



"I have a responsibility to speak out—there's something that I feel I need to respond to in this world. An African-American woman putting herself in a position of empowerment seems to be a national threat. Well, I'm saying: I'm not taking a backseat. I'm going to sit at the head of the table—Renee Cox".¹

Homeland Security: Renee Cox and Representations of Liberation

Josie Mai, May 2005

Do you know about the history of my body, my naked black body, in images? Do you know about the history of my oppressed people, my blue-black people, in images? Do you know about the sword-wielding Queen Nanny, defender of spiritual truth, preserver of a community's history in the Maroons of Jamaica, a homeland, in images? I will defend my individuality, I will defend my family, and I will defend my homeland to keep it secure. Just look. You will find me and mine gazing back at you.

Me: Flying Solo in the Frame

Let us not mince words, or waste words. The art of Renee Cox is as clear as it is complex. Addressing race, femininity, religion, and art history, it is at once deeply autobiographical and highly political. Born in Jamaica, raised in Scarsdale, New

York in the Catholic Church, married to a white Frenchman, mother of two boys, she was a fashion photographer before studying at the School of the Visual Arts for her MFA in 1992. She held her own in the controversy surrounding her piece *Yo Mama's Last Supper* (1996) in which she depicted herself as a nude Christ. She pissed off the conservative Catholic mayor of New York City. He threatened to pull funding from the Brooklyn Museum, which had displayed the piece. Cox told the mayor to just get over it. Cox was stunned that the art world split the scene during the controversy, but has never once regretted the images she creates and the trajectory of her career as image-maker.²

Her aim is to present images of empowerment, not victimization. There is a devastating history in America of the pictorial degradation of African-Americans by the colonizer in order to propagate the stereotype of persons of African descent as subservient, subhuman, powerless, stupid, shiftless, lazy, irresponsible, and dangerous³. But in this analysis, there will be no emphasis on the glorification of victimization. Rather, this may be a call to artistic arms. Bring out the big guns.

In *Hot-en-tot* (figure 1), Cox assumes the stance of the Venus of Hottentot, real name Saartje Baartman, an African slave seized by Dutch colonists who was paraded around Europe in freak shows and gawked at for the entertainment of affluent, bored Europeans. Yes, Cox is on display, urging us to view her prosthetic buttocks and breasts. But she stares back at us with a steel, calm

gaze. Her dreads are immaculate, and her makeup is fresh. She is the one in control, and now that our eyes have locked she can no longer be objectified because we have seen into the windows to her soul. She disallows both the male gaze and the imperial gaze.⁴ We should now be ashamed of ourselves for indulging in the glance. In *Liberty in the South Bronx* (figure 2), Cox looks out beyond the viewer, much like Lady Liberty herself, arm raised in a call to action, a declaration of independence. She doesn't hold the torch or a weapon (yet), but broken chains. Freedom for all, even the drugged-out impoverished residents of the South Bronx. Her nude figure exudes confidence and defiance.

It is important to note that Cox and her images of liberation and empowerment are not the only ones in the African Diaspora. While America has its own uniquely disgusting history of enslavement, apartheid practice covers the globe. In 2001, Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor put together a hugely important show and catalog, called *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*. Several of the artists and photographers dealt with depiction and the viewer's gaze on the heels of decolonization⁵. For instance, South-African photographer Zwelethu Mthethwa focuses on the South African citizen in their own home, own surroundings, producing an image reflecting dignity in the midst of such great change. In *Untitled* (figure 3), the subject looks directly at us, not in defiance, but in matter-of-fact. "This is me." "This is what I have." "This is where I breathe."

