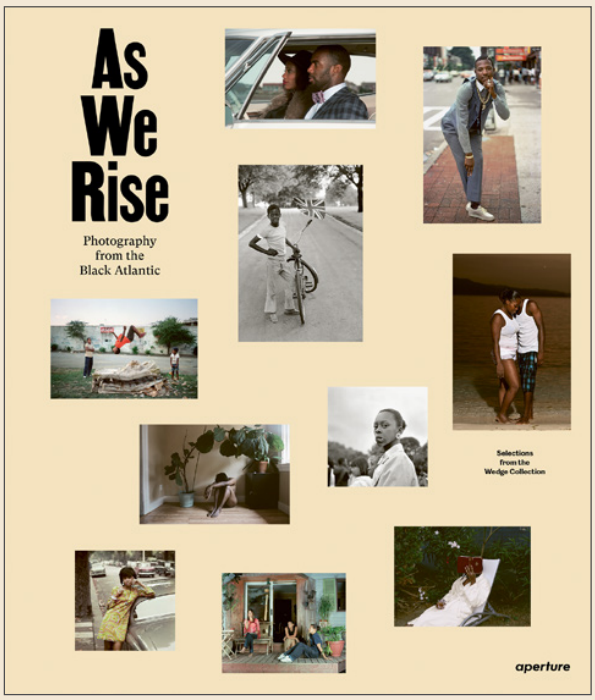
FEBRUARY 4, 2022

BEAUTY, JOY, AND BELONGING

PHOTOGRAPHY OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA

Toronto's Dr. Kenneth Montague has established one of the world's most revered art collections dedicated to African diasporic culture and contemporary Black life. Now a new book about this insightful, innovative, and internationally celebrated body of work explores how photographers picture Black identity.



Cover of *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021).

Dr. Kenneth Montague, *Self-Portrait*, 2020.

"Put yourself into what you do," Kenneth Montague told me when I asked him how and why he started building what would become one of the biggest collections of images of Black culture in the world. The seeds of his passion were sown while growing up in Windsor, Ontario in the 1970s in a "tri-cultural" world, as the child of Jamaican immigrants living in a city on the U.S. border. His family often took him to the nearby Detroit Institute of Arts, where he fell in love with *Couple in Raccoon Coats*, 1932, a depiction of an elegant man and woman in Harlem, by the acclaimed American photographer James Van Der Zee. "I'd never seen anything like them," said Montague about the pair in the image. The work inspired him to learn more about representations of Black identity in art. In the late 1990s (while also starting his career as a dentist) Montague converted a portion of his home into gallery space and founded Wedge Curatorial Projects. Over the next twenty-five years he helped artists of African descent from around the world "rise up and get noticed." Then, in 2019, the internationally celebrated publisher Aperture asked Montague if it could document his collection. The result is the recently released *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic*. The selection below, drawn from the publication, reveals how Canadian artists offer a multifaceted perspective on Black life and identity and a powerful engagement with themes including agency, self-representation, joy, beauty, and belonging.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

Following on the publication of *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic*, a touring exhibition will open at Toronto's Art Museum at the University of Toronto in September before travelling to The Polygon Gallery in Vancouver and venues in the United States.

COUPLE IN RACCOON COATS

by James Van Der Zee

James Van Der Zee, *Couple in Raccoon Coats*, 1932 (printed after 1980), Detroit Institute of Arts.

The glamour and affluence of the couple in this image reflect groundbreaking photographer James Van Der Zee's (1886–1983) vision of African American identity and culture during the Harlem Renaissance in the first half of the twentieth century. Born in Lenox, Massachusetts, Van Der Zee opened Guarantee Photo Studio in Harlem, New York, in 1917, during the Great Migration (1910–1970), when millions of African Americans moved from the South to cities in the North to escape racial violence and seek better economic opportunities. With an eye for beauty, luxury, and drama, Van Der Zee produced an indispensable record of middle-class Black life in Harlem during its rise as a thriving centre of African American culture.

