

Dress Up, Speak Up: Regalia and Resistance

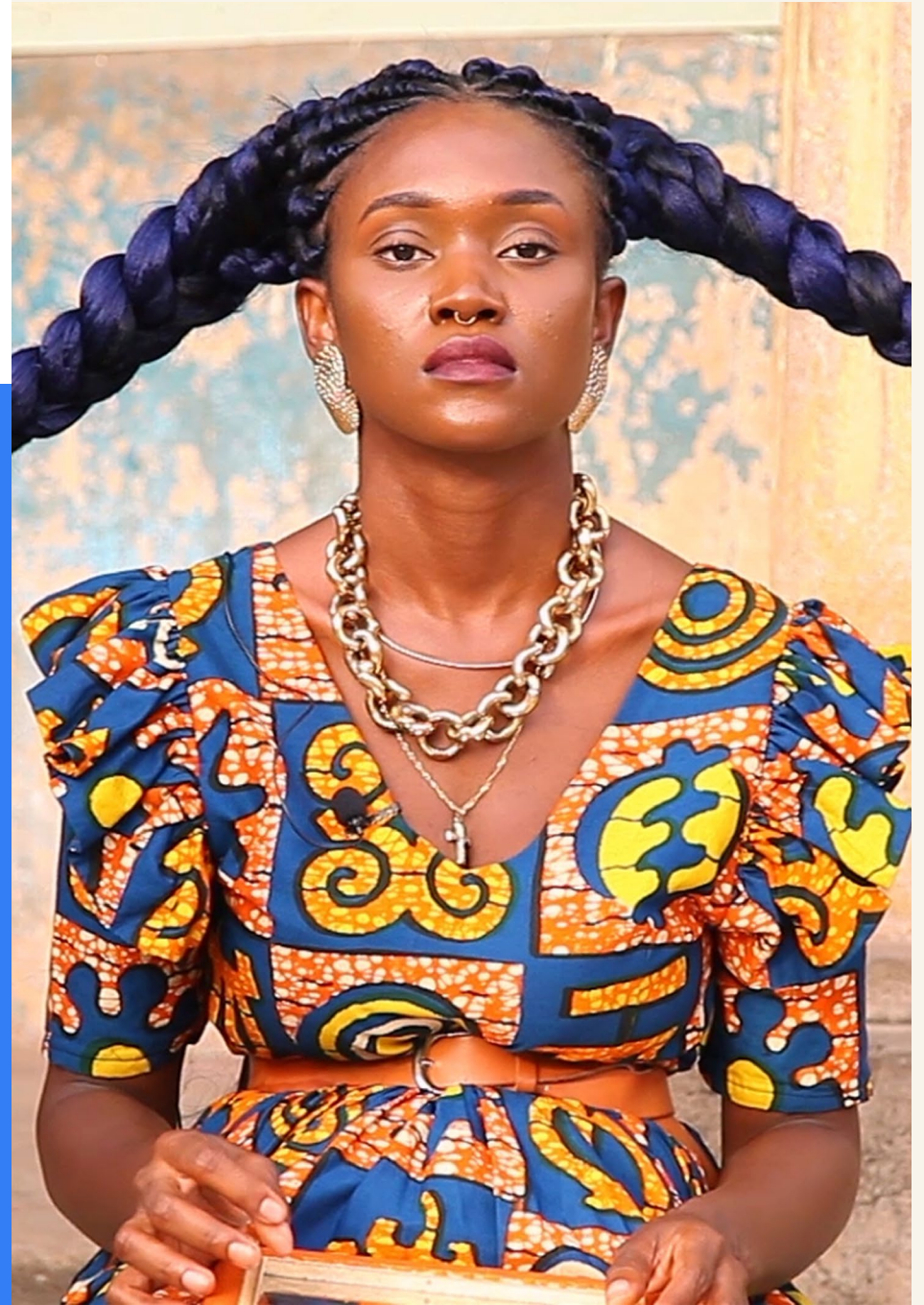


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Examining the evolution of self and society through the lens of history's influence—both documented and unseen—is the central confrontation animating the exhibition. Working with a wide range of media and subject matter, the artists adopt and adapt historical sources to address how discrimination and injustice have shaped both identity and its artistic representation. Reimagining, restaging, and re-performing imagery from Renaissance painting to present-day media, these artists expose the gaps and fissures in both art and history, illuminating the mutable nature of personal and collective memory to redefine cultural visibility.

