

# WHAT DOES AN ARTIST LOOK LIKE?

ENDIA BEAL ANSWERS QUESTIONS  
THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHY

BY JOHN ADAMIAN

**T**here's a storeroom of art somewhere on the other side of the walls of Endia Beal's office. It's a vast collection of African and African-American painting, sculpture, collage, and drawings, and Beal spends a lot of her time thinking about those pieces of art. What can they say to us? How might they speak to one another? How can young people relate to them? She has a lot of questions. Beal is the curator at the Diggs Gallery on the campus of Winston-Salem State University, where she took the position in 2014. She's an artist as well, a photographer and activist whose work uses stories to spur conversation, which ideally brings people in closer dialogue with each other, with the past, with the present, and with the infinite particulars of our shared individual humanity.


"In thinking about the vision for Diggs and moving forward, we are interested in not only educating our students on global, local and regional artists and creating an educational program that can really showcase how art can be a part of your life," says Beal summing up the

gallery's mission within the context of the wider university. "We focus on work specifically of people of color. That's not just people of color, but in many ways our main mission is the stories of artists of color specifically."

Beal, who is from Winston-Salem, credits her predecessor, Belinda Tate, the previous director at Diggs, with expanding the gallery's holdings. "We have one of the largest collections of African and African-American art in the Southeast. She really helped us grow our work within the African diaspora specifically. And so we have a large collection of African work."

Beal is also an assistant professor of art at WSSU, where she teaches photography. And her work as a curator dovetails with some of her concerns as a practicing artist. "I'm interested in contemporary artists," she says. "I'm also interested in art that reflects the experiences of my students."

An exhibit at the Diggs Gallery that closed in December of last year featured women showcased on the covers Jet Magazine. The subject of popular notions



Endia Beal is the curator of Diggs Gallery on the campus of WSSU. An accomplished photographer, Beal's recent work is the subject of an exhibit at SECCA in Winston-Salem. The exhibit, "Am I What You're Looking For," explores the aspirations and challenges faced by college-aged African-American women entering the workplace.

of beauty, black femininity, and personal stories told through mass-media are all things that you could say Beal has addressed in her own work. Beal's photos and videos serve to remind viewers that other people have stories and lives beyond what we might be in the habit of considering.

Other people are a deep mystery. We never really know what's going on inside their heads, what their lives are about, what their hopes and dreams and fears are. It's true sometimes of close family, loved ones and friends. It's maybe more true of casual acquaintances, colleagues and total strangers. We generally don't know their stories or have insights into their sufferings and feelings. Some of us can even be strangers to ourselves. Beal explores that divide, chipping away at it, in her work.

She's gotten some high-profile national attention in recent years, with work that was provocative, personal, careful, possibly squirm-inducing, sensitive and sometimes funny, depending on your take. The first blast of scrutiny and rapid-fire social-media sharing came in response to her series "Can I Touch It?" which involved photos and video inspired by experiences she had as a woman of color working at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut.

In one set of the photos she brought some mostly middle-aged white women to salons to have their hair done in traditionally African-American styles, with flourishes like fingerwaves, cornrows and a twist on natural tapered cuts. Then she took their portraits. She also discussed their feelings about adopting a style that didn't feel familiar. The video portion of the project involved, among other things, getting some of her male IT colleagues to touch her hair and body and to talk about their feelings.

In the video, the anonymous, vaguely soulless corporate setting, with empty rows of cubicles provided a visual contrast to the intimate subject of physical contact, which is discussed in halting and awkward tones by Beal's colleagues, and the snippets of footage of hands grabbing her hair, running fingers along her thigh and touching the upper portion of her chest.

That piece took shape during her time earning a Masters of Fine Arts at Yale (she graduated in 2013), when Beal worked as a graduate intern in the IT department, doing behind-the-curtain coding and metadata tagging for a new online-course program at the university. While there she learned, through rumors and inter-office chit-chat, that some of her colleagues were fascinated with her appearance and her hair. Some of them had said — though

not to Beal — that they wanted to touch her hair.

"Being a woman in that situation, especially a minority, and feeling as though these people — I didn't even think they knew my name — were having this kind of discussion and conversation about my appearance. It was a little weird," says Beal.

