



Face to face with San Francisco photographer Erica Deeman

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Erica Deeman in studio
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“Oh, my god!”

Erica Deeman gasps as she walks into her solo exhibition for the first time.

“Sometimes I have to pinch myself. It is the first time I’ve seen them all in a room together, all thirty pieces framed.”

Larger than life portraits of black women fill the walls. All of the subjects are photographed in the same way: in profile, their faces backlit against a stark white backdrop.

“So the show is about black femininity,” Deeman explains. “It is guiding the audience to think about expectations and character and how we understand a person when we look at a face.”

The images look similar from a distance because of the high contrast. In fact, they seem black and white. But move closer—it isn’t until you’re standing right up close that you can

see color and definition: the highlights in a lock of hair, the specific curve of an eyelid, or the attitude in posture makes each silhouette an individual person.

“That’s definitely my intention,” Deeman says. “On first glance to make people look at something that they've seen before, and that may be black and white, for example, and then be drawn into the work and realize the individuality of all the women. And the fact that it’s color, it kind of challenges the generalized view that you have.”

Deeman’s heritage is Jamaican and English. Back in school, she wanted to shoot a portrait series connecting subjects from the African diaspora—people from around the world with African heritage. So she set up her camera, backdrop, and lights in a studio at school.

“I would go out onto the street and I would literally kind of wait for women to walk past me that I believed were from the African diaspora, or that had one parent from the African diaspora, “ she explains.

Her breakthrough moment came when she saw Fatou Seck at a Mission District bar called Little Baobab. Deeman invited her back to the Academy to model for the project.

“I saw her as a silhouette in my viewfinder, and I knew straight away it was an important image for a woman of color to be within. Because it was really traditionally created for the white European. It gives me a chance to go back and re-articulate all those words associated with features and character, such as strength and nobility, and to give that to women of color, to black women.”

Deeman works in a small, bright studio near the ballpark in San Francisco. Two portraits from the show dominate the metal wall across from her desk. One of the portraits is a woman with braids piled sculpturally on her head. Deeman looks at her and takes a deep breath.

“I project a peaceful and comfortable position when I read her portrait,” she says thoughtfully.

The woman's eyes are cast down; her lips are slightly parted.

"I feel that there is a serenity that is allowing her to have her eyes closed in this formal environment," Deeman adds.

The two portraits are positioned so it looks like the women are looking at each other. The second portrait is a contrast to the serenity of the first.

"I don't want to use the word pride," Deeman pauses, "but there's a different presence of pride in her positioning."

That woman is Ruby Rosas.



Ruby Rosas and Erica Deeman at Berkeley Art Museum
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Back at the gallery, Rosas looks small standing next to her huge portrait.

“I’m in a complete side profile. My eyes are looking straight forward. I have zero makeup on so I’m bare-faced. My mouth is completely closed and I’m not smiling,” Rosas reflects for a moment. “More stoic. But kind of...more strong in a sense.”

She laughs and confesses that under her stoic pose, she had some insecurities.

“Well, to be very honest I didn't wear deodorant that day, so I was like, ‘I wonder if she can smell my pits?’” she laughs. Then she gets serious again.

“It’s funny because at that point in my life, I was going through a lot of crazy rough times. So it was a transitional place for me. A pivotal—like, what are my next steps? Who am I going to be now?”

She and Deeman agree that strength is a running theme in the works.

“In order to be a more liberated black woman in this country, you don’t have to be angry or super angry. You can just be strong, or still soft, but just persevere.”

Deeman wants that strength to come through in her work. She says it has been underrepresented in the past.

I think that when you look at art history, it’s rare to see a black woman on the wall in a position of power. It’s very clear that our position has maybe not been elevated or emphasized. I wanted to say that these women can be everything that anyone else can be on this planet.”

Deeman says that this work is important now because society is still asking tough questions about how women and people of color are treated.

“It feels very timely and I think because the work pulls from art history. This is a vision for the future,” she turns around and surveys the walls.

“If I want to think big, if a young woman could come in and see this work, or young child, and feel that she can see herself within it, then I have done something good.”

Then, she turns her attention to a photograph on the first wall of the exhibit.



Erica Deeman with her work
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“I love this woman!” she exclaims.

Her subject’s face is luminous; her chin tilted up. As we get closer, we can see that her short hair is gray. Deeman looks at the portrait and says she sees warmth, and vulnerability.

“Dignity and gravitas. She reminds me a little bit of my my mum, and that’s why she might be a favorite of mine.”

We stand in front of her for awhile. There’s softness in her bare shoulders and the exposed nape of her neck, but resolve in her unwavering gaze that extends to some unknown place outside of the frame.