

NUEVA LUZ

photographic journal



YODITH DAMMLASH

SONYA A. LAWYER

NAKEYA BROWN

ALEJANDRA LAVIADA

COMMENTARY BY QIANA MESTRICH

Volume 19 No. 2 – U.S. \$10.00



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"Think in terms of images and words. They can be mighty powerful when they are fitted together properly."

The late photographer Gordon Parks' words resonate. I've always seen and felt the power in an image's ability to inspire, evoke and incite. Photography is the contemporary current of our society, and we at Nueva Luz have always prided ourselves on our very fortunate ability to provide not just a platform where artists can share their talents, but a place for writers and cultural scholars alike.

Qiana Mestrich, photographer, mixed-media artist, and founder of **Dodge & Burn**, a blog focused on diversity in photographic history is our guest writer/editor for this issue. Mestrich eloquently shifts our attention to an all female troupe of photographers NaKeya Brown, Yodith Dammlash, Sonya Lawyer, and Alejandra Laviada whose visual prose touches on personal memories, identity politics, and even photography's role within the contemporary art landscape. Vastly different in techniques, from collage to staged and structural environments, these women all have profound narratives that speak to the core of our being.

It is an honor to work with the aforementioned talents and the rich legacy that En Foco and *Nueva Luz* continue to expand upon. Building new conversations, new directions and new histories all while claiming our place within the contemporary and documentary photographic landscape has been no easy feat, but it is surely a privilege.

We hope the photography displayed brings a smile to your face, raises questions in your mind, and encourages you to celebrate your own diversity.

Stephanie Baptist
Program Director and Editor

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1738 Hone Avenue, Bronx, NY 10461

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Nueva Luz is published three times per year by En Foco, a non-profit organization supporting fine art and documentary photographers of diverse cultures, primarily U.S. residents of Latino, African and Asian heritage, and Native Peoples of the Americas and the Pacific.

Nueva Luz is made possible through subscriptions, our Print Collectors Program, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs. En Foco is also founded in part by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Hispanics in Philanthropy, the Bronx Council on the Arts, ASMP, Lowepro, Archival Methods, Loupe Digital Studio, Modernage Custom Digital Imaging Labs, WNYC.org, members, subscribers and friends.



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Cover: Alejandra Laviada, *Aqua*, De-Constructs series, 2009.
Pigment print on luster paper, 28 x 35"



Nakeya Brown Free, *If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown* series, 2014. Inkjet print, 24 x 16"

USING A HISTORICAL EMOTION TO PICTURE OUR PRESENT

By Qiana Mestrich

For humans, nostalgia is more than just an evocative event. It is one of the many ways we find the strength and drive to keep living. Psychologist Kirby Farrell calls it, "a basic cultural practice and creaturely behavior."¹ Kirby references research that discovered human beings resolve feelings of loneliness, boredom and anxiety through their engagement with nostalgia.

To recall a time before is an act of comfort and self-preservation. Looking to the past strengthens us emotionally; it helps us redefine and insert ourselves into the present. For those of us who are artists/photographers, engaging with (objects and images of) the past is a way for us to answer our own questions. Nostalgia is an important, reflective practice that creates new meanings thus inspiring the creation of new artworks.

The photographers featured in this essay/issue all reference the past in their works. Yodith Dammlash creatively layers her family's old photographs, Sonya Lawyer reinterprets found photographs of strangers, Nakyea Brown stages vintage objects of beauty and Alejandra Laviada deconstructs previously built spaces. Using a variety of techniques, each photographer has found a way to create new work based on the past that is intellectually complex, original and restorative.

Yodith Dammlash's *The Names We Bear*

**Yodith
Dammlash**

What urges an artist to engage with their family's photographic archive? As photographers, we are often entrusted to be the keepers of these objects, endowing them with the utmost importance and affection. Despite the proliferation of digital images amongst our 21st century existence and on our psyche, the vintage image has not yet disappeared from our lives. We can still find an abundance of old photographic objects, cracked and stained over time, archived in our homes and on display in public spaces like flea markets.

Dammlash's series, *The Names We Bear*, makes use of the photographer's collection of prints, negatives and slides from her mother's Ethiopian family taken from the 1940s to '70s. As viewers we should not be fixated simply on Dammlash's use of old photographs but how she utilizes them to create a new series of images. For the artist the work is an attempt to sort out the past experiences and memories of family members to create meaning for herself.

