

Stephen Friedman Gallery

The New York Times
Seeing Black Futures
Jenna Wortham and Kimberly Drew
7 October 2020

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Black culture is flourishing. Jenna Wortham and Kimberly Drew want to preserve it. Here's what that means.

This essay and the portfolio below are adapted from “Black Futures,” to be published in December by One World, an imprint of Random House.

In a piece titled “LTS I,” the Nigerian-American artist Toyin Ojih Odutola paints her brother in repose, with midnight-colored skin, gold jewelry and piercing eyes, unconcerned by who might be looking at him. The painting is part of “Like the Sea,” a series of portraits of her two younger brothers rendered in her signature style, which emphasizes the depths of Black skin by applying layers of color, in this case, black pastels. Ojih Odutola said she gave her subjects the range to “just be” and exist “as they are,” rather than forcing them into backdrops that might have felt more recognizable, or informed by historical representations of Black people.



Image: “LTS I,” 2013-14 by Toyin Ojih Odutola.

Ojih Odutola named her series for a passage in Zora Neale Hurston’s “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” in which the main character, Janie Mae Crawford, reflects that “love is lak de sea. It’s uh movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore.” Crawford comes to realize that love is as vast as it is mysterious — like Ojih Odutola’s practice, which insists on the beauty in seeing ourselves as we are.

What Ojih Odutola presciently conveys through her work is that Black representation is almost always limited if we allow ourselves to be crunched into other people’s fantasies. In authoring our own images, Black people achieve some sovereignty beyond the reach of colonialist ideas and racist mythologies. Today you can see brilliant examples of this throughout our culture, whether in the plays of Jackie Sibblies Drury, or in the painter Amy Sherald’s portraits of Michelle Obama and Breonna Taylor, or in the comedian Jaboukie Young-White’s sly wit on Twitter, or even in the satirical takes on politics and public policy from young cultural producers on TikTok.

Online and off, we are witnessing a flourishing of Black creativity and art. Our Instagram posts, likes and quoted tweets are creating an unparalleled sense of dynamism and interconnectivity, and what is noticed feels more expansive than it has before. It is now possible, for instance, to witness our everyday thoughts and reactions and experiences — a staggering feat considering how little has been historically logged about the lives of Black people, unmediated and from our own perspectives.

In an essay collected in “Picturing Us: African-American Identity in Photography,” Bell Hooks writes about how photography — particularly snapshots of Black people — form “pictorial genealogies” that “could ensure against the losses of the past.” Hooks describes altars, hallways, credenzas and dressers as the commemorative homes for hallowed Black photos; today those collective memories are aggregated on social platforms. The daily diaries of our experience and the documentation of key moments in modern Black history — including the uprisings in Ferguson, Mo., the Ethiopia-Eritrea peace deal and feminist discussions about the impact of patriarchal violence on rapper Megan Thee Stallion — flow through Twitter, Instagram and TikTok. Our generation’s James Browns release their new music not through Republic Records but on Bandcamp.

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And yet, it is very likely that none of this is being preserved carefully or comprehensively for later review. Social media companies prioritize and monetize Black content, but make no effort to protect it. Ownership for Black people has long been constrained (just think of discriminatory redlining or the dismal number of Fortune 500 companies helmed by Black entrepreneurs), and online it is no different. These platforms encourage quantity over quality and make it increasingly difficult to access past posts. Already some of the most important reservoirs of modern Black culture, including Vine, a short-form video site that predated TikTok, or BlackPlanet, a social-networking site built specifically for Black people, have shuttered or faded from popular use. In some cases, the blogs, photos and clips created and exchanged on social platforms have disappeared from view. A recent update to Myspace, a social site that many Black musicians relied on, lost a trove of data some estimated to be as large as 53 million songs.

Online, there exists an inherent tension between remembering and forgetting that is particularly tormented, given how little agency we have over how information and memories are stored. Right now it is possible to download archives from Facebook, Instagram or Twitter for future reference, but it's hard to imagine that anyone is doing so with regularity. With social platforms, there is newly shared culture, and in effect, shared history, but it is one that is vulnerable to a loss as arbitrary as a server migration or company sale. Scholars like Meredith Clark at the University of Virginia and projects like Documenting the Now study how Black people use social media, but those efforts alone are not enough to capture the monumental flow of content.

Ten years ago, the Library of Congress announced plans to archive every single public tweet. The institution describes Twitter as “one of this generation’s most significant legacies” for capturing “this rich period in our history, the information flows and social and political forces that help define the current generation.” But in 2017, librarians were forced to abandon their efforts. The sheer volume of tweets — numbering in the high billions — and the multitude of formats shared on the platform (photos, videos, GIFs) made it impossible to archive and organize the catalog of data in a legible way. The Library of Congress has said it will continue to selectively save tweets around major events, like elections, and subjects, like public policy, but its challenges only highlight the urgency for more nuanced and creative approaches to archives.

