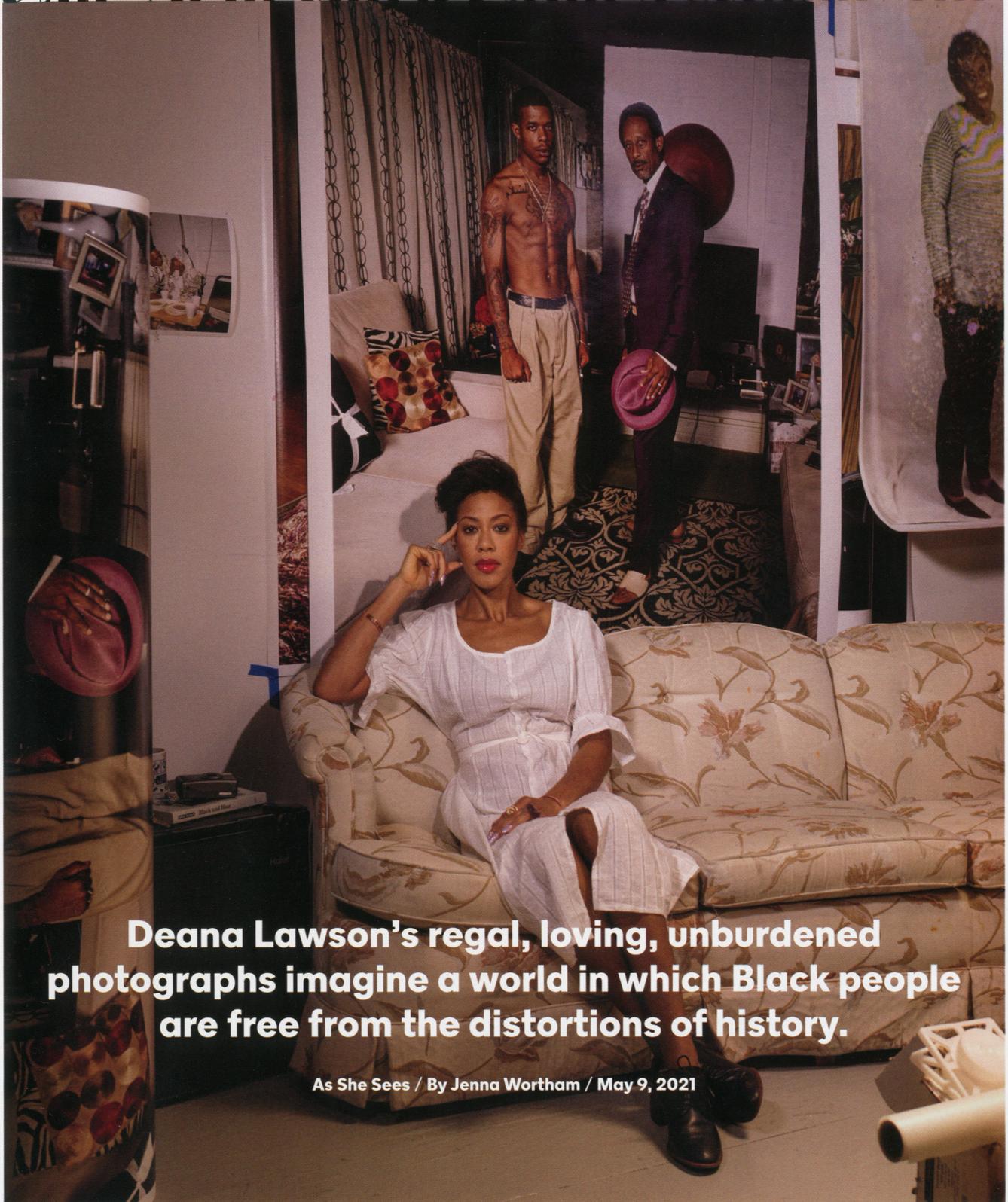


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Deana Lawson's regal, loving, unburdened photographs imagine a world in which Black people are free from the distortions of history.

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By Jenna Wortham / Photograph by Lyle Ashton Harris

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few months ago, the photographer Deana Lawson and her family were driving to an art opening in the Inglewood neighborhood of Los Angeles when Lawson spotted a garage sale out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to pull over, but her 19-year-old son was tired, and he balked. The family passed the sale again on their way back home, and this time, Lawson insisted. When she met an elderly woman tending to the sale, she knew immediately that she wanted to photograph her.

