

I gotta world I'm making in my own image.

– Ntozake Shange

Since 1997, Toronto's Wedge Gallery (now known simply as "Wedge") has presented annual solo exhibitions, premiering some of the world's most acclaimed photographers such as James VanDerZee, Tony Gleaton and Seydou Keita, whose dynamic and innovative imagery capture the beauty and grandeur of African cultural and artistic heritage. These images provide vivid testimony to the existences and ideas of their creators as well as their subjects, exploring the complex diversity of people of the African diaspora at key historic moments. The works are linked by the impetus to represent, remap and reinvent contemporary black subjectivity in order to detach itself from fixed inscriptions and provide new positions and ways of seeing through the photographic image.

Revealing the unexpected realities of the contemporary world through a shared creativity is what drives Wedge and its director and curator, Kenneth Montague. Montague's vision is evidenced by the work he has collected for many years – an impressive range of photographic portraits by Canadian and international artists taken in varied contexts and styles, from archival, documentary and studio portraits to street photography and conceptually staged tableaux. At the centre of this unique curatorial project is a specific and assertive impetus towards cultural affirmation – inserting a diasporic African presence in the contemporary Canadian arts landscape through the ambiguously charged relationship between the black body and the photographic lens.

Race has a special relationship to photography. Historically, as the most pervasive technology of visualization, photography served as the primary guarantor of race as a visual indicator of racial differences. At the same time, as bell hooks notes:

Cameras gave black folks, irrespective of class, a means by which we could participate fully in the production of images. Hence it is essential that any theoretical

discussion of the relationship of black life to the visual, to art making make photography central. Access and mass appeal have historically made photography a powerful location for the construction of an oppositional black aesthetic.¹

Given its perpetual campaign against erasure and exclusion, African-Canadian culture occupies a contested space between the Euro-Canadian reluctance to accept an African presence and the African-American insistence on reading Canadian blackness as a "lesser" shade of its own. African-American cultural critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr., suggests that black literary artists "wrote themselves into being."² In the same vein, it could be said that black visual artists have had to compose and project themselves into being through their image making. Similarly, through its exhibition roster, lectures, educational projects, vast collection and Web presence, Wedge truly lives up to its name, "wedge-ing" a space for African diasporic arts in Canada through redefinitions of the photographic portrait.

The portrait in photography has been referred to as one of the most problematic areas of photographic practice. Graham Clarke suggests that the portrait at every level, with every context is "fraught with ambiguity."³ Part of this ambiguity relates to the question of precisely who and what is being photographed. The language of portrait photographs involves a sense of the inner self declaring its "being" in terms of a single composite image, *sans* history, society or conflict. The portrait is a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of social identity.

The inscription of social identity is an important element in Montague's collection and curatorial project. Born in Windsor to Jamaican-born parents, Montague's early interest in photography was sparked by his fascination with chemistry and technology and by the sense of cultural pride his parents instilled through regular trips to cultural institutions. Now known throughout Toronto for his award-winning dental practice, Montague has successfully balanced his parallel life of art and science. He explains: "I got into McGill's school of music the same week I got into dental school. I grew up in an era of black empowerment and civil rights, and culturally speaking, ran the gamut from Martin Luther King to blaxploitation, Malcolm X to *Superfly*. That really shaped my sensibility about art, pop culture, and the synthesis of the two."⁴

Encouraged by friends and colleagues such as architect Robert Osbourne (with whom he co-curated several Wedge exhibitions), photo-historian Maia Sutnik, and gallery director



HERMANAS (THREE SISTERS)
1986 BY TONY GLEATON. COURTESY
THE ARTIST AND WEDGE



Stephen Bulger, Montague decided to launch an accessible space for the public to view his growing collection. It began as a private gallery especially designed and located in Montague's home, an impressive Richmond Street loft in downtown Toronto designed by Jamaican-born architect Del Terrelonge. The name for the gallery was derived from the long narrow shape of the loft's corridor, but more importantly, it reflected the artists' and the gallery's impetus to make space for their work and ideas.

Wedge's first exhibition, *Transforming Reality*, featured a series of photographs by Jamaican-born Toronto-based artist Michael Chambers, known primarily for his sculpted black nudes that have sparked controversy and debate for challenging conventions of Westernized beauty. From its inception, Wedge's exhibitions have been acclaimed features of Toronto's annual photography festival Contact, bringing together diverse groups and communities within the city.

