

MAGICIAN



The Black Body and Portraiture

Curated by

Jasmine McNeal

Contributions by

Kayla Shelton

Valerie Amani

Kayla Salisbury

Gozie Ojini

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THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN MAGIC IN THE BLACK BODY.

Magician: The Contemporary Black Body and Portraiture addresses the depiction of the black form through modern day eyes. Throughout art history, we have seen the black body depicted through a colonial and oppressive lens. From slavery until our contemporary time, the black corporeal was shown as subservient, in the shadows, and a second class backdrop to artistic contribution. From Casta paintings in South America depicting black bodies as the lowest class on the hierarchy, to the period of Rembrandt's negro portraits, to the contemporary moment of artists such as Kerry James Marshall, black people in art history have endured a wave of visual representation, all acting as a mirror to a moment in the black experience.

Magician shines light on how contemporary black art and artists simultaneously use and defy the oppressive notions of the past and create a new reality for the depiction of blackness. It brings the past and the present into one space, by showing the ways in which we have progressed from the depictions of the past and created new stories and visuals in our present. Black culture and representation can never be solidified in an artistic period. Black culture, along with black art, is always evolving and telling the stories of cultural history and futures. With the artists in the show brings the aspect of magic, the originality and depth which not only exude from the black body, but has been a living aspect in the community.

The exhibition innovatively incorporates the visual representation of diverse traditions in blackness, from African dance and visuals, to the incorporation of aspects of the Vodou religion, to the classic portrayal of the black body in portraiture. It features a constant theme of understanding the roots, the foundations of black development which will never be lost, such as African traditions, photos from the past, and how we visualize and experience black bodies from our past and in our present.

BLACK RELIGION AND THE KNOWING

When it comes to art history, we have seen its progression and the influence it has had on our world. And in all knowledge of history, we have seen the ways in which the black body has been subjected to oppression and the lack of representation during the process. The black body has always been represented in art history, but the manner of such representation has been influenced by colonial ideologies and power. Religion is another topic, in which the details of black influence often gets neglected from the story. In black America, it would be remiss to say that Christianity has had no influence over the culture. From slavery on, the influence of Christianity was a guiding light to faith of overcoming a life of servitude and pain. Religion was a source of power for the black community, in not only learning about a higher power, but learning about resilience and trusting the unknown. Because of the strength, endurance, and true spiritual energy of black culture, black communities were able to make Christianity flourish for them, with aspects of call and response in the church, praise dancing with the body, and even to physically catching the spirit with the Holy ghost.

To this day, we see the ways in which blackness and Christianity have inevitably joined together, to teach further generations about faith and the strength of having something to trust in. And even though Christianity turned into a gift for the community, it was forced upon the black experience, as was the use of our bodies, minds, and spirits. Christianity was a tool, for the Western world, and in this case America, to inflict their ideologies and perceptions on to the community as an act of conformity. It was, and in some cases still is, a mechanism of separation, from black identification of understanding and representation. But, like most separation politics used on the black community, it only brought forth inspiration and recreation of new identity and purpose. Blackness is deeply rooted in the spiritual experience of faith and perseverance, and christianity has only enforced a stronger relationship with such realizations. With work like Kayla Shelton's, we can experience the ways in which religion and its iconography is seamlessly embedded into the empowerment of the black body, as well as ancestral strength.

But with that also brings the topic of black religions and the knowing. Christianity is normalized and even celebrated in our society, but not much is said about the normalization and celebration of black religions. On the contrary, black religion has historically been depicted as negative, dangerous, backwards, and even

wrong. But the further detriment is the manner of which society has labeled them to be a system of belief, rather than a knowing. Religions such as Vodou, Santeria, and many others have been around for centuries in the black diaspora. Black communities have used their own truths, ceremonies, and higher powers to know of faith and spirituality. Those realities still live inside of the community today, in the every day moments that we can't explain and the everyday feelings that come in our mental and spiritual interactions. Especially for black women, there is the ability of the intuition and the leadership of femininity. And within us all from the community, is the spiritual guidance and strength from our ancestors. And for that, there is no belief, but rather a knowing and trusting that these religions and guides of spirituality are to be true.

