

A new exhibition surveys the legacy of Black women in visual culture – from fetishized, colonial-era caricatures, to the present-day reclamation of the rich complexity of Black womanhood by 17 artists (of numerous nationalities and with birth years spanning 1942 to 1997) including Deana Lawson, Zanele Muholi, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, and Coreen Simpson

Juxtaposed against archival depictions of Black women dating back to 1793, the contemporary works on view – mostly photography, but also including sculpture; mixed-media; and film – collectively create a global, cross-generational investigation into Black women’s reclamation of agency amid the historical fetishization of the Black female body



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT (credits at end of document): Detail of **Zanele Muholi**, *Miss Lesbian I, Amsterdam*, from the series *Miss (Black) Lesbian* (2009) • Detail of **Kara Walker**, *Untitled* (2014) • **Artist unknown**, *Saartje, the Hottentot Venus* (1811), an etching from a promotional poster for the “freak show” act of Saartje Baartman; the print publisher is listed as one of her enslavers, Hendrick Cesars • **Renee Cox**, *HOTT-EN-TOT* (1993-1994) • Detail of **Renee Cox**, *Miss Thang*, from the series *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* (2009) • **Coreen Simpson**, *Masked Nude, Harlem NY* (1999)

NEW YORK, NY – SPRING 2022 – Fotografiska New York is pleased to present *BLACK VENUS*, a new exhibition curated by Aindrea Emelife, which examines the historical representation of Black women in visual culture through over 30 contemporary artworks, created between 1975 and today, and a selection of archival imagery dated 1793 to 1930.

The exhibition’s thematic foundation is the Hottentot Venus, a visual-culture archetype named for the assigned stage name of Saartje Baartman (born 1789 in South Africa). Enslaved by Dutch colonizers and toured around Europe as part of a ‘freak show’ due to her non-Western body type, caricatured depictions of her spread around the globe and indelibly catalyzed the Western exoticization and othering of Black women. In *BLACK VENUS*, archival depictions of Baartman and other historical Black women pair with the vibrant, narrative portraiture by some of today’s most influential Black

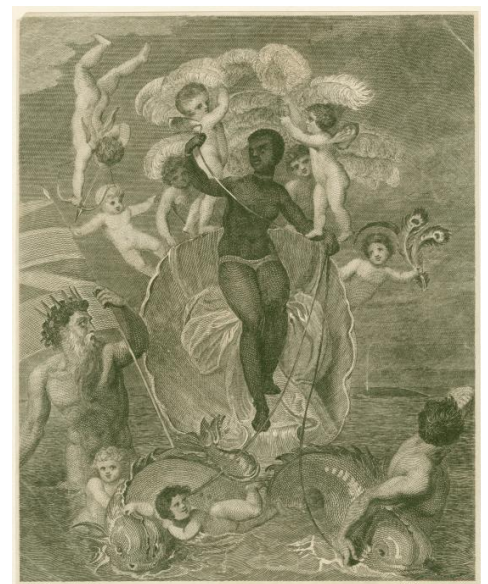
image-makers whose work deals with layered narratives of Black femininity. Said Emelife, regarding the curatorial decision to combine archival imagery and contemporary artwork:

"Rather than simply putting forth a compelling grouping of contemporary talent, I wanted to establish a legacy. By looking at early images, we identify the beginning of the othering of Black women. In a contemporary age, where Black women are finally being allowed to claim agency over the way their own image is seen, it is important to track how we have reached this moment. In looking through these images, in different stages of history - we are confronted with a mirror of the political and socio-economic understandings of Black women at the time, and what they were allowed to be. The most contemporary examples in the show are unabashed, riotous affronts showcasing all that Black womanhood can be and has always been." Artists in the exhibition include, in alphabetical order:

- **Sadie Barnette** (b. 1984, Oakland, CA)
- **Widline Cadet** (b. 1992, Pétion-Ville, Haiti)
- **Shawanda Corbett** (b. 1989, New York, NY)
- **Renee Cox** (b. 1960, Colgate, Jamaica)
- **Ayana V. Jackson** (b. 1977, Livingston, NJ)
- **Deana Lawson** (b. 1979, Rochester, NY)
- **Zanele Muholi** (b. 1972, Umlazi, South Africa)
- **Jenn Nkiru** (b. 1987, London, UK)
- **Amber Pinkerton** (b. 1997, Kingston, Jamaica)
- **Tabita Rezaire** (b. 1989, Paris, France)
- **Coreen Simpson** (b. 1942, New York, NY)
- **Ming Smith** (b. 1950, Detroit, MI)
- **Maud Sulter** (b. 1960, Glasgow, d. 2008, Dumfries)
- **Mickalene Thomas** (b. 1971, Camden, NJ)
- **Kara Walker** (b. 1969, Stockton, CA)
- **Carrie Mae Weems** (b. 1953, Portland, OR)
- **Alberta Whittle** (b. 1980, Bridgetown, Barbados)
- **Carla Williams** (b. 1965, Los Angeles, CA)

Several of the works pay direct homage to specific Black women throughout history, bringing posthumous honor to those including but not limited to Saartje Baartman. In *HOTT-EN-TOT* (1993-1994), **Renee Cox** explores the exhibition's titular inspiration by posing as the Hottentot Venus, though looking directly at the viewer rather than posed in the non-confrontational side profile of the historical depictions. In forcing the viewer to lock eyes, Cox gives agency to Baartman by interrupting the centuries-long power dynamic of the objectifying gaze upon her.

