

# Your Ego is Not Your Friend: Honesty, History & Self Love

## Renee Cox



PRECOG MAGAZINE, Nov. 2019

In Conversation  
with

# Lindsay Lee Long Florescia Escudero

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FE

Renee, can you start out by telling us about your show, *Roots Returned*, which runs at Cathouse Proper from September 28 to November 9, 2019?

RC

I'm going to be showing two pieces: *Yo Mama* and *the David*, which is going to be presented for the first time ever as a diptych, called *Origin*. *Yo Mama* has been seen quite a bit, but *the David* has not.

FE

Originally, was it intended to be a diptych?

RC

It was, but then *Yo Mama* got abducted pretty quickly into Marcia Tucker's *Bad Girls* show back in 1994, and obviously there was no place for *David* in that show.

FE

How was that piece initially received? I heard there was some controversy around it.

RC

No, not at all. You're thinking of *Yo Mama's Last Supper* and the so-called controversy when [then-mayor] Giuliani was bitching about it, calling me anti-Catholic and so on. Then I had to remind him of the 10 Commandments, you know, like *Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery*.

[Laughter]

LLL

You've gotta remind these people! You started out working in fashion photography. Had you always been making conceptual work simultaneously?

RC

Not really. I did fashion for 10 years, then at a certain point, as I reached my 30s, I wanted to do something less fleeting. You can only talk about a shoe for so long. When you're a little bit more mature, you start thinking, what is this? What am I doing? My photographs didn't have the same kind of longevity. I was doing a lot of editorial in those days, so every 28 days it was a new magazine, and what you just made was forgotten about.

FE

After doing fashion, you had a baby and then went back to school. What was that experience like?

RC

Oh, it was fun. No issues. I had infrastructure, and someone to look after him during the day. And his dad was there too in the evenings. It wasn't the perfect time to do it, but you gotta do it when you gotta do it. That whole thing around women and babies—you can make it work. Keep your eyes open. Eyes and ears open, so that you can do what you wanna do!

I mean, I say that, but I met my husband at school, we were both at Syracuse together. He became a banker later, but he wasn't that when we met, he was a student.

LLL You saw that he had the vision.

RC Yeah, he had the ambition. That's what you want. I always tell the young people—two artists together? That would be difficult. Only in America, you know, where there's no support for the arts! If you're in Denmark, fine, do what you want.

LLL I wanted to ask about your relationship with the word "unapologetic." In writings about you I come across certain buzzwords which are often associated with black women that are creative. Words like "unapologetic" have become buzzwords that imply controversy, as though there is something that we need to apologize for. How do you feel about it, given that it's associated with your work?

RC People are scared, and no—we have nothing to apologize for. If anything the others have a lot to apologize for, if you want to get down to it. I'm going to say what I need to say and I am going to say what I believe is the truth—my truth, and also facts. Now facts "don't matter" but I think they are still pretty important. I am going to speak my mind. Most people don't, and that's really boring.

I'm not going to accept the story that I was brainwashed with from the beginning, that being black was somehow inadequate. I'm on the polar opposite side of that. I'm about telling the true story about how Africans were here in North America way before Christopher Columbus. The Europeans thought the world was flat! But we're not taught that, we have to find that out on our own, usually way later in life. When I started learning all of this, I felt it was time that everybody else got to know about it too. I am not going to be made to feel inferior, which is the propaganda that has been around for the last 400 years.

FE How is it that you began learning this history?

RC It's my history and as a Jamaican-American, my family travelled, and I went to white schools, I grew up around white people in Scarsdale. Primarily Jewish, privileged. I didn't really learn that much about my history. When you experience racism—in your face—it changes how you think. Before that you might

have experienced racism, but it was camouflaged, you might not have noticed. You're with all your white friends, and they're like "ohhhhh goddddd, you're being so sensitive." Then, one day, you encounter it on your own, in a way that is very obvious. For me, it sent me to the library. I started researching and looking through old newspapers, finding appropriate books, reading bell hooks and about black abolitionists. I started going on the journey. In the David photograph, the book that he's carrying is Cheikh Diop's *The African Origin of Civilization*. You start educating yourself. Also, because I am Jamaican, I had that history to go on too. I never had any feeling of inferiority around white people, even growing up in those communities, nor did my parents. There was never a feeling of beholding. In Jamaica, there was a different form of slavery, the colonizer, plantation owner, they couldn't stay in Jamaica too long before they were passing out from the heat.