Her name was Ms. Bell, and she offered Lawson a peek into her living room. It was overflowing with ceramics, old dolls and other miscellaneous objects she had collected over the years. Ms. Bell said that her neighbors often gave her trouble about her house, complaining about what they saw as detritus cluttering up the lawn and sidewalk. But Lawson was enchanted. She experienced an overpowering sense of *déjà vu*. "Your living room is the space in my dreams," she told Ms. Bell. They exchanged numbers, and a few days later, Lawson showed her some of her photographs. Ms. Bell liked them and agreed to have her portrait taken.

On the appointed day, Lawson arrived with her gear — lights and her medium- and large-format cameras — and together she and Ms. Bell started arranging the room for the shoot. Lawson often asks her subjects to do "strange things," like posing with babies who are not their own, doing gymnastics moves in little to no clothing or wearing outfits that she supplies. She never knows how people will respond to such requests. "It's not like I'm working with models who expect artists to come to them with weird ideas," she told me. "Usually people are like, You want me to do *what*?"

Ms. Bell was amenable to Lawson's suggestions; the exchanges between them were warm and open, perhaps because they are both Aries, or perhaps because Ms. Bell grew up in Louisiana and her Southernness found kinship with Lawson's down-to-earth demeanor. At one point, Lawson recalls, Ms. Bell told her she was blessed. "There's something about you that felt OK to let into my home," Ms. Bell told her. Even at 85, Ms. Bell was completely game — to experiment, to go deep, to be *seen*, for the length of the session.

Over the last decade or so, Lawson has made portraits of strangers so stunningly intimate and revealing they somehow make you feel as if you were being allowed into a private moment simply by gazing upon them. This effect persists no matter the scenario: a nude woman, standing in an equally bare living room, flanked by gauzy white curtains; an uncle-type leaning back against a cream-colored wall, a large scar and gold cross adorning his chest and belly; intergenerational pairings; couples embracing outside, on beds, engrossed, in love.

Lawson gravitates toward domestic spaces that tend to be cluttered with life: family photos, food containers, toys, sleeping babies, Bibles, shoe boxes, towering piles of laundry. Occasionally, images of people outside will surface: a man lying elegantly across the hood of a car; two motorbike riders traveling along a dirt road; a family of three posing in a wooded area, the beads in their hair mirroring the lush wall of ivy behind them.

Lawson's artistic practice began in the home. She grew up sitting for family portraits, and they were the first images she saw. They were also some of the first she made. She's still reaching backward to pull those fragments forward, which may be why her work glows with nostalgia, the kind of appreciation of something that expands exponentially only after you leave it behind. At the same time, she wants to ensure that those memories, textures, stories make it into the future with us. "It may seem like the past, but there is so much knowledge in those spaces," she told me. "Even an environment that seems like it's from the 1990s is also a way to imagine the future."

Lawson's style has become synonymous with finding glamour in the quotidian, establishing it as already beautiful, already enough. Under her eye, leather couches shine as if recently polished, and the patterns on rugs, chintz drapes, brocade couches and bedspreads all seem to glow. Looking at her images can feel like walking backward through time, recalling childhood: visits to an aunt's house, a repast after a funeral and cozy basements that held church sleepovers. But familiarity doesn't equate to access. Lawson's sitters tend to look directly into the camera with a cool self-possession that spells out the power dynamic, lest you be confused by the rawness of the scene. Her subjects are not at the viewer's mercy. We are merely observing, and lucky for the privilege to do so.

The portrait of Ms. Bell is part of a new body of work that Lawson is making for a series of upcoming shows, including one at the Guggenheim Museum, which awarded her the Hugo Boss Prize last year, the first time a photographer has been chosen to receive the prestigious award. She has created a vernacular as recognizable as a Gordon Parks or Dawoud Bey photo or a Lorna Simpson collage. Lawson's images are singular for their sense of privacy. Her subjects retain an air of mystery, and even secrecy, despite how much appears to be revealed. "She's not only looking at portraiture, but she is exploring the history of performance in photography," Deborah Willis, an artist and professor of photography and imaging at New York University, told me during a recent phone call. Willis says Lawson is at the forefront of a larger movement of Black artists and photographers who are "putting together new ways of seeing and presenting Black people."