Including Baartman, *BLACK VENUS* recurrently references three visual culture pillars that affected Western perception of the Black female body. The other two are cultural icon Josephine Baker (1906-1975) and a 1793 etching, *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies*. The latter was made famous as a featured illustration in a highly



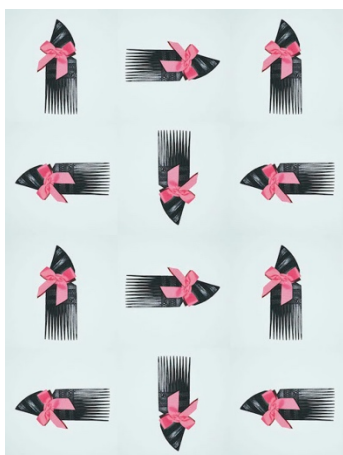
The VOYAGE of the SABLE VENUS, from ANGOLA to the WEST INDIES

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT (credits at end of document): 1930: Josephine Baker headshot by GL Manuel Freres studio, autographed. • 1924: Josephine Baker in the stage production *In Bamville* a.k.a. *The Chocolate Dandies*. • 1793: Detail of *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies* by Thomas Stothard (artist) and W. Grainger (engraver). • Ibid, alt. detail.

circulated 1798 book about the history of the British Colonies, which was authored by amateur historian Bryan Edwards—a British-expat enslaver who owned seven plantations in Jamaica. Among the etching's countless problems, which catalyzed Emelife's development of the exhibition, is its abhorrent whitewashing—even glamorization—of the transatlantic slave trade. Using Sandro Botticelli's famous work *The Birth of Venus* (1485-1486) as its inspiration, the artist presents a Black woman, the "Sable Venus" (as the artist takes it upon himself to name her), standing on a clam shell, attended to by white cherubs, being towed by a mythical duo of fish harnessed to the reins she is holding. To the left is Triton carrying the British flag and guiding the procession across the ocean, looking up at the woman with apparent desire. As a simultaneous act of fetishization and erasure of the real-life horrors a Black woman would have endured on such a journey, this widely circulated image perpetuated a violently inaccurate narrative among the Western educated class at a time when alternative visual information on the topic would have been scarce and similarly whitewashed.

The show's third key inspiration, Josephine Baker, factors heavily into the archival material and contemporary work alike. Referred to by *BLACK VENUS* artist Ming Smith as "one of the most iconic representations of Black female sexuality," Baker catalyzed a new archetype of Black women in popular culture – the "Jezebel" – when the Midwest-born entertainer moved from New York City to Paris in 1925 to elevate her performing arts career. In New York, Baker's first publicized role, in *The Chocolate Dandies* (1924), had her darkening her skin tone with paint and crossing her eyes to make the audience giggle. (A photo of her as this caricatured persona is included in the exhibition, alongside a 1930 glamour shot). In Paris, her performances were still playful and self-deprecating—consciously satirizing her Western audiences' limited view of Black beauty—but clad in burlesque attire, she became a sex symbol whose body and persona were used to satisfy colonialist sexual fantasies. In reviews of Baker's most iconic performance (her 1925 French stage debut, *La Revue Nègre*), she is almost solely described through animalistic metaphors. For Baker, Emelife posits, "self-awareness is used as a tool to challenge race prejudice." Baker led a fascinatingly multidimensional life; as a civil rights icon and key counterintelligence figure in the French resistance during the Nazi occupation, Baker is the only American-born woman to receive full French military honors at her funeral. Creative figures she personally knew and inspired range from Ernest Hemingway and Pablo Picasso to Mick Jagger and Diana Ross.