Me and Mine: Family Portrait

Cox is not alone on her quest for re-definition, re-imagining, and re-presenting. Immediately affected, even before her viewers, is her own family. The shutter clicked all through her pregnancies, and she took the opportunity to begin to envisage a liberation that extended to motherhood; a liberation that she could hand down like an heirloom. One of the most forceful and written about works, *Yo' Mama* (figure 4), towers over the viewer at over eight feet tall. It is elaborately framed, and much care is devoted to its framing and hanging, like a family portrait on the walls at home. Writer Andrea Liss describes the image:

“Cox offers a complex representation that is at once bold and contemplative. Her black emblazoned body emerges from the Rembrandtesque darkness behind her, while she holds her infant son’s lighter body in an ambivalent gesture that both offers him to the world and protects him...the oscillation in Cox’s hold on her son is reflected in the ambiguous relationship set up between her piercing expression and her frontal nude self-representation. Her gaze is focused down at the viewer; menacing, taunting, daunting. Yet, contradicting her bold projection of self, her expression seems almost sad. Cox’s ambivalent expression challenges the viewer to survey her Superwoman nakedness, which merges androgynous sensuality with distinctly feminine signs of sexuality. The provocative black high heels she wears seem an organic part of her statuesque power...This is hardly a traditional Madonna and Child image from the long repertoire of Western art and cultural history...he is pictured as emerging from the mother’s sexuality, at once a part of her and distinct, almost distant. Her body is bared so that he can remain, as his exuberant face attests, in a carefree and playful state of innocence. Cox’s hold on her son and her photographic projection of him into the world triggered a wide-ranging comment that likened him to a gun—and not just any gun, but an uzi.”⁶

In this photograph, you can see the wheel’s turning behind Cox’s expression. She is not sad and she is not ambivalent. She is mulling over her stance as a black female artist and now mother. When asked if a woman artist could do

both—have a career and a family—she forcefully replies, spitting mad and tossing her dreadlocks, “Of course! They grow up! Then what are you going to do?! Question who it is who says you can’t.”⁷ The redemption of Saartje Baartman was a beginning. Broken chains in the Bronx was a step towards liberation, a utopic declaration. Holding her son like a loaded weapon—perhaps too subtle still.

Several years later in 2001, Cox’s sons were young boys, and she explored her *American Family* in depth. Cox filled a room with family portraits. She juxtaposed a nude photo of herself with a photo of her clothed mother at the same age, juxtaposed a school photo as a catholic schoolgirl with erotic images of the adult Renee in nothing but fishnets and heels. She became Olympia herself, draped on African cloth, attended to by her own spear-wielding sons (figure 6). The family gazes at the viewer much like Manet’s Olympia, daring us to challenge the depiction of power and subservience. In the introductory essay to the show, Jo Anna Isaak noted that, “the black maid bringing the bouquet of flowers has been replaced by the artist’s two young sons. Armed with spears, they stand guard over their mother. They must know, even if they are not fully in command of this knowledge, that a lot is at stake for them in this struggle to assume interpretive mastery, to become a being with subjective freedom”.⁸ Cox takes the portrait a step further by hanging it in view of erotic shots of her own torso, reminding us she is still all woman, confident in her sexuality (figure 5).

In her essay “In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life”, bell hooks reminds us about the importance in black history of the hanging and the curation of an existence, of the power of the camera:

“For black folks constructing our identities within the culture of apartheid, these walls were essential to the process of decolonization [hooks is referring to the private walls of home, but it is extended to the public walls of the gallery]. Contrary to colonizing socialization, internalized racism, they announced our visual complexity. We saw ourselves represented in these images not as caricatures, cartoon-like figures; we were there in full diversity of body, being, and expression, multidimensional...Significantly, issues of representation were linked with the issue of documentation, hence the importance of photography. The camera was the central instrument by which blacks could disprove representations of us created by white folks. The degrading images of blackness that emerged (on salt shakers, cookie jars, pancake boxes) could be countered by ‘true-to-life’ images...the camera became in black life a political instrument, a way to resist misrepresentation...it offered the possibility of immediate intervention.”⁹

In *American Family*, Cox relentlessly and obsessively laid out her chosen and inherited roles. She is sexy queen mother. She is powerful, she is sure of herself, and she defines her territory: her family. But will she fight if threatened?