More recently, her work has reached beyond the contemporary art world, shaping popular culture. The musician Dev Hynes (who also records as Blood Orange) used her photograph of two people tenderly intertwined on a golden bedspread for the cover of his 2016 album, "Freetown Sound," an expression of outrage and pain over racial injustice. Two years later, Lawson photographed Rihanna for *Garage* magazine, capturing the soft equilibrium between the island girl Robyn (her given first name) and the majestic entrepreneur Fenty (her last name) who now presides over a billion-dollar beauty empire. Rihanna is resplendent in luxe clothing, her face open and trusting.

In the portrait that emerged from her session with Ms. Bell, Lawson has her perched on a dining-room chair; behind her are old appliances, a plastic tub, racks of clothes, a dark cherry cabinet holding dishware and a large urn filled with flowers. What stands out most is Ms. Bell's posture: She's tipped forward, her face radiant with a self-assured smile, adorned in a silky emerald green blouse and plum-colored slacks that match the tint of her hair. Her feet are festooned with a pair of oversize ski boots in a black-red-green-yellow colorway that recall the Pan-African flag designed by Marcus Garvey as a symbol of resistance and unity among Black people around the world. Ms. Bell's smile has the wry humor of a woman who has always been underestimated but knows better than to derive her value from external appraisal. The world may not know how to cherish Ms. Bell, but Lawson and her camera do.

On an unusually wet afternoon for Southern California in March, I made my way over to the house in Los Angeles where Lawson and her family spent the last several months. Aaron Gilbert, the painter with whom Lawson co-parents two children, opened their door, offering a smile as he cleaned some brushes. A replica of the artist David Hammons's African-American flag, which integrates Garvey's tricolor scheme into the traditional design, was visible in the entryway. Lawson, who was wearing



"Uncle Mack," 2016.

a fuzzy pink sweater decorated with clusters of pearls and black-and-white plaid cigarette pants, appeared behind him and led me through their modest home. The house was quiet, but there were remnants of life everywhere. A box of cake mix sat on the counter next to an Aunt Jemima ceramic cookie jar. An overflowing bookcase was topped by a white-lace runner and clusters of gold-framed photos. Children's toys lay discarded under a dining table. Lawson put on some music, and as Roberta Flack's voice filled the room, she took a seat at a glass-topped table in front of a wall painted in a rich, tropical coral that set off the

vibrant green butterfly palm frond in the corner. Two sizable geodes sat glittering on the table: one blue, the other white. I had the uncanny feeling we were sitting inside one of her images.

I'd been curious about the delicate negotiations Lawson makes with her subjects like Ms. Bell ever since I first came across her work online. The writer Zadie Smith, who met Lawson several years ago at a dinner hosted by a colleague from New York University, where Smith teaches, told me over email that Lawson struck her immediately as "calm and easy with people and open to everything." They quickly bonded as young mothers struggling

to balance their parental responsibilities with their artistic desires. Smith remembered once walking into a party with her hair picked out into an Afro, feeling insecure. Lawson, seeming to register her discomfort, came over to compliment her on it. "She's just someone who makes other people feel they can say whatever, do whatever," Smith says. Lawson told me that she considers herself extremely tenacious when going after what she wants. "I'm persistent not because I just want to be persistent, but because I feel like I have an ultimate purpose to do it," she says.

Lawson's purpose can feel prewritten. The Kodak empire is headquartered in Rochester, N.Y., her hometown, and according to family lore, Lawson's paternal grandmother cleaned the house of George Eastman, Kodak's founder. Lawson's mother did administrative work for the company for more than 30 years. Lawson's aunt Sylvia was one of the first Black female ophthalmologists in upstate New York — a pioneer in laser surgery, helping people regain their sight. I asked Lawson if she felt those details were crucial elements to understanding her as an artist, or if they were the kind of thing that becomes overdetermined by the media as a narrative. But she says she sees the Kodak connection as divine intervention. "Looking back, I do feel like there's a destiny to it," she says, especially because she didn't grow up going to museums. "The institutions I grew up with were public school and the mall," she says, laughing.

