Defying the Shadow, November 21, 2020-June 6, 2021

Defying the Shadow presents images by Black artists and of Black figures that resist the consumptive impulses of looking. As anti-portraits or visages that challenge the viewer’s desire to know, comprehend, categorize, or easily define, these works oppose a historical narrative of dispossession and domination that continues to violate the humanity of marginalized people.

Black presence(s) in public space should not be seen or signaled as radical. There often is, however, an implicit expectation that art made by Black makers explain itself to wider audiences. Resisting the practice of claiming an institutional voice that is steeped in imperial knowing, this show provides very few labels. This decision seeks to minimize the replication of oppression through the voyeuristic pleasure aligned with systems of exploitative purveyorship.

Defying the Shadow examines how Black subjects operate in and against modern political systems, which keep them under constant surveillance and risk of violence. This show considers the “defiant” body not only as a site of possibility, but also a challenge to authoritative systems of knowing, including the white-supremacist function of the traditional gaze. Beginning with Sojourner Truth’s abolitionist portraits stamped with the slogan “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance,” the assembled works—ranging from 19th-century photographs to contemporary prints—focus on the appearance of shadows in formal and metaphorical settings.

Curated by Anita N. Bateman, PhD
Former Andrew W. Mellon Curatorial Fellow
Prints, Drawings, and Photographs
RISD Museum

Exhibition graphics by Jada Akoto (RISD BFA 2022, Graphic Design) inspired by Victor Ekpuk

Shadows, RISD Museum’s 14th issue of Manual, is a companion to this exhibition. Copies can be purchased at the museum entrance, with related proceeds being donated to the RI Solidarity Fund. The full issue can also be downloaded at no charge by people who identify as Black, of Black African descent, or members of the African diaspora.

won’t you celebrate with me

won't you celebrate with me
what i have shaped into
a kind of life? i had no model.
born in babylon
both nonwhite and woman
what did i see to be except myself?
i made it up
here on this bridge between
starshine and clay,
my one hand holding tight
my other hand; come celebrate
with me that everyday
something has tried to kill me
and has failed.

– Lucille Clifton

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Gordon Parks, American, 1912-2006
Selwyn, 42nd Street, New York, 1955
Gelatin silver print
Image/sheet: 33.8 x 23.2 cm (13 5/16 x 9 1/8 inches)
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund  2005.112

Faith Ringgold, American, b. 1930
Robert Franklin
Under the Blood Red Sky, 2007
Color offset lithograph
Image/sheet: 75.2 x 55.9 cm (29 5/8 x 22 inches)
Gift of the Brandywine Workshop and Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  2014.66.31
Clarence John Laughlin, American, 1905-1985
"MOTHER" Brown, 1945
Gelatin silver print
Image/sheet: 34.3 x 25.4 cm (13 1/2 x 10 inches)
Edgar J. Lownes Fund 77.051

Renée Stout, American, b. 1958
Zanatta Editions
Recurring Damballah Dream, 1999
Lithograph
81.8 x 71.1 cm (32 3/16 x 28 inches) (sheet)
Gift of the artist and Zanatta Editions 2000.117

Howardena Pindell, American, b. 1943
Robert Franklin
Allan Edmunds
Color offset lithograph and screenprint diptych
Image/sheet: 55.2 x 151.8 cm (21 3/4 x 59 3/4 inches) (two joined)
Gift of the Brandywine Workshop and Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 2014.66.27ab
Adrian Piper, American, b. 1948

Angry Art

*My Calling (Card) #1 (Reactive Guerilla Performance for Bars and Discos)*, circulated 1986-present
Offset lithograph on paper
Image/sheet: 5.2 x 8.9 cm (2 1/16 x 3 1/2 inches)
Gift of Jan Howard  2017.16

Adrian Piper, American, b. 1948

Angry Art

*My Calling (Card) #2 (Reactive Guerilla Performance for Bars and Discos)*, circulated 1986-present
Offset lithograph on paper
5.1 x 8.9 cm (2 x 3 1/2 inches)
Gift of Alison W. Chang  2015.54

Kara Walker, American, b. 1969, (RISD MFA 1994, Printmaking)

Landfall Press, Inc.

