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Ra'anaa Yaminah Brown

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Thematic reviews

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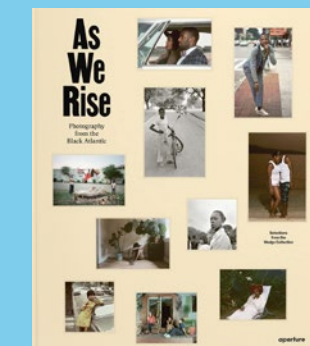
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What does it mean to represent Blackness within the realm of the photographic arts across the Atlantic? As speculated in Paul Gilroy's vital book, *The Black Atlantic* (1995), the modern Black experience cannot be understood in binaries of separate Black cultures (African, American, Caribbean, British), but rather must be acknowledged as an overarching Black Atlantic culture which transcends ethnicity and nationality. Within a photographic context, what then does it mean to explore the often unremarked intersection of these distinct cultural realities? Both the Black subject and the Black photographer have been either omitted or abysmally under-recognized within conventional narratives, such as John Szarkowski's *The Photographer's Eye* (1966), Mary Warner Marien's



Photography: A Cultural History (2002), and Charlotte Cotton's *The Photography as Contemporary Art* (2004).

However, where other mainstream accounts fall short, *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* presents a platform for the just acknowledgment of photographers from the Black Atlantic, creating a safer space in which Blackness may be analyzed and represented through a lens of liberation, decolonization, and intersectionality. Featuring selections from the repertoire of the Wedge Collection, *As We Rise* is a celebratory book that uplifts a sense of kinship and social cohesion, not only between the featured artists but between the viewer and the subject.

Established in Toronto by Jamaican-Canadian arts collector Dr. Kenneth Montague in 1997, the Wedge

Collection is one of the largest privately owned contemporary art collections across the country that puts its primary emphasis on exploring Black diasporic culture and contemporary Black life. The Collection was cleverly designed to insert necessary dialogue and the works of marginalized artists into the art historical narrative through exhibitions and collections such as *As We Rise*. A friend and frequent collaborator of Montague, Nigerian-American writer, photographer, and art historian Teju Cole, begins the book with an eloquent preface suggesting the book's invitation to listen to the photographs. His text is followed by a powerful introduction by British curator and cultural historian, Mark Sealy. Both Cole and Sealy's texts effectively position the forthcoming images, addressing the importance of scholarship of this caliber in developing the interconnectedness of members of the Black diaspora. As Cole rightfully notes, "These are pictures that say: *I am not alone, I have another with me*" (7).

To preface each detailed section—Community, Identity, and Power—the book features three vivid preludes by Nigerian-Canadian artist, curator, and educator Liz Ikiriko. These introductions

are used as an opportunity to break down each theme in relation to the photographic arts. Community as a locus for belonging, Blackness as an uncategorizable yet boundless force, and the prioritization of agency over machinations of supremacy are brought to light as the key concepts and basis for the book—offering, perhaps, a new perspective on the core aspects of what it means to be Black within an Atlantic context. It is through this contribution to scholarship that a newfound sense of kinship and relatedness may be suggested among members of the Black diaspora. Reminiscent of a family photo album, *As We Rise* presents a feeling of ease and connectivity. As Liz Ikiriko states in one of her eloquent interviews, “The collection extends out to a global diaspora and proclaims, ‘We are home’” (12).

Each interview is followed by a series of photographs in dialogue with brief texts by fellow artists and art historians. All three sections amount to over 100 original works by Black artists from across Turtle Island (North America), and throughout the Diaspora. While the juxtaposition of images is quite striking, there does not appear to be a rhyme or reason for the placement of images within each respective section. Why is it that Gordon Parks’ *Husband and Wife* (1950) is placed opposite Deanna Bowen’s *Treasury of Song* (2007)? While the lack of elaboration on the reasoning for the mismatching of eras—and black-and-white with colour photography—is perhaps a missed opportunity for additional vital context, it may

likewise have been an intentional choice to allow for viewer speculation on the character of the book.

Perhaps Yannius Davy Guibinga’s *Opposition* (2016) and *Leaves* (2016) are followed by James Van Der Zee *Jean-Michel Basquiat* (1982) to accentuate the atemporality of Black power and the ways the movement ebbs and flows with each generation. And quite possibly, the juxtaposition of Kwame Brathwaite’s *Sikolo Braithwaite* (1968) and *Self-Portrait* (1964) was done to address the artist’s perceived inner identity against his perception of that of the subject. The pairing of varying photographs within this context is, conceivably, a commentary on the intricacies of possessing layered identities and of the lived experience of members of marginalized communities. Despite the variances in style (self-portrait, group photo, double exposure, collage), colour scheme (colour, black-and-white, sepia), and time, this book’s successful curation allows it to be experienced as the expression of a compelling (though diffuse) narrative.

