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PHOTOGRAPHERS CONNECT AFRICA'S DIASPORA BACK TO THE  
CONTINENT

By Seph Rodney, June 1, 2018



The word refraction is a good one. It can begin to explain key contemporary ideas, such as the cultural shifts that occur because of voluntary migration, educational opportunity, political upheaval and the like. These shifts affect migrants, their home communities and their newly adopted ones, and speak to how these cultural changes might come to the surface through language, through dress, and, of course, through visual art. These complexities might start to be graspable through observing the phenomenon of light or other forms of energy passing through a medium and being changed in that process, altering direction or speed or even appearance.

To grasp the range of issues that come into play with the movement of people of the African Diaspora — away from the continent, around the world, and back again — the notion of a refraction is a generative place to begin. The exhibition, Refraction: New Photography of Africa and Its Diaspora at Steven Kasher gallery demonstrates how the enduring vitality of

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the continent's traditional rituals of body adornment, masking, costuming, and spirit invocation are reinterpreted by image makers of African descent born between the 1970s and 1990s. There is a good deal of variety here among, for example, the collages made by Stan Squirewell, who likes to play with Black identity by combining disparate, historically-specific costumes with found imagery. Those my age and older, who were in urban environments and paying attention to the beginnings of hip-hop, will appreciate his "King Kane" (2017), a reimagining of the rapper Big Daddy Kane in medieval armor wearing a wave of gold filigree at his neck.

Both Girma Berta and Eyerusalem Adugna Jirenga treat their photographed figures as though they were fictional characters. In Berta's 2017 print "Moving Shadows II, II" the figures of two women, one holding an umbrella, walk away from the viewer across a vast, empty field of green pigment, completely decontextualized, so much so that they might be anywhere, and might be almost anyone. The work subtly moves towards making the Black figure universal. Jirenga accomplishes a similar task though she keeps some more clear signifiers of mother Africa in her "The City of Saints XIX" (2017) where a dark-skinned woman, again facing away from the viewer, transports a basket on her cloth-covered head. The field of color that surrounds her is a bifurcated, modernist scheme of light lavender and green that brings to mind Ellsworth Kelly's visual strategies. However, the figure's presence updates and revitalizes those stagnant tactics, encourages the viewer to wonder about how dark-skinned bodies do navigate territories where they are not, at least initially, expected to be.

My favorite work is that by Keyezua whose Fortia series features a black woman, always in a voluminous red skirt (or dress) and wearing a variety of masks, sited alone in a rocky, sun-bleached landscape. The masks transform her into a creature who is unpredictable, incalculable, otherworldly. I have no idea what she is doing, but I know I want to keep watch. This photography reads simultaneously as Afro-futurist forecast and documentary work that has discovered a way to use ancestral conventions of masks not to only to invoke the past, but to project oneself into a future that has yet to be.

Refraction: New Photography of Africa and Its Diaspora continues at Steven Kasher gallery (515 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) until June 2 with a closing reception on the last day.