*The Means to an End...A Shadow Drama in Five Acts*, 1995
Five etchings with aquatint
Sheet: 88.9 x 59.4 cm (35 x 23 3/8 inches) (each sheet)
Walter H. Kimball Fund  1996.1

Roy DeCarava, American, 1919-2009

*Untitled*, 1978
Photogravure
Plate: 28.9 x 19.4 cm (11 3/8 x 7 5/8 inches)
Mary B. Jackson Fund  1990.019.4
Paul Mpagi Sepuya, American, b. 1982  
*Mirror Study (Q5A321)*, 2016  
Color inkjet print (pigment)  
33 x 21.6 cm (13 x 8 1/2 inches)  
Collection of Mark Pollack  TL96.2020.2

Toyin Ojih Odutola, American, born in Nigeria, b. 1985  
*Last Portrait of the 18th Marquess*, 2018  
Charcoal, pastel and pencil on paper  
Sheet: 60 x 47.6 cm (23 5/8 x 18 3/4 inches) (sight)  
Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund  2018.92

Aaron Douglas, American, 1899-1979  
*Dance Magic*, 1930  
Gouache and chalk on illustration board  
50.2 x 74.9 cm (19 3/4 x 29 1/2 inches) (irregular)  
Gift of Mrs. Leonard Granoff  82.188.1
Paul Mpagi Sepuya, American, b. 1982
*Mirror Study (=Q5A3505)*, 2016
Color inkjet print (pigment)
33 x 21.6 cm (13 x 8 1/2 inches)
Collection of Mark Pollack  TL96.2020.1

*In Gods We Trust*, ca. 1980s
Gelatin silver print
24.4 x 24.4 cm (9 5/8 x 9 5/8 inches)
Collection of Mark Pollack  TL96.2020.3

Adrian Piper, American, b. 1948
*Food for the Spirit*, 1971
Selenium-toned gelatin silver print
Plate: 36.9 x 37.5 cm (14 1/2 x 14 3/4 inches)
Mary B. Jackson Fund  2000.97.2
Fred Wilson, American, b. 1954
Exit Art, American, 1982 - 2012
X, From the portfolio *Tantra*, 2005
Digital color chromogenic print on Duratrans®
Image: 47 x 44.3 cm (18 1/2 x 17 7/16 inches)
Gift of Exit Art  2012.133.6.6

Jennifer Packer, American, b. 1984
*Eric*, 2018
Oil on canvas
30.5 x 30.5 cm (12 x 12 inches)
Promised gift of Judi Roaman and Carla Chammas  TL18.2019

Nicole Buchanan, American, b. 1993, (RISD BFA 2011, Photography)
*IN 08*, from the series *The Skin I'm In*, 2015
Color inkjet print
Image: 38.1 x 38.1 cm (15 x 15 inches)
Museum purchase in honor of Barnet Fain; Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund  2016.79.3

Nicole Buchanan, American, b. 1993, (RISD BFA 2011, Photography)
*DG 14*, from the series *The Skin I'm In*, 2015
Color inkjet print
Image: 38.1 x 38.1 cm (15 x 15 inches)
Gift of the artist and Gallery Kayafas, Boston  2018.107.5
James Van Der Zee, American, 1886-1983
*Nude, Harlem*, 1923
Gelatin silver print
Image/sheet: 23.8 x 18.7 cm (9 3/8 x 7 3/8 inches)
Museum purchase with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts 80.232.6

Vincent Smith, American, 1929-2003
G. W. Einstein Company, Inc.
Kelly Driscoll
*Shadows in Harlem, from Eight Etchings*, 1965 (printed 1994)
Etching
Image: 20.3 x 22.2 cm (8 x 8 3/4 inches)
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. George A. Violin 2016.126.2

