

VOGUE

Portrait Mode

Deana Lawson is revered for her startling, intimate photographs. For the first time in almost a decade, on the occasion of a major museum show, she turns the camera on herself—and debuts the results for *Vogue*. By Dodie Kazanjian.

Early in her career, in 2012, Deana Lawson made a self-portrait—the first and only one she has included in her body of work. In that image, she's in a formfitting minidress, in a public garden, and her camera is an 8-by-10 behemoth that conceals almost half her body. Although she was in her early 30s when she took that photo, she has the air of a kid with boundless ambition: Her work had just entered MoMA's photography collection. "I hadn't totally arrived, but I knew that the work I was making was important in this lifetime and hopefully for lifetimes to come," she tells me.

In the years since Lawson took that photo, she has become one of our most admired contemporary photographers, producing startling compositions, usually more than four feet tall and wide, in which her subjects—many of whom she scouts on the subway or the street—seem to have an uncanny ability to command our attention. Like the work of Jeff Wall, Gregory Crewdson, Cindy Sherman, and many others, each photograph is carefully staged. She casts, directs, and dresses (and not infrequently undresses) her subjects, who appear to trust her implicitly. The pictures are a curious mix of formal portraiture and spontaneous snapshot, truth and fiction. Despite their artifice, "real Black Life is what we're looking at in Lawson's pictures," as the writer and musician Greg Tate puts it in a new catalog essay. "In her relatively brief career, Deana Lawson has become a Diogenes, a signifying truth-seeker of unviolated Black humanity and beauty."

"She is able to marry deep truths about her subjects and their lives in a purely visual and nondidactic way," the curator and writer Alison Gingeras tells me. "It's like she casts a spell on people." (Gingeras included Lawson in her much-discussed "New Images of Man" show in Los Angeles at Blum & Poe gallery last year.) In Lawson's 2009 photograph *Baby Sleep*, for instance, a man and woman seize the opportunity to make love on a hard folding chair while their baby dozes in her swing. The people playing the lovers may have been complete strangers—who knows? Lawson rarely reveals details about the people she casts, but we believe the stories her pictures tell, with wonder and amazement. In her 2018 photograph *Axix*, three young Black women, nude, lie side by side on a floral carpet, raising themselves to look at the camera. In *Mickey & Friends <3* (2013), a painted image of Mickey Mouse, holding an ice cream cone, looks down leeringly at a pair of naked women, facing one another, hands on each other's waists.

Taneisha's Gravity (2019) presents two older women, fully dressed, on a broken-down sofa in a cramped living room. "Deana moves between photographic traditions with an ease and confidence that's pretty stunning," says the former MoMA curator Eva Respini, who put Lawson in MoMA's group show "New Photography 2011" and acquired her work for the museum's collection that same year. "We see a lot of artists who delve deep and do one thing really well. But here's an artist who is polyphonic in how she expresses her vision. She's really singular."

All of these photographs will be on view at Lawson's first museum survey show, which opened this fall at the Institute of Contemporary Art/Boston (ICA), where Respini is now the chief curator. (She's co-curating the show with former MoMA PS1 chief curator Peter Eleey.) The show covers the whole complexity of her work so far, from early portraits, to the recent color photographs with holograms inserted onto the surface, to her "assemblages"—wall-devouring collations of four-by-six-inch images that she finds in slide libraries, family archives, and other places. "Lawson uses them to build an expanded field of Black representation," Eleey explains, "creating a complex network of relationships on the wall—often including white subjects—that we can wander through in various directions and get lost among." The ICA show will travel next year to MoMA PS1 and the High Museum of Art in Atlanta.

Earlier this fall, I asked Lawson if it might be time for this brilliant portrayer of other people's inner lives to have another go at photographing herself. Turns out she had been thinking of doing just that. "It's the same impulse that came up in 2012," she says. "It's also present now. My work always begins with an impulse, a quiet urging.... I guess I work best when I don't really have the answers and just follow the instinct of what it could be. I think so much great work and ideas come from play."

"I don't really have much to say about myself," she continues. After a longish silence, she adds, "I just want to make a picture that gets closer to representing how I envision myself—as an artist, as a creator, as a person who holds a camera. How do I see myself? What do I want to become?"

