

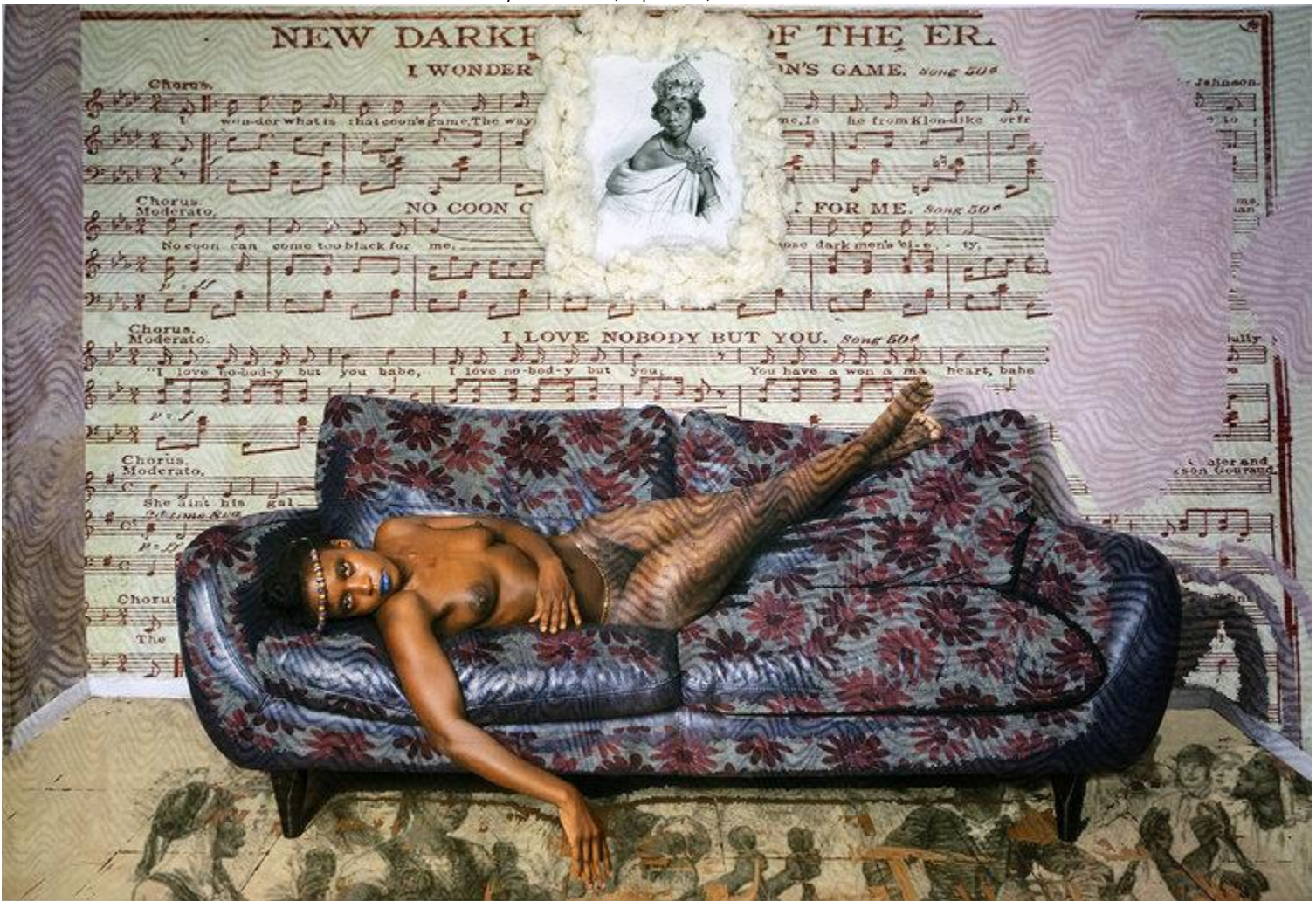
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EXHIBITION REVIEW: REFRACTION: NEW PHOTOGRAPHY OF AFRICA AND ITS DIASPORA, APRIL 19-JUNE 2

By Ilana Jael, April 27, 2018



Though African descent is the chief commonality among the 12 artists featured in Refraction: New Photography of Africa and its Diaspora, on view until this June 2nd at Steven Kasher Gallery, the remarkable images they have produced are as much about color as about blackness. Even the most straightforward “documentary” pictures among those featured, by young artists Girma Berta and Eyerusalem Adugna Jirema, are memorably distinguished by their bright, vivid backdrops. Their subjects’ traditional lifestyles as juxtaposed with the images’ aesthetic inventiveness introduces the exhibition’s

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recurring theme of the primitive, the mythic, and intuitive as juxtaposed with and transformed by modern techniques and perspectives.

Many of the featured artists explore these themes by interweaving photography with other mediums; for example, the first piece that catches the eye upon entering the exhibit, *The Sacred Star of Isis*, is a photo collage that incorporates cotton and hair on canvas. Artist Adama Delphine Fawundu, Brooklyn-born to parents from Sierra Leone and Guinea, evokes African water deity Mami Wata with the oceanic blue lipstick of her gorgeous model and the deep indigo couch on which she is pictured sensually lounging. The written music that forms the image's backdrop also hints at the cultural richness the melding of traditions her ancestors' migration has allowed.

Shades of vibrant blue too pervade Guyanese born and Harlem-raised photographer Ivan Forde's "dreamlike" cyanotypes *Birth of Enkidu* and *Remember Our Arrival*, which are inspired by the ancient Mesopotamian poem *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Hakeem Adewumi brings another African literary figure of yore into the present day in a series of four photographs inspired by Shakespeare's *Othello*. And while in the play the titular "moor" is portrayed as lacking civility, here he is shown as regal, admirable, and elegant, reclaimed and reinvented for a more insightful age.

Such insight can also be found in Nona Faustine's nude self-portraits, which take the body in its most rudimentary form and transform it into a progressive symbol. But what we choose to cover ourselves with can be just as resonant as what we reveal. In the staged, "performative scenarios" crafted by Basil Kincaid, the photographer meaningfully reflects on identity by camouflaging one subject with a plant and obscuring another with an elaborate quilt. Likewise, in the work of Angolan photographer Keyezua, traditional masks and headdresses obscure her subjects' personal characteristics, drawing attention instead to the implications of their queenly garments of regal red.

The power of clothing is also examined in a more modern context in images from Émilie Régnier's *Leopard* series, which subverts the animalistic tropes associated with Africa in the Western eye by emphasizing leopard print's association with luxury. Signifiers of opulence are also of interest to Stan Squirewell, as indicated by the upscale garb and ornate jewelry worn by the subjects of his mixed media works. He also utilizes the power of digital manipulation to play with skin tone and its implications. Though all three of his featured figures are clearly African American, one's face is drained of color as to appear white; another's has been filled in with a sky-like blue, and the last, *King Kane*, features a man who seems a darker toned black than ever could be found offscreen.

Such an exaggerated blackness is also found in the works of Haitian photographer Zarita Zevallos, who captures darker-than-life figures in poses that radiate power and strength, emphasizing the beauty and contrast that can be found in features darker than those favored by our Euro-centric conventions. Last but not least, African faces are fragmented and reassembled into abstract greyscale forms in the striking creations of Philadelphia based artist Shawn Theodore. Whatever your visual tastes, the diverse and edifying shades of this lush, complex, collection are worth examining in living color while you have the chance.