Learn more about James Van Der Zee

BACKWAY

by Tayo Yannick Anton

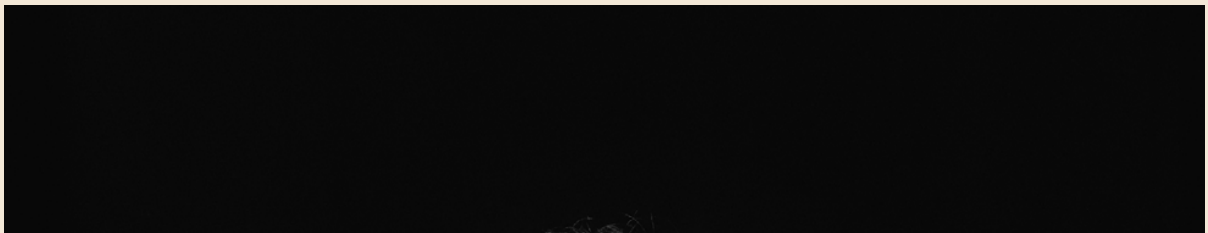
Tayo Yannick Anton, *Backway*, 2013, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy the artist.

"This image by Tayo Yannick Anton is very nostalgic for me," says Monatgue, "because I went to the Yes, Yes, Ya'All parties—very inclusive, gender fluid, sort of roving, nomadic dance events with these great DJs." Anton's photograph of a dancer bending his body into a jaw-dropping pose on stage captures the vivacity and energy of one of Toronto's largest 2SLGBTQQIA+ events. Reflecting on documenting the monthly hip-hop bash over the past decade, the photographer describes how "by midnight the party would be rammed with the most diverse, beautiful people in the city: queer, trans, bi, all shades, all sizes….I could never take enough photos to capture all moves, all the 'fits, and all the emotion in one room." *Backway* "celebrates community, diversification, and the ongoing decolonization of social events and spaces." Adds Montague, the work "radiates with Black joy."

Learn more about Tayo Yannick Anton

MALABAR PEOPLE: DANCER, 1951

by Stan Douglas



Stan Douglas, *Malabar People: Dancer, 1951*, 2011, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). © Stan Douglas, Courtesy the artist, Victoria Miro, and David Zwirner.

This work belongs to the series by the Vancouver artist Stan Douglas (b.1960) titled Malabar People, 2011, which consists of sixteen black-and-white photographs that imagine the staff and wide-ranging clientele of a fictional 1950s nightclub. The mesmerizing portrait depicts a smiling dancer in motion, the beaded tassels of her dress delicately swinging and her skin glistening with perspiration. Yet the dimly lit setting and pitch-black background evoke the sinister undertone of the film noir aesthetic, hinting at what lies beneath the glamorous façade. Part of his investigations into photographs of popular North American entertainment in the postwar period, the project reflects Douglas's broader practice of re-examining overlooked moments in history. "It's an imaginary work," says Montague, "but it's also real and about how in the 1950s Vancouver had a lot of Black folks (though they were not so visible on the city streets) who would visit clubs…It's telling us that there's a multiplicity, there's many ways of being Black."

Learn more about Stan Douglas

94 CHESTNUT AT THE CROSSROADS

by Anique Jordan

Anique Jordan, *94 Chestnut at the Crossroads*, 2016, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy the artist and Wedge Collection.

Anique Jordan's (b.1987) portrait series pays tribute to the site of the British Methodist Episcopal Church on Toronto's Chestnut Street, which was a central spiritual and political space for the Black community for over a century before being relocated to another neighbourhood. In the four photographs, a young Black woman in Victorian mourning attire stands in front of the hoarding blocking access to this sacred ancestral site, and she faces each of the four cardinal directions. Diagrams reminiscent of West African and Haitian symbols are drawn in chalk on the ground and the boards, intended to summon the ancestral spirits to witness the woman's actions. Says Montague, "This work is not only about loss—it's about thinking about our future," adding that Jordan's work represents a powerful gesture of resistance against the systemic erasure of Black histories and bodies.