The work functions as vernacular photography. The original photographer and the subjects are unknown. We are not of this family, nor do we know their stories. We can only imagine their lives, reading clues from their surroundings, Western clothing styles and facial expressions. The merging of posed and candid group-portrait styles into a single image is visually disorienting. Unaccustomed to this double vision, the eye wants to parse out the layers and survey the scenes.

This double layering reveals a tension in the subjects' posed and unposed expressions, like in the black and white image titled *Sisters*. Two girls are posed side-by-side, not touching, the way siblings are typically represented in photographs. In one layer we see them sitting and smiling (they seem happy), in the other

Commentary

they are standing with arms down at their sides, faces withdrawn and sad. We can assume these are the same children in both images, though it's not clear.

Most of Dammlash's images are tightly cropped; the edges of the frame restrain the men, women and children. Despite visible signs of a healthy life and good social class status, there's a haunting sense of unhappiness that appears in the recurring faces. Some photographs show varying landscapes from rural to urban, alluding to migration (of a family member?) though we are unclear if the move was forced or voluntary.

For me, it is the existence and sharing of these images with a larger community other than the photographer's family that matters most. Given the geographic confines around the history of photography, it is rare that we are witness to archival images of an upwardly mobile African/Ethiopian family, specifically one that lived during the leadership of the popular Emperor Haile Selassie.

Sonya A. Lawyer's *A Piece of the Dream*

Sonya A. Lawyer

Working from a personal collection of early 20th century vernacular photography, Sonya Lawyer's *A Piece of the Dream* series also references family, although the artist has no relation to the African-American female subjects in her appropriated images. Here again we should not be preoccupied with Lawyer's desire to work with subjects who are deceased, but instead we should commend her innovative online and offline presentation of the images.

Digitally archived as a 365-day blog, each image is tagged/organized into dream themes like "love" and "summer" and "fluffy". The digital manifestation of the *A Piece of the Dream* series makes it accessible to many and ultimately ensures that this oral and visual archive of African-American life endures in a world where history is increasingly documented and consumed online. In their final, physical presentation, each photograph is transferred in multiples onto swatches of fabric which are then stitched into quilts. Long considered a folk art, the tradition of quilt making has been a part of African-American culture since the early days of slavery. Within the quilts, each portrait is duplicated many times and flipped vertically, forcing the viewer to look at the same image multiple times, emphasizing the unique character of each sitter.

A poetic narrative authored by Lawyer offers new life to images that would've otherwise been unclaimed and "archived" in the ether of anonymous photography. Although some of the photographs feature more than one subject, Lawyer's texts are all told through the perspective of the females. Sourced from a variety of (true) life stories including her own, Lawyer's text interpret the photographs with such intuition and wisdom, as if she is channeling kindred spirits. Hand-dyed swatches of fabric are included in the final quilted grid, with some colors complimenting the narrative. *Lapis Alpine Blue* alludes to the subject's love of water while the lead-colored swatches in Pewter mimic the portrait's ashen, almost mugshot-grey look and feel.

Secrets are revealed, fears expressed, dreams shared and bold statements of independence are declared. Lawyer's work elevates timeless, universal stories of survival to a higher cultural status. Pieces like *Red Wine Jet Black* speak to recurring injustices within African-American communities (read #BlackLivesMatter) that operate as barriers to achieving that elusive dream.

Nakeya Brown's *If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown*

Nakeya Brown

Socialized within traditional gender norms, many women have witnessed the beauty rituals of their mothers as girls—some watch in awe, others perhaps in confusion. Amidst the "natural hair" movement of recent years, Nakeya Brown's series speaks to a generation of young women who've embraced their kinks and curls but may occasionally wax nostalgic for '70s and '80s black glamour of their mothers. Brown's minimalist *mise-en-scènes* (to borrow a design expression from film production), have no qualms about their reference to the past.

Meticulously designed, Brown's still life images arrange vintage hair products (hair dryers, rollers, combs, caps) around a particular vinyl album on a covered table. Staging this "vanity" space, Brown sets the scene by placing the objects in proportion to each other and evenly illuminating the scene with natural light. Moving across time and generations, Brown's images allow us to imagine the everyday divas that owned these objects, primping and styling while listening to the R&B records of legends like Diana Ross and Minnie Riperton. The tight, curated composition and bright, colored backgrounds suggest a modern black girl's fascination with her mother's (or grandmother's) possessions.