Lawson speaks of her childhood with reverence and wonder. "It was an incredible experience, and in some ways, my work is always reaching back toward that," she says. Her family has been rooted in the Rochester area for generations. Her mother, Gladys, has five sisters and three brothers, and her father, Cornelius, has three brothers and three sisters. She was close to her mother's side, and observed how sharply they dressed, how fully they expressed themselves, how hard they loved, how hard they fought. She heard stories that they stayed out late on the weekends but always made it to church in the morning. "I saw them as very powerful women, and that always stayed with me," she says, adding, "I also saw the complexity."

Lawson grew up in a set — first as a twin to her sister, Dana, and then as a trio with their best friend, Dana Brown, another kind of twin. When the three girls were young, they were together so much that people took to calling them "DeanaDanaDanaBrown." Lawson's twin learned she had multiple sclerosis when they were 17 and now resides in an assisted-living facility in Rochester. Brown has since moved to Alabama, but still travels with Lawson, sometimes accompanying her on her shoots. Back then, Lawson says, "we felt invincible, like the world was ours and we could do anything."

Lawson's mother didn't finish high school, and she and Lawson's father were determined that their daughters would have academic advantages. They enrolled the twins in a program that bused them out of the city and into a suburban high school, which they attended until they were kicked out for fighting. They were relocated to a rougher school in the city, where Lawson learned to play spades at lunch and also witnessed chaotic hallway fights. "That was the first time I realized class disparity in education and

She felt loved and insulated from the outside world. "I'm so happy that me and my friends weren't thinking on a bigger scale on what it means to be Black," she told me. "There's a certain innocence in it, and when you take that experience as a given, there's so much possibility." In some ways, she's always trying to get back to that period of wonder and amazement — staring in awe at her cousins as they danced to M.C. Hammer onstage at a talent show, aunts cracking one another up in the kitchen, relishing the mysteries of twinhood with Dana and having adventures with Dana Brown. Those memories influence whom she chooses to shoot and the backdrops she arranges them against. "That's a part of my gaze now," she told me.

Lawson and Gilbert met in 2000, when she was studying photography as an undergraduate at Pennsylvania State University and he was working in town. He remembers seeing her shooting pool; she remembers seeing him at a protest, selling T-shirts he'd made. They fell in love, and five months later, Lawson was pregnant with their son.

Gilbert and Lawson both applied to the Rhode Island School of Design and were accepted: Gilbert for painting, Lawson for photography. They were both in their 20s, with a 3-month-old. They couldn't afford child care, and didn't have family nearby, so "we decided to make it everyone's problem," Gilbert told me. They took the baby with them to class and floated between the artsy social scene of RISD and the welfare office. Gilbert did night-shift security and built sets to support the family; even so, at times the gas and hot water were cut off.

It was during this time at RISD that Lawson made an image that would inform her style for the next few decades. She asked her mother to put on her wedding dress and drape her body over two chairs in the living room. "It wasn't a typical portrait, because my mom had a serious face — there was something a bit unusual" to it, Lawson told me. And yet it radiated tension, knowingness and perhaps even a little drama — between mother and daughter, subject and artist. Lawson's adviser, the conceptual artist Sarah Charlesworth, singled out that image as special. "That was the beginning of the familial gaze, and the element of staging, in connection to real life," Lawson says.

After RISD, Lawson moved back to Rochester with the baby while Gilbert finished his degree. She worked as a receptionist at a law firm. "I thought my life was over, it was so depressing," she says. She did telemarketing, data entry, customer service — hourly work, with a reliable paycheck — and took a salsa-dance class in her spare time. "It was my one outlet for expressivity," she recalls. Lawson mustered the nerve to ask her teacher if she would pose for her. "That became my first nude, and it inspired how I would work later," she says. Gilbert came to Rochester, and Lawson took the summer off to photograph full time, riding around in a beat-up Volvo 240, looking for potential subjects. That time "crystallized so many of my methods," she says, meaning the way she would search for people and locations.

In 2006, they relocated to New York, arriving by Greyhound. Gilbert worked at fabrication shops in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, and Lawson

'IF YOU CHANGE THE FILTER, YOU CAN

what privilege and access students had or didn't have," she says. Even back then, Lawson remembers "always witnessing how other people lived."