Reflecting upon nearly a decade of annual exhibitions, I was also struck by those shows that highlight significant movements in the cultural history of African people globally, the artists presenting an intensely personal perspective of their surroundings and the ideals of the moment. Following its early years, the gallery changed locations to photographer Stella Fakiyesi's Richmond Street studio and gallery SOF Art House, which later became Shift Gallery.

2006 marks a turning point for the direction of the Wedge project. For the first time since its inception, it will present an exhibition not specifically curated by Montague, but guest-curated by myself. Furthermore, the choice of showcasing the work of emerging Eritrean-Canadian artist Dawit Petros brings Wedge back full circle and marks Wedge's objective toward more collaborations and community involvement, with less reliance on sales. The exhibition will also move to a new location further down Richmond Street from Shift Gallery to Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, in an effort to broaden the scope of Wedge supporters and visitors.

Future plans are to house Montague's vast and important collection within a public institution so that it can be available to a larger audience as a teaching tool. Concerned with the fact that relatively few galleries focus on the unique emerging "new Canadian culture," Wedge continues to challenge our perceptions and bring a much-needed human face to the African presence in our global community.

Dawit Petros: *Remix*

Surely there shall yet dawn
some mighty morning to lift
the Veil and set the prisoned
free... . When men ask
artists, not "Are they black?"
but "Do they know?"

– W.E.B. DuBois

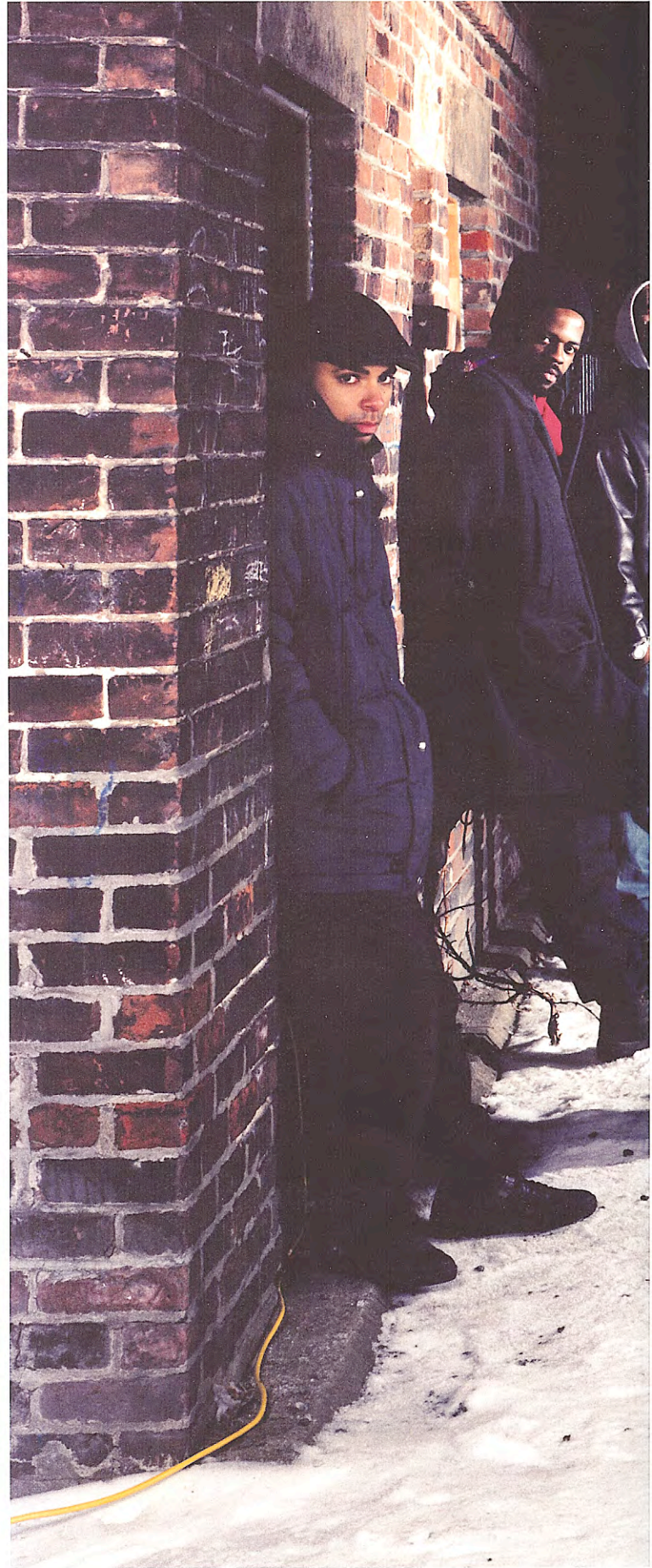
For the past seven years, Dawit Petros' photographic work has explored issues and systems of representation as they relate to site, body, space and difference. His early methodological approach is located between that of ethnography, performance art, photography and traditional portraiture painting. Some of the images have the look and feel of snapshots, as unmediated realism unencumbered by artifice and self-conscious construction, while others are carefully constructed and hyper-dramatic.