Learn more about Anique Jordan

THE WIG SHOP (1090 BATHURST ST.), 4 JUNE 1976

by June Clark

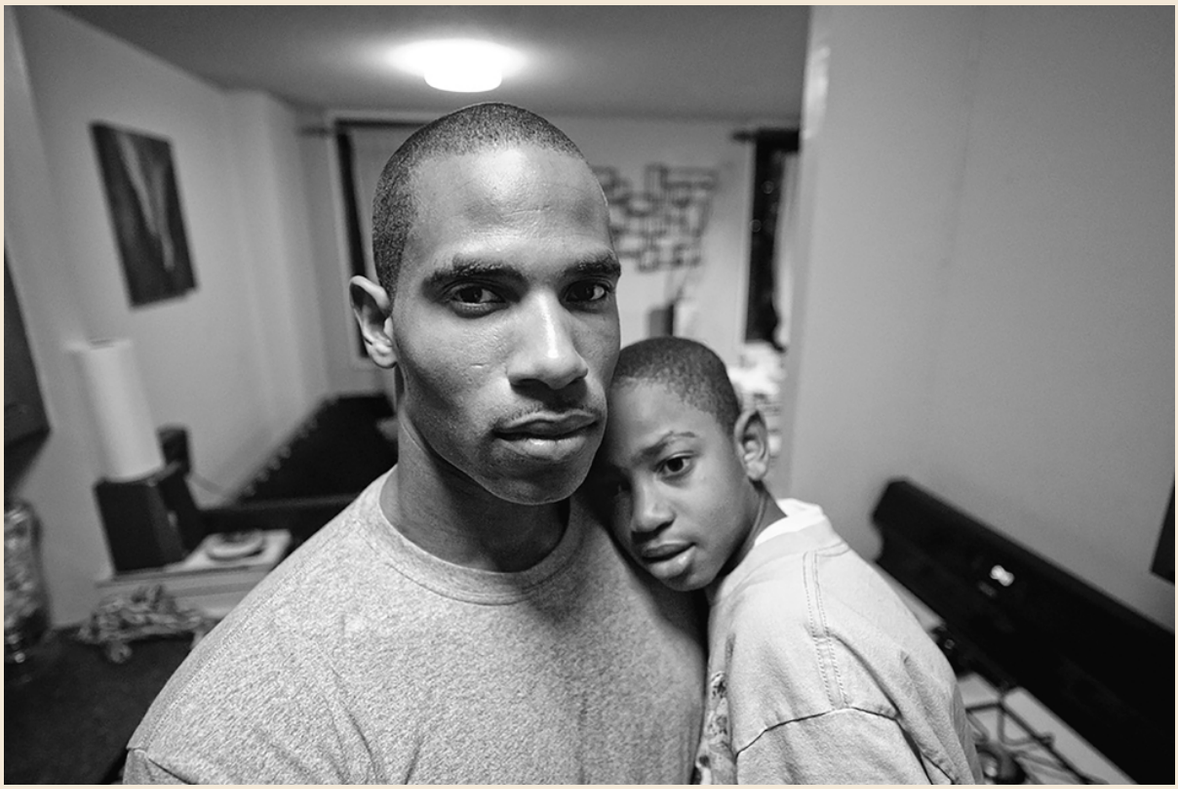
June Clark, *The Wig Shop (1090 Bathurst St.), 4 June 1976*, 1976, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy the artist and Daniel Faria Gallery, Toronto.

"There's an absence of people," in this photo by June Clark (b.1941) says Monatgue, but they're there—the ghosts of the many generations of Caribbean Canadians that have lived and worked on Toronto's Bathurst Street. After moving to Toronto in 1968 to escape the political turmoil of the Vietnam War, Clark, who became the first Black woman on the photo desk of *Toronto Life* magazine, began practicing street photography as a way of exploring her new surroundings. She was drawn to sights and spaces—like the wig shop in this photo—that reminded her of life back home in Harlem, a focal point of African American art and culture. *The Wig Shop (1090 Bathurst St.), 4 June 1976* depicts window displays leading to a recessed store entrance. The placard on the front door provides instructions to patrons that are personally signed "Sue," imbuing the space with a sense of intimacy and familiarity.

