



RECLAMATIONS

Tokie Rome-Taylor

GALLERY GUIDE

with exhibition essay by:
Dr. Rhea L. Combs



The New Gallery acknowledges the traditional, ancestral, and un-ceded territory of the Yuchi, Shawnee, and Cherokee First Nations on which we organize, exhibit, listen and learn.

Touchstones and Time Travels: An Interview with Tokie Rome-Taylor

By Rhea L. Combs

Yet we know that children are the only real Progress, the sole Hope, the sure Victory over Evil Properly reared and trained and there is no Problem or Wrong that we cannot withstand.

- W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis*, 1922¹

When looking at photographs by Atlanta-based interdisciplinary artist Tokie Rome-Taylor (b. 1977), I'm reminded of the American Negro Exhibit at the 1900 Paris Exhibition when scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, then a sociology professor at Atlanta University (who also studied and taught in Tennessee), presented objects and photography highlighting the rich lives and accomplishments of Black Americans. From 1910 to 1934 Du Bois was also editor of *The Crisis: A Record of the Darker Races*, the official monthly publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In this role he made it a point to remind readers of the importance of African American youth by publishing an annual "Children's Number." *The Crisis* used poetry, prose, and photography to address issues facing the Black community, children notwithstanding.

There was a short spell, between 1920 and 1921, when Du Bois and several collaborators established *The Brownies' Book: A Monthly Magazine for the Children of the Sun*, the first major periodical for Black children. *The Brownies' Book* was remarkable for many reasons. With a mission that "aims to be a thing of Joy and Beauty, dealing in Happiness, Laughter and Emulation and designed especially for kiddies from Six to Sixteen,"² it was a publication that recognized children were essential to creating a healthy community. It also blurred boundaries between adulthood and childhood by addressing not only the glorious wonders of youth but the harsh realities of being Black in America. In its first issue, an image titled, "Her Royal Highness, Zaouditou, Queen of the Kings of Abyssinia, Empress of Ethiopia" greets the reader. A child sits comfortably on a chaise lounge, gazing directly at the camera and wearing a large, tall crown with a cross sitting proudly at the top. The heavy, oversized robe is full of liturgical

1 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Opinion: The Children, The Marriage, Birth, Infancy, Education, The End of It All, *The Crisis* 24, no. 6 (October 1922): 147

2 Du Bois, *The Brownies' Book*, 1, no. 1 (January 1920), <http://childlit.unl.edu/brownies.192001.html>

vestments including pearls and lace. In the child's hand is a staff. The regality, determination and beauty of the image is stunning. The similarity to Tokie Rome-Taylor's photography, which uses similar motifs, is striking. It is apparent that her rich, meaningful, and carefully crafted photographs traverse time, age, and location.

Pictures of African American children have not been always met with the intention set forth by *The Brownies' Book* or the images created by Tokie Rome-Taylor. Historically, popular images of Black children were often derogatory and stereotypical: unkempt, unruly, distorted caricatures filled public imagination. Throughout art history, there has been a dearth of images that center Black children. Black children have been predominately presented in portraiture as servants or appendages. Rome-Taylor's work offers an important corrective to this historical misdirection. Like Du Bois, her art asks viewers to not only see but understand the critical significance of children. In this interview with the artist, we discuss her process and some of the meanings behind her art that illuminate the beauty and brilliance of its young subjects.

The interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Rhea Combs: Your work reminds me of images taken of Black people in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, I would love to know who are some of your creative inspirations?

Tokie Rome-Taylor: I'm deeply inspired by James Van der Zee [the American photographer who worked starting in the 1910s and continued for sixty years in Harlem documenting Black cultural life] because he photographed regular, working-class African Americans fashionably dressed in the totality and fullness of their lives, and he depicted them with the grace and elegance they deserve. These individuals took the time out to memorialize themselves in a way that is elevated. His work was elegant, and he maintained a high quality and aesthetic.

RC: Did growing up as a twin and with a lot of twins in your family (I believe there were 14 sets of twins on your maternal side) impact your artistic choices, particularly with children being your primary subjects?

TR-T: No one has ever asked me that. I want to say being a twin is not necessarily a throughline within the work, but it did help when it came to having a person who encouraged and pushed me. My sister is an artist as well. When I was on my fourth pregnancy within five years, it was my sister who was asking me when I was going to get back to my artistic practice. I realized I was drowning in children and had lost myself. I had lost myself in the mothering, in the raising, and in making sure these little people were

okay. And it was my sister who was there to say '[art] is the way to get back to yourself.'