There's a double play on setting the scene and the "setting" of black hair, a process of undoing its natural state which requires the various instruments pictured. The title's cheeky, conditional reference to nostalgia being "colored brown", implies that the sentiment is often only discussed and presented in context of mainstream white culture. In beautifully presenting objects of affection in front of her camera, Brown's series ultimately asks, are the lives and memories of brown people not worthy to be celebrated and reminisced?

Alejandra Laviada

Alejandra Laviada's *De-Constructs* series

Made over a period of 3 years, the photographs in Alejandra Laviada's *De-Constructs* series tell a story through the artist's intervention of space. Staging her own demolition of an abandoned building, Laviada's massive holes pierce brightly colored walls painted in the unapologetically bright color palette of traditional Mexican architecture and culture. These violent formations open a wound in the drywall exposing a view into the next room or alternatively, creating black voids like the one rooted in *Orange*, 2009.

Devoid of light, the black holes in Laviada's images may signify a more sinister view of Mexico's future. Viewing these images repeatedly, the mind can't help but read these holes as entrance and exit wounds made by bullet holes. At the present time, US and international news of Mexico is dominated by the nation's war with the drug cartels. Recent reports from the Mexican government state that from 2007 to 2014, civilian casualties of this war outnumber civilian deaths in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.² Yet in the same series, other punctures made in images like *Pink*, 2007 and *Blue*, 2007 uncover shades recalling the ocean and surrounding flora. Viewed sequentially, Laviada's images reflect a cycle of construction and deconstruction. Having previously created another series of photographs of bricolage sculptures, Laviada's persistent work staging architectural debris ensures the past is not forgotten. The photographer seems to be constantly looking back in longing for a home that perhaps no longer exists, while capturing the present by creating new forms that also anticipate her country's bright future.

Media artist and author Svetlana Boym clarifies that "nostalgia appears to be a longing for a place, but it is actually a yearning for a different time—the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams." Dismissing its romantic misnomer, Boym considers nostalgia to be a radical act, a "rebellion against a modern idea of time, the time of history and progress."³ Explained in this way, the experience of nostalgia seems to be a kind of spiritual time travel, a necessary act of reclaiming and preserving (our) memories in the wake of technology's forward push.

Interventions in space as well as our histories, also allow for new narratives that can directly influence our future. Dammlash's images help her understand a time she never lived through while picturing rarely-seen Ethiopian family life; Lawyer's photographic quilts and digital exhibition featuring images from discarded American family albums empower black women and girls; Brown's still lifes capture a bygone age of black beauty ideals impacting a current return to natural; Laviada's symbolic destruction of abandoned space signals a time to come. Each of these carefully considered, photographic gestures create new histories for communities traditionally underrepresented and/or misrepresented in photography.

¹ Farrell, Kirby. "Nostalgia and the Ability to Mourn". *Psychology Today*. July 2013.

Web: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/swim-in-denial/201307/nostalgia-and-the-ability-mourn>

² Breslow, Jason. "The Staggering Death Toll of Mexico's Drug War". *PBS/Frontline*. July 2015.

Web: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/foreign-affairs-defense/drug-lord/the-staggering-death-toll-of-mexicos-drug-war/>

³ Boym, Svetlana. "Nostalgia And Its Discontents". *The Hedgehog Review*, Summer 2007.

Print: http://www.iasc-culture.org/eNews/2007_10/9.2CBoym.pdf



© Eneida Cardona

QIANA MESTRICH

Qiana Mestrich is a photographer, writer, digital marketer and mother in Brooklyn, NY. In 2007, Mestrich founded the blog *Dodge & Burn: Diversity in Photography History*. With interviews and profiles of photographers of color, the blog aims to provide a more inclusive version of photography history, featuring contributions to the medium by underrepresented cultures. Mestrich is currently writing a book based on the blog scheduled for publication early 2017.

Mestrich is also co-editor of the book *How We Do Both: Art and Motherhood* (Secretary Press), a diverse collection of honest responses from contemporary artists who have walked—and are still walking—the tenuous tightrope of motherhood and making art. Now in its second edition, *How We Do Both* is available on Amazon with an eBook version coming soon.

