

# Capturing the Joy of Black Girlhood With sisters Scheherazade and Salamishah Tillet.

By Laura van Stratton



Scheherazade Tillet, *Moko Jumbie School Girl*, 2020. Photo: Scheherazade Tillet

By the end of the week, there will be not one but two new lens-based art exhibitions just blocks apart in Newark, New Jersey, that explore Black girlhood. Both are rooted in the intertwined personal, professional, and political passions — activism, art-making, curation, cultural criticism, scholarship, psychology and politics — of two extraordinary, multi-hyphenate Black sisters: Scheherazade and Salamishah Tillet.

“The exhibitions are ‘sister’ shows,” Salamishah, 46, says with a laugh. “Of course.”

Project for Empty Space, located on a bustling commercial strip of Newark’s Broad Street, is hosting “Black Girl Play,” an exhibition of Scheherazade’s work in photography, video, and installation. A short walk from there, at Express Newark, an arts center helmed by Salamishah, “Picturing Black Girlhood: Moments of Possibility” opens this Thursday. It is an expansive exhibition co-curated by Scheherazade featuring the work of more than 85 Black women, girls, and genderqueer artists ranging in age from 8 to 94 and working predominantly in photography, video, and film.

Collectively, the two art exhibitions constitute what Scheherazade, 43, calls a “Black-girl takeover” not just of Newark, but of photography itself, to center “Black girls as subjects, artists, and agents of their own lives.”

This takeover is the culmination of a residency Scheherazade began in 2019 at Express Newark, where Salamishah has served as director since last summer. A center for socially engaged art and design, it is affiliated with Rutgers University Newark, where Salamishah is a professor who plays a number of vital academic roles. But if her name sounds familiar, it may be because she is also cultural critic-at-large for the *New York Times* and the co-host of the acclaimed four-part podcast *Because of Anita*.

“Our focus on Black girls is a natural evolution of our decades of work as feminists, activists, artists on sexual and racial violence,” Salamishah says. “We wanted to invest in, elevate, and pay sustained attention to Black girls, who are undervalued in society.”



Scheherazade (left) and her older sister Salamishah Tillet as adults.  
On the right: the Tillet sisters as girls. Images courtesy of Salamishah and Scheherazade Tillet.

At Express Newark, half of the 85 featured artists in “Picturing Black Girlhood” (February 17–July 2) are girls under 18 whose work Scheherazade and co-curator Zoraida Lopez-Diago discovered through arts organizations that work with youth, including the Beautiful Project; Bronx Documentary Center; Perfect Ten; International Center of Photography; and A Long Walk Home, a Chicago-based nonprofit co-founded by the Tilletts and led by Scheherazade to empower youth to end violence against girls and women.

“Picturing Black Girlhood” positions images made in the last decade by girls and adolescents alongside iconic 20th-century images by giants like Carrie Mae Weems, Lorraine O’Grady,

and Doris Derby as well as newer work by more recently crowned art stars, including LaToya Ruby Frazier, Deborah Roberts, and Ebony G. Patterson.

For example, in Patterson's work on view (one of few sculptural projects in the show), colorful coffins dangle like piñatas from the gallery ceiling, recalling how Black girlhood in America also comprises the threat and reality of loss and violence. In the same gallery, 12-year-old Jadyn Miles's self-portrait takes on a similar theme; referencing the intense grief after her father's violent death, she has titled it *Two Months After the Worst Day Ever* (2016).

The colossal exhibition will be the visual centerpiece when Express Newark hosts the seventh edition of the Black Portraiture conference (also opening February 17); after pandemic postponements, this edition's theme is play and performance.

Down the street at the Project for Empty Space is the debut solo show of Scheherazade's photography, entitled "Black Girl Play" (through March 13, 2022). Curated by Jasmine Wahi and Rebecca Jampol, the exhibition features photos from three of the artist's series: "The Send-Off," depicting the ritual of Black teens girls in Chicago preparing for prom; "Eight," showcasing the life of Salamishah's 8-year-old daughter Seneca in Newark during the pandemic; and "Kiddies Carnival," for which Scheherazade returned to her father's native Trinidad, where the Tillet sisters attended grammar school. Taken together, the images portray an aspect of life for Black girls that is rarely documented: pleasure.

This exhibition of Scheherazade's own photography, though far more modest in scale than the show she has co-curated, feels like a flag-planting as immediately vital as Michaela Cole's *I May Destroy You*, Lauren Greenfield's *Girl Culture*, and the child-focused work of Sally Mann (whose series "At Twelve" Scheherazade cites as an influence).