I knew from the beginning I wanted my work to center children since I was already surrounded by them. I also have been an educator for more than 20 years, so I have been engaging with children and educating them. My degrees are in art education with a focus on photography. Education for me goes beyond basic instruction in drawing and color theory and becomes a relationship with mentoring and guidance. I want to show young people images that I didn't see growing up, especially in the art history books. It is important for me to create the images that I want my children to see, that I want to see in the Black community.

I am interested in centering children in my work because I see them as the touch point and access to history. They are reservoirs. When children arrive in the world, they are blank slates. Everything they see and do writes their story. It is important for me that children see themselves. So, I always knew the art would center children, but it was just a matter of what will the work say.

RC: Considering what your work is saying, please explain your aesthetic choices.

TR-T: The pearls are a nod to Western status. It is the elegance and the use of the pearl as a statement piece, but pearls also come from the water, from the ocean. It is an acknowledgement of how Blacks have traveled across ocean and land, literally and figuratively, to be where we are right now. The pearl is also made from grains of sand that over time create a beautiful, prized jewel. So, while it is a Western identifier of adornment, when thinking about Africans in America, who also have a longstanding tradition of adorning ourselves, I was trying to figure out how to hold on to tradition while recognizing our rich histories and experiences.

The cotton seen often in my work is an indicator of history. I am from the South. My people are from the South. My grandmother picked cotton. But should we look at it as just the labor involved? Or also at the strength involved in coming through a difficult period? I see the strength it took for us to make it to this point. I think cotton is a huge symbolic element for African Americans. It is strong, malleable, and versatile. Yes, there are thorns that will tear through [your skin] that are indicators of the tragedies we have come through and are still working through, but there is also a resilience and a level of beauty in the cotton; a durability and ability to shift, to change and to sustain.

RC: I read that your photographs are less about capturing reality and more about creating it. Describe what you mean by that.

TR-T: The photograph is material for me that I can adapt to find stronger meaning. I layer the cotton and the silks to see if it will exist better, or if it should serve as a clean photograph in a frame.

RC: Is this process preplanned?

TR-T: Not all the time. I am open to the process. I will ask [the sitter's family] to bring artifacts. Sometimes they don't have specific items, but because of something they've told me, I will try to incorporate those ideas into the work. Photographs of grandparents will show up because these are things they bring [to set]. Or like with "We Come to Stir the Pot," they brought in a spoon that once belonged to their great-grandmother, so I included it in the photograph. I will just keep working until it clicks.

But there are certain items I will integrate, regardless. I am going to integrate the pearls, the mother of pearl buttons and more than likely I will integrate some sort of vessel. The Mother of Pearl buttons became one of the important touchpoints in my work because it was believed that they were a means of holding on to spiritual practices for individuals who did not have control over anything within the physical realm, they could control what went on metaphysically. The same with books. At one time it was illegal for Black people to learn to read. So, I set out books; and if the child navigates to it, then that is what we use. Books will always be a touch point in my work for this reason. I layer my work and place these symbols in my work with the hope that they will raise questions. And when someone says "Tokie, why did you put that in there." It gives me the opportunity to tell the story and then that artifact has done its job. The color choices, which are earth-toned and creams, the children, and the vessels included become an invitation for me to be open.



Dr. Rhea L. Combs is the director of curatorial affairs at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery in Washington DC. Her areas of expertise include photography, African American history, and film.

Combs was previously at the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture where she served as the curator of film and photography and head of the Earl W. and Amanda Stafford Center for African American Media Arts (CAAMA)

About the artist:



Photographer and Georgia native, **Tokie Rome-Taylor** focuses on the notion that perception of self and belonging begins in childhood. Children are the subjects she centers within her works, with a focus on representing a visual elevation that had been omitted from mainstream “western art history”. Her works have a painterly aesthetic, using both digital and analog image making techniques. She often incorporates multiple mediums, including embroidery, pigments, beading and wax. The resulting works challenge the viewer’s expectation of what a photograph should look like.