A graduate of the ICP-Bard College MFA in Advanced Photographic Practice, Mestrich received her B.A. with a concentration in photography from Sarah Lawrence College. She is currently the Associate Director, Digital Content and Engagement at the International Center of Photography (ICP) in New York. This fall she will be speaking at the *Fast Forward: Women in Photography* conference at the Tate Modern in London.



Yodith Dammlash, *Elleni*, *The Names We Bear* series, 2015. Digital collage, variable dimensions.

Artist Statement

The Names We Bear is an ongoing series of digital collages using photographs of my mother's family in Ethiopia dating back as early as the 1940s to the 1970s.

I've collected and archived over 300 photographs, negatives and slides, majority of which were retrieved from a box of materials left behind by my uncle, and used my family's oral history along with my own imagined reality of the subjects, some of whom I've never met, as the basis for selecting which images to combine and superimpose. Not many people of my parent's generation in the Diaspora have this wealth of old photographs, due to lack of resources or the displacement of personal items during exodus.

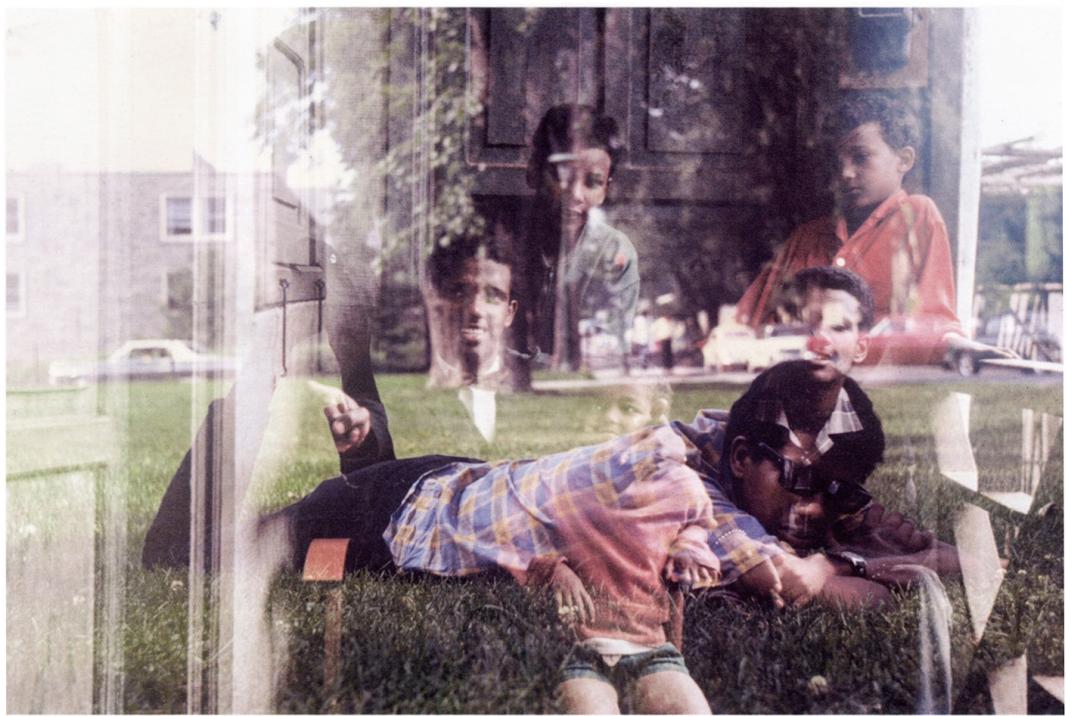
Reworking these images allows me to make sense of the stories I've been told over the years, from the overall charmed youth my mother's family had to the inevitable tragedies experienced during displacement, as well as add depth and body to previously flattened perspectives of the Diaspora.

Yodith Dammlash

Yodith Dammlash



Calm, *The Names We Bear* series, 2014. Digital collage, variable dimensions.



Yodith Dammlash

Dream, The Names We Bear series, 2014. Digital collage, variable dimensions.



Yodith Dammlash

Four, The Names We Bear series, 2014. Digital collage, variable dimensions.



Yodith Dammlash

Brothers, The Names We Bear series, 2014. Digital collage, variable dimensions.



Sisters, The Names We Bear series, 2014. Digital collage, variable dimensions.



