THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen
Renée Cox: *Returned*
By Jan Avgikos

Installation view: *Renée Cox: Roots Returned*, Cathouse Proper, New York, 2019.
Photo: Dario Lasagni.

New York City
Cathouse Proper
September 28 - November 10, 2019

Sometimes it takes years to fully appreciate the importance of a work of art, to evaluate what impact it might induce, and to see it in the context of a legacy that has yet to be realized. So it is with Renée Cox's monumental black and white photo diptych, *Origin*, created in 1993. Initially only the left half, a towering nude full-length self-portrait entitled *Yo Mama*, was exhibited. It features a thoroughly self-confident Cox in the buff, wearing high heels, and holding her squirming young son. The right half of the diptych is a nude portrait of a beautiful young Black man entitled *David*. Posed as Michelangelo's marble statue, sporting a big Afro and holding a worn book aloft. "David," like Cox, gazes intently out of the frame to engage the viewer. While each photograph is editioned separately, together they comprise the diptych *Origin*, never exhibited until now. The pair is reunited on the occasion of *Renée Cox: Roots Returned*, and inaugurates the return of Cathouse Proper's "solo-solo show" program.

Included in Marcia Tucker's notorious *Bad Girls* exhibition at the New Museum in 1994, a riotous show bursting at the seams with combative energy, Cox's self-portrait hits so many notes relevant to the expansionist politics churning in the art world of those times—feminism, identity politics, Black empowerment, appropriation, cultural critique—that to unpack its complex references is to create a kind of primer of socially motivated art produced in the '90s by emerging artists.

Cox situates her diptych at the polemic nexus of representation, particularly nude portraiture, which was heavily used and interrogated in New York at the time. As if it had never been questioned before, subjectivity mattered hugely, and meaning was absolutely contingent on the gender, race, and orientation of the artist. Whose pleasure was expressed? Whose agency was enabled? Increasingly, artists were emboldened to break taboos in search of new freedoms.

Being Black, female, and a mother—all on her own terms—is at the core of Cox's powerful self-portraits. When she engages masquerade, as various *Yo Mama* characters, religious figures, or art historical icons, it's clear as a bell that she critiques outmoded stereotypes and oppressive regimes alike. Culture wars were fought over so many issues we might take for granted. Now, no one asks, "What did you do for the patriarchy today?" But 25 years ago—whew!—it was a hot topic. The comparison affords insight into exactly how gutsy it was for Cox to present herself, in all her "babeness," with her child, and wearing heels no less!

Feminism might well have been one of the crusty institutions she targeted, whose more militant precincts proscribed conventional feminine sexiness and making babies. Not only does Cox swat away arch ideologies, she commits a "double blasphemy" with the proximity of her mother and child self-portrait to the historically rich category of the Madonna and child. Raised Catholic in Jamaica, she finally has her way with Christian iconography and banishes the white virgin! She exalts her Blackness and her bold sexual energy and authorizes herself to take charge of her own image and to speak out against societal constraints.

So how does it work with *David,* the other half of the diptych? With a similar tactical maneuver, Cox coopts a historical standard of masculine perfection, deliberately othering the white ideal with the chiseled physique of a Black man, a substitution that signals a stridently revisionist approach to art history, and one that speaks volumes about the exclusion of people of color from representation. The political import of Cox's black *David* is made more emphatic with the figure's fine Afro hairstyle, still a signifier in the mid-90's of Black Power, the Panthers, Angela Davis, and even "anti-whiteness." The explosive politics of racial identity and discrimination are ratified by the text this *David* holds, Cheikh Anta Diop's *The African Origins of Civilization* (1989), a grand expose of cultural theft that argues for an African-centric understanding of the development of ancient Western culture.

Cox's willful acts of reclamation are further implemented by the monumentality of her figures. Amplified by the scale of the photographs (super large for 25 years ago) and the camera angle, tilted slightly upward, the figures acquire heroic proportion. It's as though we look up to them, in recognition of their apotheosis. Their elevation suggests reification, righting of wrongs and revelation of truth. The idea of monumentality deployed by Cox to endow her figures with importance ricochets all the way into the present.

The week Cox's *Origin* diptych opened was the very week of the unveiling of two monumental sculptures by African-American artists, one by Kara Walker and the other by Kehinde Wiley. Wiley's *Rumors of War*, 2019, an enormous 27' high bronze equestrian statue of an African American man astride a black steed, challenges the legacy of Confederate statues installed throughout the South. Kara Walker's *Fons Americanus*, 2019, an almost 40' high fountain filled with sharks, slave ships, and drowning African figures, matches sculptural grotesqueries with the horrors of Black subjugation. What perfect timing to enable us to reflect on the importance of Cox's trail-blazing efforts to introduce the revolutionary politics of Black liberation into art. It's a renaissance today for African-American artists, yet ironically it unfolds against a cultural backdrop of increased aggression against Black Americans. *Origin* has the capacity to remind us that setting the record straight is as important today as it was 25 years ago. To assert Black histories, Black bodies, and Black experience in art is, in part, to continue the conversation that Cox began.

Contributor
JAN AVGIKOS is a critic and historian who lives and works in NYC and the Hudson Valley.