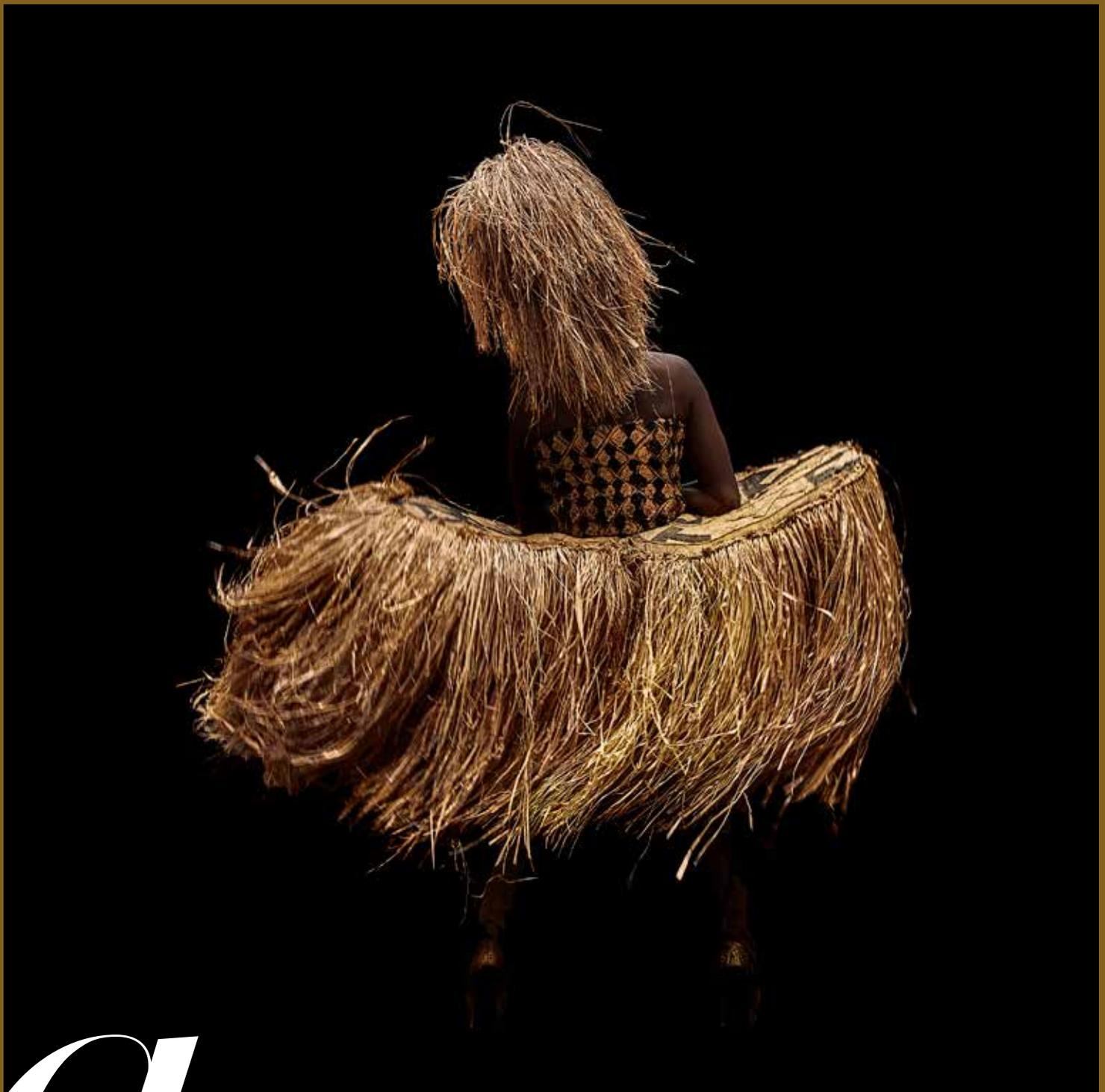


Through the lens



of humanity

*African-American artist **Ayana V. Jackson** tells
Ayesha Shehmir how she's using photography to reveal the
impact of mythology on identity*



Ayana V. Jackson was just five years old when she held her first camera. Her father, a photo enthusiast himself, taught her how to use his SLR camera, sparking what would become a lifelong interest in the art of photographic storytelling. Her first camera, a Nikon FM10, was gifted to her by her grandmother during her sophomore year at Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, where she enrolled in an introductory photography class. With no formal degree in the subject, it wasn't the systematic techniques of photography which led her to master the craft. What summoned her to take pictures was her innate desire to portray the black female identity for what it really is: powerful, passionate and beautiful. The hovering spirits which render themselves through her body are determined to challenge photographic representations from the late 19th century that seem to be ingrained within enduring gender and racial stereotypes.

