

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Erica Deeman a new face in photography

By Charles Desmarais

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Photo: Anthony Meier Fine Arts, BAMPFA  
Erica Deeman, "Untitled 02" (2014).

If you saw [the exhibition "Collected"](#) last year at Pier 24 Photography, you no doubt took notice of a row of 11 large silhouette images of

African-heritage women by Erica Deeman, prominently on view. The display was the 40-year-old's debut as an artist, and it created the kind of stir only Hollywood characters seem to experience.

Now, in a feat rarely accomplished by even the most sought-after artists, she is presenting simultaneous solo exhibitions at a major museum and at one of the Bay Area's most influential galleries. "Silhouettes" is at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive through June 11; "Brown," at Anthony Meier Fine Arts, runs through April 28.

The low-key, if prestigious, Pier 24 does not have the reach of the UC Berkeley museum, where the entire set of 30 pictures, all made in 2013 and 2014, is on view for the first time. Moreover, while the individual pictures would demand attention in most any room, BAMPFA presents them together, precisely spaced around a pristine white gallery.

Taken separately, there's a slickness about these photographs that is not unpleasant — Richard Avedon made work in the same vein — but nevertheless reads as vaguely commercial. In this immersive installation, however, we are surrounded, overwhelmed. Considered as a multipart work of art with a unified objective, the only option is to surrender to its visual logic.

The women before Deeman's lens, she [told The Chronicle](#) last year, were strangers she met on the street, friends of friends and people reached through Craigslist ads. They are individuals — their distinctive profiles and hairstyles make that clear — but a good deal of information is withheld from us because the faces fall into near-darkness. The surprising fact is that by eliminating such variables as facial expression, skin texture and coloration, the artist gives them a unity while emphasizing their distinctions.

It would be hard to conceive a more effective metaphor for pride in heritage and celebration of the beauty of all women.



Photo: Anthony Meier Fine Arts

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Erica Deeman's portraits, including "Asaba" (2015), left, and "Lane" (2016), are part of the series "Brown."

At the same time, brilliantly, the installation obliterates the unsteady notion of race. In the shadows of these images, all the figures are basically the same color. The shape of a nose, the curve of a lip are sculptural forms of interest, but they are not identity. Indeed, the stereotypes of black and white are purposefully stirred together and confused. It is not clear whether the sequence of the show was a choice made by curator, artist or both, but it tellingly heightens such contrasts, sharp features opposing soft, flamboyant coifs set against the conventional.

Seductive in their technical proficiency, the pictures draw us in for a closer look. Yet the installation, taken as a whole, hardly leaves us comfortable. What we see at that range are reflections of our own reactions and assumptions, some of which we might not wish to admit.



Photo: Anthony Meier Fine Arts  
Erica Deeman, "Blue" (2016).

Across the bay in San Francisco, the intimate but elegant Anthony Meier Fine Arts is premiering a new (2015-16) series of Deeman photographs. In an excellent short video on the gallery website (see [the link](#) in the

box), the artist explains the title for the series, “Brown.” But we would not have missed the coordinating caramel hues of the photographs, identically framed in matching warm tones of wood. The blended color serves a similar function to the shadowed sameness of the silhouette series, using uniformity as a tool to better see individuation.

These are pictures of men, and we can see into their faces. But what good is a photograph if we cannot know who they are? Scientists? Businessmen? Ballplayers? Should we embrace them or fear them?

“You will think you know them,” Deeman says at the end of the video. “And you’ll be wrong.”

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**Erica Deeman: Silhouettes:** 11 a.m.-7 p.m. Wednesdays-Thursdays; 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays. Through June 11. \$10-\$12, free 18 and under. UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, 2155 Center St., Berkeley. (510) 642-0808. [www.bampfa.org](http://www.bampfa.org)

**Erica Deeman: Brown:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays. Through April 28. Free. Anthony Meier Fine Arts, 1969 California St., S.F. (415) 351-1400. [www.anthonymeierfinearts.com](http://www.anthonymeierfinearts.com)