On one level, you could say that that's the burden we all face, going out into the world and being viewed and presumably judged based on — whatever — our skin, our clothes, our hair, our name, our age, our gender, our gait, our weight, our eyes, our smell, the sound of our voices, our posture, or any number of other external things that have nothing to do with our competence, our intelligence, our honesty, our integrity or our work ethic. But it gets complicated fast. People in positions of power and authority often make snap decisions based on their own personal reactions, assumptions and ideas about others. Beal's work aims to reveal something about what it's like to navigate these spots, for everyone.

"My end goal is to expose a certain truth," says Beal. "And for many people, we don't know what we don't know. And so if we're ignorant about certain experiences, the artwork in itself tells these stories. And it may not necessarily answer the question, but it poses questions...."

Sometimes when you're in a position of privilege, you may not necessarily understand the experiences of a person of color: being the only one in a space, and also being judged, not necessarily being judged on your performance, but on your appearance. The work, what it does is it poses those questions: well, what if? What if I gave you this opportunity [to touch my hair], something you've wanted in many ways, will it change the way you feel about your relationship with me? Will you feel more uncomfortable, or will you feel how I feel possibly every day walking through a space knowing that I'm a spectacle, right? And that people are looking at me not because they necessarily think I'm the brightest person, but because they think I'm this exotic creature."

Some of Beal's other work, photos shot from around the same period as "Can I Touch It?," when she was a grad student at Yale, is on display now at the gallery as a part of "Connecting Identities, Transforming Design," a faculty show. The photos might be less immediately sensation-



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alistic than her work explicitly addressing race, gender, power and the workplace, but they maintain her sense that flashes of insight and personal narratives can explode our potentially calcified sense of each other and the places that surround us. One set of images shows scenes from life in the Fair Haven and Dixwell sections of New Haven.

New Haven, Connecticut, the home of Yale, is filled with contrasts. There's wealth and privilege, but also plenty of poverty and crime. In 2015, one source, using F.B.I. crime statistics, found that New Haven was "the third most dangerous city with a population under 200,000." But anyone who's ever spent any time there, or in similar cities, knows that those kinds of rankings send a disproportionate signal out into the surrounding communities, creating a climate of reluctance and fear among many suburban and exurban dwellers who don't have first-hand knowledge of the place in question or the people who carry out their lives there.

Though she wouldn't necessarily put it this way, Beal's New Haven photos serve as a kind of corrective in simply capturing images of mundane life, of young people helping with childcare, or routinely getting dressed to go out, of apartment entryways and other prosaic architectural details. The photos demonstrate — to anyone who was somehow incapable of seeing it before — that places like Fair Haven and Dixwell are much like everywhere else, where people try to go about their business, raise kids, pay the rent, and maintain a sense of style and dignity, despite the obstacles of economics and circumstance.

"As a [Yale] student specifically, you're kind of taught in many ways, or oriented, not to go into the community," says Beal. Email blasts from the campus safety office and other subtle bits of communication filter through to the students each fall, new arrivals in New Haven, having the effect, Beal says, of "isolating the students and creating, to me, a sense of fear of the surrounding areas."

"During this photographic series I was interested in those quote/unquote dangerous places. But I tell people: 'I didn't get shot. I didn't mugged. None of these things happened.' And, in many ways, these people wanted their stories to be told."

One young man featured in some of the photos is seen holding a small child — perhaps one of his nieces or nephews — peering at the camera through a cloth partition that serves as a kind of screen or veil.

"At the time he didn't have any children, but he was at home doing these kind of domestic roles, and when he went out

into the community he had to put on this facade to be what the community was marked as, but when he was with me he was a different kind of person," says Beal of the subject. "The idea is the vulnerability of being able to see certain truths even within yourself that you may not have even known existed."

There's the suggestion, in these photos, as with her work in the corporate space, that somehow the world at large forces us to simplify the way we carry ourselves outside our homes, to conform to some sense of what's expected of us. That we're not entirely free to be who we are, or we might be. For Beal, her camera and her work serve to help initiate a deeper connection between people, between herself and her subjects, and ideally between the viewer and the world.

"If I can build a relationship with you and get to know you, then the photograph is going to tell a deeper truth," says Beal.

A camera can be a device that separates the photographer from the world, a barrier placed between the artist and what they train their lens on. Many great photographers have simply found a subject and clicked the shutter, knowing nothing more than that an image caught their eye. But Beal views her work as having an interpersonal, narrative, and documentary element. There are stories behind these images.

Beal says she wanted to be an artist since she was a child.

"I always wanted to be an artist," she says. "I wanted to be an art teacher. It was an obsession of mine."