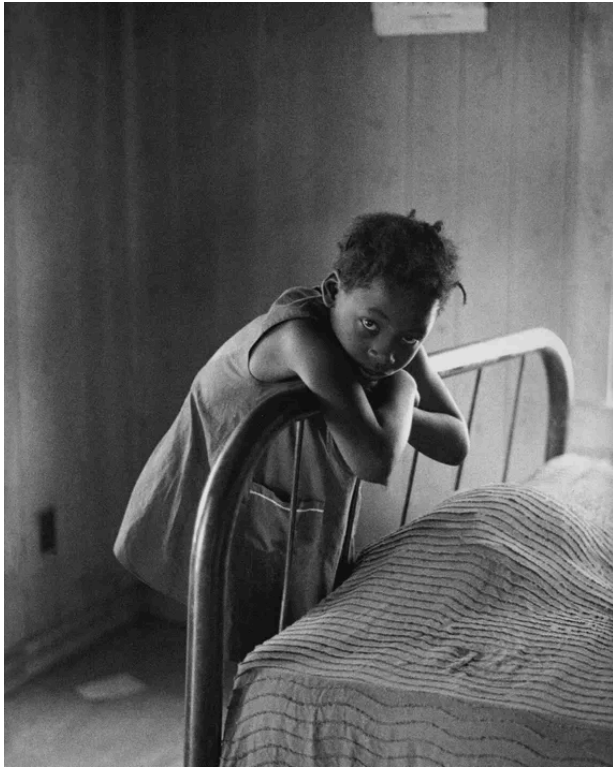
Collectively, both exhibitions defy centuries of villainization and cultural invisibility of Black girls and the unique adultification to which they have long been subject, both sexually and practically.

Scheherazade's artistic awakening began in 1998, after Salamishah was raped. As a college student studying child development, Scheherazade began a 15-year project to visually documenting her sister's healing process that "informs all the other work that I do," Scheherazade says.

That sense of threat is addressed head-on in the entrance to the exhibition of Scheherazade's artwork, where visitors are greeted by a satellite version of a project called "Black Girlhood Altar," an installation memorializing missing and murdered Black girls: girls like Breonna Taylor, Latasha Harlins, Lyniah Bell, Marcie Gerald, Ma'Khia Bryant, and Rekia Boyd. (The Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago's bigger version of the altar, on view through March 27, was featured in the *Times* Styles section shortly after it opened.) Offerings — from Nerds to roller skates to hair bows to bling — have come and continue to come from the artist, the girls' loved ones, and the communities that exhibit the altars. The altars are "ongoing, and always evolving," Scheherazade says, "like healing itself."

The Tillet sisters hope that collectively, the exhibitions serve as a "call to action" for what Scheherazade terms "an intervention in understanding the diversity and breadth of Black girlhood." She hopes viewers will leave both shows "transformed" and comprehending "the cultural significance of Black girls, but also the need to advocate for them in terms of resources, funding, programming, terms of policy." Salamishah, standing by, nods.

The Tillet sisters offered the Cut a preview of both shows. Keep scrolling to see highlights and hear more from Scheherazade and Salamishah.



**Left:** Doris Derby, *Rural Family Girlhood*, Mileston, Mississippi, 1968. Photo: Doris Derby  
**Right:** Ángelina Cofer, *Nineteen*, 2021. Photo: Ángelina Cofer

Doris Derby was a civil rights activist working as a photographer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in 1968 when she captured the young girl looking up at the camera in *Rural Family Girlhood, Mileston, Mississippi*. But neither the bed nor the nearly empty bedroom seem to belong to the girl. Adjacent to it is the staged self-portrait *Nineteen* (2021) by Ángelina Cofer, a contemporary teen deeply involved with Black Lives Matter and Me Too movements. Cofer sits in a puffy orange dress atop what looks like an inflatable pool toy on her own bed, a menagerie of stuffies at her feet. In the background, there's a bookshelf with titles like *Violent Ends*, *I Crawl Through It*, *Children of Blood and Bone*, and *Beloved*. It's a display of the self that is carefully curated by a late adolescent in the age of Instagram. "She's getting her BFA now at the School of the Art Institute in Chicago," Scheherazade says. "What I see in that look is as she's growing into womanhood, she's also holding on to childhood itself."





Samantha Box, *Performance at the HMI Awards Ball*, 2014. Photo: Samantha Box

“Samantha Box is a photographer who worked in what was at the time the only LGBTQ homeless shelter in New York City. With homeless youth, she could have focused on trauma, but instead, she’s photographing joy. And what we love about this image is her relationship and sense of collaboration with her subjects. As with a lot of artists in this exhibition, Box doesn’t just see people as subjects, but as community and partners in their art,” says Scheherazade.