Black religion is more than important, it is alive and thrives through the spirituality of black culture. It stays active not only through the practice of said religions, but also in the everyday experiences of those fleeting moments of "I can't even explain it" or "I just get this feeling". It is in the altar work of our ancestors and homage that is paid to them, by placing them in portraits, asking them for guidance, or even as simple as visiting their bodies as we mourn. In Gozie's work, the black body is not physically represented, but is still present and exemplified through his experience and relationship with black influences. Within all of us is this same experience of knowing, and allowing those feelings to flow through freely, just as those who have come before us. Accepting black religions is the acceptance of an aspect of the black experience. It is the action of allowing the space and opportunity to learn intricately about ourselves and the lineages we hold in our bodies, and even after we are gone. For black women, I know it is within the strength we hold for ourselves, our children, and the power of our intuitions. Christianity might have been used to conform, but blackness has always had its own magic, its own beat to an everlasting drum, in which we are the definers of our own religions.

“ART ON MY MIND” AND THE IMAGE OF BLACKNESS

“Given this cultural context, we are often startled, stunned even, by representations of black images that engage and enchant. Creating counter-hegemonic images of blackness that resist the stereotypes and challenge the artistic imagination is not a simple task. To begin with, artists have to engage in a process of education that encourages critical consciousness and enables them as individuals to break the the hold of colonizing representations. Once that process is completed, they then have a space to map a new terrain — one that can emerge only from imaginative inventiveness since there is no body of images, no tradition to draw on. Concurrently, even after the images are in place the art world may lack a critical language to speak to the complexities these images evoke. To see new and different images of blackness is to some extent shocking. Since images that are counterhegemonic are necessarily provocative, their seductiveness, their allure lie in the freshness of insight and vision, They fulfill longing that are oftentimes not yet articulated in words: The longing to look at blackness in ways that resist and go beyond the stereotype.”¹ (Hooks, 96)

Recently, I read an article mentioning the book *Art on my Mind* by one of the most infamous black cultural critics of our time, Ms. Bell Hooks. The book was published in 1995, 25 years ago, and the relevance to the topic of art and its cohesiveness with blackness has continued. Hooks discusses many aspects of black art, the inspiration, black art in photography, and even conversations with renowned black artists such as Carrie Mae Weems. But the most influential to me was her discussion on the black female body. Conversation surrounding the black female body, its dimensions, its tone, and its essence, has existed for centuries. But what has stayed consistent within this conversation is the representation of the black female body and its use for western society. Within such representation, black women have been portrayed in artistic spaces solely based on their physical attributes, their use for production in different forms, and their contribution to the development of western society. Some of the first images of black women were drawings and photographs of them being abused, dissected, analyzed, and observed. In all of these scenarios, they are subjected to objectification and stereotypical representation of their bodies and their culture. Hooks discusses this representation, and these “colonizing representations” have set the tone for not only how the world views the feminine energy of blackness, but also how black women can possibly view themselves. They’re dangerous, but also highly inaccurate, and only tell the narrative of a perspective of the western world

looking in, outsiders trying to understand a culture and a people that have not been given a fair opportunity to represent themselves.

But as we have seen, throughout history and to the present day, blackness is always in ownership of its own story and contribution to the world. Black art, in the hands of black artists, consistently takes advantage of the opportunity to rewrite such a narrative. Hooks graciously takes us through the steps of how to rewrite this story, by first creating work that forces the viewer to learn a revised understanding of blackness, which challenges and destroys old notions of false perception. New images are required, images in which every viewer is asked to question themselves and their knowledge of the black body, images which forces one to truly listen. The next step is to create a new playing field for black art and representation, to come from a place unknown and newly inspired. Innovative methods and mediums must go against the grain in order to challenge what has previously been set in stone. A new system is required to destroy an old one which no longer serves. As one of my favorite contributions to her piece, Hook discusses how these works are “necessarily provocative”, because images and methods which challenge oppressive systems of understanding blackness are indeed shocking, and violently necessary. What Hooks is describing is the definition of black art, which is indeed provoking, not for provoking’s sake, but because the world has finally called loud enough and black art has come to answer. We have lived long enough in a time where the definition of black art lies in the hands of a society which has no intention on telling the truth. This new narrative pertaining to the images of the black female body are intentional, truthful, and make a strong statement in the necessity of being heard. This book was written 25 years ago, and black cultural critics like Hooks, and black female artists like Weems, have laid the foundation for women to constantly feel inspired to do the work in ensuring a safe and everlasting space where we are in ownership of our art, and our stories. Artists like Kayla Shelton, Valerie Amani, and Kayla Salisbury, and young critics and curators, like myself, are the production and continuation of the women who come before us. Our existence is the counterhegemonic. As a black woman, I look in the mirror everyday searching for ways to love, question, and deconstruct the images which have been placed before me, and with that, I will always embrace and expand on the constant truth: art will always be on my mind.

