

UBIKWIST



#5

Resilience

Andi Oliver • Willy Chavarria • Jerome Lagarrigue
Renee Cox • Frank Bowling • Bettina Rheims • Luka Sabbat
Earle Sebastian • Amelie Chabannes

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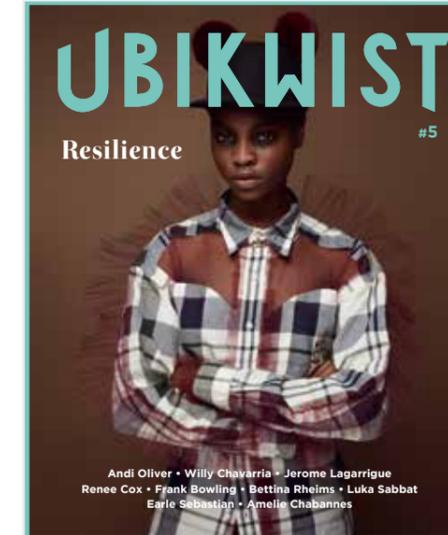
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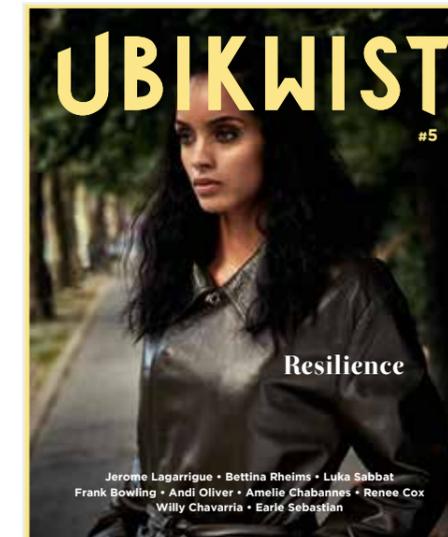
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PHOTOGRAPH : LUIS MONTEIRO
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HAIR : ERNESTO MONTENOVO @ DAVID ARTISTS
MAKE UP : JULIE JACOBS USING MARC JACOBS BEAUTY
CASTING : CATERINA MATTEUCCI

PHOTOGRAPH : IÑAKI
STYLING : GIANNIE COUJI
OLAMIDE WEARS SHIRT BY DRY CLEAN ONLY
HAT & NECKLACE BY KARL LAGERFELD
MAKE UP : TOPOLINO @ CALLISTE
HAIR : VINCENT DE MORO @ AGENCE AURELIEN
CASTING : BARBARA BLANCHARD



PHOTOGRAPH : BETTINA RHEIMS
ELVIRE DUVELLE-CHARLES & NEDA TOPALOSKI,
"FEMEN", MAI 2017, PARIS © BETTINA RHEIMS
COURTESY GALERIE XIPPAS
MAKE UP : TOPOLINO
HAIR : OLIVIER SCHAWAIDER

PHOTOGRAPH : SEAN WALTROUS
ASHLEY WEARS COAT BY WILLY CHAVARRIA
NECKLACE BY ALLISON READ SMITH
HAIR : NELSON VERCHER FOR RITA HAZAN SALON
USING RENE FURTERER
MAKE UP : SABRINA ZIOMI
CASTING : JULIUS POOLE



HAIR AND MAKE UP : PAYTON HOLBROOK
PHOTO ASSISTANT : ELLA BRAND
EQUIPMENT PROVIDED BY K&M TRIBECA RENTALS NYC

RENEE WEARS COAT
BY ALEXANDER MCQUEEN

T H E B O D Y I S T H E M E D I U M

Renee Cox
by Monique Long
Portrait Christian Kilrain
Carter Coleman

Renee Cox is a Jamaican American visual artist whose career has spanned close to thirty years. She began as an editor in Paris and New York, shooting fashion stories for major publications including *Seventeen*, *Glamour*, and *Essence*. She started making art after graduate school and found success, and acclaim, for her work – notably her *Yo Mama* series. In this year alone, her work is included in three group exhibitions including *POWER* at Sprüth Magers, Los Angeles, a show featuring works by Black women artists from the nineteenth century to present; the inaugural triennial at Columbia University's Wallach Art Gallery; and *This is Not a Selfie*, an exhibition of photographic self-portraits at the San José Museum of Art.