Ayana graduated with a degree in Sociology from Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia and now lives between Johannesburg, New York and Paris. As an adolescent African-American growing up the United States,

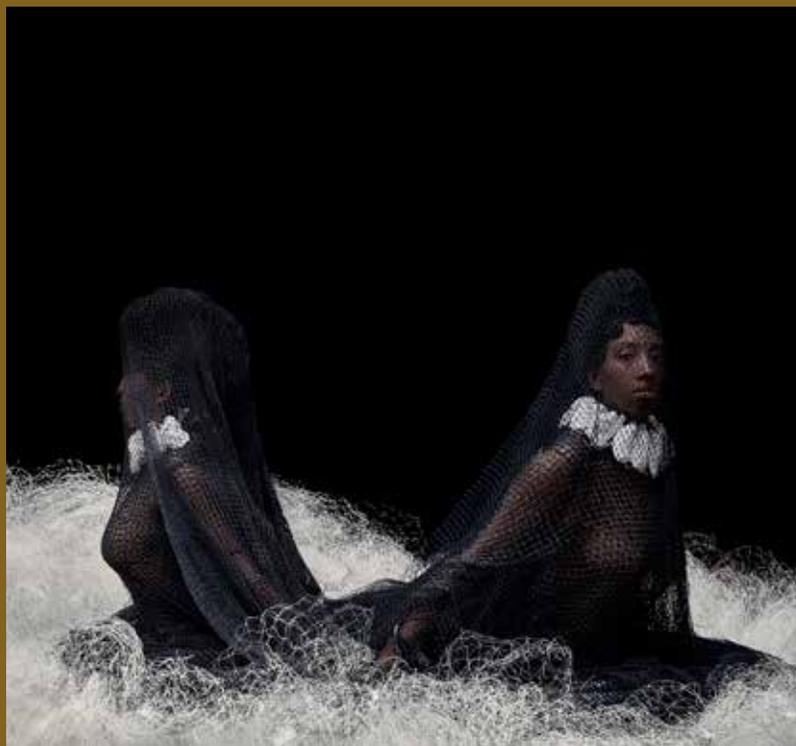
she felt she was surrounded by a cloud of racial undertones and gender stereotypes. "I was made aware, before I even studied slavery, before I studied civil rights, before I studied colonialism, before I understood racism as a structural problem, that outside forces were intent on making me feel ashamed of being black," she says, pausing. "And I had a sense that I was going to carry that to my death bed." But Ayana was not raised to surrender, she was determined to fight for justice, to fight for what she felt was right. And so an artist was born.

Ayana floats gracefully behind the camera, but if you look closely, there's a sense of vulnerability too, a sense of restraint in the characters that she depicts through her own body. In her work *Sighting in the Abyss II* (2019), a graceful figure is hauled forward by a commanding ethereal force, yet her restrained hands suppress her efforts—a testament to the impact of stereotypes on identity development, which hits close to home for the artist. "There is a lot of text on my skin when I enter rooms that are populated with people with identity associated with power—American or European," she expresses. "Due to the racially divided history of the

Facing page: *The rupture was the story*. 2019. This page: *The self-forgetfulness of belonging would never be mine*. 2019. Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim Gallery



country I was born in, the presence of my body in certain spaces is problematized and in some cases not welcome unless it performs in a certain way.” Through the medium of photography, Ayana discovered a way to express her sentiments about race. Her images became a means to deconstruct and then reconstruct the historic narratives that still prevail today. “I mine 18th and 19th century Western art and early photographs for content,” says Jackson. “I ask how the black body has been portrayed, who and what has been left out of the frame, and start from there. When I can’t find them, I invent and perform the characters I wish I had seen as a young girl.” For her work *Sea Lion* (2019), Jackson chose a portrait of a young Elizabeth I as her muse. “I imagined myself as Elizabeth Regina’s



undersea black mirror figure. In this work I am building a counter universe,” she says. On show at the new Chicago-based Mariane Ibrahim Gallery from 20 September until 26 October 2019, *Take Me To The Water* (2019) is Ayana’s newest body of work, exploring African and African-American mythologies. She uses performance and studio-based self-portraiture to consider the role these narratives play in constructing identities. “This is a work rooted in speculative fiction,” she says. “In some cases, the characters bring forth characteristics associated with Coastal African water spirits that continue to be revered in present day African and African Diaspora communities,” she says. “In other cases, I am inventing characters that might live in the fictional land of Drexciya at the bottom of the Atlantic.” A strong inspiration for Ayana’s work, Drexciya was an early nineties American electronic music duo from Detroit, which gave rise to the mythology of an underwater world of surviving babies whose pregnant mothers were thrown overboard slave ships. “It hit me in my gut,” she recalls. “While the reality of the drowned mothers is a horrid truth of the slave trade, they were discarded as sick cargo, Drexciya as an aquatopia is of course a myth. But history has taught us that many societies embrace all sorts of mythologies to make the horrors or discomforts of the present more bearable.” Building on this ideology, Ayana imagines Drexciya’s water beings as if they had been midwived by pre-existing African water spirits from countries that were impacted by slave trade. Presented through kinetic figures that seem to be moving along an undersea current, the works illustrate the impact that mythology can have on identity.

