

EAST BAY EXPRESS

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Erica Deeman: *Silhouettes* at BAMPFA

By *Sarah Burke*

In 1928, African-American author Zora Neale Hurston famously wrote “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” And in 1992, African-American artist Glenn Ligon memorialized the phrase by turning it into one of his signature black and white text paintings — thick, gooey black paint smudging across a white canvas. San Francisco photographer Erica Deeman’s *Silhouettes* also brings the phrase to mind. The series of thirty large-scale, back-lit profile portraits of Black women appears to anticipate the white gaze, alluding to anthropological drawings from the 1800s. But, simultaneously, they also subvert that gaze. Upon close inspection, the photographs reveal a nuanced gradient of

browns in the edges softly hit by light, freeing the subjects from imposed assumptions about blackness. All thirty of Deeman’s gorgeous portraits will be on view at the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (2155 Center St., Berkeley) from March 8 through June 11. Deeman will give an artist talk at 6 p.m. on March 8. Not to be missed.