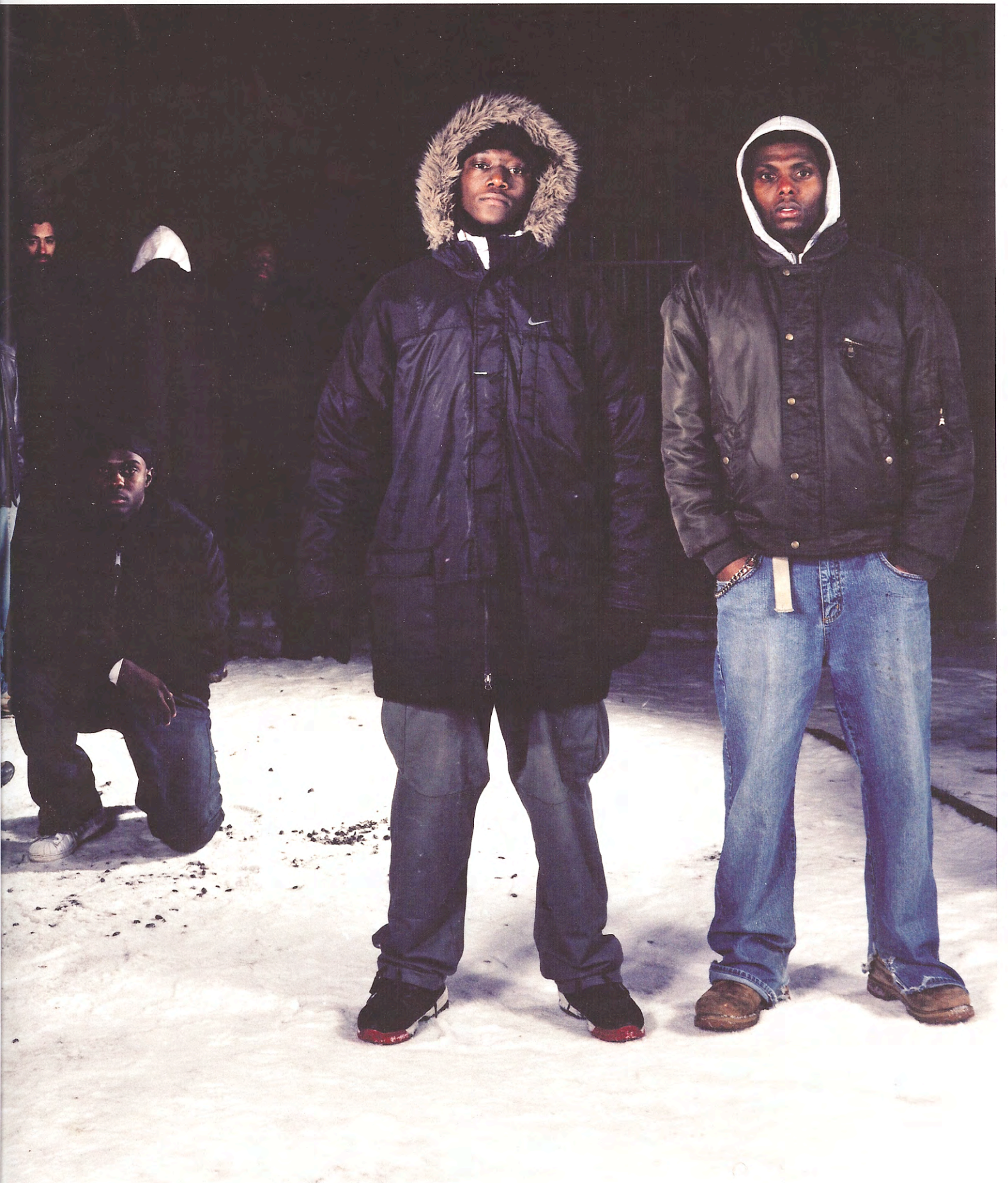
Of particular significance to his imagery are explorations of personal identity and the role of national identity as key components of analysis in visual culture, technology and new media. His early works revolve around photographic portraits of families, friends and acquaintances, with a specific focus on moving through and around traps of authenticity, extending contemporary definitions of black "community" while interrogating constructions of "whiteness."