In December, her solo show, *Renée Cox: Soul Culture* will open at the Columbia Museum of Art in Columbia, South Carolina. It marks a turning point in her practice, and the first time a new body of her work will be exhibited. Cox's *Soul Culture* is a series of digitally manipulated images that have been cut and hand woven into kaleidoscopic objects in high relief and mounted on gold leaf or black velvet. She is still conceptually exploring the figure, gender, and identity. Yet she has transformed the photographic portraits she is known for into mandala-like compositions that reference Eastern religious art, 1960s psychedelia, and references to African ceremonial sculptures.

At her Bronx studio this summer, we had a candid conversation about the trajectory of her career including the impetus for *Soul Culture*, the activist component of her practice, and that New York moment in the early aughts that made her famous.

What does resilience mean to you?

I suppose I'm living proof of resilience in some ways. Just simply by the token that I'm still here and still doing what I'm doing. I'm sure over the years that others thought I should be gone by now. But my dedication and my love of what I do keeps me doing it in spite of all the adversities.

Let's talk briefly about one of your most public adversities – Mayor Giuliani and one of your most acclaimed bodies of work.

Back in 2001, I had a piece called *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, which I had shown at the Venice Biennale a year or two beforehand. It was shown in a decommissioned church and was met critically in Venice. And then it came to New York, to the Brooklyn Museum. The night before the show, before it was even open to the press, I got a call from the *Daily News*. They started telling me about the reaction to the work, but I had no idea what they were talking about.

The next day, I took my NYU class to see the show, because the show had 92 African-American photographers. My class had 22 Caucasian students and, I think, 2 Asian students. I took it as my personal responsibility to show these students work by African American artists. I took them to the museum, and we made it through about 85% of the show before we got to the gallery where my work was installed. I had no idea what was about to happen, as I had no input into the curatorial or administrative decisions behind the show or the hanging. They had these velvet ropes in front of the work. The press was installed there as well; I guess because it was the controversial piece of the show – me being there was like an extra bonus for the press. The press converged on me when I arrived, saying things like "Mayor Giuliani says you're anti-Catholic. Mayor Giuliani said this, said that." I was shocked. The next day, I was in two of New York's main newspaper headlines.

I based *Yo Mama's Last Supper* on Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. I placed myself at the center of the table as the Christ figure and surrounded myself with Black disciples (with the exception of Judas, who was White). I went to Catholic school and was taught that we are all created in the image of God. So, if that was true, I could play God in this photograph. I'm nude, because I didn't want to have any class associations or status paraphernalia, with the exception of the shawl over the forearms to give it this heavenly impression. I was coming to the viewer in all of my essence. Anyway, it seems that Mayor Giuliani and the [American] Catholic Church got really upset by this and found it offensive.

It's interesting to think that you were accused of being anti-Catholic; when in Italy, the most Catholic country, there wasn't any problem.