Family, which she also sees as a microinstitution, complicated and rich with ancestral wisdom, grounded her sense of self early on. She remembers the summers, barbecues, big family reunions. She remembers wearing color-coordinated outfits for Grandpa Jeffries's annual birthday celebrations. One year, the color was red, and everyone, including the kids, wore tuxedos with red cummerbunds; another time, it was dark blue. Lawson recalls an Easter when two of the cousins got into a fistfight and started rolling down the hill, fighting in their Sunday best. In a way, she's still working out the tensions of those moments. "There are these dichotomies, these opposites of niceness and roughness," she says, her voice trailing off.

returned to administrative work, this time at the International Center of Photography, which allowed her to take as many free classes as she wanted. "It was heaven-sent," she says. Graduate school prioritized the conceptual, but now Lawson had time to nail down the technical necessities of her work. In 2011, several of Lawson's photographs were selected for the Museum of Modern Art's New Photography show. For her, that moment was "pivotal," she recalls, although making art and making a living was still a struggle. The following year she began teaching visual arts at Princeton University, which she still does today. Being included at the Biennial of the Whitney Museum of American Art in Manhattan in 2017 was another landmark moment. In the last five or six years, between teaching and showing her work widely, Lawson has become successful.

Each time I visited with her — at her home in Los Angeles, her studio in Gowanus, in Central Park near the Guggenheim — we circled the questions of consumption, hypervisibility, exploitation that trail her work even as she is trying to interrogate them through it. She is hypersensitive about her subjects' becoming objects; she sees the images, ultimately, as a collaboration, and invites her muses to her openings to see the products of their time together. Whenever possible she has tried to place her work in museums and galleries in the hope of making it accessible to the widest potential audience. Yet she has an impulse toward discretion. "Sometimes I wonder now if I should have done the opposite, chosen the private and familial, and not been open to the world," she says. But no matter where the work lives, she wants it to command respect. "It's like when you come to my mom's house you take your shoes off," she said. "When you see my work, it's the same."

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he first time I encountered a Deana Lawson photograph in person was in 2017, at the Whitney Biennial. It was a full-body experience, which is to say I felt the response before my mind registered that there was something to respond to. I rounded a corner and locked eyes with the central figure in a photograph called "Sons of Cush." His beautiful and wide-set eyes transported me to summers spent swimming and roughhousing with a childhood friend. My eyes traveled around the image, registering the sexiness of his bare torso; the slouched, spread legs; the dewiness of the crown on the newborn he's holding, its slickness suggestive of the birth canal it recently passed through and the act that preceded its arrival. Despite the gulf of age between them, man and child seem equally vulnerable. There's the contrast between the size of their hands, and the interplay of textures between blue satin and dark skin. Another person, just out of frame, is sitting on a couch, draped in ropes of gold chains,

hands in a variety of configurations. I felt myself splitting into a series of consciousnesses: a reverent love for seeing such beautiful images of Black people made by a Black artist, a worry about how they might be interpreted and a cynicism about how they got to be there in the first place.

Scholars including Christina Sharpe write about the material impacts of slavery, colonialism, imperialism and their afterlives, which continue to produce policies and narratives that limit Black life. In her 2016 book "In the Wake: On Blackness and Being," Sharpe lays out the concept of wake work, or the work of upholding our existence in spite of the unrelenting violence that tries to extinguish it. Perhaps this explained the conflicting emotions coursing through my body. The past was present as I stood before Lawson's work, frozen in awe. My own wake work was making itself known in that moment, in the fear that our own images will be wielded against us, even when they depict something sacred and pure.

Lawson asks us to consider our reaction to the work to be part of the work itself. "I know that there is a power unleashed in it," she told me. In that way, her practice reminded me of a 2014 installation by the artist Kara Walker, comprising several sugarcoated sculptures, including a 35-foot-tall and 75-foot-long "sugar baby" sphinx wearing a head scarf, with large breasts, buttocks and visible labia. The space where it was displayed had been used to process sugar cane imported from the Caribbean and harvested by enslaved people. Walker's exhibition evoked the horrific history of the industry, and yet selfies of people pretending to cup, lick, stroke and fondle the sculptures flooded Instagram, unveiling a secondary commentary on the subjugation and violence that Black people, especially women, have endured, and are still enduring. The pleasure visitors took in defacing the work recalled centuries of Black pain for white amusement. Our subconscious is always present in the room, even when we're unaware, or willing it not to be.