Cover: Yvonne Osei
EXTENSIONS, 2018
Single-channel video, color, sound, running time 6 min. 4 sec.
Courtesy of the artist and Bruno David Gallery



Bedecked and bejeweled, the figures populating *Dress Up, Speak Up* occupy fluid space and time, evoking past and present, fact and fiction, memory and desire, to illuminate the complexity of contemporary identity. Whether redefining historical concepts of Westernized ideals, rewriting the visual language of ancient religious tradition, or uplifting the gender-bending bling of popular culture, these representations of self and other role-play in real time, reach back through history to address prevailing personal, social, and political challenges. Artists exaggerate and celebrate everyday experiences and materials that confront, transform, and redefine cultural visibility, while others recast themselves into living instruments of protest, using performance to confront historical injustices that continue to shape the present.

The finery utilized to dress up and speak up often consists of everyday or non-traditional materials. Raúl de Nieves gathers thousands of plastic beads and other discarded, commercially produced materials to fashion his evocative *Somos Monstros [We are Monsters]* figure, while Wilmer Wilson IV covers his body with “I Voted” stickers to express his struggle to fully participate in the democratic process, and in postage stamps for his performance as Henry Box Brown, an American slave who shipped himself to freedom. Adopting a second skin, both physically and metaphorically, Wilson exchanges his individuality to embody a symbol of the struggle for civil rights—to be free, to vote, to be heard.

Amplifying an everyday practice into performance spectacle, Yvonne Osei examines beauty, colorism, and the legacies of colonialism. In the video, *EXTENSIONS* the artist choreographs an unexpected encounter on a busy street which “reveals the apparatus, culture, and methodology of hair braiding in Ghana. Characterized by Afrobeat music blasting in the streets, the video shows two hairdressers with their assistants braiding a woman’s hair in front of Sister Pokua Beauty Parlor, a small kiosk salon at a busy corner in Asafo, a town in Kumasi, Ghana. A spectacle is created in public as the sitter’s indigo-colored extensions stretch out several yards into the Asafo community. Hair in the black community is an important asset that speaks of heritage, community, beauty, womanhood, and sisterhood. The video celebrates craftsmanship, highlights teamwork, and reveals the labor and conversations that take place in black spaces that cultivate beauty. Through hair braiding, this Ghanaian woman becomes the center of attention in Asafo.”

Also highlighting experiences of daily Ghanaian life, Derrick Ofori Boateng’s colorful photographic metaphors exude joy. Emphasizing colors, clothing, and patterns that often hold their own symbolism, Boateng shares playful motifs and visual interpretations of well-known proverbs into his carefully staged images, cloaking his subjects in kaleidoscopic scenes of saturated color in a style he calls “Hueism.” The artist used a smartphone to shoot and edit this series of photographs, a simple tool which allows him to enhance and affirm narratives of his daily experience to the world—images that contrast many perceived media stereotypes of Africa.



Raúl de Nieves
Somos Monstros (We Are Monsters), 2016
Vintage millinery patches and fabric

Jill Frank also contrasts a predominant media representation, in this case of Western social rituals in three images from the series *Psychodrama*. Part artist, part documentarian, and part psychotherapist, Frank reenacts traumatic, awkward, and embarrassing moments as her subjects remember them but not as they appear in photography from the time. “Psychodrama really [came] to be about memory, personal experiences and where they lacked documentation. It was also about making those memories accurate for the participant, making this person feel that in their history of visual images some of their most important experiences are visually represented.” Through large format images and costumed subjects, Frank sets a cinematic tone around personal moments full of expectation, but contrary to most photographs of celebratory times, these images relay the true experiences of the subjects.

Rooted in cultural pride and earnest identity, Manuel Hernandez Sanchez, presents a portrait of his friend, known as Fez, evoking the style of his ancient ancestors. Using visual symbolism found in the ancient frescos of the Mesoamerican city, Teotihuacan, Sanchez reconnects with his Indigenous roots, monumentalizing Fez, who is surrounded by her own words, and posed in, as the artist says, “her teaching stance, emphasizing the importance of her profession.” Both artist and subject exclaim their identity and their heritage as a bold act of defiance; decolonizing through their study of ancestral history and science, especially mycology.