LLL There was a different relationship to racism and violence.

RC Yeah, if you're getting conked on the head, it was probably by someone who looked kind of like you—black people were in the majority. Whereas down South, that wasn't the case. In Jamaica you didn't have people being lynched like that, and all of the heinous, Medieval crimes against humanity. Working on sugar cane plantations was horrible and scary dangerous, but it was a different thing. Not as heinous. It can affect people's attitudes.

LLL There is some the tension to resolve in the diaspora.

RC Exactly. But I think that should be a meaning reserved for us. To take care of in private and work it out from there. We don't have to involve everybody with that conversation. The bottom line is that Caucasians have been very, very good at "divide and conquer," creating a situation of crabs in a basket, competition among each other. We never had a very good PR department, you know?

There's a lot of crazy going on in the world right now. You've got Brazil now, with Bolsonaro, and the United States, you've got England. All you need is to have one charismatic nut job telling folks "they're taking this from you" and all of those crazy people will rise up. They already did it here, they put Japanese people in internment camps. You've got South and Central Americans in camps. It's happening, now. It's supposed to be a time of vision.

FE Your work has a lot of vision!

RC

I think so! I've always been interested in speaking to the point of PR, of creating imagery that would empower brown and black people. Imagery that a little black kid could look at and think, "wow, I could be a superhero. Far out! I could be Queen Nanny leading guerrilla revolts against the Brits and winning." For me, that's the most important message. Without naming names, others don't always want that. I don't think we can afford to make negative imagery around ourselves. Not for the public. If you want to do it, fine, but that's not what I agree with. Whatever little fodder you give them, they run with it. I like to be fair. In my fairness, I think it's not for me to judge any artist about what they want to do—you can do what the Hell you want to do. But that doesn't mean that I won't critique that position.

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in Mali know about the Sirius A and B star systems for a gazillion years, and the West didn't discover that until the 1980s? So who is primitive here? Who is backwards?

FE

How do you define a public? Or, what would a private space mean in this context?

It sounds like I really hate white people, but guess what, I am married to a white guy. They are not all haters. But something happened when they left Africa, maybe it was moving into caves and looking over their shoulders for a saber tooth tiger or something like this. It's still there, you can see it! But, on the other hand, it's not a good history: who commits most mass murders with assault weapons? White people. Who came to the Americas and killed off all the indigenous people? White people. Who came over and brought smallpox in blankets? White people. It's not a good history. But to their credit, they have been able to spin it, and everybody thinks they are it with a bag of chips. I want to know the technique for that, so I can do that for my people!

RC

The artworld, the public, the people that are buying are primarily Caucasian. It's a market, which turns artists into a brand. Doesn't even matter what you do, basically, so long as they can put a title on it. The unfortunate thing is that a lot of people of color are not a part of that market.

FE

What do you think about the removal of monuments?

LLL

Of all your many hats and titles, photographer, activist, curator, educator, is there one part of you that you feel rules the rest?

RC

I think they shouldn't have been up there in the first damn place. This is the control of the history, somebody telling their story. I'd like to see some balance there.

RC

No. You bring them out as you need them. I am not trying to categorize myself. I will leave that to the others. That brings a lot of stress to you, to have to do that for people. If others want to write about these differences, okay, but I don't live my life like that. Aside from some of the things we have talked about, yes—I am an Afro-American, Jamaican artist. It's clear when you see me and the work, which is totally informed by and proud of that history. It's about the self-love, honey.

FE

And more, making other monuments. Putting better ones in their place.

LLL

This is something that I love about your work. There is such a consideration of self, and a placement of the self at the center of an environment, for the purposes you've been talking about: education, the empowerment of blackness, etc. Do you feel like the history you are advocating for is of equal importance to the work itself?