It's harder to pose with Lawson's images the way people posed with Walker's sculptures, making the interplay between art and its consumption harder to observe and identify. With Lawson's images, all that work is happening almost entirely in your own mind, as you stand before it and try to reconcile all of the thoughts and feelings — pride, defensiveness, anxiety — that may emerge.

Tina Campt, a professor at Brown University and the author of a forthcoming book called "A Black Gaze: Artists Changing How We See," told me that she thinks this is one of the most poignant goals of Lawson's work. "Her work places demands on you," she told me in a recent phone call. Campt sees Lawson's work as pushing viewers, especially if they are Black, into a new relationship with themselves, their community and the pain of their shared history as subjects of a medium that can inflict as much harm as it can inspire freedom. "There is a certain level of divestment you have to do when you encounter her work," Campt says. "You are face to face with what you bring to the image, and you are confronted with what it brings up in you. The question is, Can you let that go to really take in the image?"

It wasn't until a few years later, while looking at Lawson's work in her 2018 monograph, that I noticed a buried element in "Sons of Cush" that speaks

CHANGE HOW YOU SEE THE WORLD.

holding a stack of money casually, loosely, in one hand. It's another take on sexiness, power, means of survival, legacy. Though static, Lawson's images move. They move you too.

I suddenly had the impulse to cover the picture with my body. I wanted to hug it, I wanted to hold it, I wanted to lift it from its mount and carry it home. It felt uncomfortable to see such raw and intimate images of Black people on display, not only in public but within the context of an art world that has historically ignored and undervalued them. This image was hung alongside five others, including "Uncle Mack," featuring an older gentleman leaning against a wall holding a shotgun; "Nicole," an image of a nude woman sprawled out on a rug, pastel children's toys piled nearby; and "Signs," which depicts several young men, seemingly outside at night, holding up their

precisely to Campt's point. On the wall in the image, you can see a whiteboard covered with branches of the biblical Noah's family tree, drawn over a rough sketch of Africa, with arrows pointing to parts of the continent where chapters of the saga of the flood were said to have taken place. Perhaps, the image suggests, these are descendants of a holy lineage, and this child dressed in satin robes is, in fact, a tiny newborn king, sent to offer redemption. This portrait is capturing a second birth: celebration, singing and glory.

Lawson's images have elements of invention — a mix of a found location, like Ms. Bell's house, and a combination of subject, backdrop, clothing and props. Lawson prefers not to reveal which aspects are found and which are inserted. This opacity is purposeful, but can leave some viewers uneasy about whether