Manuel Hernandez Sanchez
Fez, 2023
Acrylic on shaped cotton canvas

Kudzanai Chiurai’s theatrically staged multi-media series, *We Live in Silence*, presents an alternative history that recasts the leader of African Black liberation from colonial rule as a woman, challenging the gender bias that traditionally places Black males first as the victim of colonization, and subsequently as the heroic liberator of the post-colony. Combining references to religious and cultural rituals with pop-culture imagery, *We Live in Silence* was conceived as a direct response to Mauritanian filmmaker Mel Hondo’s 1967 drama *Soleil Ô*, offering a counter-narrative and speaking to the silence that afflicts many in postcolonial Africa. The multi-media works of *We Live in Silence* use female protagonists to propose a new image of a post-colonial future. “African nations that fought and won independence from European powers are still being shaped systematically by the colonialist social and political institutions that presently govern in Africa,” says Chiurai. His artworks articulate a profound, provocative resistance to that history by placing Black women at the center of a new, global narrative drawn from a wide range of cultural sources.

While directly invoking Christian iconography and Biblical narratives, Gaela Erwin's self-portraits combine the sacred and the secular in what she describes as "an investigation of gender roles in contemporary society and the influence of Christian religious symbols as a source of inquiry." *Self-Portrait as Mater Dolorosa* is part of Erwin's *Martyr* series, which presents the artist as various saints, both male and female, with images of the source of their martyrdom depicted with a Renaissance-like portrait. Here, Mary, mother of Christ, appears above her doomed infant son in utero, the tear on her cheek foreshadowing his fate and her sorrow. Erwin's *Self-Portrait (with Ostrich Egg)* and *Twelve Apostles*, includes likenesses of male colleagues and friends, as well as of the artist, posed as Christ and holding an ostrich egg. "This work bears theistic hallmarks of European Christian art," explains the artist. "The Christ-like pose and hand gestures are borrowed from iconography of the Catholic Church. The iconic pose of Christ offering a benediction is paired with an ostrich egg held in the other hand."

In *Lament* by Berni Searle, the artist's gold hands are not gloved, but painted with metallic leaf, transformed into icons, relics incorporated onto a living body; the lace covering her face and upper body is both decorative and symbolic, recalling ceremonial body ornament and tattoos. Searle's images capture the artist's staging of *Shimmer*, which she performed in the town hall of Bruges, Belgium, a Gothic building that was elaborately refurbished by King Leopold II, the brutal colonialist ruler of the African Congo (he ordered the severing of hands from colonists who failed to meet his rubber quotas). By adorning herself in lace and gold leaf, Searle inhabits, mourns, and resurrects lost lives, while embodying and expanding symbolic access to the space she occupies: her veiled figure may be a citizen or saint, Muslim or Christian, European or African.

The legacies of Anglo-European colonialism and the need for new monuments that reflect the traumas and erased histories are illuminated in *The Anthropophagic Effect*, *Helmet no.3* by Jeffrey Gibson. A Native American artist of Cherokee and Choctaw heritage, Gibson's work explores the material histories and futures of several Indigenous handcraft techniques and aesthetics, including Southeastern River cane basket weaving, Algonquian birch bark biting, and porcupine quillwork. The helmet sculpture included here was created for a 2019 exhibition at New York's New Museum, entitled "The Anthropophagic Effect." The phrase is derived from Oswald de Andrade's legendary 1928 *Anthropophagic Manifesto*, which argued that Indigenous communities could "devour" colonizers' culture as a way to resist and radically transform Western culture. Describing his work as inspired by practices that have long predated the arrival of colonizers on the American continent, the artist says "I engage materials and techniques as strategies to describe a contemporary narrative that addresses the past in order to place oneself in the present and to begin new potential trajectories for the future."

