

Large Text

As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic

Curated by Elliott Ramsey

September 7–November 19, 2022
University of Toronto Art Centre

Exhibition organized by Aperture, New York

**Art
Museum**

Selections from the Wedge Collection including works by

Raphael Albert, Henry Clay Anderson, Tayo Yannick Anton, Liz Johnson Artur, James Barnor, Dawoud Bey, Arielle Bobb-Willis, Deanna Bowen, Jody Brand, Kwame Brathwaite, Sandra Brewster, Elliott Jerome Brown Jr., Vanley Burke, Mohamed Camara, Kennedy Carter, Jorian Charlton, June Clark, Michèle Pearson Clarke, Renee Cox, Erika DeFreitas, Jabulani Dhlamini, Stan Douglas, Louis Draper, Rotimi Fani-Kayode, Samuel Fosso, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Courtney D. Garvin, Jérôme Havre, Barkley L. Hendricks, Leslie Hewitt, Ayana V. Jackson, Rashid Johnson, Aaron Jones, Anique Jordan, Seydou Keïta, Lebohang Kganye, Luther Konadu, Deana Lawson, Zun Lee, Oumar Ly, João Mendes, Jalani Morgan, Dennis Morris, Aïda Muluneh, Eustáquio Neves, Jamal Nxedlana, Lakin Ogunbanwo, J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere, Bidemi Oloyede, Horace Ové, Gordon Parks, Dawit L. Petros, Charlie Phillips, Afonso Pimenta, Ruddy Roye, Athi-Patra Ruga, Abdourahmane Sakaly, Jamel Shabazz, Abdo Shanan, Malick Sidibé, Xaviera Simmons, Ming Smith, Paul Anthony Smith, Sanlé Sory, Eve Tagny, Texas Isaiah, Hank Willis Thomas, Mickalene Thomas, James Van Der Zee, Nontsikelelo Veleko, Ruby Washington, Ricky Weaver, Carrie Mae Weems, Kehinde Wiley

Our Supporters

The Art Museum gratefully acknowledges operating support from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Toronto Arts Council, and the Ontario Arts Council, with additional project support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic

The ethos of community is at the heart of the collection from which this exhibition is drawn. Established by Dr. Kenneth Montague, the Wedge Collection is Canada's largest privately owned collection committed to championing Black artists. The title *As We Rise* is borrowed from a phrase that Dr. Montague's father would often invoke: "Lifting as we rise." By this, he emphasized the importance of parlaying one's personal success into communal good. He believed in investing back in the Black community to which he and his family belonged. As an ethic, "lifting as we rise" suggests an expanded sense of family, one that reaches beyond close relatives. As an exhibition, *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* embraces this expansive sensibility, centering the familial alongside the familiar.

Familiarity resides not just in the exhibition collectively, but in the photographs unto themselves. Black subjects are depicted by Black photographers, presented as they wish to be seen. Largely, these subjects are aware of the camera, and yet they never seem rigid or unnatural. The gaze is mutual and consensual. But the imagery produced is far from uniform. It is as varied, surprising, and heterogeneous as the Black Atlantic itself. Like a family album, it is idiosyncratic.

The concepts of community, identity, and power intersect and merge, discernable in many of the

photographs not as features to be singled out but rather as a recognizable essence; a recognition of the complex strength, beauty, vulnerability, and irreducibility of Black life.

As Liz Ikiriko writes: “The pictures here forefront the experience of Black life, in all its myriad forms: a marker of the histories and spaces (real and ephemeral) that transcend geographic boundaries. . . . The collection extends out to a global diaspora and proclaims, ‘We are home.’”

The Wedge Collection was started in 1997 in Toronto by Dr. Kenneth Montague to acquire and exhibit art that explores Black identity. Montague also founded Wedge Curatorial Projects, a nonprofit arts organization that supports emerging Black artists.

The texts in this exhibition are adapted from the book *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021).

Exhibition Essay: Familial, Familiar

In his preface to the book on which this exhibition is based, the writer and photographer Teju Cole describes *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* as an album. He likens it to a family photo album, with the sitters in every portrait exuding comfort and confidence. Family—and the kinds of images at home in a family album—proliferate through *As We Rise*: Seydou Keita's photograph of twin babies in costume, or Malick Sidibé's endearing shot of a brother and sister dancing on Christmas Eve; Deana Lawson's festive picture of the Coulson family in their living room, or Dawit Petros's image of the Hadenbes family standing, somehow relaxed yet regal, in their yard; or Zun Lee's intimate, close-up photo of a father staring straight into the camera as he holds his son. In these photographs, the subjects are present with the photographer. They are in community.