In 2015, we set out to create our own analog archive of contemporary Black life by Black people and for Black people. This project eventually became the book “Black Futures,” from which this portfolio is drawn. The ephemerality of social media terrified us, and as such, inspired us. We also wanted to acknowledge and assemble the multifaceted tiers of dialogues happening among activists, artists, academics, performers and athletes about Black life today. Generations before us had collections like Toni Morrison’s “The Black Book” (1974); Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith’s “All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave” (1982); and countless other texts, and similarly, we wanted to create a book that could serve as a guide to this unprecedented moment of connectivity and production to ensure that it would not be lost in the annals of history.

We set out on this project with a keen awareness that all archives are incomplete because they rely on the priorities and preferences of the authors and collectors. We called on the wisdom of Saidiya Hartman, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, who writes in her preliminary note to “Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments” that “every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern and the enslaved is forced to grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known, whose perspective matters and who is endowed with the gravity and authority of historical actor.” One solution, embedded within “Black Futures,” is encouraging our readers to see the book as an invitation to document our present as they see fit, too.

Right now, many of us are actively engaged with dismantling the history of the past, exposing it as wrong, perverted. This summer, we watched as people toppled racist monuments into rivers, renamed streets, unearthed pasts that we were told did not matter. The familiar is being made strange and shown to be ripe for revision. You

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can see this in the work of Amanda Williams, for example. Williams repaints empty houses on the South Side of Chicago using a palette based on products historically marketed to Black people. They include Crown Royal bag purple, Luster's Pink Oil Moisturizer pink, Ultra Sheen blue. Williams's houses transform an otherwise bleak landscape into something rich and brilliant, and simultaneously raise an eyebrow at how colors are tethered to notions of race and class. Sarah Lewis, who teaches art history, architecture and African and African-American studies at Harvard, uses her "Vision & Justice Project," which includes a multifaceted curriculum and print publication, to decenter whiteness in academia and scholarship. In describing the project, Lewis urges "speaking faith over the future" to sharpen our visual literacy as we do the work of looking back to better understand where we are headed.



Image: "Crown Royal Bag," 2014-2016, by Amanda B. Williams. Courtesy of the artist

The cultural landscape is a metaphorical sundown town — welcoming us conditionally and refusing us methodically, violently and consistently. In June 2015, in an article for The New Yorker, Edwidge Danticat wrote about Black people that "we have always traveled from place to place looking for better opportunities, where they exist. We are not always welcomed, especially if we are viewed as different and dangerous. ... Will we ever have a home in this place, or will we always be set adrift from the home we knew? Or the home we have never known." "Black Futures" is meant to be a dwelling place for our most precious cultural exports in a moment in which so much of our work is still subject to erasure. It wasn't enough to define

ourselves by our examples of productivity; we also wanted to go further and invite each contributor to delve into what it meant to be alive.

The book is not an answer, but a series of prompts and questions, including what it would mean for everyone to create their own "Black Futures" project. We know that one book can't begin to capture everything about Black life, but we also know that too much has already been lost. Our effort goes beyond whom or what we should remember, but how we might begin the work of resisting being forgotten.

JENNA

It's finally here! The book baby we've been gestating for FIVE YEARS is finally about to make its earthside debut. I can hardly believe it.

KIMBERLY

Yes, here it is! Our firstborn, "Black Futures"! I'm so excited we get to share even just a bit of it with the world.

JENNA

How would you even describe what we made?

We have over 100 contributors.

We've been calling it a visual anthology, but it's SO much more than that, right?

KIMBERLY

SO much more, but we have to leave some things to the imagination. For now, I'm excited to share this essay and a specially curated selection of works that appear in the book.

JENNA

We hope you love it as much as we do. Enjoy!

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Image: 'Untitled', Maty Biayenda. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, NYC

The reclining figure is surrounded by their own collection of Black art in their home. Biayenda, a Namibian-born, Paris-based painter and textile designer, often depicts gender-expansive figures in an effort to explore the versatility of Black beauty.

KIMBERLY

I'm SO glad we got to share Maty's work, both in "Black Futures" and here.

JENNA

It's so powerful, and reminds me a tiny bit of the painter Emma Amos, who passed away this spring.

KIMBERLY

I've loved Maty's work since I came across it in 2016 (when Maty was a teenager, mind you). Maty recently did a live painting for Kenneth Ize's Spring 2021 Ready-to-Wear presentation. The kids are all right!



Image: Still from 'Hair Nah,' 2017. Momo Pixel



Image: A video game created to combat the microaggressions of white people touching Black hair without consent.

JENNA

I'm trying to remember where I first heard about "Hair Nah" ... it was 2017, and it was EVERYWHERE — The Fader wrote it up, and so did Polygon and VentureBeat.