As *We Rise* eloquently addresses what it means to be Black in Western society through photography. There is no oversimplification of the Black lived experience, but rather the presentation of numerous complex layers of being and identities that are intersectional. While these conversations are implied in the inclusion of the imagery, there does, however, appear to be a dearth of textual commentary on said nuanced identities. The book touches on ideas of queerness and gender through Texas Isaiah’s *My Name Is My Name I* (2016) and Rotimi Fani-Kayode’s

Twins (1985). Still, something is left to be said, particularly around the striking and necessary presentation of queerness in works such as Jody Brand’s *Moffie in Irma’s Garden* (2017) in relation to gender nonconformity and its interrelatedness to Blackness throughout time and space.

The same can potentially be said about the intersectional identity of Black women. The book includes a plethora of impressive works displaying femininity and femmehood; Michèle Pearson Clarke’s *Gloria* (2018), Raphael Albert’s *Miss Black & Beautiful* (1972), and Kennedy Carter’s *Untitled (Self-Portrait)* (2020), but the potent conversations on the intersectional identity of femmehood and Blackness are not contextualized in writing. And where is the significant commentary on sexuality, hypervisibility, and the sexualization of Black femme bodies that Mickalene Thomas’ *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* (2006) so poetically demands? But perhaps these conversations are meant to be implied; rather than be provided with a complete analysis, readers are meant to infer and formulate an introspective exploration of Blackness, identity, and their own connectivity.

In centering Blackness, *As We Rise* allows for the reimagining of Black people across the Black Atlantic as main figures in their own stories. There are conversations on Black joy in Tayo Yannick Anton’s *Backway* (2013) and Jamal Shabazz’s *Flying High* (1982), among numerous other representations of Black beauty, happiness, and excellence across the ages. *As We Rise* serves as an important addition to existing scholarship in establishing an environment in

which the Black body is forefronted in a way that uplifts the community rather than painting it in a light of fragility and pain. As Teju Cole declares in his spirited preface, this dynamic photographic treasure trove is a nod to the Black lived experience and is wholly imbued with a sense of compassion, Black love, and joy.

The book beautifully finishes with a final interview with Dr. Kenneth Montague outlining his motivations, influences, and guiding principles not only in the creation of *As We Rise*, but his development of the Wedge Collection. This text, intentionally the last moment experienced, allows readers the opportunity to synthesize their own introspections about the book without being influenced by the curators' intentions. Montague's interview provides necessary context about the importance of taking up space as Black folks within the realm of the arts.

In a society where Blackness is frequently scrutinized and under question, this excerpt of the Wedge Collection refuses to accept any conventional narrative and instead presents varying depictions of Black identity, extending across eras and beyond both time and space. It combats harmful stereotypes and inaccurate narratives while simultaneously placing the Black body, both behind and in front of the camera lens, on a pedestal of reverence and pride. *As We Rise* speaks to the instrumental power of photography; as having the power to present the world from a familiar, loving perspective—from within a community, as a device to exorcise,

celebrate, and heal, and as a historic and vital tool for the acknowledgment of Black power.

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Blackity

Artex, Montreal
September 23, 2021 to June 23, 2022
Curated by Joana Joachim

Jenny Burman

The first things you notice when you enter both the material and virtual exhibition spaces of *Blackity* are the vertical lines on the walls or screen, which are like lines on an old dot-matrix printer, the way they look grey but your brain knows they're made up of tiny black dots. There are skinny and fat lines, stretching from the bottom to the top, with lots of white space in between, and lots of printed or scanned materials

laid out against this line-blank-line space. The lines are a data visualization, marking the volume of materials this exhibition draws from, according to decade: 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, 2000s, 2010s. *Blackity* "begins to trace a temporal cartography of Black Canadian art history," writes curator, art historian and Concordia professor Joana Joachim.

The lines, like the exhibition overall, hold in place this wonderful assemblage of images, texts and artworks, against the ephemeral-ity (the "blips in time") of Black artists' visibility in Canadian art and criticism worlds, and towards the creation of another archive to stand with the scores of archives, mostly "little 'a' archives," that exist on websites, in gallery and community centre basements, in magazines and books and libraries, in people's memories and stories.¹ Together these materials form a bold tradition of making, performing, talking and writing about Black diasporic and Black Canadian art over the last fifty years. The tradition is multifarious, multi- and intergenerational, collaborative, and engaged with Indigenous art and art by other



Blackity (exhibition view), Artex, Montreal, 2021. Photo: Paul Litherland.