LENS CRAFTER

"The earth tones—the earth, the anchor, the centering, the browns—was more the energy I was feeling at this chapter in my life," says Lawson, pictured here in her 2021 self-portrait.

Kazanjian, Dodie, "Portrait Mode," *Vogue*, December 2021





Lawson grew up in a large and interconnected family in Rochester, New York, and the experience was central to everything she would become. “My mother, her sisters and cousins were all very complicated, gorgeous, and heartbreaking women,” she said in a published conversation with Deborah Willis, chair of New York University’s photography department. Deana’s father, Cornelius, was the family photographer, snapping pictures on every occasion. “My father was taking the photographs, and my mom was patiently and consistently organizing them into albums, sometimes chronologically, but not always,” Lawson tells me. “I started looking at the family albums when I was eight or nine. Looking at it in a book format was almost like reading a story.”

Deana and her identical twin sister, Dana, were inseparable. They shared the same bedroom at home and during their first year at Penn State. Growing up, everybody called them DeanaDana, and when their best friend Dana Brown was with them, it became DeanaDanaDanaBrown. (Her friendship with Brown, who now lives in Alabama, continues—Brown often travels with and assists her on photo shoots.) The Lawsons were a boisterous and self-confident clan (her parents had three children from previous marriages, and Lawson’s mother, Gladys, has eight siblings and Cornelius has six), in a big, self-confident town. They came of age listening to Sunday morning gospel and intergenerational music on WDKX, the Black-owned radio station. (“It was super community oriented,” Deana tells me.) DeanaDana’s grandmother

had worked as a housekeeper for George Eastman, who founded Eastman Kodak and put Brownie box cameras in the hands of almost every American family. Their mother had a well-paying administrative job with Kodak for 39 years, and their father worked for Xerox. Lawson has said that she felt “destined” to be a photographer.

Lawson, however, didn’t feel the call to be an artist until her sophomore year at college. “It was a self-realization,” she says. “I knew I was good on the creative end of things. I was always drawn to clothing and fashion as a teenager, and I thought the only way to embrace that was through the fine arts.” She told Willis that “a weight was lifted” when she decided to be an artist. “I felt like I could exhale, like I had come home to myself.” Although she and her sister Dana had both entered Penn State to major in business, “we were feverishly wanting to establish who we were independently, and in some ways, Dana led the way,” Lawson says. “I’m six minutes older, but I often thought of her as the older one. She had a wisdom. Dana was reading Angela Davis and Zora Neale Hurston before I was, and she was the first to travel to Africa and to become a vegetarian.” Dana decided to major in African American studies and comparative literature. But at the age of 17, she had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and eventually had to drop out of Penn State. She now lives in an assisted-living facility in Rochester.

Deana, devastated by her sister’s illness, knew she had to continue—to succeed for both of them. She had fallen in love with a young artist, the painter Aaron Gilbert. Their son, Judah, now 19, was a newborn when she started



IN OTHER ROOMS

"She is able to marry deep truths about her subjects and their lives in a purely visual and nondidactic way," says curator Alison Gingeras. FROM LEFT: Lawson's *Coulson Family*, 2008; *Self-Portrait*, 2012; *Taneisha's Gravity*, 2019.



"I think we all have the potential to be bigger and larger, but not in the ways we tend to value those words"

grad school at the Rhode Island School of Design, and 13 years later, they had Grace, who is now six. No longer married, Lawson and Gilbert are still close friends and dedicated co-parents.

Lawson returned to Rochester with Judah after RISD, while Gilbert stayed to finish his degree. They moved in 2008 to New York City, where she got a job at the International Center of Photography. She took as many free classes as she could there, photographing all the time and developing a personal style—which was recognized in the 2011 MoMA show. She also got a teaching job at Princeton, where she still works.

By 2017, Lawson had caught the eye of art world insiders. The *New York Times*' Roberta Smith, reviewing Lawson's work in the 2017 Whitney Biennial, wrote that her photographs of Black people "smolder with quiet determination." Zadie Smith profiled her in *The New Yorker*. In 2020 Lawson won the Hugo Boss Prize, which brought her a show at the Guggenheim Museum and a bushel of rave reviews. She also moved across the country to Los Angeles, while still maintaining a Brooklyn home—it was a time that felt like a turning point, and perhaps an incentive for a new self-portrait.