Remixing, cutting up, editing, collaging. Variations of these aesthetic approaches have manifested themselves throughout the twentieth century in the work of artists in a variety of media from music to writing: Picasso, Duchamp, Burroughs, Godard, Grandmaster Flash, even theorists such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. It has almost become a cliché to announce that we live in a "remixed" culture.

According to Brian Eno, this kind of activity is the essence of postmodernism:

Dawit Petros
"Watch"
from *Transliteration*
2003









Dawit Petros
"Untitled (The Living Room)"
"The Porch" (detail)
"Untitled (The Kitchen)"
from *Some Families*
2003-04



Dawit Petros
"Venus as Elsa"
"Untitled (Two)"
"Hadenbes Family"
from *Reinscriptions*
2005







UNTITLED (C. 1999-03) BY JAMEL SHABAZZ, SISTER COOL (1974) BY JAMEL SHABAZZ, WATCH (2003) BY SEYDOUKHETA, COURTESY THE ARTIST AND WEDGE

An artist is now much more seen as a connector of things, a person who scans the enormous field of possible places for artistic attention, and says, What I am going to do is draw your attention to this sequence of things.⁵

Part candid, part tableau, Petros' inspirations for the composition and cinematic staging of these works have come from such diverse influences as American portrait photographers Tina Barney and Dawoud Bey, and Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra. His recent inclusion in the exhibition *Faking Death: Canadian Art Photography and the Canadian Imagination* at the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York marks an important entry in his career as an emerging artist.

Petros uses his work to help break down the powerful hold that rigid concepts of race and gender have in our culture, while redefining the photographic image as both document and metaphor. He explains: "My intention is not to faithfully recreate but to recontextualize. The images bear a contemporary aesthetic and combine diverse elements drawing from hip-hop culture, cinema and advertising. These images serve as evocative points of departure rather than coherent answers to wider debates of race. My work denotes how meaning shifts as media, subjects and histories are translated and retranslated."⁶

Using strategies that mix and blend fact with fantasy, Petros challenges the viewer's assumptions about artistic authority and authenticity. By questioning commonly held beliefs about representation in general, the works initiate reconsideration, allowing new questions to be asked and new values to be formed.

Petros' early series *Transliteration* (2003) situates black subjects within scenarios that paraphrase compositions and poses from famous Western European paintings. The term "transliteration" is defined as a mapping from one system of writing into another. Here he displaces the heralded portrait genre of oil painting in the canon of mainstream art history to situate a space for contemporary black Canadian subjectivity using photography as a signifier in that process.

Curator Jessie Lacayo explains:

Petros' work accounts for the key points at which construction and manipulation affect the process of translation. The act of translation, in this instance, is the work of cross-cultural analysis and interpretation. It requires submerging in another culture and communicating its thought and beauty in a new idiom. It calls on a greater capacity of experience, adaptability

and adjustment, as well as an evaluation of intangible values and ideologies.⁷

"Watch" (2003) was inspired by Rembrandt's painting *The Nightwatch* (1642), a group-portrait painting depicting company civil guards preparing to march. Petros' contemporary image is a strikingly composed portrait of young black men posed outside of a desolate building on a snow-fallen winter's night. The men are clad in parkas, jackets and other winter attire, and the landscape surrounding them looks cold and surreal. Are they guarding something, keeping "watch" as the title suggests, or are they merely watching us? As we look into the distance, our gaze is at once met and rebuffed, our interest simultaneously sparked and contested by the surrounding men. By including glances that question or contest the camera's view within his photographs, Petros also draws attention to the invasiveness of his own practice.

Historically, black people have been objects of representation rather than subjects and creators because institutional racism often determines who gets access to the means of representation. Through his dialogical strategy, Petros unravels this double-bind as the subject "looks back" to ask the audience who or what *they* are looking for.

The brilliance of Petros' undertaking is not in his ability to simply plant "new" black bodies in(to) the poses and spaces traditionally occupied by yesterday's Old Masters, but more specifically in his ability to transform the image; in the haunting dissonance of these familiar images made unfamiliar. The end result is a series that refigures traditional representations of the artistic portraiture genre (notoriously void of black images) and that also mocks "blackness" as a marketing device to ask deeper questions about vulnerability and survival. The work allows us to see how images of black youth, gender, beauty and hip-hop culture counteract and collide in daily life and in contemporary mainstream representations.