Learn more about June Clark

JEBRON FELDER AND HIS SON JAE'SHAUN AT HOME, HARLEM, NEW YORK SEPTEMBER 2011

by Zun Lee



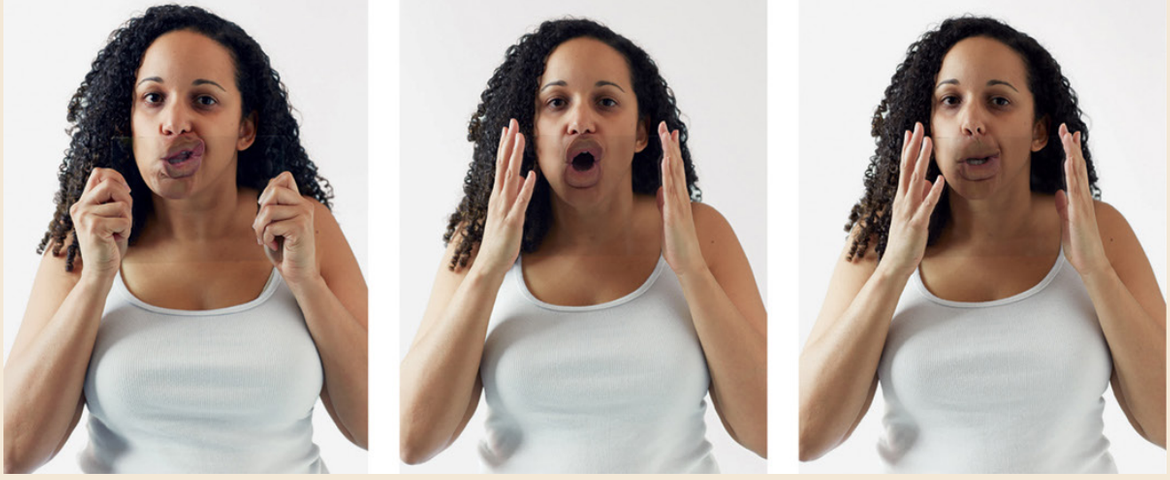
Zun Lee, *Jebron Felder and His Son Jae'shaun at Home, Harlem, New York September 2011*, 2011, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy Zun Lee, from the Father Figure Project.

This candid moment was captured by Toronto-based Zun Lee as part of his four-year project documenting the domestic lives of Black fathers and families in cities across the United States. Lee created the Father Figure Project, 2011–15, to counter the limited and often negative representations of Black fathers in mainstream media. Beyond simply making portraits of those he met, Lee sought to, in his own words, "immerse myself in these father's lives to get a sense of how they negotiate their daily spheres not just as fathers but also as Black men." The trust and friendships that Lee developed with these individuals afforded him rare insight into "very personal parenting scenarios…that are fleeting and often hidden from the public realm but nonetheless meaningful."

Learn more about Zun Lee

I AM NOT TRAGICALLY COLORED (AFTER ZORA NEALE HURSTON)

by Erika DeFreitas



Erika DeFreitas, *I Am Not Tragically Colored (after Zora Neale Hurston)*, 2013–14, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy the artist.

"I saw this work in a little, non-profit gallery in Parkdale many years ago," says Montague, "and it just blew me away." In these nine serial self-portraits by Scarborough-based Erika DeFreitas (b.1980), the multidisciplinary artist holds a piece of glass to her mouth as she pronounces each syllable in Zora Neale Hurston's powerful phrase, "I am not tragically coloured." Like the photographs themselves, the glass freezes her words—it stops her lips from moving and blocks the sound. But in this suspension and silence, the words scream out, their presence amplified as we come face to face with every syllable. As she made this work, DeFreitas reflected upon not only Hurston's famous quote, but also the late, great bell hooks' statement, "words are not without meaning, they are an action, a resistance."

Learn more about Erika DeFreitas

PROPOSITION 2, MOUNTAIN, BADWATER, DEATH VALLEY, CALIFORNIA

by Dawit L. Petros

Dawit L. Petros, *Proposition 2, Mountain, Badwater, Death Valley, California*, 2007. Temporary sculptural installation, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy the artist / Bradley Ertaskiran.

"It looks like this work shows a hand holding snow. Actually it is salt, and shows the artist in a salt flat," says Montague, explaining this photograph by Chicago-based artist Dawit L. Petros (b.1972), who was born in Eritrea and came to Canada as a refugee. "So much of his work is about the movement of Black people and his own personal story, coming as an Eritrean refugee to Saskatchewan, growing up there, and then going to art school in Quebec." This photograph is part of Petros's project The Idea of North, which took him to the sub-Arctic town of Churchill, Manitoba, and to Badwater Basin in Death Valley, California. Blending the features of these two disparate cultural and geographic regions, Petros's work examines the significance of frontiers in shaping collective and individual identities. It was inspired by two sources: a found photograph of Tanzanians on the top of Mount Kilimanjaro, and Canadian pianist Glenn Gould's journey from Winnipeg to Churchill for the CBC radio documentary *The Idea of North* (1967).