As well as heavily featuring in the show's archival material, Josephine Baker is honored in several of the show's contemporary artworks, notably Ming Smith's *Me as Josephine* (1986). In speaking about the work, Smith poses the idea that "the erotic needs to be understood as a creative power." By casting herself as Josephine Baker, the perennial embodiment of Black female sexuality, Smith embraces and investigates how Black women's sexuality has been demonized, perhaps because of its power.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT (credits at end of document): **Ayana V. Jackson**, *Anarcha* (2017) • **Sadie Barnette**, *Pick & Bow* (2020) (dimensions-variable wallpaper) • **Amber Pinkerton**, *Akuol the Muse* (2021) • **Kara Walker**, *Walker Fons Americanus* (2019)

Multiple works in the show build upon contemporary academic discourse by Black women. For **Ayana V. Jackson**, the work is Dr. Shatema Threadcraft's 2018 scholarly papers on "the long and still-incomplete path to Black female intimate freedom and equality—a path marked by infanticides, sexual terrorism, race riots, coerced sterilizations, and racially biased child removal policies," as examined from antebellum slavery through present day. Jackson's *Intimate Justice in the Stolen Moment* series offers counterimages to the cruelty described so vividly in Threadcraft's text. While still grounding her subjects in an historical time period that suggests her subjects are laboring in enslavement or servitude,

Jackson presents stolen moments where the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Black woman's body can be found in a state of leisure and repose.

An important aspect of *BLACK VENUS* is its omnipresent reinforcement that the contemporary Black female experience is not monolithic. For overtly personal works and larger-commentary pieces alike, the lived experience that informs each artist's explorations of the show's themes spans cultural and generational contexts while immersing the viewer in distinct zeitgeists. While **Amber Pinkerton**—the youngest artist in the show—was born in Kingston, Jamaica in 1997, **Coreen Simpson**, the oldest artist in the show, was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1942. Simpson's early-1990s images of nude black women in African masks in her Harlem apartment are poignant in their own right but even more interesting in the context of her life at that time; personal narratives remain front-and-center throughout *BLACK VENUS*.



FROM LEFT (credits at end of document): **Ming Smith**, *Me as Josephine* (1986) • **Maud Sulter**, *Les Bijoux IX* (2002) • **Carla Williams**, *Venus* (1994) • **Carla Williams**, *Untitled Self-Portrait (Gold mules)* (1992)

"By visiting the exhibition and exploring the Black female image from the late-1700s until now," said Emelife, "viewers are invited to confront the racial and sexual objectification and embodied resistance that make up a significant part of the Black woman's experience—and to celebrate the current upheaval of this stereotype, at the hands of Black artists. In an age where Black women are taking positions in power, fronting the covers of fashion magazines, and taking up space in all manner of fields and industries, it is a reminder to look back and see how far we've come, so we can look to the future. It is a hypervisibility with agency – the Black woman is resilient, powerful, soft, luxurious, queer, disabled, a fashion icon, ethereal, mother, daughter, friend, and lover. *BLACK VENUS* is a feeling. It is a valiant call to action to be seen and to celebrate in Black women; their aspirations, convictions, contributions and how perceptions of Black womanhood have shifted over time – how agency has been reclaimed. This exhibition is a celebration of Black beauty, an investigation into the many faces of Black femininity and the shaping of Black women in the public conscious – then and now."

BLACK VENUS was conceived and guest-curated by independent curator Aindrea Emelife, and organized by Amanda Hajjar (Director of Exhibitions, Fotografiska New York) and Terrence Phearse (Exhibitions Manager, Fotografiska New York).

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FIRST PANEL IMAGE CREDITS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Detail of Zanele Muholi, *Miss Lesbian I*, Amsterdam, from the series *Miss (Black) Lesbian* (2009). © Zanele Muholi, courtesy of Yancey Richardson, New York, and Stevenson, Capetown and Johannesburg. • Detail of Kara Walker, *Untitled* (2014). © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Sprüth Magers. • **Artist unknown**, *Saartje, the Hottentot Venus* (1811), an etching from a promotional poster for the "freak show" act of Saartje Baartman; the print publisher is listed as one of her enslavers, Hendrick Cesars. Public domain and with image file courtesy of the New York Public Library. • **Renee Cox**, *HOTT-EN-TOT* (1993-1994), Courtesy of the artist. • Detail of **Renee Cox**, *Miss Thang*, from the series *The Discreet Charm of the Bougies* (2009). Courtesy of the artist. • **Coreen Simpson**, *Masked Nude, Harlem NY* (1999). Courtesy of the artist. **SECOND PANEL IMAGE CREDITS, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** 1930 archival image: Josephine Baker headshot by GL Manuel Freres studio, autographed. Collection of the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. • 1924 archival image: Josephine Baker in the stage production *In Bamville* a.k.a. *The Chocolate Dandies*. Collection of the Billy Rose Theatre Division, The New York Public Library. • 1793 archival image: Detail of *The Voyage of the Sable Venus, from Angola to the West Indies* by Thomas Stothard (artist) and W. Grainger (engraver). Collection of the Miriam and Ira D Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, The New York Public Library. • Ibid, alt. detail. **THIRD PANEL IMAGE CREDITS, FROM LEFT:** **Ayana V. Jackson**, *Anarcha* (2017). Courtesy of the Artist and Mariane Ibrahim. • **Sadie Barnette**, *Pick & Bow* (2020) (dimensions-variable wallpaper). Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco. • **Amber Pinkerton**, *Akuol the Muse* (2021). Copyright of the