In 2015, Mariane Ibrahim Gallery hosted *Archival Impulse* (2011–2013), paying homage to Ayana’s work from 2011 to 2013. The renowned series of work confronts late 19th century photographs during the period of colonial expansion across Africa and America. *Maria di Latte* (2011), another notable series by the artist, explores the association between black femininity and domestic servitude. “At the time that I made *Archival Impulse* and *Maria di Latte*, I was preoccupied with the way that the history of photography is intertwined in the construction and perpetuation of racialized and gendered stereotypes,” says Ayana. Later, in the series *Intimate Justice in the Stolen Moment* (2015–2017) which was presented at The Baudoin Lebon Gallery in Paris, France and *Dear Sarah* (2016), Ayana began to focus on photographic representations of black womanhood that were less heard of. “In the case of the former, I began to consider studio portraits commissioned by black women who documented themselves with photography and in the latter, the story of Sarah Forbes Bonnetta, Queen Victoria’s God Daughter,” she says. “At the time of its making, I felt that both sets of reference imagery fell outside the general

Facing page: *Sea Lion*, 2019. This page: *Double Goddess A Sighting in the Abyss*, 2019. Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim Gallery

perception of 19th and 20th century black womanhood.” Previously, the artist’s work has been featured at the Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden in Marrakech for the inaugural exhibition entitled *Africa Is No Island* in 2018. In October 2020, the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African Art will present a solo exhibition devoted to the artist.

When Ayana moved to Germany at the age of 27, she met Katharina Sieverding, who became one of her biggest inspirations. Renowned for her portrayal of political realities through self-portraiture work, Sieverding was Ayana’s professor at the University of Arts Berlin, where she introduced her to large format printing and photographic theory. “I only spent three semesters as an unenrolled

student, but if you look at Katharina’s work, you can see her fingerprint all over me,” Ayana shares. It was many years after leaving Berlin that it dawned on Ayana that she had a tendency towards multiplying herself just as Sieverding has done, with only slight changes between the frames, as seen, for example, in Ayana’s new work entitled *Cascading Celestial Giants I and II* (2019) or previous works such as *To Kill or Allow to Live* (2016).

American artist Carrie Mae Weems was another influential artist behind Ayana’s self-portraiture work. “I am privileged to not only have studied her, but to also know her. We check in from time to time,” she says, of Weems. “She has taught me that there is an urgency to the work we are doing, it is not just for our own healing as non-white women or people, it is for the healing of all of humanity.”

As showcased in *Cascading Celestial Giant I* (2019), the ethereal figures in Ayana’s work rise above the ground, fighting to give a voice to marginalized groups. “We are living in a Eurocentric era that has promoted Eurocentric ideas of beauty, civilisation, education and religion,” she says. “Many people have suffered from having their identities disgraced through a racist colonial gaze.” And Ayana felt no less a victim of this gaze. Although she grew up Catholic, she was aware that African belief systems were constantly challenged by a society that questioned its logic believing, for example, that Santeria, Candomblé, or Hatian Vodoun is black magic. “There are many religious mythologies all over the world,” she says. “The West likes to call them witchcraft but all traditional belief systems are essentially a web of mythologies. My father explained to me that African or Eastern mythologies are just as worth being familiar with as the Greek or Roman. I was struck by how I was lead to look down upon the myths or religions coming from the region of the world where people looked most like me.” Ayana learned the power of narrative early on. “As a young person, the world was telling me that in order to be worthy, I had to be something else, someone else. Thankfully, my father put the world into perspective so I could have a sense of pride.”

Ayana is using the power of photography to challenge history and paint a new picture. To tell the world a version of the truth that was left out of the literal and figurative frame. Through the ethereal beauty and transcendence of her characters, she is stripping stereotypes to destroy untrue realities and ultimately, heal humanity. “I think early photography is complicit in building the barriers that keep us apart,” she says. “And it has the potential to help destroy them.” ■ marianeibrahim.com

Take Me To The Water by Ayana V. Jackson is on show at Mariane Ibrahim Gallery in Chicago, Illinois from 20 September until 26 October 2019