This ethos of community is at the heart of the collection from which this exhibition is drawn. Established by Dr. Kenneth Montague in 1997, the Wedge Collection is Canada's largest privately owned collection committed to representing African diasporic culture and contemporary Black life. Many of the acquisitions have come about through, or helped to foster, personal friendships between collector and artist; Dr. Montague is intentional in championing Black artists, and—particularly with emerging artists—bringing their work to higher acclaim.

The title *As We Rise* is borrowed from a phrase that Dr. Montague's father would often invoke: "Lifting as we rise." By this, he emphasised the importance of parlaying one's

personal success into communal good. He believed in investing back in the Black community to which he and his family belonged. As an ethic, “lifting as we rise” suggests an expanded sense of family, one that reaches beyond close relatives. As an exhibition, *As We Rise* embraces this expansive sensibility, centring the *familial* alongside the *familiar*.

Familiarity infuses *As We Rise*, joining together vantages from around the Black Atlantic in a space of mutual recognition. Socially and geographically, the notion of the “Black Atlantic” considers how, between 1492 and 1820, some two-thirds of people crossing the Atlantic were from the African continent; and that these forced migrations have spun connective threads between Africa, the Americas, and Europe, weaving a foundation for what scholars such as Paul Gilroy argue constitutes a Black consciousness. Jamel Shabazz emphasises joy in his stylish street photographs of youth in New York, as hip hop gained prominence in the 1980s; Oumar Ly foregrounds the everyday, the vernacular, in his portraits taken on streets in 1960s Podor, Senegal. Kennedy Carter preserves, in her self-portrait, a tender moment of care as her father trims her hair at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. These photographs span space and time, yet remain sympathetic to one another; a suggestion, perhaps, of this “Black consciousness” that Gilroy alludes to.

Wherever these photographs engage legacies of violence or injustice against Blacks, they do so from a position of power. Reflecting on the life of Sarah Bonetta Forbes, a Yoruba woman given as a gift to Queen Victoria, Ayana V. Jackson does not portray Forbes as property but instead explores her autonomy, and the possibilities for self-invention that—according to the historical record—she plausibly enjoyed. When racism is

addressed, it is done so as a celebration of individuals active in the Toronto chapter of the Black Lives Matter movement, conveyed forcefully in the tintypes by Bidemi Oloyede, or in the dramatic documentation of protest by Jalani Morgan. Each of these works is rooted in its own specific context and locale, but together they speak to a broad and transnational affirmation of Black dignity, echoing the urgent calls for anti-racism that have grown ever louder in recent years. Their message is recognisable. Regardless of where viewers situate themselves, these photographs engender familiarity.

Indeed, familiarity resides not just in the exhibition collectively, but in the photographs unto themselves. Black subjects are depicted by Black photographers, presented as they wish to be seen. Largely, these subjects are aware of the camera, and yet they never seem rigid or unnatural. The gaze is mutual and consensual. But the imagery produced is far from uniform. It is as varied, surprising, and heterogeneous as the Black Atlantic itself. Like a family album, it is idiosyncratic.

How is a family album organised? Often by chronology, or sometimes by the people shown, or else by other typologies: birthdays, holidays, special events. However they are sorted, albums bring together distinct and even unrelated moments into rhythms and cadences. In his preface, Cole parallels the family album with the music album, and this exhibition takes cues from both these formats, imagining the photographs at once as disparate snapshots united by an intuitive visual logic and as tracks on a record, organised around repeating motifs and themes. A prelude comes in the form of James Van Der Zee's *Couple in Raccoon Coats*, one of the oldest photographs in the exhibition and one of the first that Dr. Montague acquired. An overture occurs with Deanna Bowen's *sum of*

the parts: what can be named, in which the artist traces her lineage as far back as Jones County, Georgia, 1815, naming her ancestors and recounting the political events that shaped the world around them.

