is the intimacy of engaging with one person in their home, and oftentimes you can only fit but so many people in the frame. It gets hard to direct three or four or five people and have that moment happen. My comfort zone is one or two, in terms of that plane of focus between individuals.

AJ: You say you "direct." Which is not a big surprise, particularly since everybody or most of these people are staring at the camera. There's a pronounced gaze thing going on in this work, right?

DL: Right.

AJ: But people who are directing their gaze toward the camera under your direction—there's a kind of connection happening.

DL: Yes.

AJ: Do you think it has something to do with defusing the gaze when you've got multiple people? Like, the gaze being the fuse?

DL: I think about the capacity for human engagement, particularly in images and in pictures. I'm trying to conjure or direct the subject, in a way, to give me their full potential.

AJ: What do you mean by "their full potential"?

DL: People are creative, godlike beings. I don't feel like we carry ourselves like that all the time, or that we know how miraculous we are. When I speak of potential, teasing out this incredible, powerful person in front of me, I am trying to locate the magnificent and have it come through in the picture. **G**

This interview is an exclusive excerpt adapted from *Deana Lawson: An Aperture Monograph*, to be published by Aperture in late September.