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Deana Lawson Reveals Hidden Grandeur in Her Uncanny Portraits

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Self portrait of Deana Lawson and her daughter, Grace, in 2017. Deana Lawson

By Arthur Lubow

Oct. 11, 2018

The furniture may be covered in plastic and the wall paint peeling, but when the photographer Deana Lawson poses her African-American subjects in humble rooms, she sees the survivors of a history of slavery and colonization who stand proudly amid the shards of vanished empires. “They are displaced kings and queens of the diaspora,” says Ms. Lawson, 39, surveying some of the large prints in her studio in the semi-industrial Gowanus section of Brooklyn. “There’s something beautiful and powerful that hasn’t been taken away.”

Best known for her staged portraits of nude black women in colorfully cluttered settings, Ms. Lawson says that her images often come to her in dreams. On a conscious level, though, she is composing an alternate mythology to the disparaging images of black people that persist culturally, seeking out what’s extraordinary in ordinary lives. What’s more, she is part of a broader movement that recognizes the attractiveness of bodies that don’t conform to the conventional standards of beauty, whether prescribed by race or gender.

A selection of Ms. Lawson’s photographs opens on Oct. 13 at the [Underground Museum](#), an exhibition space in Los Angeles dedicated to African-American culture; much of the work was displayed earlier this year in a show at the [Carnegie Museum of Art](#) in Pittsburgh. And last month, the Aperture Foundation published a handsome monograph that showcases 40 of her images, with an introductory [essay by Zadie Smith](#).

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