An amalgam of cultural sources animates portraits by Stephanie Syjuco, who was born in the Philippines. For her *Cargo Cults* photographs, Syjuco swaths herself in patterned fabrics from head to toe, posed, studio-style, in interiors covered in still more layers of black and white textiles. The shape-shifting graphics obscure the figure and highlight the designs, which today are associated with "ethnic fashions," derived from the colonial history of the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Upon closer inspection, sales tags from shopping mall stores are discernable on the clothing: the massive consumer trade conducted by GAP, Forever 21, Urban Outfitters, Target, and others, now trace the shipping routes our predecessors traveled, many unwillingly. Overlaid on each of these works is a calibration scale, drawing attention to the practice of identifying "neutral grey." As critic Charles Desmarais notes, "Stephanie Syjuco wants you to know that, physics aside, images are never neutral."

Stephanie Syjuco
Head Bundle, from the series *Cargo Cults*, 2016
Archival pigment print





Yowshien Kuo
What I purpose is to Inter-be, 2023
 Acrylic, Bone Ash, Chalk Dust, Glitter,
 Plastic, and Synthetic Fibers on Aluminum

As a personal form of resistance, Yowshien Kuo explores identity as an Asian American through lively, riotous imagery based around symbols and visual language of Americana, Rococo, and early 20th century photography. Kuo questions what makes an American through his images, building stories involving characters, which are often representative of the artist himself as he subverts familiar imagery.

Jody Paulsen and Athi-Patra Ruga, utilize dress and performance to embody and celebrate the fluidity of sexual identity, resisting the definition and representation of gender as binary. In *Delicate Boy*, Paulsen creates a self-portrait, incorporating then crossing-out some of the obsessive thoughts he records in his journal, eventually settling on a declaration of *Delicate Boy*, gifting himself grace in what may be a complicated world. The “homotropical paradise” that Paulsen builds in *Find Your Gaggle* shows the possibility of belonging without judgement—vibrant, masked figures dance together as an equal community. Fellow South African artist Athi-Patra Ruga’s tapestries highlight queer culture in his home country. Portraits of bold, rebellious, costumed figures pose and perform in *Voodoo Face* and *The Coronation of Unongoloza*, even the irregular edge of the tapestry shape resists the norm. Paulsen, Ruga, and others use craft-based materials and techniques to intentionally subvert the dominant understanding of art by relying on materiality based in outsider traditions that mirror costume and fashion.



Jody Paulsen
Find Your Gaggle, 2019
 Felt collage

The marginalized populate many of Ebony G. Patterson's lush and layered, figure-laden tableaux, which map the contemporary spectacle of identity, both celebrated and hidden. Patterson mines art history, transforming Medieval tapestry and Renaissance portraiture into dizzyingly vibrant and embellished mixed media to illuminate who and what are visible and not in postcolonial culture. Adorned in bright hues and sparkling sequins, her subjects combine material allure with articulate critique. "My ongoing body of work explores constructions of the masculine within popular culture—while using Jamaican dancehall culture as platform for this discourse," explains the artist. Referring to *Brella Krew* from the *Fambily Series*, Patterson says, "The early work looked at the fashionable practice of skin bleaching, followed by investigations of so-called 'bling culture' and its relationship to the masculine within an urban context. While still making references to dancehall culture, my work raises larger questions about beauty, gender ideals, and constructs of masculinity within so-called 'popular black' culture. It examines the similarities and differences between 'camp aesthetics'—the use of feminine gendered adornment—in the construct of the urban masculine within popular culture."

in hell.

in, held.

inhale.

breathe.

The poetic lines incorporated into the title of Fahamu Pecou's *Breathe* articulate the artist's transformation of tragedy into transcendence. One of a series entitled *grav*ity*, which the artist describes as "addressing both contemporary and lingering concerns around race and society using the trend of *saggin'* as an allegory for the tensions that emerge in the identity, performance, and visibility of black men." Here, the young man wearing the loose layers of pants associated with *saggin'* is bent over but not broken, his body weary, yet graceful and strong, seemingly floating in space. The title makes intentional reference to the phrase "We Can't Breathe," which was repeated in protest after Eric Garner's death in police custody in 2014. Pecou says he seeks to "change the phrase from a plea of desperation to one of affirmation," to re-present his subject as beatific, a glowing, iconographic figure, an image of ascension.