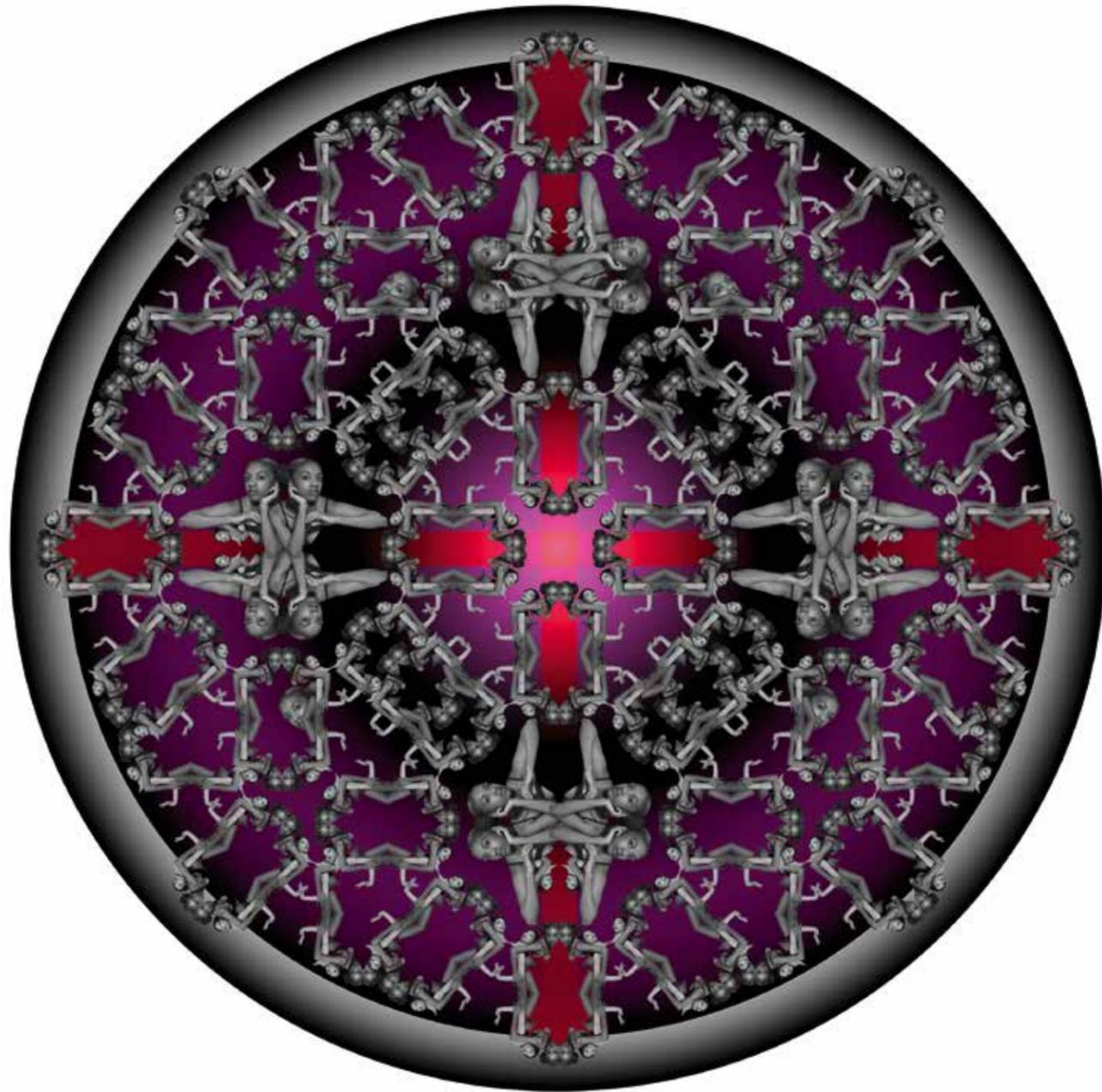
That fact went by the wayside very quickly. The press brought up Chris Ofili and the elephant dung. But elephant dung is the miracle "kaka," because elephants eat tree bark, and their dung is used for everything. It's considered a gift from the heavens. Everyone reads it wrong. They didn't bother to find out the meaning behind the work, to ask why the artists decided to work a certain way. You can't be up there making judgements about it... there was a lot of judgement going on at that time.

Do you think it did, in fact, have something to do with your nudity and the fact that you're Black... inserting the Black body?

Absolutely. That was something that I would mention, and the press would try to squash that very quickly. I told William Donohue, who at the time was head of the Catholic League, point blank: it's not about me being nude; it's about being a Black woman daring to upset the accepted representation of Black women. And to think I'm created in the image of God and had a place at the table. That's what was so threatening. I mean, think: what if other Black people started thinking like that? All hell would break loose. That's just the inherent racism and White supremacy that exists in this country. Period.

