

## A Portrait of a Man Named Jonathan

[nytimes.com/2020/08/21/t-magazine/erica-deeman-artist-portrait.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/21/t-magazine/erica-deeman-artist-portrait.html)

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*In each installment of The Artists, T highlights a recent or little-shown work by a Black artist, along with a few words from that artist putting the work into context. This week, we're looking at a piece by Erica Deeman, who focuses on portrait photography, exploring questions of race and identity. Her new show, "Familiar Stranger," opens next week at Anthony Meier Fine Arts.*

**Name:** Erica Deeman

**Age:** 43

**Based in:** San Francisco, Calif.

**Originally from:** Nottingham, England

**When and where did you make this work?** I made this photograph with Jonathan in my living room in San Francisco in 2016.

**Can you describe what is going on in the work?** Jonathan — a friend of my roommate at the time — was visiting the United States from London. I'd been working on my "Brown" portraiture series for a while, which focuses on men from the African diaspora and is centered on what it means to see and be seen as a Blackman in the United States and beyond. I asked if he would consider sitting for me, and thankfully he agreed. I set up the background and lights in my living room, and we began the collaboration. For me, coming to the U.S. has had a profound impact on my sense of self and belonging. The topics of race, gender and representation drove our conversation — sharing the familiarity of our homeland experiences, moments of joy, frustration and reflection. I wondered how he felt in the limited time he had spent here. This image was made in a moment of pause and deep thought.

**What inspired you to make this work?** So many thoughts and ideas were pulsing through my mind at the time. First, a tenderness in seeing Blackmen, set against the historical archive of portraiture and scientific photography. Seeing the beauty in Blackness, I am constantly reminded of Carrie Mae Weems's piece, "I Looked and Looked and Failed to See What so Terrified You" (2003). There was also a significant community-building aspect in making the photographs. I was still finding my feet, so to speak, so making this work allowed me to fold into the Black community in the Bay Area, feeling a deeper connection to my new home.

**What's the work of art in any medium that changed your life?** I admire artists who can use any medium to share their ideas. For me, Howardena Pindell is one of those artists who has the mastery of transforming her audience. Of her pieces, I choose the video work "Free, White, and 21" (1980). I first saw it at the Pérez Art Museum Miami a few days after Art Basel one year. The museum was very quiet, and I had the opportunity to spend uninterrupted time with it.