¹Hooks, Bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. p. 96. New Press, 1998

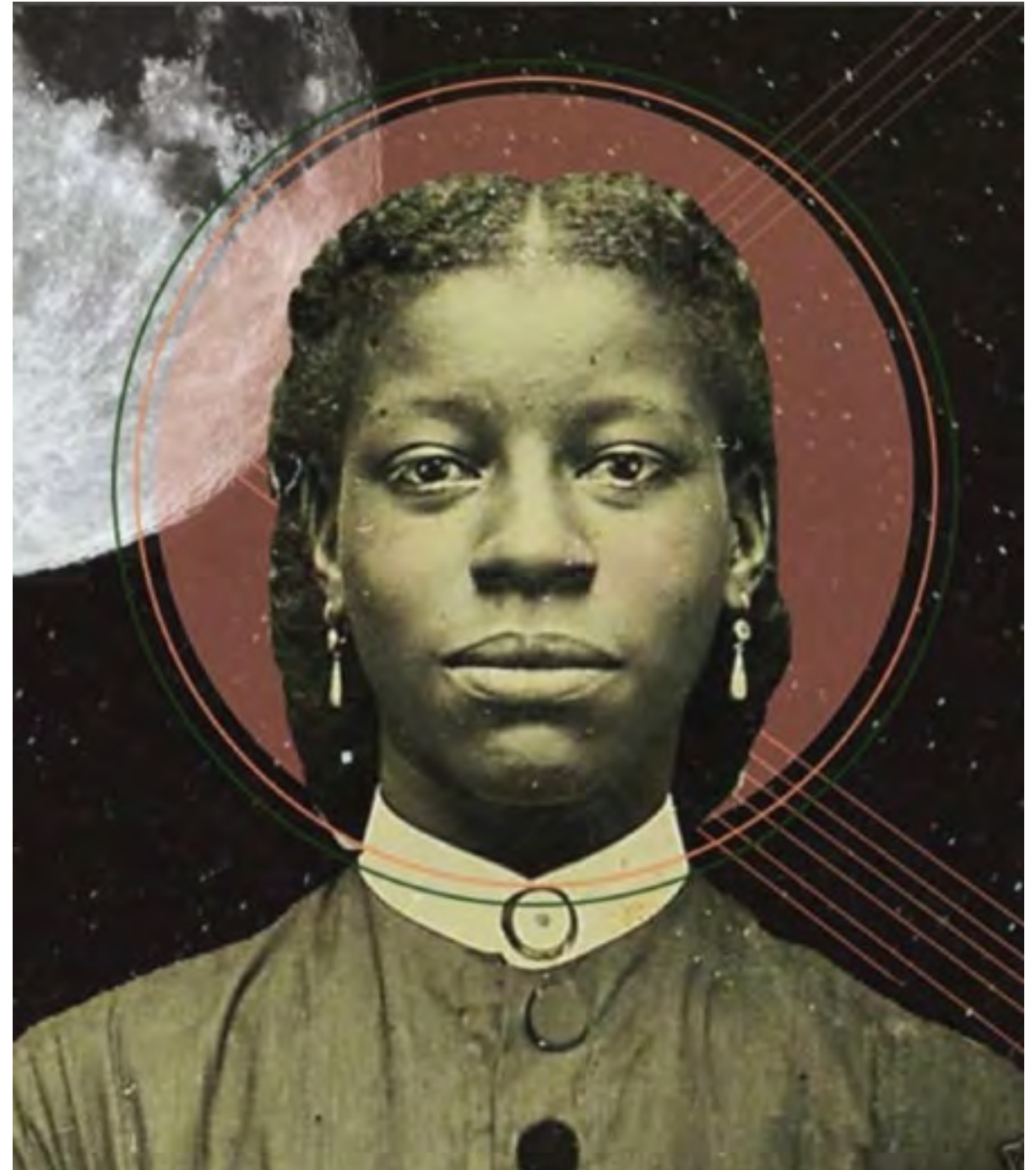
**KAYLA
SHELTON**



Kayla Shelton is a mixed media visual artist based in Los Angeles, California. Through her work she aims to spark meaningful discourse around the stereotypes that surround black femininity and beauty within our culture. Her paintings, drawings, and collages contain themes of identity, womanhood, and representation as well as notes of religious and sacred iconography.