IT SHALL BE NAMED FROM FLIPPING THE SCRIPT, 1994





THE HIGHEST LIGHT FROM SOUL CULTURE, 2017



YO MAMA'S PIETA, 1995

It doesn't fit the paradigm – Black people are supposed to be and look defeated.

And the mayor had unsuccessfully tried this rhetoric with Chris Ofilé and failed...

I was quoted saying, "Get over it."

I believe that you also said *Yo Mama's Last Supper* isn't a work to hang over your couch in your living room.

Right, or at least if you do, you will definitely have to have a conversation about it. Because that's the point, as far as I'm concerned. Art should be a form that opens up conversations, where you can cross over racial and class lines. But not everyone is interested in being challenged in that way.

Looking back, you thought "this is my chance" for myself or my work to get exposure. Was there a point when you thought it went too far?

I always thought that I was right and had a right to do what I was doing. So I did. I had to figure it out for myself on the spot: who to talk to, who to not talk to, how to talk to the press in sound bites – quick, short, two-part sentences. I got some help from The Creative Coalition – a bunch of actors, directors and movie industry people – who were really behind the First Amendment. This all continued from February until September 11, 2001.

Do you think looking back, almost 20 years later, that it had an adverse effect on your career, either short-term or long-term?

I'm not sure. I'm not sure that I would think of it in those terms. It definitely helped in terms of name recognition at the time, but certainly not in terms of financial recognition. I always tell people: "[fame] does not equal money."

I still think conceptually that it's shocking, because there is a Black woman at the table. It doesn't fit the paradigm – Black people are supposed to be and look defeated. People would send me used condoms, death threats. I had to call the FBI after a while, because it was getting out of hand.

What's awarded is when Black people are portrayed as victims; you get a lot of attention for that, because it doesn't challenge the status quo. I think of my work as challenging that paradigm and the status quo. I have my own fantasies about Black people being able to rise up and do what they want to do... receive the support they're entitled to.



CHUCK CLOSE FROM THE PEOPLE PROJECT, 2000

You use photography to make your work, but I would argue that your body is the medium. At what point did you decide that it was necessary to use your own body in your work?

Ok, kids. I'm not supposed to say this, because I do have an MFA degree, and I did go to the Whitney Independent Study Program, but guess what? I'm always available for me. [laughs] I know it's not the reason you were looking for, but that's the truth. And now that I've given you my credentials, I feel that I have every right to say it. I have never cancelled on myself, and I do like myself in many ways - not in a narcissistic way, like I've been accused of in the past. But I'm saying once you can have a real self-love, I think beautiful things can happen. As a Black woman, I've always had that sort of self-love. I never felt like I needed to hide that. I like working with me.

In all of these iterations of yourself that you've presented over the years - your pregnant self, your self as a national hero, a superhero, historical figures - it seems to have culminated in your new series, *Soul Culture*, as an exploration of that multiplicity, a meta-exploration of all of these people.

I think *Soul Culture* embraces all of it, because it's all a part of the life situation. One informs the other. By the time I got to *Soul Culture*, I had gone through my own personal enlightenment; I had learned how to be happy. The new work came out of this new space.

Now I'm looking at Buddhist art, Himalayan art, psychedelic art. I'm more open to these other realities, and it starts coming through in the work. I'm still creating a few more pieces in this series, since I like to work with bodies.

Can we talk about the difference between this work and previous series that you've done? You've touched upon on the philosophical differences, but I'd like to hear about the technical differences in making this series.

This series is much more labor intensive. When I started out, they were flat, and I was working in Photoshop. But I feel like photography has some issues. Essentially, it's become too accessible to every schmuck in the world. Everyone is a photographer now. When I was young, you either studied it or were self-taught, but no one dared to think they were a photographer right off the bat. Even to deal with the equipment, you had to be special for that. Now, with the phone, everyone takes pictures. The attention span for looking at pictures has become greatly reduced.