Glenn Ligon, American, b. 1960
Exit Art, American, 1982 - 2012
*Untitled, from the portfolio In the Year Three*, 2003
Photogravure
Sheet: 56 x 76 cm (22 1/16 x 29 15/16 inches)
Gift of Exit Art 2012.133.8.3
Paul Meleschnig, American, b. 1966, (RISD BFA 1988, Photography)
Untitled, from the series SPAR/CUBA, 2000, printed 2012
Gelatin silver print
Image: 37.9 x 37.9 cm (14 15/16 x 14 15/16 inches)
Gift of the artist  2014.98.2

David Hammons, American, b. 1943
Untitled (Body Print), 1974
Grease, powdered pigment, and spray paint on silver-coated paper board
Image/Sheet: 50.7 x 61 cm (19 15/16 x 24 inches)
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund  2001.31.2

Romare Howard Bearden, American, 1911-1988
Ritual, ca. 1965
Paper collage
Board: 24.3 x 10.2 cm (9 9/16 x 4 inches)
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund  2002.31
Carrie Mae Weems, American, b. 1953
*When and Where I Enter, The British Museum*, from the portfolio *Rivington Place*, 2007
Inkjet print
Image: 47.6 x 38.1 cm (18 3/4 x 15 inches)
Walter H. Kimball Fund  2014.35.6

Kelly Taylor Mitchell, American, b. 1994, (RISD MFA 2018, Printmaking)*
*Untitled*, from the portfolio *Prints for Protest*, 2017
Color screenprint
Image/sheet: 55.9 x 38.1 cm (22 x 15 inches)
Museum purchase: Museum Works of Art Fund, by exchange 2017.10.7

Aïda Muluneh, Ethiopian, b. 1974
*Age of Anxiety*, from the series *The World is 9*, 2016
Color inkjet print
Image/Sheet: 80 x 80 cm (31 1/2 x 31 1/2 inches) (sight)
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund  2018.19
Kerry James Marshall, American, b. 1955
*Bride of Frankenstein*, 2010
Hardground etching with aquatint
Plate: 40.4 x 30.3 cm (15 7/8 x 11 15/16 inches)
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2019.11.2

Kerry James Marshall, American, b. 1955
*Frankenstein*, 2010
Hardground etching with aquatint
Plate: 40.5 x 30.5 cm (15 15/16 x 12 inches)
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2019.11.1

Ming Smith, American, b. 1947
Gelatin silver print
Image: 18 x 11.5 cm (7 1/16 x 4 1/2 inches)
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2018.22
Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883) was an abolitionist, women’s rights activist, and social reformer. Born in New York as Isabella Baumfree and legally known as Isabella Van Wagener, the surname of her enslaver, she took the name Sojourner Truth in 1843 after a spiritual encounter directed her to travel the United States to publicly condemn the institution of slavery. Truth was a compelling orator, drawing thousands of people to hear her speeches for equality. She improvised her most famous speech, commonly remembered as “Ain’t I a Woman?” at the 1851 Women’s Rights Convention in Akron, Ohio. In it, Truth draws attention to her perspective as a Black woman and critiques white patriarchy’s erasure of her position. Years later, her original words were intentionally erased and rewritten in “southern Black slave dialect” by white suffragette Frances Dana Gage. This version, meant to appeal to white audiences, is incongruous to the way Truth actually spoke, in a New York low-Dutch accent. Gage’s misrepresentation is still the most well-known version of Truth’s speech today.

Sojourner Truth sold her portraits as cartes-de-visite—inexpensive photographic calling cards first mass-produced in the 1850s—as a means to fund her antislavery speaking tours. These images bear her name as well as the phrase “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance,” declaring Truth’s ownership of her person as a free woman and her prerogative to use her likeness in a manner of her own choosing. This phrase also draws attention to the difference between what can and cannot be commodified: Truth’s picture can be bought, but she—the substance—is not for sale. In the 1800s, photographic writing also articulated ideas about the shadow in relationship to image making.