Untitled II, 2017, digital collage, mixed media, floating frame, 25 x 35



Joana Jenkers | 2018, digital collage, mixed media, floating frame, 25 x 30



Untitled I, 2018, digital collage, mixed media, floating frame, 35 x 35



Crowned | 2019, painting, wallpaper, 25 x 35

VALERIE AMANI



In order to hunger for liberation, we must see ourselves as agents of liberation, as fighters and leaders. We have been induced to propaganda that feeds our sense of inferiority for so long that it is both necessary and vital for us to now radically push our own propaganda - propaganda that will manifest itself into change. The premise of these works - each playing an individual role to encompass what my understanding of what spirituality should (and shouldn't) be. I found myself in an all black African church, full of people worshiping in a church that carried a large painting of a blonde haired blue eyed Jesus Christ, and I couldn't help but wonder - How the hell did we get here? - this inspired the making of Searching for Andromeda. It is a challenge to how we visualize Christian and holy figures; a doorway to explore history, revisit the role imagery has played in mental enslavement. With Shukuru, The Sunswallower - it was a step towards creating more of these spiritual references with black bodies, black female bodies. It is part of an ongoing collection that aims to create independent fantasies and myths around the healing nature of black women.

The Magic portrait ventures off into the exploration of life after death - or rather the life in death; our connections to our bodies and a celebration of the multiple rituals that celebrate and connect with the spirit. I have always believed that spirituality and sensuality is one in the same, in Spiritual Orbit I use my own body-body becomes temple and I celebrate the spiritual power within myself. I hope to provide an alternative way to through a spiritual imaginarium- taking from continental traditions of folklore and storytelling where black bodies transform into the likes of gods and enlightened ethereal beings. I would hope that my art is an addition towards the movement of reclaiming black african narratives - when we see ourselves as powerful, as mighty, as capable of wonder, when we see ourselves free from death - then we can start manifesting those beliefs.

Valerie Amani



Magic Portrait | 2018, digital collage, 90cm x 45cm
right: **Spiritual Orbit** | 2018, digital collage, 60cm x 60cm





Searching for Andromeda | 2018,digital collage, 23.4cm x 33.1cm



Sun Swallower | 2019, digital collage, 23.4cm x 33.1cm

KAYLA SALISBURY

My Art is black and that's it. I create black people for the black public. I comment on how we are represented, where we are going, where we have been and where we are now. Our responses and the responses to our being. Our mere existence is fundamental to this country, to this world and I feel our people - our resilience, strength, our stories and culture is absolutely beautiful. The good and the bad - how we are represented is very key to me, so I dedicate all of my work and my life to my people.



Kayla Salisbury



That's Gay | 2017, ink, quill drawing, digital color, 11 x 17



Negrophilia | 2016, Lithography and Silkscreen print, 24 x 36



Void of Representation Face study | 2016, 1 of 3 of a series, acrylic, 5 x 7



My First Black Model | 2015, oil painting, 8.5 x 11



Omo Dolls | 2017-present, sewn and beaded acrylic, hand stuffed doll series

GOZIE OJINI

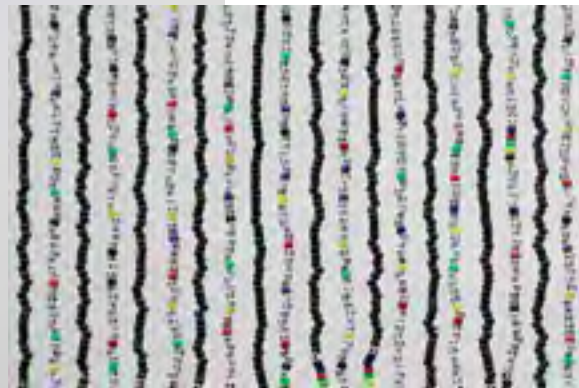


In his essay, *Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias*, Foucault describes the museum, library, or general archive space as “a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place”. *Untitled* (2019) is a work that is concerned with the contentious relationship between the containment and cultivation of black mold, the act of archiving precious artworks, and the representation of blackness. The work is structured in such a way that the black mold’s plexiglass encasing is simultaneously the apparatus that allows it to grow. As the mold lives and grows, it colonizes the cellulose rich environment, that is the Nike Air Force 1’s. The sculpture’s existence is a constant state of entropy within an enclosed system, much like the archive itself.

