



Erica Deeman: Silhouette explores Black female identity

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By, Wanda Sabir



Erica Deeman

When one thinks of Black women photographers, Carrie Mae Weems comes to mind and, regarding silhouettes, Kara Walker. Though certainly a historic revisioning of beauty and portraiture, a form reserved for the aristocracy, Erica Deeman's first major solo exhibition at Berkeley Art Museum Pacific Film Archive celebrates the form – the Black female form. The silhouette is not all, just an angle, a perspective – it is not even a profile. The character len(d)s herself to the pose, but what's the context? It's what patrons bring to the discussion.

Deeman's subjects, who get to keep their secrets, know like the mighty Sojourner Truth knew the power of the image and what it means to have 30 Black women portraits in a major art institution. What does this say about her beauty, presence, agency? It is surprising there has been no noticeable activity along fault lines as radical as such a concept is. The large-scale portraits, created over the course of nine months in 2013 while the Jamaican European artist was still a student at the Academy of Art University, is up through June 11, at the BAMPFA, 2120 Oxford St., Berkeley. Visit bampfa.org or call 510-642-0808.



Silhouette photos courtesy of the artist and Anthony Meier Fine Arts, San Francisco

In a lower gallery, the work is inviting and seductive. There is a tranquility within the space, a certain stillness that invites a chat or a visit. The portraits cover multiple walls – some alone, others paired as if in conversation, except the heads are facing away from each other. Other portraits have the subjects facing each other, yet the eyes do not meet. What are the women thinking? For once, the outside world ceases to matter. They are all there is.

Deeman's goal is to display African Diaspora women in a dynamic way that broadens the way they perceive and are perceived. Displayed in this way – there is an intentional avoidance of the word "hung" – also contributes to interpretation of meaning as well as what kinds of conversations are possible between spectator and subject. The story of how the artist contracted with the 30 women is about as entertaining as the lovely images.



Erica Deeman: "In terms of finding the women, I was still in school so I would set up my lights, go outside where my studio was in San Francisco, just kind of like wait for people to pass by. And there was lots of foot traffic, so I would wait around for women who looked like they were from the African Diaspora, Black women. I would explain the project to them and invite them into my studio to be photographed.

"I might meet maybe three people and they would say, 'Well, you know what? Would you like to meet more people,' and I would say 'Yeah.' ... So then they would invite their friends and I would make the portraits that way. In this way, I was able to [photograph] age diversity, as well as skin diversity and hair diversity.

"It is always a collaboration when you make a photograph. I would never say that I didn't give any direction and I would never say I gave all the direction. I would give [the women] postures and direction. We definitely did left and right poses. What is helpful are the subtle nuances of emotions that I find in the images, which helps me edit.



“When the women came to the studio, I just asked them to feel confident. I didn’t have a makeup or style artist to add to the perfection. It was really about them feeling comfortable and as confident as they felt they could be in the photograph. That was the starting point of each portrait. This is their photograph as much as it was mine. I am controlling the moment we are sharing together.”

Wanda Sabir: The idea of having these Black women in the space – what is lovely is the size of the gallery. It’s a big room. There are benches; you can sit with the women. They are all around you; it’s like a big party.

ED: I also feel very calm when I am in the space. There is an air of calmness, reflection. This is my own work, but I think that it conjures these stereotypes associated with Black women, with women of color, and offers a counter-narrative. We can have deep stories and varied stories.



WS: Yes, there is a calmness or stillness which is not always associated with Black women. Black women: The stereotype is that she is strong, independent, fierce, hard ... and we are all that too.

ED: There is all of that, there are other things as well perhaps more hidden. Silhouettes links to physiognomies and is connected somehow to character and was linked to the bourgeois classes of white Europeans. Seeing these Black women in this environment challenges that norm and the legacy. This space, this environment is for them to open up that narrative. I am really excited to see the work up. It is the first time the work — all 30 have been in one space. When you make something and you see it on the wall, I am excited that I made it (she laughs).

Erica Deeman has done it again, this time with Black men. The exhibit, entitled “Brown” for the backdrop, which is close to her skin tone as well as that of the brown-skinned men, opens with a reception March 23 and is up through April 28 at [Anthony Meier Fine Arts](http://www.anthonymeier.com), 1969 California St., San Francisco, 415-351-1400.

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