Everyday People: *Some Families* and *Reinscriptions*

Searching for some sense of family away from his own in Saskatchewan, Petros began an exploration of the family portrait and representations of the family album. His series *Some Families* was shot in Montréal beginning in 2003.

The family – that standard by which civilizations are judged – is explored through portraits within the dynamics of

domestic space. However, the political-aesthetic tension that the images embody here is heightened by the tensions of race and identity invoked in Petros' efforts to portray the multicultural realities and the consistently redefined parameters of the Canadian "family."

Perhaps one of the most emotionally charged images in the series is "The Porch" (2003), a diptych that features a mother and her two teenaged daughters posed on their back deck. The young-looking and stylish mom, who also happens to be white, gazes into the camera, smoking and seemingly oblivious to her daughters, who also happen to be "black" and who are both sitting posed in her direction. Another image has the women standing face forward, looking again into the camera, leaving the audience to wonder about the nature of their stance and their relationships to each other.

Taken together, the images subtly but provocatively call attention to the uneasiness of the cross-class and interracial looking that Petros' photographs entail. The awkward poses and strained expressions of his subjects, the contentious glances offered by several individuals he captures on film are elements that make the experience of viewing his images frequently uncomfortable, yet endlessly intriguing. Not only does Petros interrogate representations of black subjectivity, he achieves what many post-black artists have set out to do, which is to make "whiteness" visible.

To the viewers without prior knowledge of the conceptual impetus behind some of these images, they resemble photographs one would find in the ads of glossy fashion and hip-hop magazines, such as *Vibe* or *The Source*. They create a desire for access in the spectator and relate in many senses to the desire to consume celebrity. Hip hop is all about visual agency. It fully understands the power of the visual image and its impact on ideological perceptions.

In 2004, Petros moved to Boston to pursue graduate studies at the Museum School of Fine Arts. Again, he found himself searching for a sense of place and belonging, and was particularly alarmed by the state of race relations in the United States. He began to seek out people from his native Eritrean community to photograph. The result is an intensely personal body of work named *Reinscriptions* (2004-05). In this series, he photographed families, posed individually or as couples and siblings outside of their suburban homes, in their front and back yards. It is a project that examines a population displaced by war, using home as a reflection of longing and belonging.

In 1993, following Eritrea's official independence from Ethiopia, the artist explains that many Eritreans who were living abroad in places such as Canada, the United States, Australia

and England were given the opportunity to return to their native country. What occurred instead was that those who could afford to buy homes did so in these Western nations. Instead of following through on their lifelong dreams of returning "home," they fulfilled a new dream of owning a home in the West. As a result, Eritreans are now shifting the face of the suburban and urban landscape wherever they live.

Wanting to document that process, Petros' images take identity to a place that is not easily located nor always recognizable. The work examines how a population of immigrants shifts the visual demographics of any suburban community. However, they also address how we engage with perceptions of so-called "difference." In these images, the artist plays with the notion of absence and presence in relation to the "othered" body and the space surrounding it.

Lauri Firstenberg discusses the intersection of photography and stereotype in her essay "Autonomy and Archive in America," recognizing that a prevalent strategy in photography is a total negation of the body in the service of a new brand of portraiture, or antiportraiture, wherein space is a surrogate for the human subject. Identity is abstracted by its absence, indexed by signifiers of landscape in this nonfigurative photography. The obliteration of the figure provides a new archive of spaces. This shift to visualizing identity as place includes locales of historical memory.⁸

In exploring constantly shifting locations of identity through the performative black body, Petros draws attention to the critical foundations of DuBois and Fanon – free agency and recognition by the viewer of that agency. Echoing this strive toward agency, Petros writes:

As a cultural worker who is located smack in the middle of a multitude of values and histories, I relish the ability to pick and choose and then synthesize. This proclivity for hybridity and translation of elements from one and into another is central to the work.⁹

Resisting a simple "positive" versus "negative" approach to representing black bodies, the performative force of Petros' work lies in the way that each of the images serves to produce a regenerative space of visibility that not only signifies on mediated representations of black identity, but also calls attention to the lack of transgressive self-representational images of blackness in the portraiture canon, particularly from the Canadian arts tradition. At the same time, the work veers toward a sort of antiportraiture, wherein space is a surrogate for the human subject.



Dawit Petros
"Some Go Weeping
and Some Rejoicing"
from *Passages*
2005

