

Flava: Wedge Curatorial Projects 1997–2007

Edited by Elizabeth Harney
Toronto: Wedge Curatorial Projects, 2008. 142 pp., 50 color and 80 b&w photos, index. \$60 cloth.

reviewed by Julia Schlosser

Flava: Wedge Curatorial Projects (1997–2007) presents a collection of photographic images exploring issues related to black identity and culture. The photographs, taken in Diaspora communities around the globe, range from the post-World War I era to the present day. The book is introduced by Deborah Willis, leading historian of African American photography, and edited by Elizabeth Harney. It celebrates the vision of Dr. Kenneth Montague, director of Wedge Curatorial Projects, a Toronto-based photographic gallery whose curatorial mission is “dedicated to photo-based work exploring black identity” (jacket notes). Flava—an expression used by photographer Jamel Shabazz, whose street images of 1980s New York hip-hop culture are featured prominently in the book—comes from the African American lexicon and refers to the essential element or flavor found in relevant cultural expression (p. 4). The term also refers to Montague’s efforts to introduce to the Toronto art community and --with the publication of this book-- the larger international art scene, issues related to black photographic expression.

The book is divided into two sections. The first section reprises eight photographic exhibitions mounted by Wedge Curatorial Projects during its ten-year history. Selections of photographic images originally featured in the shows are included along with catalog essays by Willis, Ruth Kerkham Simbao, Warren Crichlow and P.L.E. Idahosa, among others. James VanDerZee, a leading portrait photographer during the Harlem Renaissance, opens the book.

VanDerZee’s imagery sets the tone for this photographic collection, optimistic portrait and documentary-based representations of and by the inhabitants of black communities in Africa, Britain, Canada, Mexico, and the United States. VanDerZee ran a portrait studio and worked consistently to satisfy his middle class African American clients’ desires to present themselves as prosperous members of New York society at that time (Willis-Brathwait and Birt 1993:24).



The book continues with work from the heyday of another legendary portrait photographer, African modernist, Seydou Keita, that were taken during the 1950s and ‘60s.

Dennis Morris’s edgy 1970s documentary images of community life in inner city London and Jürgen Schadeberg’s photographs of a 1950s apartheid society poised to explode with racial violence are the exceptions to the generally affirmative quality of the portraiture presented throughout the book. Tony Gleaton’s evocative documentary portraits reveal little-known aspects of communities of African ancestry in Latin and South America. J.D. GEokhai Ojeikere’s fantastical representations of 1970s hairstyles from Nigeria help reclaim the racist tradition of ethnographic photography pointed at Africa in the nineteenth century. The tense, highly posed tableaux constructed by Eritrean-Canadian artist Dawit Petros conclude the first section of the book and provide a welcome dose of conceptual content. One thing that is evident from this section is the fact that in its ten-year history, Wedge never featured a female artist in any of its shows.

The second section of the book displays pictures from forty-four photographers featured in the Wedge photography collection. Somewhat confusingly, each of the eight artists in the first section of the book has an additional grouping in the second section, drawn from Montague’s personal collection of images. This compilation represents a remarkably diverse group of photographers, including works by young, contemporary, and well-established Canadian and American artists as well as members of Autograph, the Association of Black Photographers in Britain (pp. 2–3).

Unfortunately, the authors neglect to include any biographical information about the additional artists in the second section of the book. Furthermore, less-controversial images by artists known for their provocative social and political content have been selected, subverting their more avant-garde content and allowing the second section of the book to be understood on one level as simply a collection of portraits. A quick read of New York-based artist Mickalene Thomas’s *Afro Goddess with Hand Between Legs* (2006) could mistakenly be interpreted as a 1970s-era portrait instead of a provocative interrogation of blaxploitation images of women.