© Danielle Finney

YODITH DAMMLASH

Yodith Dammlash (b. 1986) is an Ethiopian-American photographer and archivist living and working in the Washington D.C. area. Her work explores her ancestry through the lenses of womanhood and collective memory. Dammlash's digital collage series integrates old family photographs, slides and film negatives, and weaves together audio interviews with her family to create a narrative around personal and larger social histories of Ethiopian immigration, displacement and the creation of home. Her work has been featured in Rooted in Magazine, East City Art, The Root, MSN, Huffington Post, Prince George's Suite Magazine, SUNU Journal (forthcoming) and Electrical Revival (forthcoming). A member of MAMBU BADU Photography Collective of female photographers of African descent, Dammlash has helped to publish an anthology of photography and co-curated an exhibition of several nationally award winning Black female photographers at Vivid Solution Gallery.

www.yodithd.com



She liked delicious ambiguity.

Sonya A. Lawyer, *MS 139 (Pewter)*, *A Piece (of the Dream)* series, 2012.
Inkjet transfer on fabric, 24 x 24"

Artist Statement

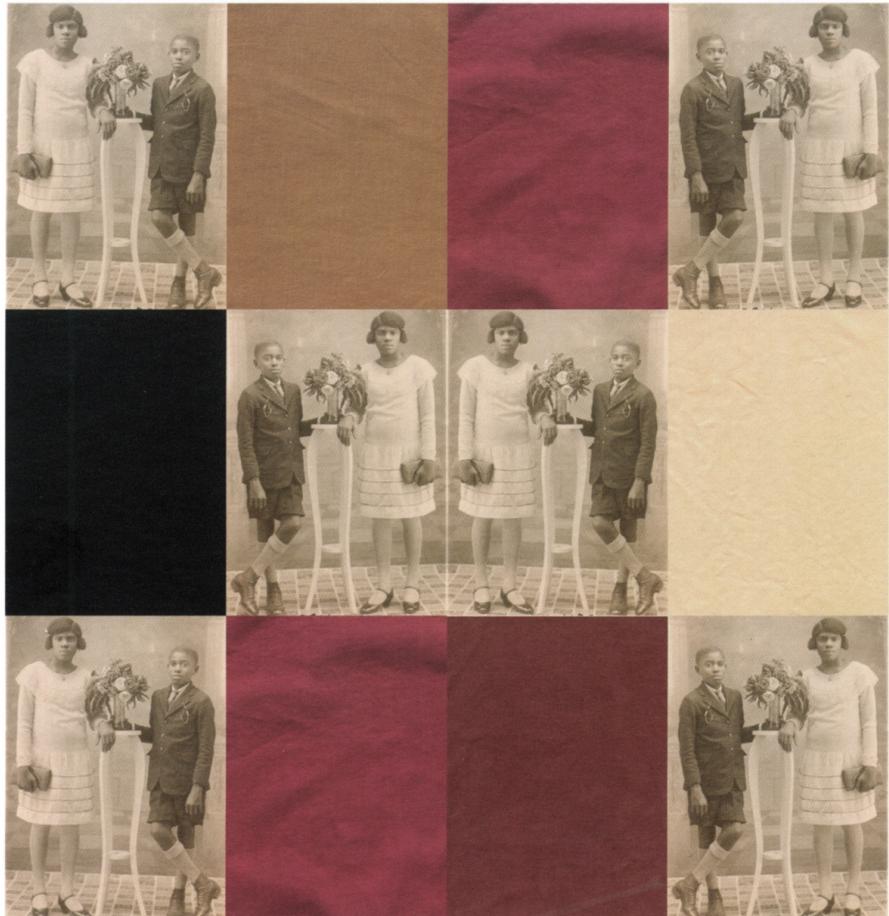
In 2001, I began collecting vintage photo albums. Most of them have been purchased through online auctions and others were purchased at antique stores. The women, men, and children in the images I have collected are anonymous and only now known by their auction id number and their seller's quirky username. The thought of families torn apart albeit figuratively, and then sold to the highest bidder is very disturbing and repeats a very troubling part of history. Although I recognize my own complicity by participating in the auctions of my ancestors, I feel that I am rescuing people from further disturbance.

"A Peace (of the Dream)" is a photographic-based blog project which overlays a personal narrative over vintage images of women, men and children to create quilt-like pieces of art. Some of the imagery used in the work is anonymous and some are family members. The narrative is partly stories from my own life, partly family members' recollections and close friends' anecdotes, but all of the narrative is grounded in someone's reality.