The most exciting imagery in the show is by Salamishah’s daughter, Seneca Steplight-Tillet, who has allowed her aunt to exhibit a 38-second video self-portrait shot with a cell phone. Like every child, she seems mesmerized not just by her own image, but by the cascade of frames within frames she can make ad infinitum with just a mirror and a phone. The exhibition itself — the hard edge of the screen on which the video plays, the right angles of the gallery — adds other layers of framing. The effect is, perhaps, a reframing of selfie culture that the artist, at 8, has yet to enter. “She didn’t know it would be part of an exhibition when she made this,” Scheherazade says.



Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled (Woman and Daughter With Make Up)*, 1990. Photo: Carrie Mae Weems



Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is ... Girlfriends Times Two*, 1983/2009. Photo: Lorraine O'Grady

The curators have sited Steplight-Tillet's video next to "*Untitled (Woman and Daughter With Make Up)*," (1990), by Carrie Mae Weems, part of Weems's famous "Kitchen Table" series. But the layers of framing immediately draw comparison to a different classic elsewhere in the same gallery: Lorraine O'Grady's famous 1983 image entitled *Art Is ... (Girlfriends Times Two)*, where, although the girls are clearly delighted at being photographed, it is an adult photographer who provided the heavily gilded frames.

"How Black women understand Black girlhood is distinct from how Black girls understand themselves," Salamishah says, adding, "Either out of a protective instinct or just having gone through this experience on their own, Black women will just capture different things than Black girls do."



**Another photo of Seneca, this one captured by her aunt.** Scheherazade Tillet, *Playing With Makeup Birthday Gift With a Close Friend*, 2020. Photo: Scheherazade Tillet



Nydia Blas, *Resana With Mirror*, 2016. Photo: Nydia Blas

Rather than a bathroom or bedroom, where children tend to pursue explorations of this kind, the subject here is seated (in formal attire, no less) in front of a mantel in a traditional, bourgeois living room. “Nydia Blas took such a risk here as a photographer,” Scheherazade says. “We have this image, one of the most important in our show, protected in the corner of the gallery to afford it some privacy. It’s a look at the inner world of girls exploring their own bodies. It’s striking because it’s so taboo.”

Sheherazade used a small camera to get extremely close to her young subjects at Carnival in Port of Spain, Trinidad. “I can use my own culture to gain access,” Scheherazade says, but “eye contact and engagement are very important for me.” Words that come up repeatedly as Scheherazade discusses her own work are “intimacy,” “engagement,” and “consent.” Even for street photography, she says, none is possible without the others.



**Scheherazade Tillet, *Queen of the Band*, 2020.**



“Prom send-off is a ritual for Black girls on the South and West sides of Chicago. It’s this coming of age, a rite of passage that’s happening, like a quinceañera or a bat mitzvah,” says Scheherazade.

Girls in her leadership program invited her to attend their send-offs and to take photos as they prepared, often with the help of their girlfriends and extended female relatives. “I got to see this coming of age and how much work went into it.”

“It was this magical space.”

**Scheherazade Tillet, *Mother, Grandmother, and Daughter*, 2019.**





It isn't about who their date is. "Most of these girls go to prom by themselves." In fact, "it's not even about the prom," Scheherazade says. "It's about the girl and the family together ... the send-off is the best part. The families hang out and celebrate this moment. You ask some of them why it's so significant, and it's because it's close to the girls' high-school graduation. It's also about community. They sometimes have a huge block party and close off the streets to celebrate these young women."

**Scheherazade Tillet, *Asia's Big Reveal for her Little Cousins*, 2019.**



"Because the ritual is particularly working-class, the girls are actually criticized a lot, like, 'How dare you spend so much money!' So the idea that Black girls can't have that kind of joy made me even more interested to witness and document what this is all about and to tell the story with pictures on our terms."

It's as much about coming of age as it is about economic pride. This young woman, seen counting cash in the driver's seat, worked two jobs — at Pizza Hut and USPS — to make her big night possible.

**Scheherazade Tillet, Jermiah Paying the Prom Vendors, 2019.**



Part of that economic pride is being able to support businesses owned by Black women, whether it's for a dressmaker, catering, beauty treatments, or to rent an oversize chair that functions as a throne for the night. The young woman in this photo “waited in line at 5:30 a.m. to go to the only Black-owned salon in her neighborhood,” Scheherazade says.

**Scheherazade Tillet, *Danielle in her Backyard With Throne Chair*, 2019.**



Typically, a young woman “waits for hours in her room until everybody comes over. It’s very much like a wedding,” Scheherazade says, “This is her coming out of her room before she goes outside.”

**Scheherazade Tillet, Naya’s First Big Reveal in her Prom Dress, 2019.**