RC

Exactly. That's part of the propaganda! In terms of my work, one thing that I realized really early was scale. Simple. Most time you go into black folks homes, even of means, and they will have their family pictures in little frames, maybe on a piano, and that's it. Those are the ancestors. Having lived in Europe, you go to some European's house, and they have an oil painting up there of some ancestor, 7 feet tall, holding a rifle with dogs at their feet, standing on a plot of big land, looking like owners. And that's what they were. Nobody else believed in owning the land until they came along! But it teaches the next generation, and that's why they are entitled, why they believe that they are supposed to have everything. I get it. But how come then, in a black person's house, I'm looking at a little 8"x10"? When I broke out with the work, I was thinking about that. Yo Mama is 7 feet tall. If this falls off the wall, it will kill you, or break something. It demands respect. And as a people, we have to demand the respect. You have to tell people what time it is.

RC

Absolutely. I think history is important—it is his-story, her-story. You better tell your story, because the other isn't going to tell it for you! So, I'm saying, let's talk about the pyramids. They can't build a pyramid today. When you see that, it's wild. The Incas, in Machu Picchu, they can't build that today. How did the Dogon

FE

I'd also like to ask about your newer work. You are making kaleidoscopes, right? And also using collage.

Yes. My new work comes from my enlightenment. Which means getting out of my ego. Learning how to be happy. You might say, how do you do that? 99 percent of people, including myself until recently, have negative thoughts running through their head all day long. Usually you are not controlling it. I got sick of suffering, of being depressed, and feeling sorry for the little me. "Why don't I have a retrospective?...Why don't I have a book?...Oh my God, I'm being written out of the canon...how did this happen to me?" It was driving me crazy. Literally. One day I discovered Eckhart Tolle and he said one line, basically, "why are you waiting for the world to validate you?" It was an ah-hah moment and I changed. Once you get it with your whole body, not just your mind, but your heart and your soul and your gut, then everything changes. You're like, shit, why am I waiting to be validated by crazy people? It's a recipe for disaster! So after that, I started my own brain-washing. Whenever a negative thought comes in, I address it in that moment. If you let it build up, it goes into the Pain Body, and then you're a mess. So when that thought comes in I say, "fuck you ego," and it goes away. You do it for the rest of your life, because your ego isn't going away. Your ego is not your friend, at all. It's a vicious thing.

Once you know how to deal with it, things can change, and then, for me, the work changed. In essence it is the same portraiture that I've made since I was in high school. But now, I can take it further. I learned about what Photoshop can do, and also worked with someone much younger than me who can help me with the program, and started to create. It comes from a place of no thought—because if I thought about it, I wouldn't do it! And also, keyword, there's a lot of joy that comes from that. People like to devalue joy and fun. No, honey—those are super important words. You have to have joy.

You go around to the galleries and you see a lot of joyless, depressive, ugly shit. And people like it because they are in the same position. It's everywhere—you turn on the TV and all you see is deceit, greed, people throwing drinks in other people's faces, people killing each other of course, then they are already dead and you have to go into some forensic scenario, this is all poison. The only thing I can watch is Flipping Houses or home decorating shows. You think it's entertainment but it is a poison that keeps you in a state of fear.

LLL

Those pieces have a sacred geometry aspect as well. Was that intentional when you were creating them, or did it evolve into that?

It evolved into that. The fun part is being on the journey. So you start out with the portrait, then you can cut things out, flip things horizontally or vertically, then you can multiply it, then you get into fractals, and then you're like, "wow!" Self similar images can go from Gigantor down to the size of an atom using the same image. That kind of stuff is really fascinating and fun. The three-dimensional stuff that I'm doing; I haven't seen anybody attack photography like that. I'm not just saying it because I'm doing it. Now, with photography, we are in a bit of a dilemma. Every schmuck is a photographer. They don't have to know about depth of field—anybody can shoot. Then, I have to take it further, to another realm. In that work, I hand-cut everything, it is very tedious. They are also unique, there is no edition. I think that's exciting.

You've got to create from the heart, the gut—whatever you want to call it—the soul. The work is just living, being. Contrary to popular opinion! It's about being aware and sensitive to what is going around you in the world. And then you use the mind for the execution, for marketing, etc. The mind is a tool. But you're not supposed to live there 24 hours a day. The great ideas don't come from that, they come from the heart and then you process that the way you need to. People ask, "what's your next work." I don't know! I have no idea. Are you paying attention to the work that's there *now*? But whatever is next, it's going to be good!

Image Credit

Origin (1993), Renee Cox, archival digital ink jet print on cotton rag, each 4x7 ft.