

At last, a black Canada by black Canadians



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Position as Desired

At the Royal Ontario Museum
Until March 27, 2011, 100 Queen's
Park, Toronto; www.rom.on.ca

On your way to the spectacular *II Anatsui* exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum, take the time to see *Position as Desired* – a much smaller, much less publicized (but in no way less valuable nor less beautiful) exhibition organized in tandem with the Anatsui extravaganza.

Position as Desired is a concisely curated exhibition of contemporary (and some historical) photographic representations of the African/Caribbean diasporic experience in Canada – as witnessed and captured by African Canadians. This distinction is important, as museums (I'm not picking on the ROM here, but museology in general) have a long and unpleasant history of presenting non-white people as "the other," via imagery not created by said "others." To present portraits and photo-representations of African Canadians taken exclusively by African Canadians is an inherently political action, even now.

But I'll let the ROM speak for itself. As Silvia Forni, the museum's associate curator of World Cultures, notes in her foreword to *Position as Desired's* catalogue, "African Canadians are not newcomers to this land. ... Yet their presence in the dominant narrative is still too often marginal." Furthermore, Forni writes, "As with any museum, the scope of the ROM's exhibits is limited to those areas best covered by our collections ... [and] there are many important stories that cannot be told relying only on our own resources."

In other words, a show of images of black Canadians taken by black Canadians needed to be outsourced. And *Position as Desired* employs excellent sources. In only a handful of the non-contemporary vernacular works are the identities of the photographers unknown, and/or presupposed to have been taken by non-black artists.

The signature work in *Position as Desired* is Dawit L. Petros's stunning *Sign* – a large portrait of a young black man dressed in a typical Canadian fur-lined parka.



Dawit L. Petros's *Sign*: There is so much going on in this photograph, one barely knows where to start.

AT OTHER VENUES

Nick Ostoff: *Some New Paintings*

Ostoff departs from his photo-realist roots and presents unexpected emotional line-and-pigment geometrics. To Oct. 16, Diez Contemporary, 100 Niagara St., Toronto.

Raffael Iglesias: *Mil Fuegos*

If there's a hot, brilliant colour Iglesias hasn't used in his wild, graffiti-driven paintings, it must be a hue known only to the angels. To Nov. 6, Peak Gallery, 23 Morrow Ave., Toronto.

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The model looks directly into the camera, his gaze focused as a laser and yet soft, open and curious. His mouth is closed, his dreadlocks tumble out from under the enormous hood, and the forefinger and thumb of his right hand are configured in a signalling gesture. The man looks pensive, perhaps angry, but also as intrigued by his photo-interrogator as Petros clearly is by the model.

There is so much going on in this photograph, one barely knows where to start. First off, it is deeply Canadian – I swear I have that very parka somewhere in my closet. And so do you. Secondly,

the hand gesture is enigmatic. Is it a welcoming gesture, a warning gesture, or a culturally specific greeting? The viewer must decide (and, yes, many people will read it as a "gang sign," and Petros is playing with that tension).

The model's gaze is equally ambivalent, and in presenting this ambivalence, Petros is both invoking and working against the tired, racist notion of the "inscrutable," possibly dangerous other. Petros's photo asks the viewer to acknowledge his/her own prejudices (black man as gangster, the "angry black man" stereotype), while simultaneously admiring

the beauty of the man's face, the exquisite, almost liturgical composition of the photograph, and the sensual presence of the down-filled, blanket-like parka.

That *Sign* is placed at the front door of the Canadian heritage exhibition hall is no accident. This black man, the placement tells us, is important too, and deserves wall space in any true assembly of heritage makers.

Christina Leslie mines similar rich veins with her series *Everything Irie*. Photographing family members and friends from her Jamaican-Canadian community, Leslie lets her subjects speak for themselves. The photos are comprised of two equal parts, with the top half taken up by a head-and-shoulders portrait, the bottom by quotes, in Jamaican patois, from the subjects. The photographs have also been gently tinted in red, gold and green.

My favourite from this suite is the portrait of "Auntie Lorna" – a handsome, middle-aged woman in a crisp suit jacket who recounts her time as a member of the British Women Royal Army Corp. "Me was one of de lickest at 98 lbs," Auntie Lorna remembers. But from the look of her determined, smiling face, I suspect she was not to be messed with at any weight.

By letting her subjects tell part of their life stories, good and bad, Leslie does more than give voice to her portraits, she creates a novel in imagery – one of those large, multigenerational novels that Canadians write and buy by the truckload. Leslie's novel-in-pictures, however, is much more entertaining, and more necessary.

Other highlights include Megan Morgan's reworked family photographs, wherein faces are positioned in a kind of colour-coded Modernist-style, building-block grid. Morgan's assemblage speaks to the power of family, which is the pre-eminent theme in *Position as Desired*.

Stella Taklyesi's offers an alarming image of a shirtless black man whose face is partially covered by a menacing, spiralled target circle, while Michael Chambers's reminds us, via a luminous image of a nude black man whose upper body and face are covered by a huge sunflower, that the naked realities (pun intended) of black maleness still remain obscure to the dominant culture.

All this excellent work is only a fraction of what's on offer in *Position as Desired*. My only suggestion for improvement is that the ROM remount this show in a bigger space, with more works from the artists and their peers.

Nobody would miss a couple of dinosaurs for a month or two.