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ART | 28 AUG 2020 | BY JAREH DAS | PHOTOGRAPHY: DEANA LAWSON

# Deana Lawson's intimate and resplendent visions of Black life

In her largest exhibition to date, American artist Deana Lawson explores representations of Black identity through majestic and celebratory photographs

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Deana Lawson, *Chief*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Born in Rochester, New York to a mother who worked at Kodak, and a father who was the designated family photographer, Deana Lawson has long engaged with the medium of photography, with the family album format informing her aesthetic approach. The family photo album also serves as a metaphor for unity in the lives of the Black diaspora who are scattered across the world due to migration as a result of invasion, conquest, colonisation and immigration. In a recent interview with *PARIS LA*, Lawson describes this influence by stating: ‘One of my first visual influences was the idea of a family album. In my portrait work, I am creating more formal images, a theatre of the family snapshot.’

In centring on the nuances of Black lives in the USA and extending across the diaspora to countries such as Brazil, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Jamaica, Lawson highlights those who have been overlooked by the art historical canon and portrays Black individuals as celebratory, king and queen-like figures. She also presents personal and powerful portraits in domestic and outdoor scenes including kitchens, living rooms, bedrooms, and in nature. Worn furniture, lived-in couches, rugs and unmade beds lend themselves particularly well as props in intimate compositions that give insight into the rarely depicted everyday lives of those she photographs. The majestic and elaborate qualities of Lawson’s images seem to take James Baldwin’s call for Black excellence when he stated: ‘Our crown has already been bought and paid for. All we have to do is wear it.’



Deana Lawson, *Vera*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

In Lawson’s solo exhibition ‘Centropy’, on view at Kunsthalle Basel and co-produced with the Fundação Bienal de São Paulo as part of the 34th Bienal de São Paulo, Lawson presents recent and new large-format photographs, moving images and holograms, one of which is titled *Boom Box Hologram (working title)*, 2020 and is an homage to the iconic boombox. *Axis*, 2018 stands out for its stunning depiction of Black femininity. Three nude women of different shades of brown press up closely against each other as if conjoined. Each has one leg outstretched in a synchronised pose framed by a boldly patterned kitschy carpet. *Chief*, 2019, as the title suggests, alludes to a leader or ruler of a clan reinterpreted through a contemporary lens and sees a male sitter adorned in gold jewellery and a crown. Both of these works and others on view command the gaze of the viewer in a direct manner, a hallmark of Lawson’s portraits.

This exhibition continues Lawson’s investigations into non-stereotypical representations of Blackness at a time of global racial reckoning, when renewal and optimism are needed now more than ever. ‘Centropy’ brings together nuances of Black identity across the diaspora showing shared and universal aesthetics that uplift individuals beyond the constraints of their everyday lives. It calls attention to a group that refuses to be overlooked any longer. ★



Deana Lawson, *Axis*, 2018. Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

### INFORMATION

‘Centropy’, until 11 October, Kunsthalle Basel. [kunsthallebasel.ch](https://kunsthallebasel.ch)

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