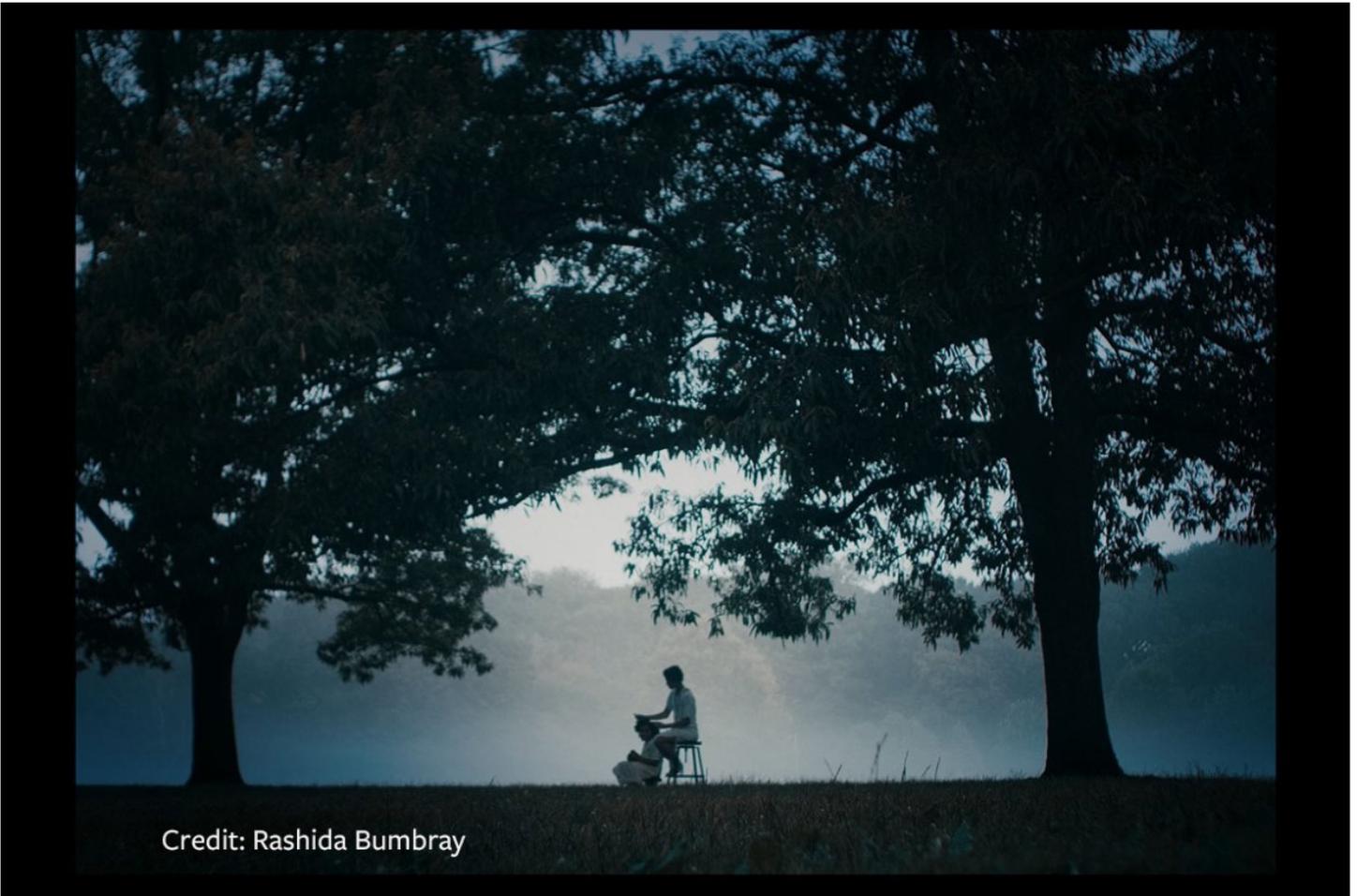




RUTGERS
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OF NEW JERSEY

Black Portraiture[s] Conference Issues Call to Action and Liberation

BY CARRIE STETLER February 22, 2022



Credit: Rashida Bumbray

The theme was play and performance, but the “Black Portraiture[s] VII” conference gave serious consideration to the power of imagination— and Black girlhood —as a pathway to freedom.