Homeland: Security

A few years before *American Family*, Cox dressed up and got aggressive. She became Raje, fictional superhero. Raje wore thigh-high shiny black boots and a tight costume in the colors of the Jamaican flag. She sat “chillin” on the head of the Statue of Liberty, she liberated Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from their product image, she claimed the homeland of Africa, she kicked the corporate white male’s ass, and she hailed a taxi in Times Square (figure 7). She went there, to a place of fury and justice. Her sons had no black superheroes, so mom

filled in the huge gap. Her body was not nude this time, but supported like a corset by the homeland. Raje's body was a weapon, all strength and physical tension. She was pissed.

Cox readily admits and embraces the influence of Blaxploitation films, especially in the roles of Pam Grier.¹⁰ The Coffy and Foxy Brown of the 70s, and the Jackie Brown of the 90s were all bold, beautiful, gun-slinging and quick-thinking. Again, her sons had no black superhero. Neither did Cox, so Pam Grier on the big-screen could not be denied. An important thing to note is that Cox was sixteen when Foxy hit the big screen. Just listen to this description of the plot of *Foxy Brown* (figure 8):

"A young Black woman of no apparent means, lives in a comfortably-furnished apartment in a Black neighborhood. Her brother is a cocaine dealer who has run afoul of his white mobster suppliers; her lover, Michael, a federal agent, is recovering from an attempted assassination by the same mobsters. The first hint of Foxy's unusual capacity for action is her rescuing her brother from the clutches of his mobster friends. She sequesters him in her apartment and then visits her lover in the hospital, eventually bringing him, too, to her apartment. Despite her lover Michael's plastic surgery, he is recognized by the brother, who then reveals his true identity to his partners in exchange for a return to their good graces as a dealer. Michael is killed, dying in Foxy's arms, and Foxy is transformed into the avenger. She extorts the names of the killers from her brother and joins the prostitution ring directed by the mobsters. Foxy and Ann, another black woman, are assigned as sexual toys to a corrupt judge, who, in exchange, is expected to give light sentences to two mobster thugs. Instead, the two women conspire to humiliate the judge, each for her own reasons. The judge in revenge hands down long sentences. Foxy's identity is discovered by the mobster chiefs who pursue and capture the two women. Foxy saves her companion, who presumably joins her husband and child, but for herself it means a period of torture and rape. Foxy escapes, killing her two keepers. In retribution, her brother is now executed by the mobsters, and Foxy persuades an organization of Black community vigilantes to join her in seeking justice and revenge. Together they ambush the mobsters at a cocaine drop, capture the mob boss, and Foxy castrates him. Foxy delivers the severed penis in a jar to the boss's

mistress, kills the woman's bodyguards, and leaves the wounded mistress to contemplate a life with her castrated lover."¹¹

Cox was a baby girl during the Civil Rights movement, an adolescent during the Black Power movement, and a teenager during the Blaxploitation explosion. Rage had to be brewing; an artist can't simply accept the status quo.

February 2005 brought the show *Queen Nanny of the Maroons*. Cox spent several years in Jamaica, researching, forging relationships, and shooting hundreds of photographs surrounding the legend and legacy of Queen Nanny.

In 1655 the British captured Jamaica following the exodus of the Spanish who had occupied her since 1494. Before fleeing, the Spanish released their African slaves. These ex-slaves, joined by runaway slaves, formed the community known as the Maroons, derived from the Spanish word, Cimarron, meaning, wild or untamed. With their freedom the Maroons fought the British to retain their independence and African culture.¹²

Queen Nanny was a cunning military leader and spiritual guide. She would hide in the brush with her sword, then ambush the British soldiers. She was a symbol of unity, strength, and the many roles of women in an unjust era. No small wonder that Renee Cox wanted to bring Queen Nanny's mostly ignored legend to light. Cox portrayed herself in the many roles of Queen Nanny, as mother, teacher, warrior, church member, spiritual devotee, and Queen (figures 9, 10). Although surrounded by lore (for instance, British soldiers portrayed her as a

savage who would catch bullets with her buttocks and fart them out again¹³), Cox found a true-to-life heroine from her homeland of Jamaica to emulate and glorify.