KIMBERLY

I mean, it's just perfect. We've ALL been here:

JENNA

It amused me to see the tech world fall all over themselves to write about boundaries and microaggressions — especially since it's an industry where I experienced some of these exact microaggressions.

Momo did the good Lord's work for all of us with this one.

Also, doesn't this character remind you of Solange ...

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Image: Ntozakhe II, Parktown, 2016. Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of the artist; Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York; and Stevenson Cape Town/Johannesburg

A photograph from the artist's series of self-portraits, titled "Somnyama Ngonyama," which translates from Zulu to "Hail the Dark Lioness." The image confronts the politics of race within the history of photography.

JENNA

Working on this profile of Muholi in 2015 truly changed my life.

KIMBERLY

Muholi is a once-in-a-generation creative force.

JENNA

Say that!

That's exactly why it felt so important to commemorate their work, both these self-portraits and their own archival practice of queer people in South Africa, in our book.

KIMBERLY

May we all be an example of rigor and tenacity in the ways Muholi has over their career.



Image: 'A question is a sentence designed to elicit a response. Today, we want to know what the sloppy future holds,' 2018. Kameelah Janan Rasheed. Courtesy of the artist

One of several banners displayed in the lobby at the Brooklyn Museum in 2018. Rasheed's work often plays with the slipperiness of language, and here, complicates the idea of "progress" as linear.

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Image: 'I used to feel (before Lamictal),' 2018. Shadi Al-Atallah

The painting, part of a series on the theory of catharsis, is a large-scale self-portrait capturing the artist's exploration of self and the journey to restore spiritual equilibrium.

KIMBERLY

Mmm, I love this series so much.

I first saw Shadi's work in London at the BBZ BLK BK Alternative Graduate Show, and it's stuck to my ribs ever since.

JENNA

I feel like the pairing in the book — Shadi's work and adrienne maree brown's excerpt from "Pleasure Activism" — is the perfect example of how our brains work in tandem.

The moment I sent you the excerpt, you were like, ah Shadi!

It's one of my favorites. Both works deal on the difficulties (and importance) of prioritizing feeling good in our bodies.



Image: Stills from 'This Hair of Mine,' 2016. Akinola Davies Jr. and Cyndia Harvey. Courtesy of the artists.

Images from the filmmakers' short film, which was inspired by a school in South Africa where young women said that they had been banned from wearing "untidy Afros."

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Image: 'There Are Black People in the Future,' 2018. Alisha B. Wormsley. Courtesy of the artist

The artist created the sign for Jon Rubin's collaborative project "The Last Billboard," a publishing platform for artists in the East Liberty neighbourhood of Pittsburgh. Wormsley's sign, which addresses gentrification, was removed by the building's owner, We Do Property, because of "people in the local community who said that they found the message offensive and divisive."

JENNA

I actually first saw the work when one of our other contributors, Jason Parham, sent it to me via email.

KIMBERLY

It is such a sad story in some ways, but Alisha turned this set back into an opportunity for others. She set up a series of microgrants

for artists to envision the next manifestation of "There Are Black People in the Future."

Lemons meet Lemonade.

JENNA

I LOVE THAT!!!!

KIMBERLY

Shout out to all the Black Mamas in "Black Futures." We love youuuuu!



Image: 'Composition of Embedded and Recessed Earrings with Gold,' 2019. LaKela Brown. Courtesy of the artist. The artist sets everyday adornments like earrings into plaster.



Image: 'Mr. Allofit and Gyre perform, Johannesburg, South Africa, 2017'. Fela Gucci. Courtesy of FAKA. The queer South African artists Mr. Allofit, left, and Gyre performing in Johannesburg, as photographed by Gucci, a member of FAKA, an art, music and performance collective in South Africa.