“Play is movement..play is leisure and protest. It is the re-staging of America,” said Salamishah Tillet, executive director of Express Newark, which organized the three-day event.

“What does it mean for black children to have the right to imagine and create? What does it mean for Black people to have the chance to rest?” she asked the audience at Saturday’s Marion Thompson Wright (MTW) Lecture Series, held at the Newark Museum of Art but also available to virtual visitors.

The series, sponsored by the Price Institute, showcased conversations between a gamut of Black artists and intellectuals discussing themes of play, utopia and performance. The line-up included Tyler Mitchell, the first Black photographer to shoot a Vogue cover, Grammy-winning jazz violinist Regina Carter, playwright Dominique Morisseau, and artist Bisa Butler.

Other guests were artist and curator Deborah Willis, Linda Harrison, director and CEO of the museum, renowned scholar Dr. Farah Jasmine Griffin, and Kamilah Forbes, the executive producer of the Apollo Theater.

On Thursday night, there was an opening reception for “Picturing Black Girlhood: Moments of Possibility,” an exhibition featuring work by 85 Black girls, women and genderqueer artists from ages 8 to 94. Although well-known photographers such as Carrie Mae Weems, Lorraine O’Grady and Latoya Ruby Frazier have work in the show, many of the images were shot by girls and young women.

Held for the first time on all three floors of Express Newark, including the Paul Robeson Gallery, the sweeping exhibition, curated by Scheherazade Tillet and Zoraida Lopez-Diago, includes wall-sized images along with smaller, framed pieces, video installations, sculpture and a case displaying white gowns from various coming-of-age events and the crowning of Miss Newark. Styles range from photojournalism to self-portrait, dreamy utopian images, and photos that reference history, including the black and white images of photographer Doris Derby, who documented southern Black girls and women during the Civil Rights movement.

In her remarks at the reception, Sherri Ann P. Butterfield, Rutgers-Newark executive vice chancellor and associate professor of Sociology, confided that the exhibition moved her to tears. She described the many ways it countered stereotypes of Black girls.

“Contrary to what we’ve been led to believe as a society, Black girls are beautiful, they are brilliant, they are sensitive, they cry when they are hurt, they experience pure joy, they play with abandon, they enjoy music and dance without expecting others to co-opt it, they laugh they smile, they do hair, not always ask an act of political resistance but because it looks and feels good,” she said. “Black girls are deserving of – and frankly, owed – love and care.”

Rutgers President Jonathan Holloway, who attended the events, was also moved by the exhibition. “These images tell important stories, just as often as their creation is another powerful story about agency and freedom,” he said.

He urged the audience to retain the show’s sense of possibility after the exhibition closes in July. “It is an affirmation of possibility, an affirmation of visibility. And we dare not participate in the process of returning after this exhibit closes, returning after February, to a mode where the invisible is normal and the impossible is mundane.”

Scheherazade Tillet said she hopes the show will serve as a wake-up call.

“The activist identity is what I want people to leave with, we have a call of action here. Black girls aren’t free right now,” said Tillet, a photographer whose show “Black Girl Play,” at Project for Empty Space in Newark, was also part of the conference. A reception for the show was held Friday.

In her introductory remarks at the opening of the MTW series, Rutgers-Newark Chancellor Nancy Cantor condemned a reactionary, deteriorating political climate in which books are banned and historical accuracy repressed. She described the MTW gathering, which annually convenes scholars and artists to explore Black history, as an act of resistance against “whitewashing.”

“Yes, we are living in a serious moment when historical revelation is feared more than celebrated,” she acknowledged. “Yet we my friends are here today to celebrate it, no matter what.”

She described the work of the conference’s many artists as vital.

“We know that the only way to really undo the force of whitewashing is to paint with a different color, speak loudly with a different voice, play a different tune, portray a different history, a different childhood, a different set of dreams, play a different part than they relegate you to over and over again through history,” she exhorted. “Turn the narrative, to your narrative, not theirs for you. And that, of course, is where and when and why the artist enters the room, in ways that simply can’t be ignored.”