In 1964, African American artist Calvin Burnett reimagined Truth’s photographic image as a print. “I’ll keep you scratching” refers to the response Truth had given to a white male dissenter who didn’t like a speech she had given and compared it to a flea bite. Truth allegedly replied, “Lord willing, I’ll keep you scratching,” implying she would continue to bring attention to uncomfortable issues of the day, including racism and sexism.
The rise of studio photography in the mid-1800s, followed by the introduction of inexpensive cameras in the early 1900s, gave Black sitters and photographers new power to create and share portraits of their own construction. Another example of a carte de visite from the 1800s is seen here. The image on the right, inscribed with the studio name Fredericks & O'Neil, shows an unidentified sitter. Like Sojourner Truth, the subject is seated and wears a shawl and cap, a sartorial cue that speaks to the ability to self-fashion through portraiture. This photo card, like Truth’s, could have been printed in multiples and exchanged.

Fredericks & O'Neil, American, photographer
*Portrait of a Black Woman*, 1860
Albumen print with graphite
Plate: 8.9 x 5.7 cm (3 1/2 x 2 1/4 inches)
Gift of N. David Scotti  1991.130

American
*I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance, Sojourner Truth*, 1864
Albumen silver carte de visite
10 x 7.2 cm (3 15/16 x 2 13/16 inches)
Walter H. Kimball Fund  2020.13
Vernacular photography includes snapshots of day-to-day living. This group, dating from the 1920s through the 1970s, shows the quotidian richness of Black life—the celebratory and the mundane. Most of the individuals cannot be identified, as the pictures have been removed from their original contexts. However, each photograph archives an experience that was cherished for its personal meaning, the specifics of which are now lost to us as contemporary viewers.

Early black-and-white Polaroid film required a stabilizer to make an image permanent. This fixant was applied to the surface of the paper to preserve the image, but an uneven application would eventually lead to streaking. Brownish streaking or “bronzing” of unfixed areas, seen in some examples here, is actually a faded part of the photograph. This discoloration resembles cast shadows, adding additional metaphorical and visual depths to the image.
American
Untitled, 1939
Gelatin silver print
Image: 8.5 x 5.9 cm (3 3/8 x 2 5/16 inches)

American
Untitled, ca.1930-1935
Gelatin silver print
Image: 10.5 x 6.2 cm (4 1/8 x 2 7/16 inches)

American
The Rainbow Ballroom, ca.1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 9.1 x 11.9 cm (3 9/16 x 4 11/16 inches)
American
Untitled, ca. 1950s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 8.3 x 12.3 cm (3 1/4 x 4 13/16 inches)

American
Untitled, 1958
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.6 x 7.8 cm (3 x 3 1/16 inches)
American
Untitled, ca. 1930s-1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 8 x 5.2 cm (3 1/8 x 2 1/16 inches)

American
The Last Dress, ca.1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.6 x 6.3 cm (3 x 2 1/2 inches)

American
Untitled, ca.1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 9 x 9 cm (3 9/16 x 3 9/16 inches)
American
Untitled, ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.9 x 5.6 cm (3 1/8 x 2 3/16 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. 1940s-1960s
Diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)
Image: 5.5 x 7.3 cm (2 3/16 x 2 7/8 inches)

American
Untitled, ca.1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 6.8 x 10.1 cm (2 11/16 x 4 inches)
American
Untitled, 1950s
Diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)
Image: 7.3 x 9.7 cm (2 7/8 x 3 13/16 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. 1950s-1960s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.7 x 7.7 cm (3 1/16 x 3 1/16 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. 1948-1960
Diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)
Image: 7.3 x 9.7 cm (2 7/8 x 3 13/16 inches)
American
Untitled, 1973
Color chromogenic print
Image: 11.7 x 7.9 cm (4 5/8 x 3 1/8 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. 1960s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.7 x 7.7 cm (3 1/16 x 3 1/16 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. 1940s-1950s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.7 x 7.7 cm (3 1/16 x 3 1/16 inches)
American
**Untitled, ca. 1970s**
Dye diffusion print
Image: 7.3 x 7 cm (2 7/8 x 2 3/4 inches)