This work is a celebration of lives past and present—a visual poem created through reflection and discovery. In weaving together pieces of family history or memory, the quilt creates a story about our shared humanity. It's about the stories we tell over and over again, and the secrets that we keep inside for far too long. It's about our likes and dislikes, our faith and our disbelief, our friends and our enemies, our futile searches and our brilliant discoveries, but most of all, it's about how when we really step back and examine our lives, we actually see the common threads (dreams) that bind "us" all together.

Sonya A. Lawyer

Sonya Lawyer



She was afraid for
the safety and psyche
of her brothers
sometimes,
because some of society
saw them as a threat
when they walked down the street
carrying
a bag of candy and a can of pop.

MS 379 (*Red Wine Jet Black*), *A Piece (of the Dream)* series, 2012. Inkjet transfer on fabric, 24 x 24"



She believed in
the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, Cupid, Leprechauns, Unicorns,
and God,
but that didn't mean
she was born yesterday.

Sonya A. Lawyer

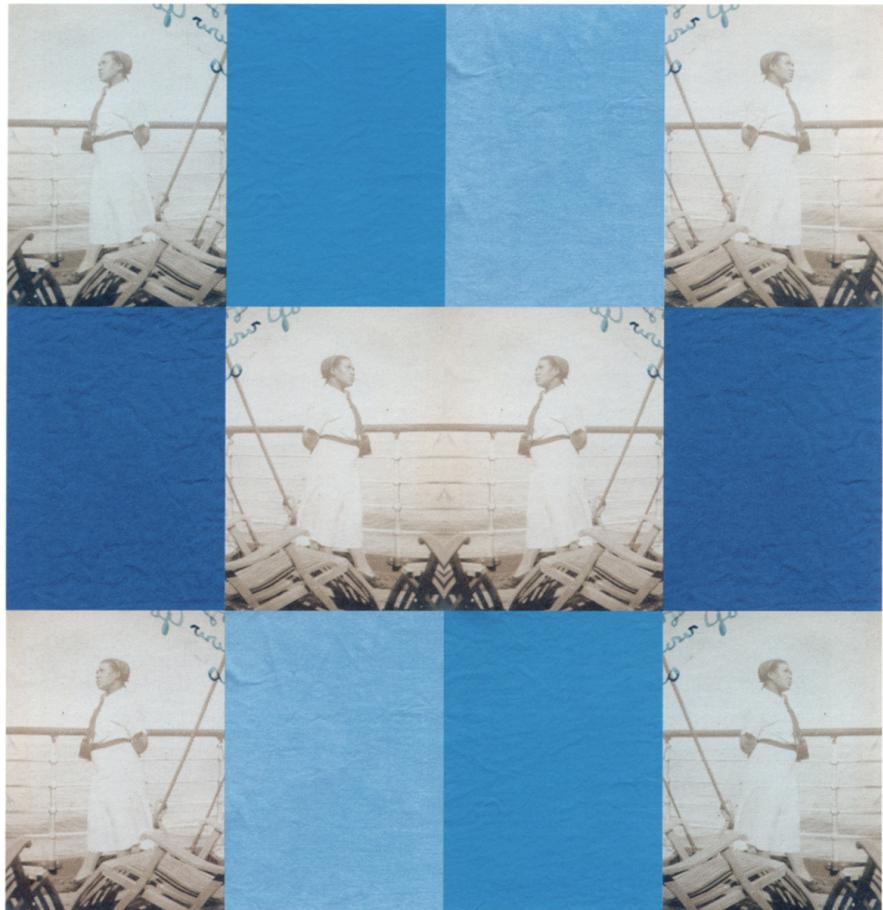
MS 370 (Sunshine Red Light Emerald Green), A Piece (of the Dream) series, 2012. Inkjet transfer on fabric, 24 x 18"



She missed him.

Sonya A. Lawyer

MISS 1913 (Yellow Charcoal Gray), A Piece (of the Dream) series, 2012. Inkjet transfer on fabric, 15 x 9"



She loved the water.
She had a healthy respect for
its ability to
float a boat
and sink a ship
with the same
amount of grace
and indifference.