A tragedy drove Beal to seek a kind of solace in art in high school.

"The first person I ever loved was shot and killed," she says. The young man was at the wrong place at the wrong time, during a fight at a party, she says. "It was terrible and tragic. In many ways, I think as a young person I understood what my purpose was through this event."

Beal was troubled by the depiction of the event in the news media.

"He was a poet, and he wrote all these really beautiful poems," she says. "What happens, when a life is thin-sliced, is we forget about all the other things."

She keeps a piece of his writing framed on her office wall, next to some of her own work, as a reminder.

"When I was talking about individuals and stories, it comes from a deeper place, because I found that life is so short; it'll be over before we even know it, and if we don't have the opportunity to know more than just what is presented, sometimes we can feel like things are missing, like there's a hole, a void."

A photography class in college helped Beal cement her path. She went on to

study art history, focusing on the Renaissance. She noticed that images of women and of women of color weren't necessarily a part of the story.

"In studying art history I just realized there are certain things that were missing," says Beal.

While studying art history and digital photography in Florence, Italy in 2007 and 2008, Beal found herself fascinated by contemporary Italian society.

"I was surprised that Italy was sort of a melting pot of diversity," says Beal. "I didn't meet that many African-Americans in Florence, but I did meet a lot of Africans."

Migrants and refugees from West and North Africa were highly visible in Europe at the time, though probably less a part of the political and news landscape than they are today. Beal took photos of immigrants from Senegal and other West African countries in Italy. Beal says many of her subjects had come to Europe "just to survive." Part of her arrangement was that she would take their pictures and then come back the next day with a print, as a kind of quid pro quo. Many of these people hadn't seen images of themselves captured in this manner.

"It's a chance to see yourself in a different light," says Beal.

Beal's time at Yale gave her a chance to see how some of the world's greatest living artists realize their vision through relentless focus, persistence, and self-searching. She got to work with Richard Prince, Gregory Crewdson, Collier Schorr, Coco Fusco and many others.

"As an artist we have our purpose. But one of the hardest things is to figure out what your purpose is," she says. Beal says grad school is a great place in that it provides a safety net where one can fail spectacularly and learn from it.

In her artist statement, Beal says she aligns herself with artists like Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson, who use stories to pose questions about gender norms and conformity.

"My job as an artist is to tell the stories that hadn't been told, my own personal ones that are intimate and secret, and also the ones that possibly we see every day but we really don't see every day," says Beal.

Much of Beal's work involves subjects in North Carolina, so in a way her return to Winston-Salem, after time in upstate New York, Washington D.C. and New Haven, has been a practical one.

"All of the work that I was making, I was making it at home. It was North Carolina-based content.

The subjects I was looking for and the space I was searching for were at home," she says, explaining the no-brainer logic

behind moving back to the area, in addition to having family here.

One other thing that Beal took with her from her time at Yale was a blown-up photo backdrop of the office scene from her internship, the same seen for some of "Can I Touch It?" She brought the backdrop with her and photographed a number of young women of color, mostly from North Carolina, in their homes, asking them to dress in a way that felt comfortable but also to imagine that they were going into a job interview, posing them in front of the backdrop. She also spoke to the women about their feelings about corporate America and about fitting in or standing out in a workplace. The series — called "Am I What You're Looking For?" — poses a question, literally, like her previous work based on her internship experience.

Beal is a fan of the interrogative mode. She insists that part of the point of her work is to present questions. And she raises questions while discussing her photos. The images in "Am I What You're Looking For?" point to the notion that many employers, those in a position to hire people, might have a somewhat preconceived idea of what the person who will fill a position would look like. That mental picture might not include someone with brown skin, or an afro, or a tattoo, or a tight white dress.

"What does a professional look like?" says Beal. "Sometimes when you ask that question, people of color are not necessarily in that equation of what is considered a professional."

It's easy to want to turn Beal's work into a commentary on broader national issues, to boil it down to a message about race, or a message about gender, or privilege or power. Any attempt to turn her work into some kind of didactic sloganeering or simple lesson-delivery system gets met by the artist with a return to the fundamental element of individual narratives at play.

"The experiences that are happening in the nation are all personal experiences," she says.

Beal insists on the humanity of the people she photographs. People, not subjects. She seems as interested in getting to know them as she is in photographing them.

"The relationships that I have — those relationships to me are more important than the medium itself," she says. "They're more important than the photograph."

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