

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW; Nihilists Beware: A Swath of Black Life, 'Family of Man' Style

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You don't have to consult a calendar. If there's a major new museum show of African-American art in town, it must be February. Such is the jaded reaction of more than a few black artists to the predictable swell of mainstream attention that comes their way during Black History Month, then quietly dies down.

To be fair, the Brooklyn Museum of Art has a schedule of its own. With "Hip-Hop Nation: Roots, Rhymes and Rage" last fall and a reinstatement of its African galleries due to open in May, this underattended institution is making a sustained effort to reach a local audience, and it may be paying off. When I dropped by the hip-hop show on a school holiday last December, the place was shaking.


So "Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers," a big, home-grown survey that opens today, isn't an anomaly in programming; it's business as usual. And with nearly 100 artists, a sharp installation and a good-looking, if text-thin catalog, it's being given mainstage treatment.

As with the catalog, accessibility is written all over the show, which has been organized by an impressive trio of participating artists (Anthony Barboza, Beuford Smith and Orville Robertson) along with Barbara Head Millstein, the museum's curator of photography. Pictures are sorted out under the broadest possible themes (people, beauty, family, religion, etc.). Formal polish tends to predominate over conceptual grit. An atmosphere of feel-good "Family of Man" humanism prevails.

A catalog essay by the cultural critic Clyde Taylor catches the tone when he compares the "air of triumph" in this exhibition with the "fashionable nihilism" and "trendy transgression" of the much-criticized "Black Male" at the Whitney Museum six years ago. In the world of contemporary African-American art, which is fiercely divided on issues of black self-representation, these are fighting words. Interestingly, Mr. Taylor also contributed an essay to the catalog for "Black Male," a show that he found "sharply intelligent" at the time.

In any case, few of the Whitney artists are in Brooklyn; they weren't asked or they turned down the invitation. Maybe this is a sign of conservative times. It certainly reflects generational differences. "Black Male" was mostly a show of young, art-school-vetted artists by a very young curator. "Committed to the Image" includes a few newcomers (Suné Woods and Keisha Scarville, both born in 1975) and a few veterans (Gordon Parks and Inge Hardison, now in their late 80's) but is primarily made up of artists who, like the curators, are in middle age and midcareer. Many came to photography through other art forms or through journalism. Several are self-taught.

These variables are evident in the first gallery, which is devoted to the genre and style called street photography. Ms. Hardison, a sculptor and actor, is here with two shots of Harlem taken just after World War II. Across the room is a 1994 photo of Mexico City, in brilliant turquoise and tomato-red, by C. W. Griffin, 47, a former painter and a staff photographer at The Miami Herald.

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The artists around them represent still backgrounds and demonstrate the ways in which amorphous themes -- politics, say -- can be individually handled. Mr. Robertson shoots fragments of public advertising to reveal sometimes sinister meanings. Mr. Smith extracts a different content from disintegrating hip-hop posters. The work of both has oblique links to Omar Khareem's shadowy image of police officers on a beat. And all of these images make sense beside Martin Dixon's "Skin Deep, Ann Arbor, Michigan," a portrait of soft-faced Midwestern teenagers doing what youngsters, white and black, do everywhere: hang out and try to look bad.

The terrain covered here is pretty much that of the show: unsensational ordinary life, with the heat turned up now and then. The section titled "People" encompasses Linda Day Clark's neighborly 1994 portrait of a young Muslim woman on a Baltimore street and Hugh Bell's 1957 picture of a strung-out but magnetic Billie Holiday at Carnegie Hall. The "Country" section pairs portraits of Louisiana sugar cane cutters by Keith Calhoun and Chandra McCormick with Eli Reed's shots of Rwandan children in a refugee camp.

LeRoy W. Henderson Jr.'s image of a young ballerina posed in front of a classical frieze aptly appears under "Beauty." So does a monumental picture by the Nigerian-born artist Mfon (Mmekutmfon) Essien of a tautly muscled sitting figure wearing nothing but a pair of white high heels. With the face half cropped, the subject might be taken for a man or a woman. It is in fact a self-portrait of the artist, who lost both her breasts to cancer. Ms. Essien died of the disease earlier this week.

Her image is a star presence in the show, up there with those of Holiday and John Coltrane, who appears in a moody 1966 photo by Chuck Stewart. The Coltrane photo hangs in a high-spirited section labeled "Performance," where Kwame Brathwaite catches James Brown onstage, and Oggi Ogburn, who has been documenting rhythm and blues singers for 30 years, immortalizes one exuberantly coifed vocal quintet in the picture "Process and the Doorags."

The celebrity beat goes on in Gerard H. Gaskin's runway shots of New York City's annual Black and Latino Gay Ball and culminates in the mock-heroic, identity-tickling tableaux of Renée Cox. In one, the megawatt artist is perched on the crown of the Statue of Liberty as a black-power version of Wonder Woman. In another, titled "Yo Mama's Last Supper," she casts herself as a nude, buff Jesus surrounded by black male disciples. The work has already provoked "Sensation"-style protest from the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, which monitors what it considers anti-Catholic incidents.

Fantasy takes leading-edge form in Stephen Marc's computer-generated montages of family photographs, African sculptures and self-portraits. Other artists achieve similarly unorthodox effects through nondigital means: Don Camp uses rubbed-in earth and paint to make photographic monoprints; Accra Shepp prints images on dried leaves.

Finally, any visitor will compile a personal list of out-of-category favorites. Mine includes two smart pictures by Charles Martin (one of a Brazilian religious procession, the other of a bullet hole in a dress shop window); Albert R. Fennar's witty studies of odd-duck architecture; an unearthly "Times Square" by Nathaniel Burkins; two set-up pieces by Mr. Barboza (oddly, they're among the few images that might be construed as a reference to AIDS), and Lonnie Graham's domestic interiors suggesting a cross between altars and lived-in rooms.

It's an eclectic list from a sprawling show that has its share of bland entries and a few out-and-out clinkers. Is it all too much? Yes. But what are you going to do? Museum showcases of African-American work are still rare birds. It says a lot that Deborah Willis's "Reflections in

Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present," which had its debut at the Anacostia Museum in Washington only last year, and to which the Brooklyn show owes a clear debt, was one of the first, if not the first, comprehensive historical survey of its kind. (The show is now at the New York State Museum in Albany, through March 11.)

Black photographers are working in every conceivable medium and style, from agitprop to abstraction. (Look at Herb Robinson's "Études" in this show, or check out what the Nigerian-born, New York-based artist Iké Udé is doing with his fashion-plus-culture magazine, aRUDE.) It goes without saying that they should be a routine part of the mainstream institutional mix, always there, right in the center, period. But that isn't happening, or is happening at a glacial pace. So the option is still the all-black survey, into which as much work has to be crammed as possible.

That being the case, we have every reason to be grateful for "Committed to the Image." Sure, another set of curators might have put together a tougher, snappier show, but this one is a carefully thought out, lovingly produced edition of the model at hand. It's important to remember, though, that other models are possible, and they're worth pushing hard for.

"Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers" opens today at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, 200 Eastern Parkway, at Prospect Park, and remains on view through April 29.