Fahamu Pecou
Breathe, 2015
Acrylic and oil stick on canvas

When describing the inspiration for his *Darker Gods* project, Damon Davis states: “I also set out to speak about our experience removed from the spectacle of pain that is often associated with Blackness. This work hopefully inspires and empowers those that view it to see themselves in these deities and that gives them a different way to see the way we are portrayed in the media and popular culture.” Davis creates a pantheon of gods and mythological figures based in Yoruba and Greek mythology and seen through a lens of Afro-Surrealism. These gods are the guardians and representatives for members of communities like Davis’s in East St. Louis—those who may be called upon to protect people earning and surviving at the margins and rewriting the narrative into one of unquestioning magnificence, beauty, empathy, strength, and worth. According to the artist, “this is an ongoing story because myths and legends continue to change with the world and time they exist in.”



Damon Davis
Icon, 2016
 Digital collage with hand embellishments
 Courtesy of the artist

“It is the idea of leaving the weight of the world,” says Jefferson Pinder, describing his film, *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)*. Inspired by a vast array of visual and aural sources including NASA footage and Civil Rights protests from the 1960s, Martin Luther King’s “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech, poet Gil Scott Heron’s “Whitey on the Moon,” 2001: A Space Odyssey, *The Right Stuff*, *Apollo 13*, and Ilya Kabakov’s *The Man Who Flew Into Space From His Apartment*, Pinder stitched together over 2,000 still and moving images to create this work. The news and film reels are projected onto the artist’s face and neck, which he has carefully coated in thick white paint, evoking Japanese Butoh theater. “I was drawn to its protest sensibilities and how it emerged out of post WWII, post atomic rebels to create these ghosts, these people that have these amazing physical qualities that almost survived outside the body,” explains the artist. Pinder’s Afrofuturist vision follows the protagonist into space and to a dramatic ending, when, as in the myth of Icarus, a fiery explosion sends him hurtling back to earth. Critic Faedra C. Carpenter writes, “The final moments of this performance video do not echo the utopian vision of the Civil Rights movement, but rather the grim reality of smoldering smoke and a figure that is still standing after a turbulent ride.” Pinder employs his face as a white canvas to both reflect and project the ongoing impact of racism—presented here as embedded in his skin—and to enact aspirations for transcendence. Fantasy and history bear equal weight in *Afro-Cosmonaut/Alien (White Noise)*, as the artist is narrating his own reality, asserting “the freedom to liberate [himself] from an identity based upon someone else’s interpretations.”



April Bey
 COLONIAL SWAG - If You Meet Me as a \$100 Bitch
 Me Supposed to be a \$150 By Next Week, 2023
 Jacquard woven textiles with hand-sewn fabric and sequins

The idea of space travel as transcendence from discrimination also informs April Bey's mixed media textile, *COLONIAL SWAG - If You Meet Me As A \$100 Bitch Me Supposed to be a \$150 By Next Week*. The regal figure, rendered here as a Jacquard woven textile in saturated color, is derived from AI; sequins underscore the artifice and power of the fantasy on display. One of numerous works belonging to Bey's *Atlantica Series*, the image recalls an advertisement, and indeed it is promoting Bey's fictional fashion brand, Colonial Swag, which the artist describes as a "high-fashion luxury brand on Atlantica that uses fully sustainable, ethically mined colonialism from Earth's developing countries to create beautiful, priceless pieces of fashion." Bey credits her father for first envisioning Atlantica for her as a child as a way of explaining racism, telling her that they were descended from extraterrestrial travelers who had come to the Bahamas from another planet called Atlantica. Combining personal experience, memory, and fantasy, Bey critiques American and Bahamian history and culture, and the white supremacy that is a legacy of colonialism. Exuding the notion of swag that the title further highlights, Bey's queer, diasporic models have eluded systemic oppression; they are free to claim a separate history, and to fully embrace and express their individuality and their value, which is further emphasized in the subtitle here. Bey says that "Atlantica gives everyone a blank canvas to say, 'Okay, if I could create my own planet, my own culture, would I even have any need for gender? And how would that look if we just appeared and none of us had any knowledge of race or gender or class or even currency or poverty?'"

Reimagining history to envision new futures creates a powerful pathway for resilience and transcendence. Whether expressing one's everyday lived experience or for those who inherit a legacy of resisting cultural erasure, telling untold tales—lived, remembered, or imagined—remains vital.

Dress Up, Speak Up: Regalia and Resistance was curated by Alice Gray Stites, former 21c Museum Director and Chief Curator. For this iteration, the exhibition and accompanying text has been appended.

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