

# SFGATE

## Gallery intern improbably leaps to important show

By **Sam Whiting** Updated 1:52 pm, Monday, May 2, 2016



Photo: Student



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Deeman experimented with backlighting to create her silhouette portraits.

One moment **Erica Deeman** was an intern at Pier 24 Photography. The next, she was a featured artist there, her portraits of women from the African diaspora shown in their own gallery between ones dedicated to famous photographers **Robert Frank** and **William Eggleston**.

For someone who had never taken a serious picture until four years ago, having 11 oversize color prints on display at one of the largest spaces in the world dedicated to photography amounts to a Horatio Alger story, especially since her pictures were made with a borrowed camera.

“This is something that I could not have imagined in this short a time frame, and at such a prestigious establishment” says Deeman, who is 39 and just two years out of the **Academy of Art University**.

The portfolio, called “Silhouettes,” fulfilled a graduation requirement for her bachelor’s of fine arts. It was not a graduation requirement that she also work for free at a gallery, but she did, pulling a 9 to 5 shift one day a week at Pier 24. She’d been there for nine months before she brought in her portfolio to show to another gallery, after work. She had stashed the portfolio with her coat and was headed out the door when **Christopher McCall**, the director of Pier 24, noticed her carrying it.

“I was on my way to show my portfolio to somebody, and Chris said, ‘Why don’t you show me?’” recalls Deeman, who is from industrial Nottingham, England, (**Robin Hood**’s hometown) and is hesitant to self-promote in the brash American way. “I said, ‘Well ... OK.’”

### **The collectors**

That simple transaction resulted in Deeman’s pictures being in a group show called “Collected” that takes over all the gallery space at Pier 24, the massive shed next to the Bay Bridge. “The Pier,” as Deeman calls it, exhibits the collection of its benefactors, Andy and Mary Pilara, and others. The exhibitions run for up to a year and usually display one collector’s interest. Now for the first time ever, selections from all the big-name collectors in the Bay Area are here together. The collectors represented range from Bob and **Randi Fisher**, who offered William Eggleston’s full-color portfolio of ’60s and ’70s highway work, called “Los Alamos,” to Susie Tompkins Buell’s collection of documentary classics heavy in **Dorothea Lange** and **Walker Evans**.

Also there is rarely seen work by Robert Frank, from the Bluff Collection, and a room crammed wall to wall and floor to ceiling with rock and jazz portraits and album covers by **Richard Avedon** and **Lee Friedlander**, from the collection of publisher **Nion McEvoy**.

Right in there with all of these names is Deeman, who qualifies for “Collected” because Pilara was so impressed by her work that he collected 10 of her images. “My work focuses on the question of identity and how much visual information is needed to begin a dialogue of understanding who somebody is,” she says, during

a break from Art Market San Francisco, where she was earning a day's wages setting up exhibits.

“Silhouettes” started in 2013 as Deeman was transitioning from being an account director in a London advertising agency to fine art photographer in San Francisco. She already had one bachelor's from Leeds Beckett University and had started on her second.

Always interested in portraiture, she invited an African American woman she did not know to have her picture made at the Academy of Art studio. She set up for a traditional shoot with front lighting but was intrigued by lighting the subject from behind, to create a silhouette.

“When I saw it, I felt something akin to anthropology,” she says. “It was almost sculptural, yet still portraiture.”

Thus began a series of 30 portraits that took nine months. Deeman used strangers she met on the street, friends of friends and people reached through Craigslist ads. The only requirement was that they be willing to pose with shoulders bare.

“There was no makeup or hair or anything like that,” she says. “I just asked them to come as they feel confident.”



Photo: Gabrielle Lurie, Special To The Chronicle

Artist Erica Deeman walks past her photographs, which are in the show, "Collected", at Pier 24 Photography, in San Francisco, California, on Friday, April 29, 2016.

### **Prototypes shot**

The prototype series was shot with a digital camera and printed on Inkjet paper, 10 inches by 10 inches. These are the images that McCall saw.

“She has the compelling combination of technical precision and culturally charged content,” says McCall. “This allows her to render the work in a beautiful, empathetic way without stripping it of its powerful message.”

McCall suggested that all the portraits be reshot so that they could be blown up and still retain their clarity. This meant recontacting all of Deeman’s subjects and asking them to come in again, to the Academy of Art studio.

She used a Hasselblad 501 medium-format camera on loan from the school, and paid for her own color film. “Seven dollars a roll,” she says. She got a discount

printing voucher from a school friend, which allowed her to print one enlargement, 4 feet by 4 feet.

She brought that picture into Pier 24 to show McCall her progress, and stashed it in the curatorial room. Pilara came in and asked who the photographer was. When he found out, Deeman got a stipend in order to finish her printing, 30 images in all.

The entire series got its own private 10-day pop-up show at Pier 24. But 10 days cannot compare with nine months. The exhibitions are long because Pier 24 allows just 90 visitors a day, plus a few school groups, to give the art room to breathe.

Make a reservation for a Thursday and you might find Deeman out on the floor. She is still working her volunteer shift, one day a week, 9 to 5.

“The Pier, yeah,” she says.

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**Collected:** 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday-Friday. Through Jan. 31. Free. Pier 24 Photography, on the Embarcadero, S.F. Appointment required. (415) 512-7424. [www.pier24.org](http://www.pier24.org)