I've always had this gripe with photography, asking how to get photography off the wall. So I tried to make a photograph come off the wall with 3D elements. Every 3D work has a flat version; that's where it started. For the first time, as a photographer, I have the feeling of being a painter. I can bring all the elements together to create this one being, as it were. That's been really exciting, because you don't get that with photography. And then I became interested in fractals and sacred geometry and constructing these beings (I consider them portraits) from a multitude of people. Using other people to make one, hence bringing us into the notion that we are one. The only thing that anchors it is the face in the middle - the portrait.



D.R. MINOTAUR FROM SOUL CULTURE, 2017

Once you can have
a real self-love, I think
beautiful things
can happen.



BANANA ROAD FROM QUEEN NANNY
OF THE MAROONS, 2005

With *Soul Culture*, there has been this challenge of getting inside the photograph. With these, you can literally go inside the photograph because they're not flat. How do you show that as a whole? That's been an interesting process, to have the dimensionality transfer. You create it three dimensionally, but you're forced to represent the work in a two-dimensional setting. So, you work with lighting, et cetera, to create shadowing and such to make it appear more three dimensional.

Actually your piece in [the landmark exhibition] *Black Male* looks like a precursor to the dimensional work in *Soul Culture*. Were you exploring those concepts even in 1994?

Yes, I had *Cross Mask* hanging from the ceiling so that you could walk around it. In this way, it became more sculptural. The same thing happened with the cross piece, *It Shall Be Named*, in the *Black Male* show. It was a huge cross-shaped piece made out of enormous mahogany frames that I had made. Again, it was hanging from the ceiling at an angle similar to the way they hang work in European cathedrals, so you feel like the work is coming at you... like it's almost

going to fall on you. The images in both of those pieces were tiled, in order to give me the scale that I wanted. In *It Shall Be Named*, I left out the genitalia, so that I could make gnarly tree-like shapes with the arms. The crucifixion piece represented a tree that Black men were hung from when they were lynched.

I don't think many people have asked you about your influences and other artists or disciplines you've looked at.

Within photography, definitely Avedon, Irving Penn. All fashion.

And you began your career shooting for the major fashion magazines, working as a photographer and editor. Was it difficult to segue from commercial photographer to a practicing artist?

I had help in the sense that at the time, you had to have credentials. I went back to school to get an MFA, and then I went to the Whitney Independent Study Program. I would say that I...

Baptized yourself...

Yeah. Going to grad school was good, because it gave me two years to figure out what I wanted to say with photography. I knew what I wanted my photography to look like when I was doing fashion. And I thought about things conceptually to a certain extent, but it wasn't solidified. Graduate school gave me time to solidify it, and the Whitney Independent Study Program was icing on the cake. I had Mary Kelly there, who had done postpartum documentary work back in the 70s about her child. And then, with me being pregnant in October (the program started in September), having her there was a catalyst. She couldn't show her work, because of the feminist movement in the 70s. But at my time (the 90s), I could show my baby. [I decided] I'll show myself as the forceful person that I am.

How do your children feel about having been in your work?

[laughs] I think that they just take it for granted. I don't think they are impressed or anything. They're kids, and you're never impressed by what your parents do, especially not to your face. But I have to tell my kids, as far as mothers go, I'm pretty cool. [laughs]. They turned out well, so actually they're my best creations.

THE RIVER QUEEN FROM QUEEN NANNY
OF THE MAROONS, 2005

Transcribed and edited by Martha Scott Burton



It's not about me being nude;
it's about being a Black woman
daring to upset the accepted
representation of Black women.



DO OR DIE, 1993



LIBERTY IN THE SOUTH BRONX, 1993



BLACK HOUSEWIFE FROM DISCREET CHARM OF THE BOUGIES, 2009

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE ARTIST
WWW.RENECOX.ORG