Portal (2019) is an interactive work that deals with access, safety, memory, and psychological tension. I became interested in the metal detector as a subject because of its imposing structure, its visual placebo, and its link to many schools and government/public spaces across America. Bodies are shaped and surveyed as they step through a metal detector. They are either assumed dangerous or are assumed to be stepping into a space that possibly contains dangerous people.

The sculpture is an operational metal detector adorned with conflicting quotes by students, teachers, and district attorneys about the objects’ presence in schools, written in the visual vernacular of pony beads, and presented in the form of a beaded curtain. In a recent installation it was my intention to have the metal detector on and at the front door of the space with an iron bar securing the beaded curtain, causing the detector to trigger continuously. Due to an issue with the fire code of the building, *Portal* was installed off and away from the door as a free standing object. Despite this passivity, the work invited viewers to walk through the portal into another space that was the same as (or different from) the one they just exited.

Gozie Ojini



Portal | 2019, Metal Detector,
Pony Beads, Iron Bar

Portal | detail



Untitled | 2019, Air Force 1's, black mold, cottonballs, pvc, LDPE, and water

CURATOR'S NOTE

Magician: The Black body and Portraiture is the epitome of the contemporary black artist in Los Angeles. We have evolved from Pieter Paul Reubens and Rembrandt. We are here, we are magic and we will be heard. With our bodies, with our colors, with our culture, that cannot be stolen or made for profit. We are, without Reubens, without Rembrandt, without Baroque, without history books that would never include us in the story. Magician, with pink and blue, with French and Asanti Twi accents and twists for the western world to learn form. From black woman style, to black form, to black woman magic. Magician. From African print to the metal detector. From ancestral energy to Renaissance frames. We, will always be handsy, always be color, always nuanced, always black. And forever evolving.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to thank FOCA, for giving me this opportunity and seeing the vision for this exhibition and it's influence in the Los Angeles art space.

I want to thank my mom, for always telling me I can, even when I feel like I can't. Thank you to my family and friends for the constant support of this crazy dream of mine.

And lastly, I want to thank God, my ancestors, and my intuition, for the sleepless nights, and affirmations that I will not be stopped until the black community has a space where our vision and our art can truly thrive.



Fellows of Contemporary Art (FOCA) is a non-profit, independent and membership-based organization that supports contemporary art in California.

Founded in 1975, FOCA is an outgrowth of a support group previously associated with the Pasadena Art Museum. Today, FOCA has over 150 members residing throughout all areas of California. The membership dues support FOCA's missions.

Sponsoring California artists, curators, and their exhibitions, is at the heart of FOCA's mission. This is accomplished through the following three programs:

Curators Award: FOCA awards major grants to Curators to realize and support all or part of an exhibition at museums or non-profit art institutions, and publication of a scholarly catalogue. Through this endeavor, FOCA has an impressive collection of exhibition catalogues of California artists.

FOCA Fellowships: Every other year, FOCA awards three unrestricted \$10,000 grants to emerging and mid-career artists in recognition of their contribution and impact on California art. This program was instituted in 2006.

Curators Lab Exhibition Program: Annually, FOCA offers an Open Call for curatorial submissions from emerging curators or artists to present proposals for group exhibitions. The proposals are reviewed by the Curators Lab Committee, and each year, three exhibitions are awarded for presentation at FOCA's exhibition space in Chinatown. Since our first Curators Lab exhibition in 2007, more than 285 emerging or established artists and artists collectives have been featured in 35 exhibitions. Each project includes a public event and catalogue documentation.

FOCA is very pleased to present "*Magician: The Black Body and Portraiture*" curated by Jasmine McNeal, featuring works by Valerie Amani, Gozie Ojini, Kayla Salisbury and Kayla Shelton.

Noriko Fujinami, Curators Lab, Chair
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