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Raeschell Niakya Wakiesha Sumata Latrella Sahirah Keytra Resheda Tashenia Flisha Quitalla Koletia Kesia Dabratzi Snicka Chalay Rovetta Meosha Tamikka Nakia Mirmala Tanika Jemelah Laneeda Lkiesha Sonyette Contrennia Jacinda Khadija Ginnette Tynette Veneitte Talana Keshia Lennette Salathia Peninnah Chanteria Roneshia Coletta Mishayla Tawana Shamecca Lakesha Inetha Tenera Desibrace Coletha Keesha Drwilda Shiqundia Queenlana Delinda Ayanna Malique Argirtha Fekisha Sharnell Jamaka Tetelalisa Khepri Claretta Hairothea Caprolanda Niakya Demetra Sumatra Neeama Cleastine Tashondria Lashon Natacha Shadelle Theresia Valkisha Bethena Kianna Nichelle Shemika Everloyce Sharkesha Jenise Ziondrea Latanza Noella Syretta Ghalyah Shalako Jilisa Tafreesa Sheritta Keyah Latifah Charisa Renneda Quonish Kiyanka Tanisha Shonta Shennelle Mandisa Tonisha Kenisha Makayla Narie Jerrica Shontel Felisha Tizza Moniqua Lashae Tinisha Tawonda Shanita Shonek Hazline Jazmin Shkise Tiara Shranda Sakura Ronisha Anaijah Raeschell Sha'Shauna Gerschell Zoriyah Evaretta Malyaia Qadeera Camesha Tynisha Briahna NaTasha Schanta Curtisa La'tonia Kalia Oryntha Mikayla Ebonee Chantel Quentera Keziah Shekila Cludetta Aaleah Ebony Danette Shanice Takira Sharee DeNisha Nalsya Tekena Thomeka Malvina Laquinda Sharleene Nekasa Kwadi Ja'Tovia Rashida Anunnaki Nashira Faizah Shayna Lethia Phelisa Dronellar Meechala Hynifah Nikia Shiann Akllah Shamiyah Shatora Larrika Lavetta Meosha Jattera Zeldra Natanya Daleshawna Shawanna Lateatha E'monie Destine Kamildh Denisha Carlette Glenshler Deecoily Shantil Tamala Tamielya Nakeisha Tamisha Khlana Schnika Charnell Tiyon Shantelle Jzonque Ca'tina Joscalyn Shawnya Shalonda Ral'Nece Chalandra Taloria Tiffanique Tanachi Jakyra Zanyasha Chieboni Aivaye Jakerria Janieka Raenette Michel'le YeEtta Chanell Jawon Ronette Kawanda Seechanna Denishia Senalka La-a . . . Harlow Bristol

Image: 'Pluralism,' 2016. Deborah Roberts. Courtesy of the artist. For this collage, the multimedia artist assembled dozens of Black names that Microsoft Word identified as "misspelled," as indicated by the red squiggles underneath them.

JENNA

Remember that time we were having dinner in Chelsea and we realized Deborah was sitting right behind us?

KIMBERLY

HAHHHAHAHAH! Wait, really?

JENNA

Yep! We were having a working dinner, and discussing the book, and she was right there — it felt divine, somehow.

Our project became a little more concrete and less abstract in that moment. So special.



Image: 'Ashley's Nameplate,' 2018. Naima Green. Courtesy of the artist. A photograph taken at a party for "Documenting the Nameplate" in Brooklyn. The project, for a forthcoming book by Isabel Flower, Marcel Rosa-Salas and Kyle Richardson, showcases and memorializes the histories around nameplate-jewellery culture.



Image: 'Shinnecock Powwow,' 2018. Rahim Fortune. "Shinnecock Nation" by Rahim Fortune, image courtesy of the artist. The image documents a traditional Native gathering like those of the artist's youth. He grew up between central Texas and the Chickasaw Nation.

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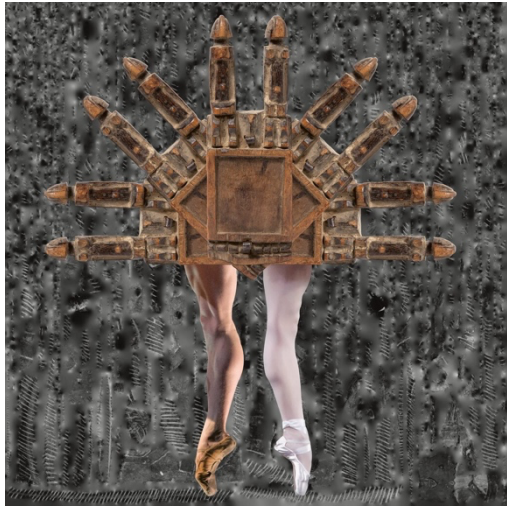


Image: 'Move in Place III,' 2015. Brendan Fernandes. Courtesy of Brendan Fernandes and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago

Part of a series of digital and photographic collages that highlights the various meanings a body in motion can encapsulate. The Kenyan-Canadian artist has said that choreography is “a tool for coding and decoding the language of movement.”



Image: 'Invited to the cookout,' 2017. David Leggett. Courtesy of the artist and Shane Campbell Gallery, Chicago

The painting includes an abstracted image of Dajerria Becton, 15, being mounted and tackled by the former police officer Eric Casebolt at a pool party in McKinney, Texas.

KIMBERLY

SPOILER ALERT David's work opens and closes “Black Futures.”

His ability to fuse humor and hard truths makes him one of my favorite artists working today.

JENNA

You truly cannot look away, especially from this piece. Your eyes don't know where to go, they're trying to decode the fear on Black Bart's face.
(Also, Black Bart!)

Then they want to land on the softness of the rainbow, and finally, you have to reckon with Dajerria's experience and the horror of it all. It's brilliant.

KIMBERLY

Yes, sometimes we just have to sit in this discomfort.