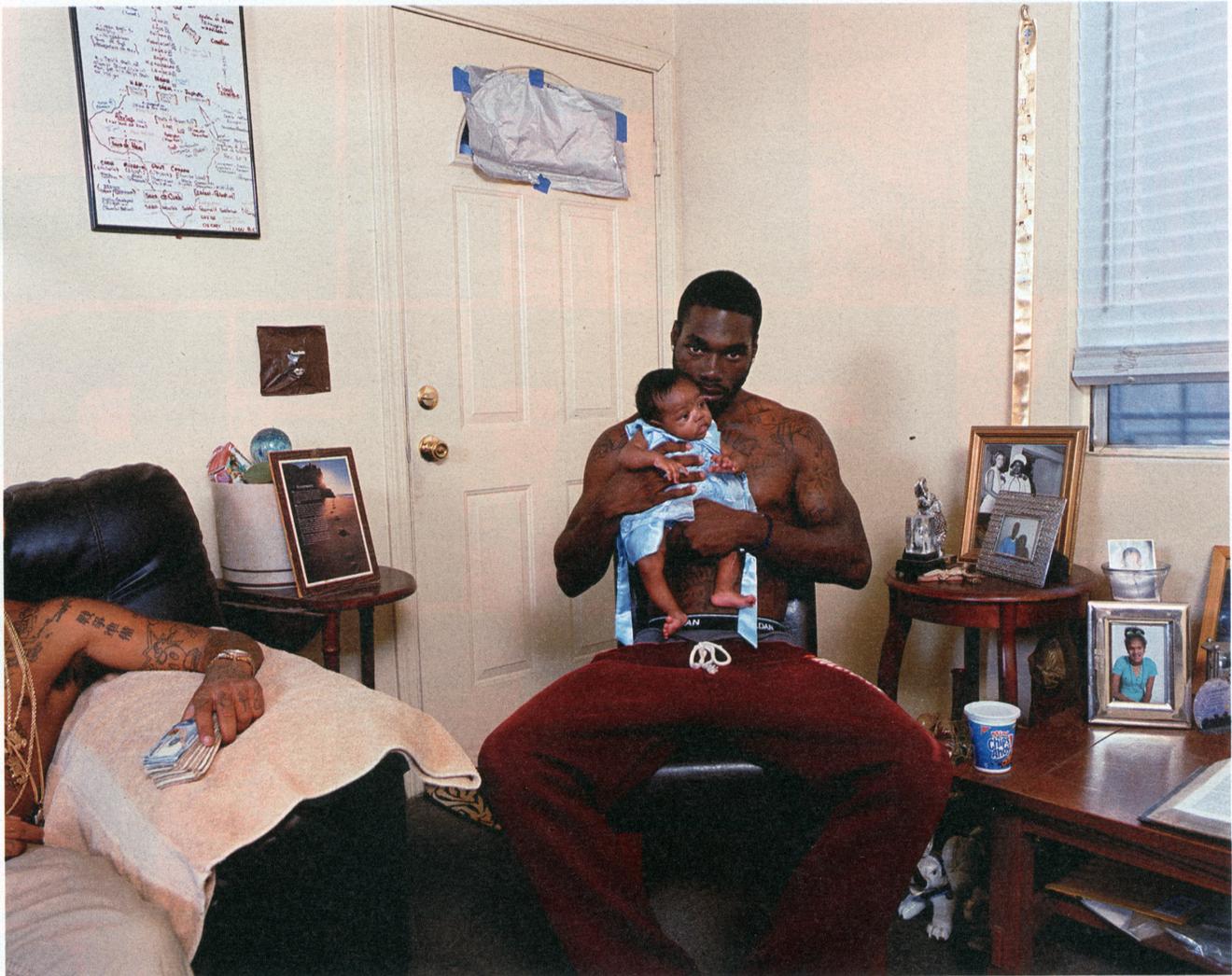
"Ms. Bell at Home," 2021.

they — or the subjects — are being manipulated. To Lawson, a staged image still represents a truth. "I'm giving an image that I do want you to believe; that is real — it is real, to me, in this moment, and I don't want that to be minimized, because the believability is important," she says. "And it hijacks that notion if we focus too much on how it's made and what trick did you use."

She has toed this line in different ways throughout her career. In 2013, Lawson showed a series called "Mohawk Correctional Facility: Jazmin & Family" that appropriated prison photos that her cousin Jazmin took during visits with her partner at the time, Erik, who was then incarcerated. They

almost pass for family photos, the kind you'd take in a mall. But the context reveals what self-expression and family love looks like within the carceral system, beyond criminalizing mug shots.

Lawson is a study in polarities: She has tremendous confidence in herself as a skillful image-maker, even as she is deeply, and sometimes painfully, aware of the wildly varying range of responses to her work. "Just because I'm making work with Black folks in it does not mean all Black folk like my work." She has occasionally had subjects turn down her offer to photograph them after seeing her work. "People are like, *Ugh*, why are you doing *that*?"



"Sons of Cush," 2016.

She mimed a knife sliding into the softest part of the gut.

Here she paused for a moment. "It's all certainly valid," she told me. "There's an infinite spectrum of possibility with Black creativity, and it might not align with what you want to see." It pleases her when people connect with someone in her photos, and recognize themselves too — like when a cousin saw the central figure in "Sons of Cush." She turned to Lawson and said, "Ooh, he is *fine*," which delighted Lawson. "I liked that she was identifying her desire in art," she says. "How many other figurative pieces in a museum would she walk up to and have the same reaction? I love these types of dialogues."

At an opening in 2018 at the Underground Museum in Los Angeles, a young man walked up to her with a compliment that is one of Lawson's all-time favorite reactions to her work. "Man, I love your work," he told her. "You like real niggas in your work," he went on, Lawson told me, laughing and slapping her hands on her thighs. "He didn't see that figure as a muse in art often," she says. "To me, that was powerful."

Late last summer, Lawson did an online talk at the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass Village, Colo., with the curator Helen Molesworth. A viewer in the audience asked Lawson whether her (Continued on Page 49)