

Studio

The Studio Museum in Harlem Magazine Summer/Fall 2014



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Numbers and Trees V, Landscape #6, 1989
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Museum

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Draped Down: Dressed in the Vernacular

by **Monique Long,**
2013–14 Curatorial Fellow



Draped Down
Photo: Adam Reich

The fellowship at the Studio Museum provides an aspiring curator with professional experience for a calendar year. From the beginning, I was immersed in the day-to-day activities of the Museum's Curatorial Department. I have become familiar with common practices that helped me mount my own exhibition with art from the permanent collection.

The first half of the program was marked with a series of discoveries: the challenges and rewards of collaborating with artists on new work; working with other curators, departments and institutions; and the process and logistics of bringing an idea

to bear in the form of an exhibition in the galleries.

One of the most important things that I discovered was that curators never stop learning what is new with art and artists. The most successful curatorial projects are those that address a problem or propose a question that has not yet been fully explored, and make new connections across media—regardless of whether the practice is based in contemporary art. Ultimately I decided to pursue my personal interest in fashion history using the same paradigm, and to develop a framework with which to talk black fashion.

The challenge I faced in developing my exhibition, *Draped Down*, was how to talk about fashion and still honor the art I selected without simply using it to support my argument: What makes black fashion black?

From the time I learned about the Harlem Renaissance, New York and particularly Harlem became a point of departure for my research. In the introduction for *Draped Down*, I write that the origin of black style is the New Negro and black dress is distinguished by its connection with every related cultural or political movement thereafter (the civil rights movement, black nationalism, hip-



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hop, etc.). The New Negro was first defined in the eponymous anthology first published in 1925. Alain Locke, in his manifesto, also titled “The New Negro,” states that Harlem is the birthplace to a kind of black “Zionism,” or the ethos of a new identity of American blacks. Further, Zora Neale Hurston became a muse, so to speak, of the exhibition. Her cohort, which she deemed the Niggeratti, were the glamorous bohemian cousins of the New Negro. Artists and writers were the creative force behind the movement. In fact, I chose the title of the exhibition from a slang term of the era that Hurston listed in a glossary she compiled for her anthropological research: “draped down: to be dressed in the height of Harlem fashion. also: togged down.” Coincidentally, Hurston’s contribution to *The New Negro* anthology, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” is also an analysis of black slang of the period.

As I selected work from the permanent collection related to the theme of *Draped Down*, I became aware that the connective tissue of the show is the artists’ relationship to Harlem. Some were contemporaries of the New Negro, such as James VanDerZee and Ellis Wilson. There were interesting sartorial connections as well. Wilson’s first artistic efforts, for example, were daily pictorials he painted for the local boutique in his native Kentucky neighborhood as a young artist in the early twentieth century. Also, there are Andy Warhol’s Polaroids, a recent gift to the Museum from the Warhol Foundation. The photographs are of a drag queen whose name

Draped Down: Dressed in the Vernacular

also happens to be Monique. Warhol, who often used fame as a theme in his work, once said that drag queens are a living archive of feminine Hollywood glamour. I chose the Polaroids because, although Monique is only wearing a plain T-shirt, her poses and attitude are evocative of a fashion editorial. Other artists I included as a result of my own reading of their work. Njideka Akunyili uses collage made with images from African fashion magazines to create perspective and shadow in paintings of herself and her family in domestic settings. The first time I saw her portraits they reminded me of Works Progress Administration photographs of blacks in the South at the beginning of the twentieth century. Their cabins were often lined with newsprint, used like wallpaper. One could interpret that these African Americans, some twenty years after Reconstruction, were surrounding themselves with aspirations. Certainly, Akunyili, who is originally from Nigeria, wasn’t aware of this early American and somewhat obscure practice. However, I used a quote from Locke’s essay to justify incorporating artists from other parts of the diaspora: “With the American Negro, his new internationalism is primarily an effort to recapture contact with the scattered peoples of African derivation.”

In Hurston’s definition of the expression “draped down,” she also provides the synonym “toggled down.” “Togged,” I learned later, is an informal expression dating back to the eighteenth century that means to get dressed for a special occa-

sion. The origin of “tog” is derived from “toga.” It is interesting that a garment worn by ancient Romans to establish citizenship found its way into black vernacular, and this deserves further investigation. The works in *Draped Down* give a visual interpretation of the faceted relationship between citizenship and clothes, and how that relationship is negotiated throughout the diaspora.

For my time as a fellow, I’d like to thank my beloved colleagues, including the Curatorial Department; Edwin Ramoran, Public Programs Manager; my predecessor, Jamillah James; and the entire Studio Museum family, whom I will never forget. I especially want to thank Thelma Golden. A profile of her in *Vogue* in the early 2000s, which I spied by chance, inspired me to write my thesis on the history of black style.



Andy Warhol
Ladies and Gentleman (Monique) (detail), 1974
Gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Pittsburgh 14.3.4–14.3.20

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Hurvin Anderson
Mrs. S. Keita—Wallpaper, 2010
Museum purchase with funds provided by the Acquisition Committee 11.1.3