Sonya A. Lawyer

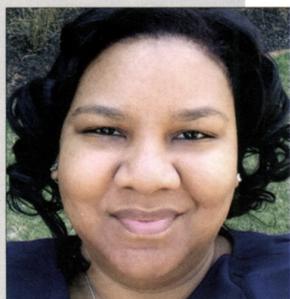
MS 528 (Lapis Alpine Blue), A Piece (of the Dream) series, 2012. Inkjet transfer on fabric, 24 x 24"



She didn't write them, but they were the right words.
"What we call the beginning is often the end.
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from."
-T.S. Eliot

MS 402 (*Hot Pink Clear Yellow*), A Piece (of the Dream) series, 2012. Inkjet transfer on fabric, 24 x 24"

© Self Portrait



SONYA A. LAWYER

Sonya A. Lawyer is an artist and educator. Her work has been exhibited in the Jenkins Johnson Gallery (NYC), School 33 Art Center (Baltimore). Lawyer's work was included in the traveling exhibition "More than Code", which was held at Sommers Gallery at University of New Mexico, Union Gallery at University of Arizona, Forum Gallery at Cranbrook Academy of Art, and Big Orbit Gallery in Buffalo, New York. She was an Artist in Residence at Light Work in Syracuse, New York and participated in Maryland Art Place's 19th Annual Critics' Residency. Her work has been published in *Contact Sheet*, *The International Review of African American Art*, and *The Washington Post*. In 2009, she received the Individual Artist's Award from Maryland State Arts Council. Fall 2015, Lawyer will have a solo exhibition of her latest body of work "BEAUTY Re-covered" at the Arlington Arts Center, Virginia. She obtained her BS from Howard University and her MFA from the University of Florida. Currently she is the Editor in Chief of SALYSÉ Magazine, a fashion/beauty and art photography publication.

www.sonyalawyer.com

www.apeaceofthedream.com



Nakeya Brown *Sophisticated Lady*, *If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown* series, 2014.
Inkjet print, 24 x 16"

Artist Statement

My work is the visualization of my African American female identity positioned within hair politics, hair rituals, and black culture. Each photograph I make explores racialized beauty standards and defines the bountiful actualities of African American women. Through portraits and still life imagery I interpret and re-imagine personal memories and experiences tied to race and gender politics.

In *If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown*, I collect objects associated with home life and beautification processes as building blocks in constructing identity and black feminine spaces. Each tableau is a site where memoirs, intimacy, womanhood, culture, and blackness converge in order to cultivate a sense of belonging.

Nakeya Brown

Nakeya Brown



The Edge of A Dream, If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown series, 2014. Inkjet print, 24 x 16"



Nakeya Brown

Going Down Makes Me Shiver, If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown series, 2014. Inkjet print, 24 x 16"



Nakeya Brown

Rising Desire, If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown series, 2014. Inkjet print, 24 x 16"



Nakeya Brown

You Stepped Into My Life, If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown series, 2014. Inkjet print, 24 x 16"



Lovin, Livin, and Givin, If Nostalgia Were Colored Brown series, 2014. Inkjet print, 24 x 16"



NAKEYA BROWN

Nakeya Brown was born in Santa Maria, California in 1988. She received her BA in Visual Arts and Journalism & Media Studies from Rutgers University. Her work has been exhibited at the McKenna Museum of African American Art, Woman Made Gallery, Vivid Solutions Gallery, and Five Myles Gallery. Brown's work has been reviewed by n+1, The Washington City Paper, African & Afro-Diasporan Art Talks, ForHarriet, and has been published by international publications Hysteria and Tonelit. She is a recipient of the Hortense May Boutell, Richard T. Evans, and Winifred Todd Farah endowments. She is currently pursuing her M.F.A at The George Washington University. Nakeya lives in Washington, D.C with her 2-year-old daughter, Mia.

www.nakeyab.com



Alejandra Laviada, *Blue, De-Constructs* series, 2007. Pigment print on luster paper, 28 x 35"

