

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

**Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) presents
*Black Venus***

Curated by Aindrea Emelife

An exhibition surveying the legacy of Black women in visual culture from fetishized, colonial-era caricatures to the work of over 20 contemporary artists who are reclaiming the rich complexity of Black womanhood including Sadie Barnette, Deana Lawson, Zanele Muholi, Kara Walker, and Carrie Mae Weems

April 5 - August 20, 2023

Press Preview: April 4, 2023; 10am-12pm

(December 20, 2022, San Francisco, CA)—The Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) presents the only West Coast showing of *Black Venus*, an exhibition curated by Nigerian-British curator and art historian Aindrea Emelife, that examines the representation of Black women in visual culture. Juxtaposed against archival depictions dating back to 1793, the over 45 contemporary works on view collectively create a global, cross-generational investigation into Black women's reclamation of agency amid the historical fetishization of the Black female body.

Originally created for Fotografiska in New York where it debuted in 2022, the exhibition, which features primarily photographic works, but also sculpture, mixed media, and film, has been expanded and updated for Bay Area audiences with the addition of several local artists and pieces from local collections. It travels to Somerset House in London after its West Coast stop at MoAD.

The exhibition's thematic foundation is the Hottentot Venus, a visual-culture archetype named for the assigned stage name of Saartje Baartman (born 1789 in South Africa). Enslaved by Dutch colonizers and toured around Europe as part of a 'freak show' due to her non-Western body type, caricatured depictions of her spread around the globe and indelibly catalyzed the Western exoticization and othering of Black women. In *Black Venus*, archival depictions of Baartman and other historical Black women pair with vibrant, narrative portraiture by some of today's most influential Black image-makers whose work deals with layered narratives of Black femininity.

“Viewers are invited to confront the racial and sexual objectification and embodied resistance that make up a significant part of the Black woman’s experience—and to celebrate the current upheaval of this stereotype, at the hands of Black artists,” says Emelife. “In an age where Black women are taking positions in power, fronting the covers of fashion magazines, and taking up space in all manner of fields and industries, it is a reminder to look back and see how far we’ve come, so we can look to the future. The most contemporary examples in the show are unabashed, riotous affronts showcasing all that Black womanhood can be and has always been.”

Participating artists include:

Sadie Barnette (b. 1984, Oakland, CA)
Widline Cadet (b. 1992, Pétion-Ville, Haiti)
Shawanda Corbett (b. 1989, New York, NY)
Renee Cox (b. 1960, Colgate, Jamaica)
Taiye Idahor (b. 1984, Lagos, Nigeria)
Ayana V. Jackson (b. 1977, Livingston, NJ)
Deana Lawson (b. 1979, Rochester, NY)
Zanele Muholi (b. 1972, Umlazi, South Africa)
Jenn Nkiru (b. 1987, London, UK)
Yetunde Olagbaju
Frida Orupabo (b. 1986, Sarpsborg, Norway)
Amber Pinkerton (b. 1997, Kingston, Jamaica)

Tabita Rezaire (b. 1989, Paris, France)
Coreen Simpson (b. 1942, New York, NY)
Lorna Simpson (b. 1960, Brooklyn, NY)
Ming Smith (b. 1950, Detroit, MI)
Maud Sulter (b. 1960, Glasgow, Scotland; d. 2008, Dumfries, Scotland)
Kara Walker (b. 1969, Stockton, CA)
Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953, Portland, OR)
Alberta Whittle (b. 1980, Bridgetown, Barbados)
Carla Williams (b. 1965, Los Angeles, CA)

Renee Cox explores the exhibition’s titular inspiration by posing as the Hottentot Venus, though looking directly at the viewer rather than posed in the non-confrontational side profile of the historical depictions. In forcing the viewer to lock eyes, Cox gives agency to Baartman in her work *HOTT-EN-TOT* (1993-1994) by interrupting the centuries-long power dynamic of the objectifying gaze upon her.

In addition to Baartman, *Black Venus* recurrently references other visual culture pillars that affected Western perception of the Black female body including cultural icon Josephine Baker (1906-1975), who catalyzed a new archetype of Black women in popular culture – the “Jezebel.” As well as being highlighted in the show’s archival material, Josephine Baker is honored in several of the show’s contemporary artworks, notably Ming Smith’s *Me as Josephine* (1986). In speaking about the work, Smith poses the idea that “the erotic needs to be understood as a creative power.” By casting herself as Josephine Baker, the perennial embodiment of Black female sexuality, Smith embraces and investigates how Black women’s sexuality has been demonized, perhaps because of its power.