Nigerian-British artist Rotimi Fani-Kayode, known for his confrontational, homoerotic images tinged with symbolism from his native Yoruba culture, is included in the book with a 1989 portrait titled *Twins*. Fani-Kayode’s image comments on African sentiment toward twins and the photographic convention in which duplicate portraits of individuals in the guise of twins are constructed. Joy Gregory, a British artist who has explored diasporic movement across the globe from West Africa to Europe, is included with images from her *Autopportrait* series; similarly Samuel Fosso is represented with one of his humorously punning self-portraits. Eileen Perrier and Clement Cooper explore issues of mixed-race identity in the UK, while Nontsikelelo CELolo’ Vuleko’s *Vuyelwa* dazzles the viewer with her fashion flair.

Images from the Wedge Project exhibitions in the first section of the book, clearly grouped by artist and supported with didactic information via the catalog essays, not only serve to reflect the artistic output of the photographers, but when viewed together, function as a collection of documentary artifacts, exposing the reader to often obscure aspects of Diaspora culture. The second section could have served to introduce us to another disparate, yet equally compelling, face of contemporary black culture—artists engaged and grappling with sometimes volatile socio-political issues of race, gender, identity and self-representation.

However, lack of referential information and the unfortunate choice of an extremely small font size used to title and index the images force the reader to resort to outside sources (and their reading glasses) in order to fully understand the depth and richness presented by these photographs.

Kenneth Montague is so passionate about increasing the understanding of Diaspora photography that he started the Wedge Gallery project in 1997 using his home as his initial gallery space. Wedge Curatorial Projects has infused Toronto’s art scene with issues related to black culture, provided a venue for underrepresented artists and artwork, and reached out to the community with workshops and collaborative projects. While not perfect, the book pro-

duced by Montague's collective is handsomely styled, rich with images, and serves to further understanding of black identity through a far-reaching collection of portrait images.

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Willis-Braithwaite, Deborah, and Rodger C. Birt. 1993. *VanDerZee: Photographer, 1886–1983*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

film review

Fourteen Films on African Art

by Christopher Roy
 Art and Life in Africa Project,
 University of Iowa 2001–2008.
http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/List_of_DVDs/Index.html.
 \$24.95 DVD, \$30 Blu-Ray

reviewed by Peri M. Klemm

The fourteen documentary DVD's on art, art making, and culture in West Africa produced by Christopher Roy since 2001 are extremely beneficial to students, artists, scholars, and collectors alike. The topics range from the general (*African Pottery Techniques; African Weaving; Fulani*) to the specific (*African Art as Theatre: The Bwa Masks of the Gnomou Family of the Village of Moni; Carving a Crocodile Mask and Shaping a Leaf Mask*). Each DVD offers individual chapters (for example, "pottery techniques" include convex mold, concave mold, rare hammer and anvil technique, coiling technique, direct pull technique, firing) for isolated showings. These chapters are excellent teaching tools, animating what students often only see as static in museums and readings. For artists, particularly weavers and potters, the attention to the art-making process and the high quality close-ups will be especially useful. Scholars and collectors will be able to watch specialists and performers create and honor through movement masks, gods, kings, and the decorated body.

The majority of the films focus exclusively on Burkina Faso (*Speaking with God: Mossi Divination, Masks of Leaves and Wood: The Bwa People of Burkina Faso, African Sculpture: Carving a Mask, Shaping a Leaf Mask, Art as a Verb in Africa: The Masks of the Bwa Village of Boni, African Art as Theater: The Bwa Masks of the Gnomou Family of the Village of Boni, African Art in Performance: The Winiama Masks of the Village of Ouri, Burkina Faso, A Year in the Life of an African Family, From Iron Ore to Iron Hoes: Smelting Iron in Africa*) while others include Burkina Faso and Ghana (*African Weaving, African Pottery Techniques*) Ghana (*Arts of Ghana, The Death of an African King: The Funeral of the Omanhene of Techiman with Sarah Adams*), and the Sahel Region (*Birds of the Wilderness. The Beauty Competition of the Wodaabe People of Niger, Fulani. Art*

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