artist and courtesy of Alice Black. • Kara Walker, *Walker Fons Americanus* (2019). © Kara Walker, courtesy of Sikkema Jenkins and Spruth Magers. **FOURTH PANEL IMAGE CREDITS, FROM LEFT:** Ming Smith, *Me as Josephine* (1986). © Ming Smith, courtesy of Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London. • Maud Sulter, *Les Bijoux IX* (2002). Courtesy of the Estate of Maud Sulter, © 2022 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York and DACS, London. • Carla Williams, *Venus* (1994). Courtesy of the artist. • Carla Williams, *Untitled Self-Portrait (Gold mules)* (1992). Courtesy of the artist.

ADDENDUM: ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND ON SELECTED BODIES OF WORK ON VIEW

COREEN SIMPSON (b. 1942, New York)

Simpson describes that her background as a foster child spending time in an orphanage taught her to fight for survival. As a single mother of two in the 1980s, she asked God to direct her in how to support her family as a single mother. Soon thereafter, in the late-1980s, Chanel released a modern cameo pin, which inspired Simpson to create a cameo pin of a Black woman. This new “visual badge for women of color” brought her immense success in the artistic practice of jewelry design, with the Studio Museum in Harlem selling the design to lines around the block and wearers including Rosa Parks and Maya Angelou. This project underwrote “all of my creative wishes,” she explains, as well as supporting her family. One of the works in *BLACK VENUS*, from Simpson’s *Harlem, NY* series, is another example of Simpson creating with Black women a reinterpretation of a white framework; a common archetype of European painting (a white woman in repose on a palatial daybed or couch) is reinvented as a masked Black woman on Simpson’s couch in Harlem, texturally framed by the parquet floor and wall molding characteristic of the neighborhood’s interior architecture.

CARLA WILLIAMS (b. 1965, Los Angeles)

As a meta exploration of the cultural shift toward a safer climate (and more respectful context) for Black women to publicly own and assert their sexuality, the photographer Carla Williams is using *BLACK VENUS* to debut four works from a series of nude self-portraits she made between 1987 and 1994. She remarked: “When making them 30 years ago, I knew I had complete control over the images and thus invested in them a degree of freedom that I might not have if I had thought anyone would ever see them, because I didn’t think anyone ever would. The only other nude Black women I would have encountered would have been in the *National Geographic* magazines—per the old Richard Pryor joke, “the Black man’s *Playboy*”—or in the actual *Playboy* and *Penthouse* issues my father kept under the bathroom sink. I recognize in these photographs an exploration of one’s physicality, beauty, sexuality, power, and pleasure through humor, seduction, and performance. As much as my older, wiser self would like to claim otherwise, what I know is that there was nothing deliberate or political in their creation; that came later. I was a young Black woman exploring the way I looked before the camera. The photos’ directness, honesty, and playfulness were only possible for me before I knew the degree to which any of it ‘mattered.’ It now seems like a vital time to bring these images out of storage to take their place within a lineage of image-making. As I continue to see some of my favorite young Black women artists exploring the representation of our bodies, I am certain that it is crucial to make ourselves—our bodies—seen.”

MAUD SULTER (b. 1960, Glasgow, Scotland; d. 2008, Dumfries, Scotland)

One of several portraiture series in the show that honors a specific figure, through posthumous gaze reclamation, is *Les Bijoux* (2002), a nine-panel performative self-portrait series by the late Ghanaian-Scottish artist Maud Sulter. Displayed in the exhibition as a looped projection (the original nine works are large-format Polaroids), Sulter poses as Jeanne Duval, a romantic companion and longtime muse to historically celebrated white male creatives including Charles Baudelaire (her partner of 25 years), Gustave Courbet, and Édouard Manet. Sulter conceived the series in 1988, after encountering an image of Jeanne Duval captioned as “Unknown Woman” and experiencing a visceral response to such a literal embodiment of the historical erasure of Black women. Instead of exoticizing her, as the white male artists did in their creative depictions of Jeanne Duval, Sulter presents her fully clothed and engaging confidently with the camera.

AMBER PINKERTON (b. 1997, Kingston, Jamaica)

Also exploring the concept of gaze reclamation is Amber Pinkerton, whose work *Akuol the Muse* (2021) gives prominence to the subject’s piercing gaze, essentially prohibiting the freedom of voyeuristic intentions. In a highly technical handprinted cyanotype process, followed by digital treatment to replicate the chemical effects of a salt paper print, Pinkerton manipulates contrast, tone, and texture to create an otherworldly aura and distinct vignette treatment that echoes archival photographs produced at a time when women weren’t granted such agency over the end result.