

STEVEN
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L'ŒIL DE LA PHOTOGRAPHIE

REFRACTION: NEW PHOTOGRAPHY OF AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORA

April 25, 2018



An exhibition entitled Refraction: New Photography of Africa and its Diaspora and currently on view at Steven Kasher Gallery in New York presents a generation of photographic artists of African descent born in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. They reside in Luanda, Paris, Philadelphia, Addis Ababa, New York and beyond.

These artists portray Black bodies in acts of cultural mediation. They revive the traditional African rites of masking, costuming, quilting, body ornamentation and invocation of spirits. They refract those rituals through the lenses of contemporary art practices such as performative self-portraiture, collage, montage and digital manipulation. They merge cultures past and present, looking towards a more inclusive, harmonious future.

Refraction is an ocular cleanse. The work of these artists bridges the gap between Black stereotypes Black and Black reality. The photographs in the exhibition navigate the complex relationship between innate identities and identities evolved from social, political and cultural influences. On a technical level, these artists are heralds of new dimensions in photography, bending, transmuting and pushing the medium.

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Some artists in the exhibition record this world and some invent new ones with an eye to the conceptual, even fantastical. Their work blends fact and allegory, the real and the imagined, the present and the future. Their language is a mixed vocabulary of photography, sculpture and performance. Ranging from Afro-futurism to Afro-documentary, these photographs reclaim and re-connect a multitude of Black histories and identities.

On one hand, there are the documentary styles of Girma Berta and Eyerusalem Adugna Jirenga, both under 30, who provide contemporary outlooks on the urban African environment. Hakeem Adewumi, Emilie Regnier and Zarita Zevallos make portraits that examine cross-cultural signifiers, such as leopard print, with a charged cinematic beauty. Shawn Theodore and Stan Squirewell employ digital and analog photomontage techniques drawing on personal experiences and family history to examine the fluctuating understanding of the self.

Basil Kincaid and Keyezua stage performative scenarios with hand crafted quilts, masks and costumes to act out empowering contemporary rituals. Adama Delphine Fawundu and Ivan Forde's elaborate, dreamlike compositions use sewn collage and cyanotype to create modern representations of spiritual icons and ancient myths like Mami Wata and the Epic of Gilgamesh.

These images act as flares in our cultural consciousness. They confront and expose existing narratives as social constructs that will never be more than approximations of a more complex reality. As Sarah Lewis says, "How many movements began when an aesthetic encounter indelibly changed our past perceptions of the world? The imagination inspired by aesthetic encounters can get us to the point of benevolent surrender, making way for a new version of our collective selves."