"I think of myself not only as an artist, but as a force," she tells me in our conversation about how the portrait came into being. "I think we're all a force in some way. I often talk about light, and how human beings are like light—energy having an earthly experience. I see myself as light totally connected to photography. I think we all have the potential to be bigger and larger, but not in the

ways we tend to value these words. Not in terms of fame or money, but who are we and what are we destined to do in this lifetime?"

She goes quiet again, as though pulling back from what she said, and then, "Maybe it's because I'm aging. I'm at a certain level in my career, and maybe this is a new chapter, and I felt like I needed to document that. It wasn't necessarily anything super deep. It was just a sort of misty feeling of 'this is something I need to do.'"

Lawson's new self-portrait has a lot in common with the one she did in 2012. In both of them, she's with her camera, her partner in life. She's wearing a floral dress and standing in a garden, behind a view camera on a tripod, holding a shutter release, looking straight at the viewer. The contrast between camera and background, technology and nature, is unavoidable, and so is the fictional aspect—she's obviously not taking the picture with this camera. She's serious and somewhat aloof, a fictional character whom she has cast, directed, and carefully dressed. (She's photographed herself nude before, and says she might consider doing so for a future self-portrait. "Anything is possible.")

But make no mistake, these are two very different women and two different photographs. The new picture is nowhere near as bright and punchy as the earlier one. "It's more subdued and more quiet," she says, "but still very strong and direct and also maybe a little bit more mystical, with the motion blur." The new portrait shows a woman in her own backyard, wearing a tea-length, full-skirted dress—the formality is undercut by the white jogging pants you catch a glimpse of under it. "For

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snippets of the one-man show that started it all and shot the film on (or in re-creations of) the actual locations in which Larson spent his days and nights. A who's who of musical theater songwriters and performers show up in cameos. (Stephen Sondheim—a real-life Larson fan and mentor—doesn't make an actual appearance, though Bradley Whitford does an admirable job capturing his physical and vocal tics.) "I really wanted to get it right," Miranda says, "so that the ghost of Jonathan Larson didn't come back to haunt me and tell me that I fucked it up."

For Garfield, the project became equally personal. Just before shooting began, his mother died, and Larson's story of loss and what we leave behind took on a more profound meaning for him. "Every day on set was a prayer to my mum through Jon," he says. "I got to commune with my mother through singing Jon's songs, through attempting to complete Jon's unfinished song while simultaneously attempting to sing as much of my own song while I'm alive as possible. And helping Lin sing his song, and singing the

song of what it is to be a struggling young artist, and singing the song of people who feel abandoned by society. It became this epic orchestra, through Jon, where we weren't only singing for him, we were singing for ourselves and we were singing for our greater community and we were singing for our ancestors." Garfield laughs, adding, "I mean, it doesn't get better than that." □

PORTRAIT MODE

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self-portraits, I don't like to go out and shop for anything," she says. "I like to see what's in my closet. I found this beautiful dress at a consignment shop three years ago, and I'd only worn it once. The earth tones—the earth, the anchor, the centering, the browns—was more the energy I was feeling at this chapter in my life."

She's in full command of herself and her camera, a smaller four-by-five, and the shutter release this time is in her left (dominant) hand, which you can't see because of the blur. She has customized this camera with crystals surrounding the

lens—something she learned from her mentor Louis Mendes, whom she has called her "third education, outside the academy." (He's a self-made street photographer whom she met when she first came to New York.) "I love how he outfitted his camera with wooden panels. It's just a way of personalizing your tool, your apparatus, and making it yours." Lawson readily acknowledges the many photographers she has learned from, including Diane Arbus, E.J. Bellocq, Sarah Charlesworth, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Malick Sidibé, and James Van Der Zee. In the new self-portrait, her gaze is both revealing and guarded. As Peter Eleey told me, "That combination of exposure and protection courses through her work."

All this and much more comes through in Lawson's latest self-portrait. "I guess the only way to say it is that it's a visual manifestation of the thoughts and feelings I had about who I wanted to be and what I wanted to become—as a human being, as an artist, communicating in this lifetime." □

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