Working in tandem with her centering of children, Rome-Taylor explores questions that stem from ethnographic and historical research. These questions probe material, spiritual, and familial culture of descents of southern slaves act as entry points for Tokie Rome-Taylor to build symbolic elements that communicate a visual language. The sitters’ family heirlooms, and recollections of family history, are combined with the historical research about the lives of Africans brought to the Americas. The research centers on their material culture, spiritual practice, and traditions. These have all been used to create a visual language that speaks to our shared history. Children and their family heirlooms, the real or imagined histories of these children’s families and their ancestors all collide to spark conversation around material wealth, familial and cultural traditions of African Americans in the South. Rome-Taylor’s work is held in multiple private and institutional collections including the MOCA GA, The Fralin Museum at UVA, and the Southeastern Museum of Photography. She has an extensive national and international exhibition record including the Atlanta Contemporary, the Fralin Museum, The Southeastern Museum of Photography, The Griffin Museum of Photography, SP-Foto SP-Arte Fair in São Paulo, Brazil, and the Zuckerman Museum of Art, amongst others.

Rome-Taylor is a native of Atlanta, 20+ year veteran educator and working artist. She is open to opportunities that relate to artist talks, visiting institutions, residencies and workshops, as well as commissions.

Artist Statement:

I am a photographer, interested in ethnography, identity and representation. My multimedia practice is grounded in the understanding that one’s self perception and sense of belonging in a society begins in childhood.

Children are the subjects I use to speak of a sense of belonging. These images of Black and brown children re-examine history and tradition, through photographic portraits that counter the propaganda of inaccurate stereotypical, subjugated, and inferior historical depiction of people of color. They represent a visual elevation that had been omitted from mainstream “western history”.

Questions that stem from ethnographic and historical research that probe material, spiritual, and familial culture of ancestral descents of southern slaves are entry points for me to build symbolic elements that communicate a visual language within my work. My work positions black bodies in a space that leans into the past, reaching back to address the erasure of worth in how black bodies are perceived and represented. These traditions that we were able to preserve- such as the passing down of objects, making offerings to ancestors, and the use of material objects as spiritual devices, allow the resurrection of power and autonomy once denied. My work stands in direct defiance of that erasure. Denied access to traditional materials and practice in the Americas, a creolization of symbolic elements of European status and wealth have been utilized to visually connect to ancestral practice of adornment and spirituality. I make no attempt to recreate the past, rather to create images that combine elevation and connection to diasporic practice. They stand strong, weaving together adopted western trappings of wealth and status with symbolic representations of their cultural, historical, and spiritual connections.

The Canon R5 digital camera is both my method of creating raw material, the photograph itself, and my method of creating frozen moments in imagined historical time. In the studio, I compose the photograph to capture layering of person, textures, and objects. I am currently working on a body of work that integrates the sitter’s family heirloom, and its symbolic meaning to the family. By centering this heirloom the imagined histories and the real histories of these children’s families collide.

The photographs are created with children exhibiting wisdom and self-awareness beyond their visible years, conjuring notions of passed down ancestral knowledge. I incorporate found items that contain a history of people in the past, that are domestic, and somewhat nostalgic. Family heirlooms of the sitters are also incorporated, adding their historical meaning and value to the images. The objects are literal family heirlooms or selected items by me that are reminiscent of them, evoking familial connections and the memory. The sitter, in combination with the objects, creates a dialogue regarding their dynamics in history. The use of fabrics and rich materials, as well as the layered directional lighting are inspired

by renaissance paintings, who historically did not depict people of color. If they were included, they were typical only as background elements within the works. In this way, I continue to combat the erasure and omission of black bodies, framing them in a position of elevation. After creating the images in camera, they are further manipulated digitally. I use multiple layers, painting in light and shadow, as well as color grading, to create a painterly image. Further manipulation may come in the form of archival images digitally collaged within the piece, using the image as a digital negative for cyanotype or as the base image for physical manipulation via embroidery, beading, gold leafing on vellum or encaustic. The use of beading, embroidery, gold leafing, and wax are all inspired by the materials used in creation and adornment of clothing within traditional West African culture. I explore mediums and layering in order to grant myself freedom from the expectation of how a photograph should ultimately exist.

www.tokietaylorstudio.com
IG: @tokiestudio

Associated Events:

Public Artist Lecture:

September 19, 6 p.m., AD120

Reception/Gallery Talk:

September 20, noon-1:30 p.m., The New Gallery

First Thursday Art Walk:

September 7, 5 - 7:30 p.m., The New Gallery

October 5, 5 - 7:30 p.m., The New Gallery

Curator/Gallery Director: Michael Dickins
Gallery Assistants: Mai Mai Newberry, Freddy Batts