This time, Cox brandishes the sword and there is a look in her eye that denies the hesitancy to use it. A British journal published in 1788 described an encounter with a woman presumed to have been Nanny herself, wearing bracelets and anklets made from the teeth of British soldiers: "The old hag had a girdle around her waist with nine or ten different knives hanging in sheaths to it, many of which I have no doubt have been plunged in human flesh and blood."¹⁴ In a sense, Cox is again redeeming and re-presenting the falsely portrayed and exploited African woman (Saartje Baartman), but this time she will kill and not just stare us down.

Who are you? The colonizer, or the colonized? Perhaps now that you know of me, mine, and what I am capable of, you won't be so quick to destroy me.



Figure 1 *Hot-en-tot*, Renee Cox, 1994



Figure 2 *Liberty in the South Bronx*, Renee Cox, 1992



Figure 3 *Untitled*, Zwelethu Mthethwa, 2002



Figure 4 *Yo Mama*, Renee Cox, 1993



Figure 5 Installation View of *American Family*, Renee Cox, 2001



Figure 6 *Olympia's Boyz*, Renee Cox, 2001



Figure 7 *Taxi*, Renee Cox, 1998



Figure 8 Pam Grier as *Foxy Brown*, 1974



Figure 9 *Lolivya*, Renee Cox, 2004

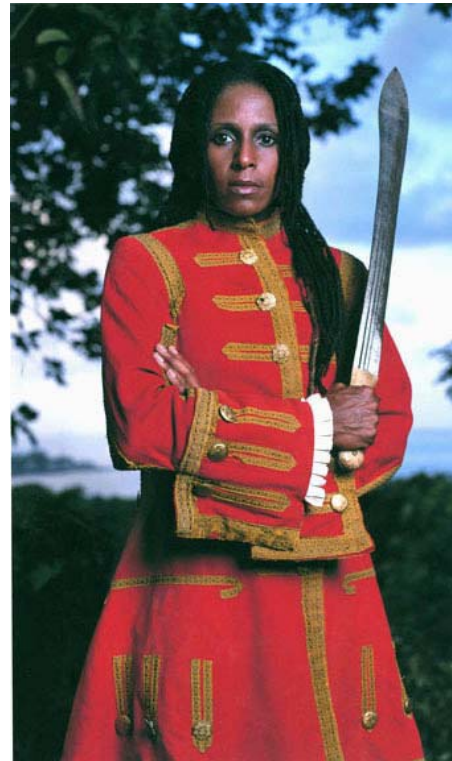


Figure 10 *Queen Nanny*, 2004

¹ Srivastava, Vinita. "The Woman Behind the Storm." *Savoy* May 2001: 41.

² Cox, Renee. Studio visit interview. 6 May 2005.

³ Farrington, Lisa. "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude." *Woman's Art Journal* 24, 2004.

⁴ Farrington, Lisa. *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005, 223.

⁵ Enwezor, Okwui, editor and curator of *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945-1994*. New York: Prestel, 2001. This show asks "what is the place of Africa in the writing of new narratives and conclusions particular to the proper understanding of the twentieth century?" (preface by Jo-Anne Danzker). This question is explored through contemporary art, cloth/posters, photography, architecture music, theater/literature, and film made by Africans.

⁶ Liss, Andrea. "Black Bodies in Evidence: Maternal Visibility in Renee Cox's Family Portraits." *Familial Gaze*. Ed. Marianne Hirsch. Hanover and London: The UP of New England, 1999. 279-281, 285.

⁷ Cox *ibid*.

⁸ Isaak, Jo Anna. *Renee Cox: American Family*. New York: Robert Miller Gallery, 2001.

⁹ hooks, bell. "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life." *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*. Ed. Willis, Deborah. New York: The New Press, 1994. 48-50.

¹⁰ Cox *ibid*.

¹¹ Robinson, Cedric. "Blaxploitation and the Misrepresentation of Liberation." *Race & Class* v40 no1, 1998, 5-6.

¹² Jackson, Brian Keith. "The Land of Look Behind", February 2005. This essay was displayed on the wall of Robert Miller Gallery as an introduction to the exhibition.

¹³ Gabriel, Deborah. *Jamaicans*. 2 Sept 2004. Feb 2005

<http://www.jamaicans.com/articles/primearticles/queennanny.shtml>.

¹⁴ *ibid.*