Artist Statement

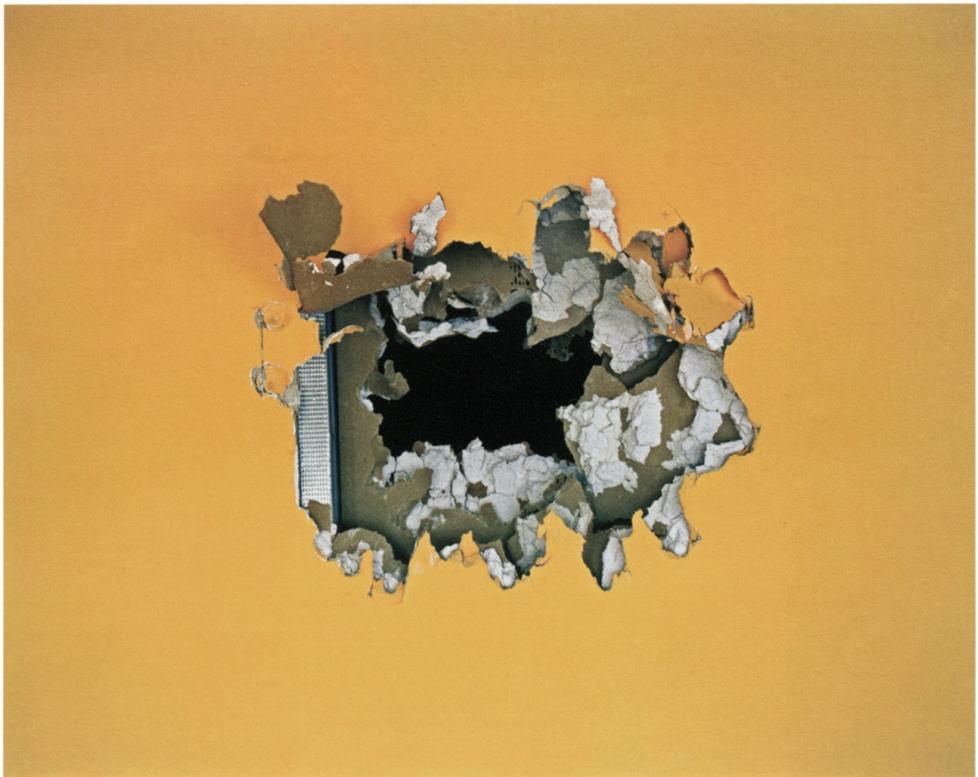
The term *De-Constructs* references the endless cycle of destruction and construction of a space. The images were taken in a site that is scheduled for demolition, where I broke holes into the walls of various rooms and photographed the abstract forms of these perforations. The photographs expose the view of one room into the next, and the contrast of colors between the foreground and background transform the photographs into abstract canvases. The images explore photography's relationship to abstract painting, and in particular with the color-field paintings of the 50's and 60's, which was a strong visual reference point for this work.

Throughout my work and practice, I'm very interested in exploring photography's role and relationship to other artistic media, and to create images that lie at the intersections between different creative disciplines. I approach my photographic process as a painter and sculptor, looking for ways of constructing an image on my photographic canvas.

From 2005 to 2010 I photographed various buildings in the Historic Center of Mexico City that were in the process of being demolished or redeveloped. I used the sites as temporary studios and photographed my interventions in each space. I'm very interested in the cycles of decay and rebirth that characterize the city, and how these cycles define the identity of a place and help shape our collective memory. Buildings are in a continuous process of decay and construction, and photography serves as a register and a pause within these entropic cycles.

Alejandra Laviada

Alejandra Laviada



Orange, De-Constructs series, 2009. Pigment print on luster paper, 28 x 35"



Alejandra Laviada

Red 13, De-Constructions series, 2010. Pigment print on luster paper, 28 x 35"



Alejandra Laviada

Purple , De-Constructs, 2010. Pigment print on luster paper, 28 x 35"



Alejandra Laviada

Pink, De-Constructs series, 2007. Pigment print on luster paper, 28 x 35"



White, Ochre, Blue, De-Constructs series, 2009. Pigment print on luster paper, 28 x 35"

© Self Portrait



ALEJANDRA LAVIADA

Alejandra Laviada (b. 1980) lives and works in Mexico City. Alejandra completed her BFA in Painting at the Rhode Island School of Design and received an MFA in Photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York. She is a member of the photography collective POC (www.pocproject.com). Her work explores photography's shifting role and relationship to other artistic media, such as painting and sculpture. The images emerge from the intersections between these different mediums, and aim to question and redefine photography's various roles within contemporary art. In 2010, Alejandra won the Photography Biennial in Mexico City, and in 2009 was awarded Photo España's *Descubrimientos* Prize for her Photo Sculpture series. She is recipient of FONCA Young Creators grant for 2012-13. Her work has been exhibited widely, and has been shown in various photography festivals including: Hyeres, The New York Photo Festival, Photo España, and Guatephoto among others.

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Nueva Luz

photographic journal

Published by En Foco, Inc.
1738 Hone Avenue
Bronx, NY 10461
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