

# ARTFORUM

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**Erica Deeman**

By Jeanne Gerrity



“And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description,” Claudia Rankine repeats four times in *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) a narrative poem that grapples with the insidious and indelible effects of widespread racism. The image of the American black man is unequivocally linked to this country’s racist history, and with “Brown,” her first solo gallery show, British-born artist Erica Deeman joined a centuries-old initiative seeking to counter negative images of African American men in the public consciousness.

The first visage the visitor encountered upon entering Anthony Meier Fine Arts was that of an older man with a furrowed brow who gazes outward, a few inches above eye level (Gregory, 2016). The sitter’s kempt moustache matches his short shock of ash-colored hair. The subtle tonal variations of his brown skin are complemented by the photograph’s light-umber background. His expression conveys a sense of self-possession. Gregory is one of twenty photographic portraits of men from the African diaspora living in San Francisco that jointly constituted this show. The medium-format photos are unmanipulated and void of the accoutrements that might denote class or social status.

With these deceptively straightforward pictures, the artist’s stated aim was to provide a foil for the deleterious tropes of black male portraiture—particularly images affiliated with the spurious

practice of physiognomy and those of mug shots—carrying on an effort begun by Frederick Douglass in the nineteenth century and that continues today via projects such as Question Bridge: Black Males, 2012–, initiated by Hank Willis Thomas and Chris Johnson and featuring a rotating and continually expanding cast of collaborators. Of course, the image of the black male in mass media is complex. Contemporary depictions range from wrenching photographs of victims of police violence to distinguished portraits of our black former president; these and myriad other examples inundate our television screens and news feeds. In conversation with this sprawling range of representations, Deeman's stark likenesses ask more questions than they answer. What does it mean to photograph black men devoid of context? What is an artist's responsibility when addressing issues of gender and race? When is a photograph art, and when is it a vehicle for activism?

Beyond their political underpinnings, the photographs are formal achievements on a par with the work of contemporaries such as Rineke Dijkstra and Dawoud Bey. However, unlike those two luminaries, Deeman grants her subjects a certain autonomy: These men, most of whom reject the photographer's gaze, maintain a selfhood. Their unclothed bodies are literally stripped of sartorial signifiers; however, in certain portraits, details reveal aspects of the sitters' personal lives. In *Derek*, 2016, for example, a tattoo of a dragon is partially visible, and an indentation from an ear piercing is discernible. Deeman's willingness to show such unvarnished details allows her photographs to largely skirt the potential reading of black-male fetishization that dogged those of artists like Robert Mapplethorpe. Portraiture necessarily entails an intimacy between artist and sitter, and here Deeman inserted herself into the work by using a background color matched to her own skin tone. This conceptual choice is somewhat puzzling, but the resulting effect ultimately served to unite the works aesthetically while also drawing attention to the inherent bias toward whiteness in studio photography. Color film exposure settings for skin tone, light, and color were until recently calibrated using a tool known as the Shirley card, which depicted a pale female model (and the use of which had the result of obscuring details on darker-skinned figures).

Deeman's photographs—with their precise capturing of singular shades of brown, of the subtle shadow in the cleft of a chin, of a pimple about to erupt on a smooth forehead—stand in contrast to the history of exclusion, both subtle and overt, that suffuses this purportedly objective medium. Her decision to focus on ordinary yet idiosyncratic physical characteristics paired with her technical proficiency as a portrait photographer allows Deeman to position her sitters as unique individuals rather than anonymous members of a group. Formidable as a suite of expressive portraits, this body of work also registered as particularly pertinent to our charged moment.

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