One of several portraiture series in the show that honors a specific figure, through posthumous gaze reclamation, is *Les Bijoux* (2002), a nine-panel performative self-portrait series by the late Ghanaian-Scottish artist Maud Sulter. Displayed in the exhibition as a looped projection (the original nine works are large-format Polaroids), Sulter poses as Jeanne Duval, a romantic companion and longtime muse to historically celebrated white male creatives including Charles Baudelaire (her partner of 25 years), Gustave Courbet, and Édouard Manet. Sulter conceived the series in 1988, after encountering an image of Jeanne Duval captioned as “Unknown Woman” and experiencing a visceral response to such a literal embodiment of the historical erasure of Black women. Instead of exoticizing Duval, as the white male artists did in their creative depictions of her, Sulter presents her fully clothed and engaging confidently with the camera.

Also exploring the concept of gaze reclamation is Amber Pinkerton, whose work *Akuol the Muse* (2021) gives prominence to the subject’s piercing gaze, essentially prohibiting the freedom of voyeuristic intentions. In a highly technical handprinted cyanotype process, followed by digital treatment to replicate the chemical effects of a salt paper print, Pinkerton manipulates contrast, tone, and texture to create an otherworldly aura and distinct vignette treatment that echoes archival photographs produced at a time when women weren’t granted such agency over the end result.

Multiple works in the show build upon contemporary academic discourse by Black women. For Ayana V. Jackson, the work is Dr. Shatema Threadcraft’s 2018 scholarly papers on “the long and still-incomplete path to Black female intimate freedom and equality—a path marked by infanticides, sexual terrorism, race riots, coerced sterilizations, and racially biased child removal policies,” as examined from antebellum slavery through present day. Jackson’s *Intimate Justice in the Stolen Moment* series offers counterimages to the cruelty described so vividly in Threadcraft’s text. While still grounding her subjects in an historical time period that suggests her subjects are laboring in enslavement or servitude, Jackson presents stolen moments where the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Black woman’s body can be found in a state of leisure and repose.

An important aspect of *Black Venus* is its omnipresent reinforcement that the contemporary Black female experience is not monolithic. For overtly personal works and larger-commentary pieces alike, the lived experience that informs each artist’s explorations of the show’s themes spans cultural and generational contexts while immersing the viewer in distinct zeitgeists. As a meta exploration of the cultural shift toward a safer climate (and more respectful context) for Black women to publicly own and assert their sexuality, the photographer Carla Williams contributes four works from a series of nude self-portraits she made between 1987 and 1994.

She remarks: “I recognize in these photographs an exploration of one's physicality, beauty, sexuality, power, and pleasure through humor, seduction, and performance. As much as my older, wiser self would like to claim otherwise, what I know is that there was nothing deliberate or political in their creation; that came later. I was a young Black woman exploring the way I looked before the camera. The photos’ directness, honesty, and playfulness were only possible for me before I knew the degree to which any of it ‘mattered.’ It now seems like a vital time to bring these images out of storage to take their place within a lineage of image-making. As I continue to see some of my favorite young Black women artists exploring the representation of our bodies, I am certain that it is crucial to make ourselves—our bodies—seen.”

About Curator Aindrea Emelife

Aindrea Emelife is a Nigerian-British curator and art historian specializing in modern and contemporary art, with a focus on questions around colonial and decolonial histories in Africa, transnationalism, and the politics of representation. Born in London, United Kingdom, Emelife studied at The Courtauld Institute of Art before embarking on a multifaceted career as a curator and art historian, producing highly acclaimed exhibitions for museum, galleries, and private collections internationally. Emelife is the Curator at Large, Modern and Contemporary at EMOWAA (Edo Museum of West African Art), the new West Africa-focused museum complex designed by David Adjaye located in Benin, Nigeria which partially opens in 2024. Emelife’s first book, *A Brief History of Protest Art*, was released by Tate in March 2022. Emelife has contributed to exhibition catalogs and publications, most recently *Revising Modern British Art* (Lund Humphries, 2022). In 2021, Emelife was appointed to the Mayor of London’s Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm.

ABOUT MoAD

The Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) is a contemporary art museum whose mission is to celebrate Black cultures, ignite challenging conversations, and inspire learning through the global lens of the African Diaspora. MoAD is one of only a few museums in the United States dedicated to the celebration and interpretation of art, artists, and cultures from the African Diaspora. The Museum presents exhibitions highlighting contemporary art and artists of African descent and engages its audience through education and public programs that interpret and enhance the understanding of Black art. Founded in 2005, the Museum continues to be a unique, cultural arts staple in the San Francisco Bay Area community.

For more information about MoAD, visit The Museum’s website at moadsf.org.

For media information or visuals visit our online press gallery or contact:

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Online <https://www.moadsf.org/press-resources>

General Information

The Museum is open Wednesday-Saturday 11am–6pm and Sunday, 12–5pm. Museum admission is \$12 for adults, \$6 for students and senior citizens with a valid ID. Youth 12 and under always get in free. For general information, the public may visit The Museum’s website at moadsf.org or call 415.358.7200. MoAD is located at 685 Mission Street (at Third), San Francisco, CA.

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