Learn more about Dawit L. Petros

UNTITLED

by Jorian Charlton

Jorian Charlton, *Untitled*, 2021, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021). Courtesy Jorian Charlton, Toronto.

The work of Toronto-based photographer Jorian Charlton "was a real education for me" says Montague. "The way that she assembles her models and her storytelling is about showing Black bodies and bodies that aren't necessarily in the kind of magazines that she grew up or I grew up reading. I like the way she takes ownership of those images, and in the way that she's portraying her models, there's a lot of agency, ownership, and power." With a focus on family and friends from the Jamaican Canadian community, Charlton assembles an archive of personal images to create works like *Untitled*, 2021, where two women crouch on the grass, turning away from the viewer, but revealing their fashion statements from head to toe. The soft light and Kodak frame create a sense of intimacy, as though we are flipping through a family album. In her current exhibition, *Out of Many*, now at the Art Gallery of Ontario, Charlton's work is paired with a collection of 35mm slides that her father gave her, forging links across generations as albums are wont to do.

Learn more about Jorian Charlton

GROW

by Aaron Jones

Aaron Jones, *Grow*, 2016, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021).
© 2021 Aaron Jones, Image courtesy Wedge Collection.

By combing through, cutting up, and recombining images from encyclopedias and popular periodicals such as *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *O*, Toronto-based artist Aaron Jones creates arresting collages that he views as affirmations of new realities and future possibilities, works that Montague calls "our soul song." In *Grow*, 2016, he merges a Black woman's made-up face with a black panther's, their left eyes neatly aligned, her teeth offset against the cat's fangs. Jones includes textual fragments like "grow," which becomes the title of the work, and "out of darkness," a phrase conjuring manifold and complicated associations in the context of this imagery. In his deft hands the complexity of collage becomes a metaphor for contemporary Black experience.

Learn more about Aaron Jones

LOWCANES

by Camal Pirbhai and Camille Turner

Light coloured short coat with a red cape
Waistcoat and breeches

Camal Pirbhai and Camille Turner, *Lowcanes*, 2011–18; from the series Wanted, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021) © Camal Pirbhai and Camille Turner, Courtesy the artists and Danna Heitner Art + Interiors.

In the powerful series Wanted, artists Camal Pirbhai and Camille Turner subvert the writings of eighteenth-century fugitive slave ads (such as the text that can be seen in the top left corner of the work above) by transforming them into oversized photographs (about the size you would see in bus shelters) that read like contemporary fashion editorials. Pirbhai and Turner sourced the ads from Canadian newspapers and mined the texts for sartorial clues that were meant to identify the freedom seekers. *Lowcanes*, 2011–18, refers to an ad from 1775 describing a man of the same name who was wearing a “light coloured short coat with a red cape to it,” when he fled slavery. In the artists’ reimagining, the subject sits at the end of a bar counter, assertively meeting our gaze with a red and blue plaid cape draped over his shoulder. In Turner’s words, this striking image and others in its series “seek to restore the humanity of people who were deemed property and excluded from Canada’s historical narratives.”

Learn more about Camal Pirbhai and Camille Turner’s series Wanted

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BLUR 14

by Sandra Brewster

Sandra Brewster, *Blur 14*, 2016–17, from *As We Rise: Photography from the Black Atlantic* (Aperture, 2021), Courtesy the artist and Olga Korper Gallery, Toronto.

Challenging fixed notions of Blackness, this image of a figure in motion is part of Toronto artist Sandra Brewster's portrait series Blur, 2016–18. Brewster directed the movement of each subject and then, using a gel medium, transferred their printed images onto archival paper. The faces in the resulting portraits remain indistinct, the concealment of their identities a deliberate act of resistance performed by the photographer and her sitters. Reflecting on how "Black representation takes the form of rebuttal turned affirmation" in Brewster's work, Liz Ikiriko writes, "Opacity functions as a metaphor for the *being* and *becoming* of Caribbean migrant and diasporic experiences."

Learn more about Sandra Brewster

Visit ACI's online exhibition
Sandra Brewster: Traces of Home: Migration, Memory, and Being

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PAST NEWSLETTERS

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