

*Leigh Raiford*

*Erica Deeman: Familiar Stranger*

*“Shifting Photography’s Grounds”*

Embedded in every photograph is the trace of its failure, the impossibility of the task of “faithful” and “true” representation which we have assigned to the medium, and on which we insist despite knowing better. No matter the photograph’s technical perfection, its careful framing, the beauty of its protagonist, the care taken in the darkroom or editing software, photographs are often not enough or too much. This is especially true of Black people’s engagements with photography. And since the inception of the medium circa the 1830s, the photograph more often than not has been a site of violence or an aspirational attempt to counter the violence of capture, imprisonment, repetition, fixity. Inevitably photography fails.

Photographer Erica Deeman’s new body of work, *Familiar Stranger*, is born from the artist’s frustration with her chosen medium; it marks an effort to expand her own practice, and an attempt to push the boundaries of what we have allowed photography to be. A series of fifteen very black, irregularly shaped sculptures, each approximately 4½ by 3½ inches, the works float in simple white shadow boxes. From a distance they appear abstractly textured ceramic shards, but upon closer inspection, Deeman’s own face comes into view. The striations of her skin, the topography of her hair, combine to reveal an intimate geography of Black womanhood. The transubstantiation of photograph into sculpture, also registers the traces of Deeman’s fingerprints. The evidence of the artist’s labor, often muted if not invisibilized in the final photographic image, is here made manifest in a photograph made into three-dimensional relief.

*Familiar Stranger* expresses exasperation with photography’s hubris and its inadequacies, refuses photography’s violences, while also exploring photography’s “optical unconscious,” that is the “new and strange” the “waking dreams” invisible to the naked eye but which the camera can render legible.<sup>i</sup> The works of *Familiar Stranger* begin as black and white photographic self-portraits which Deeman then prints as molds via a 3D printer. Cassius obsidian clay is then pressed into the molds, left to dry for a week and then fired twice. In the first firing the clay shrinks, cracks, becomes at once volatile and delicate. It is only in the second firing that the pieces take on their ebony veneer. It is significant that though of the earth, Deeman has chosen a human made clay, mixed in her adopted home of California, a material suited to the artist’s exploration of the roots and routes of her own diasporic identity.

Identity, as Black British cultural theorist Stuart Hall tells us, is always a process of becoming, never a final arrival.<sup>ii</sup> And indeed photography often fails when it is understood as confirmation of fixed (and often fictitious) truths. But when understood as a way of encountering the world and oneself in it, photography can be a site of new knowledge and infinite possibility. The process that Deeman has developed for *Familiar Stranger* (which takes its name from the title of Hall’s posthumously published memoir<sup>iii</sup>), reveals the terrains upon

and through which her diasporic identity is forged, landscapes always latent in the photograph.

Deeman's practice has wrestled with the limits and possibilities of photography. The 2014 series *Silhouettes* harkened back to the eighteenth century cut paper practice, a bourgeois parlor game and also a visual mode of racial classification in its attention to skull shape and facial slopes. Silhouettes historically rendered its subjects in stark black against white (literally and metaphorically) but in choosing to photograph in color, Deeman instead focused on the rich textures of Black women's hair, the proud tilt of chins, the relaxed position of bare shoulders. The more recent series *Brown* (2018) bathed Black male protagonists in the warmest of earth tones, as if to protect them from the violence that the apparatus threatens. Both *Silhouettes* and *Brown* crisply display Deeman's technical skills and both demonstrate Deeman's commitment to collaboration, building trust with her subjects, the photograph as one outcome of a shared conversation and an offering of care.

Such skill and care no doubt led to the invitation to photograph archival objects found in the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture for the *New York Times*' Pulitzer prize-winning [1619 Project](#), edited by Nicole Hannah-Jones. In photographing the material and quotidian artifacts of slavery—a woven basket for harvesting rice, iron shackles intended for children—Deeman encountered a series of conundra: documenting the things used by and on people who were once used as things; photographing objects that she could not touch because of their historical fragility but which describe a history of the hyperaccessibility of Black bodies to physical manipulation; how to reconcile the desire to touch as a curative versus the legacy of touch as violation.

Through placing the photograph into a larger set of questions about history and hapticality, *Familiar Stranger* responds to and attempts to resolve these conundra. Deeman calls these works sculptures, but I prefer to think of them instead as ceramics, objects that have everyday use. As fragments they function as inventories, archeologies of the self; they move us from the archival to the archeological, from the time of photography to geologic time. They insist that the terms of belonging can be found simultaneously across time, place and medium.

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<sup>i</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Little History of Photography," (1931) in Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, editors, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 276, 279.

<sup>ii</sup> See especially, Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities," in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, editors, *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in Rutherford, Jonathan Rutherford, editor, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998).

<sup>iii</sup> Stuart Hall with Bill Schwarz, *Familiar Stranger: A Life Between Two Islands* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).