Refrains of Bowen's history are familiar to me; I've heard them before. She and I are both descended from free Blacks who left the American South from Oklahoma, settling in homesteads on the Albertan prairie in 1910. The Canadian government, alarmed at this influx of Black immigrants, passed anti-Black immigration laws shortly thereafter. Such connections as my identification with Bowen arise organically. Many of the photographs in *As We Rise* interconnect, visually or thematically, in ways sometimes clearly seen and in other instances softly sensed. Unlike the book, which sorts the photographs into three themes of "Community," "Identity," and "Power," the exhibition's categories are subtle and incidental, perhaps difficult to define. Indeed, how can community, identity, and power be parsed apart in the context of contemporary Blackness? Here, these concepts intersect and merge, discernable in many of the photographs not as features to be singled out—a scene of community here, versus an assertion of power there—but rather as a recognisable essence; a recognition of the complex strength, beauty, vulnerability, and irreducibility of Black life. Community, identity, and power underscore the show in its entirety, articulated throughout the space in the eloquent words of Liz Ikiriko.

Ikiriko is one of several esteemed writers to respond to the photographs in *As We Rise*. Dr. Mark Sealy also contributes, reflecting on how these photographs, and their assembly in the Wedge Collection, constitute acts of great care. The book and exhibition are further enriched with texts by such

luminaries as Isolde Brielmaier, Julie Crooks, O’Neil Lawrence, Ugochukwu-Smooth C. Nzemi, Zoé Whitley, and Deborah Willis, among others. These writers describe the photographs from their vantages as scholars and historians but also just as Black viewers, perceiving in these evocative images something resonant—something familiar—and profoundly true.

This truth is crucial. Ikiriko notes the “profound deficiency” in positive, and accurate, representations of Black community in popular culture and the arts. *As We Rise* marks an important amendment to the visual record. As Ikiriko writes: “The pictures here forefront the experience of Black life, in all its myriad forms: a marker of the histories and spaces (real and ephemeral) that transcend geographic boundaries—from photo studios in Mali, to the nightclubs of southeastern Brazil, to the streets and subways of Manhattan. The collection extends out to a global diaspora and proclaims, ‘We are home.’”

—Elliott Ramsey

Public Programming

Opening Reception with DJ Andy Williams

Wednesday, September 7, 6pm–8pm

University of Toronto Art Centre

Curatorial Tour and Book Signing by Dr. Kenneth Montague

Saturday, November 5, 2pm–4pm

University of Toronto Art Centre

Dress Codes: Fashion and Community in African and Diasporic Culture

Saturday, October 22, 2pm–4pm ET

Online on Zoom

Tender Gestures, Radical Acts: Archiving, Collecting, and Curating Black Art and Culture

Date to be announced.

Online on Zoom

All programs are free. For more information and to register, visit artmuseum.utoronto.ca/programs/

Audio Descriptions



Exhibition Introduction



James Van Der Zee

Couple in Raccoon Coats, 1932
gelatin silver print



Vanley Burke

Boy with Flag, Winford, in Handsworth Park, 1970
gelatin silver print



Exhibition Text by Liz Ikiriko: Community



Dawit L. Petros
Hadenbes, 1932
 chromogenic print



Samuel Fosso
'70s Lifestyle, 1975–78
 gelatin silver print





Jamel Shabazz

Rude Boy, Brooklyn, New York, 1982

chromogenic prints



Deana Lawson

Coulson Family, 2008

archival pigment print



Carrie Mae Weems

First Self-Portrait, 1975

hand-printed gelatin silver print



Exhibition Text by Liz Ikiriko: Identity

Couple in Raccoon Coats, 1932

gelatin silver print



Lebohang Kganye

Ka 2-phisi yaka e pinky II; from the series *Ke Lefa Laka*, 2013
archival pigment print on cotton rag



Anique Jordan

94 Chestnut at the Crossroads (detail), 2016
digital chromogenic prints



Xaviera Simmons
Denver, 2008
chromogenic print



Elliott Jerome Brown
Devin in Red Socks, 2016
archival pigment print



Exhibition Text by Liz Ikiriko: Power



Bidemi Oloyede

Joanna Okoh from BL|ARCHIVE, 2018

tintypes



Jalani Morgan

Black Lives They Matter Here, 2014

chromogenic print

Visiting the Art Museum

Justina M. Barnicke Gallery

7 Hart House Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H3
416-978-8398

University of Toronto Art Centre

15 King's College Circle
Toronto, Ontario M5S 3H7
416-978-1838

Hours

Tuesday	Noon–5pm
Wednesday	Noon–8pm
Thursday	Noon–5pm
Friday	Noon–5pm
Saturday	Noon–5pm
Sunday	Closed
Monday	Closed

Closed on statutory holidays. For information about class tours and group bookings, contact artmuseum@utoronto.ca

Admission is FREE.

artmuseum.utoronto.ca
artmuseum@utoronto.ca
[@artmuseumuoft](https://www.instagram.com/artmuseumuoft)