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CULTURE IN THE CITY

Lifting as we rise

As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic brings the intersections of Black life into focus at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. Ahead of the exhibition's September 7 opening, we connected with Dr. Kenneth Montague to learn more.

August 31, 2022





Jamel Shabazz, *Best Friends, Brooklyn, New York*, 1981, chromogenic print. From *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy of Jamel Shabazz.

25 years ago, Dr. Kenneth Montague — AGO Board Member, dentist and art collector — established [the Wedge Collection](#), the largest privately owned collection in Canada committed to representing African diasporic culture and contemporary Black life. The Wedge Collection exists as a living archive of works by Black artists not only from Canada but from the Caribbean, the U.K., the U.S., South America and throughout Africa. Community, in the many definitions of the word, ties together these artists and over 400 works.

It's from the Wedge Collection that *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* was born: first as [a compilation book of photographs and accompanying texts published by Aperture, New York in 2021](#) and now an exhibition curated by Elliott Ramsey, on view September 7 through November 19 at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto. The title *As We Rise* comes from “Lifting as we rise”, a phrase Dr. Montague’s father would impart to emphasize the importance “of parlaying one’s personal success” beyond one’s close relatives into the community. The book and exhibition are celebratory and explorative presentations of contemporary Blackness, with Black subjects depicted by a roster of Black photographers such as Mickalene Thomas, Seydou Keita, [Zun Lee](#), Vanley Burke, James Van Der Zee, Jorian Charlton and more. *As We Rise* the exhibition is a visual record of Black life as it is lived on both sides of the Atlantic, within the African continent and in its far-reaching global diaspora. Like a family album, it embraces familial and familiar sensibilities, and 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...”

We connected with Dr. Montague for more of his insights about the book, exhibition and the Wedge Collection overall.



Samuel Fosso, *'70s Lifestyle*, 1975–78, gelatin silver print. From *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). © Samuel Fosso, courtesy JM.PATRAS/PARIS.

AGOinsider: What can these images tell us about Black life in the diaspora? Why is it important to collect these images and present them in both the exhibition and the book?

Montague: In many ways, the works in my Wedge Collection are pushing against the predominant images of Black folks being depicted as oppressed, suffering, or engaged in acts of violence. Instead, I am looking for the beauty in ordinary Black life, and focusing on love—of ourselves, and of each other. My late father, Spurgeon Montague, talked a lot about "lifting as we rise". The folks at the Aperture Foundation felt strongly that this would be an apt title for a book and exhibition celebrating the aspirational outlook of my collection.



Tayo Yannick Anton, *Untitled*, 2009-2014; from the series *Yes Yes Y'all*, digital print. From *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy of the artist.

AGOinsider: The intersections among community, identity and power are central to the book. How were these themes translated and expressed in the exhibition?

Montague: My local book team of Maria Kanellopoulos, Emilie Croning and Liz Ikiriko worked with Aperture editor Denise Wolff to distill the many tropes in my collection down to these three main themes. However, exhibition curator Elliott Ramsey decided to riff on the concept of the family album — which was also highlighted in celebrated writer and photographer Teju Cole's foreword to the book. Within the exhibition, you will find evidence of community, identity, and power as a kind of energy flowing through the many images on view.



Dawit L. Petros, *Hadenbes*, 2005, chromogenic print. From *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy of the artist & Bradley Ertaskiran.

AGOinsider: You’ve often referred to James Van Der Zee’s *Couple in Raccoon Coats*, (1932) as being one of the images that first sparked your interest in photography and your journey as a collector. Is there a more recent addition to your collection, perhaps on view in *As We Rise*, which stands out to you as being particularly timely and culturally relevant?

Montague: Wedge Collection artist Dawit Petros has several images included in this exhibition. *Hadenbes* is a standout (image above), and is one of the first works on view as you enter the space. Here, the artist relates an autobiographical journey by featuring an immigrant family from Eritrea posing for the classic backyard photo in their suburban home in Saskatoon. A new life in a new country: this is a theme that so many Canadians can relate to—yet historically we have such a dearth of images depicting families of colour. The photograph reads as one where the subjects are in dialogue with the artist and have full agency over how they wish to be seen. Their deeply earned pride is obvious.



Dr. Kenneth Montague, photographed in his home office with photographs from the Wedge Collection. Photo by Ebtí Nabag.

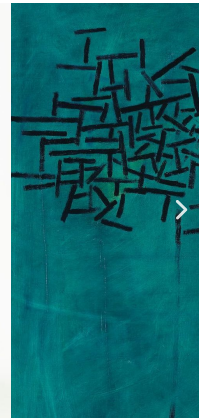
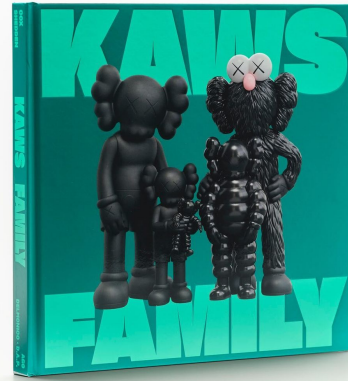
As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic goes on view at the Art Museum at the University of Toronto this Wednesday, September 7. The exhibition includes works from the Wedge Collection by Raphael Albert, Henry Clay Anderson, Tayo Yannick Anton, Liz Johnson Artur, James Barnor, Dawoud Bey, Arielle 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 Keita, Lebohang Kganye, Luther Konadu, Deana Lawson, Zun Lee, Oumar Ly, João Mendes, Jalani Morgan, Dennis Morris, Aida 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 Royce, 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, and Kehinde Wiley.

Purchase the compilation book with texts by Teju Cole, Mark Sealy, Liz Ikiriko, Deborah Willis and more at select retailers, including shopAGO. In case you missed it, Dr. Montague gave us a glimpse of his collection of photographs in this AGOinsider story.

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