American
**Rabbits Maybe, ca. 1950**
Gelatin silver print
Image: 6.8 x 10.2 cm (2 11/16 x 4 inches)

American
**Hazel's Birthday Party, Age 21, Chicago, Illinois, ca. 1940s**
Gelatin silver print
Image: 11.4 x 16.5 cm (4 1/2 x 6 1/2 inches)
American
Untitled, ca. 1960
Diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)
Image: 9.7 x 7.4 cm (3 13/16 x 2 15/16 inches)

American
Some Kids, ca. mid 1950s-1960s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 10.2 x 5.8 cm (4 x 2 5/16 inches)

American
Untitled, 1954
Color chromogenic print (Kodacolor)
Image: 11.5 x 7.6 cm (4 1/2 x 3 inches)
American
Untitled, ca.1960s
Color chromogenic print
Image: 5.4 x 7.9 cm (2 1/8 x 3 1/8 inches)

American
Untitled, ca.1930s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.8 x 5.4 cm (3 1/16 x 2 1/8 inches)

American
Untitled, 1959
Color chromogenic print (Kodacolor)
Image: 7.5 x 11.3 cm (2 15/16 x 4 7/16 inches)
American
Untitled, ca.1970s
Dye diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)
Image: 9.5 x 7.3 cm (3 3/4 x 2 7/8 inches)

American
Michelle, Cliff, Connie, and Donnie, 1971
Color chromogenic print
Image: 8 x 7.8 cm (3 1/8 x 3 1/16 inches)

American
Untitled, 1954
Color chromogenic print (Kodacolor)
Image: 11.4 x 7.6 cm (4 1/2 x 3 inches)
American
Untitled, ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.8 x 7.6 cm (3 1/16 x 3 inches)

American
Untitled, 1954
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.6 x 8.8 cm (3 x 3 7/16 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. late 1940s-1950s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 11.6 x 7.6 cm (4 9/16 x 3 inches)
American
Untitled, ca. mid 1930s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 10 x 6.2 cm (3 15/16 x 2 7/16 inches)

American
Untitled, 1956
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.6 x 7.7 cm (3 x 3 1/16 inches)

American
Georgia, Jurdon, Minnie, Byron, ca. 1927-1930s
Gelatin silver print
Image/sheet: 11.1 x 6.8 cm (4 3/8 x 2 11/16 inches)
American
Untitled, 1929
Gelatin silver print
Image: 13.4 x 7.8 cm (5 1/4 x 3 1/16 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. 1920s-1930s
Gelatin silver print
Image/Sheet: 3.5 x 6.5 cm (1 3/8 x 2 9/16 inches)

American
Untitled, 1957
Diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)
Image: 11.5 x 7.7 cm (4 1/2 x 3 1/16 inches)
American
*Doris Hollingsworth, Bill Keyes, The Moore Girls...*, ca. late 1950s-early 1960s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 9.1 x 11.4 cm (3 9/16 x 4 1/2 inches)

American
*Untitled*, ca. mid 1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 12 x 7.7 cm (4 3/4 x 3 1/16 inches)

American
*Untitled*, ca. mid 1900s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.4 x 5.5 cm (2 15/16 x 2 3/16 inches)
American
Untitled, 1946
Gelatin silver print
Image: 10.6 x 6.2 cm (4 3/16 x 2 7/16 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. late 1930s-early 1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 13.5 x 8.8 cm (5 5/16 x 3 7/16 inches)

American
Untitled, 1962
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.6 x 7.7 cm (3 x 3 1/16 inches)
American
Untitled, ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 7.6 x 5.1 cm (3 x 2 inches)

American
Untitled, ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
Image: 10.5 x 6 cm (4 1/8 x 2 3/8 inches)

American
Untitled, c. 1950s
Diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)
Image: 6.1 x 8 cm (2 3/8 x 3 1/8 inches)