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**Renée Cox interviewed by Nicole Plett
Rutgers University Inn, New Brunswick
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Never Has She Ever: Renée Cox Solo Show

Featuring the “Queen Nanny of the Maroons” Series
2008-09 Estelle Lebowitz Visiting Artist-in-Residence
Monday, September 22 - Monday, December 8, 2008
Mabel Smith Douglass Library Galleries
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Special Event: Wednesday, October 22, 2008, at 6 p.m.

Renée Cox: Estelle Lebowitz Visiting Artist-in-Residence Public Lecture
Mabel Smith Douglass Room, Douglass Library

Renowned contemporary American photographer Renée Cox celebrates black womanhood at the same time she challenges the limiting roles customarily assigned to Blacks and women in our culture. She is one of the most controversial African-American artists working today, using her own body and ingenious narratives to critique the racism and sexism entrenched in the dominant society.

This exhibition and lecture was organized by the Mary H. Dana Women Artists Series, a program of the Institute for Women and Art (IWA) in partnership with the Rutgers University Libraries, in collaboration with the Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions and the Visual Arts Department/Mason Gross School of the Arts. The IWA operates under the auspices of the Office of the Associate Vice President for Academic & Public Partnerships in the Arts & Humanities. Co-sponsors include: Associate Alumnae of Douglass College, Barbara Voorhees Leadership Initiative, Department of Art History, The Feminist Art Project, Global Initiatives, Institute for Research on Women, Office of the Dean of Douglass and Douglass Residential Campus, and the Women's and Gender Studies Department. These events are made possible in part by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts.

Queen Nanny of the Maroons was first shown at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York City, in February and March, 2005. Cox exhibited the body of work in the Jamaica National Biennial 2007 where it won the Aaron Matalon Award.

Born in Colgate, Jamaica, in 1960, to an upper-middle class family, Renée Cox was an only child. When Cox was an infant, her family left Jamaica and moved to Jackson Heights, Queens; while living in the U.S., the family traveled back to Jamaica regularly. When Renée was 10, her parents were thinking about moving back to Jamaica; in advance of a move that never happened, they sent Renée to an Anglican boarding school there. This was where Renée Cox discovered the historic figure of Queen Nanny of the Maroons. After one year's schooling in Jamaica, Cox resisted going back. She next attended an Episcopal boarding school on Long Island where she

played on the boys' basketball team. Her family eventually settled in Scarsdale, New York, where Renée spent her high school years before enrolling at Syracuse University.

*At Syracuse Cox majored in Film Studies, but moved into still photography after graduation. She worked as an Assistant Fashion Editor at Glamour Magazine and then moved to Paris to pursue a career as a fashion photographer. She spent three years working in Paris, shooting for magazines that included *Votre Beaute* and *Vogue Homme* and for designers Issey Miyake, and Claude Montana, among others.*

*Cox married and returned to New York City, where she continued to work as a fashion photographer for ten years. Among her clients were editorial magazines such as *Essence*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Mademoiselle*, *Seventeen Magazine*, and *Sportswear International*. She also worked with Spike Lee, producing the poster for his 1988 film *School Daze*.*

In the early 1990s, inspired by the birth of her first son, Cox decided to focus primarily on fine art photography. She received her Master of Fine Arts at the School of Visual Arts in New York and subsequently spent a year working with Mary Kelley and Ron Clark in the Whitney Independent Study Program. She had her first New York one-woman show in 1998.

Please see: <http://reneecox.org/>

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Renée Cox:

Q: I'd like to focus on your "Queen Nanny of the Maroons" series, completed in 2004, and now on display in our galleries. How did this heroic figure (who I must admit I had never heard of before) come into your life?

[Note: Maroons is a term used to describe runaway or fugitive slaves who fled slavery first under Spanish rule and then under the British. They formed independent, self-sustaining settlements on the island's inaccessible interior highlands.]

When I was 10, my parents had the nerve and the audacity to send me back to Jamaica to boarding school because they said they were going to move back there – and they actually didn't move back. But I was sent first, to pave the way. I can remember taking a B.O.A.C. flight back to Jamaica – back then you had to get dressed up to travel by plane.

The school was a really uptight, upper-crusty place with an English headmistress. When I misbehaved – which included talking out of turn in class – I had to go and sit on this woman's veranda as punishment! [*Hearty laugh.*] Fortunately I did that for one long year, and then I just bitched and complained to my parents. Basically when I came back for the summer, I refused to go back from Jackson Heights to Jamaica and they sent me to an Episcopalian boarding school on Long Island where some of the teachers were nuns.

School in Jamaica was daunting when I was going through it -- because you're a little kid. But at the same time, I think it made me more independent and resourceful in terms of figuring ways to

get what I wanted. What I would do was that I'd hang out in the kitchen with the cooks and I'd promise to have my parents bring them back to work in the United States – which was always a big draw for them – so I wouldn't have to eat the Spam. It was a way to get better food. False promises, but it was about survival!

I discovered Queen Nanny, which was when I was going to school in Jamaica -- because she's a national hero. That was the first time I had heard of her, but it stuck. So for me, in my unconscious or double consciousness, she was always a figure there. But the thing is, a lot of these histories don't get any credit because they weren't written, or what was written was written by the colonizers. So you get a really skewed view of the history.

I guess, unlike other girls, I never felt like I couldn't do what I wanted to do. I never felt that I had restrictions in front of me. When I was going to junior high school, I was the first girl to play on the boys' basketball team – which I fought them tooth and nail for. They didn't have a girls' team but I was really good and I played with the boys all the time. I still have one little article from a Long Island newspaper with a photo of me playing 'Round the World' with a basketball on my finger, standing next to my coach. They had to let me play because I was better than a lot of the boys on the team. This was before Title IX [the 1972 regulation establishing equity for girls in school sports]. And they were making excuses like, 'Where are you going to change clothes?'

I played there one year, and after that we moved to Scarsdale where they had a girls' team and I played on the girls' team. I went to college in Syracuse and played varsity on the women's team for my freshman year. Then I decided I didn't want to be called a lesbian and I got out of basketball.

Q: What kind of creative thinking and practical planning went into the “Queen Nanny of the Maroons” series?

It was an interesting journey. It took two-and-a-half to three years to complete the project.

After my “American Family” show -- I was proud of the show but the reviews were so-so. Roberta Smith gave it a lot of ink, but she made it like totally convoluted and didn't know where I was coming from. She said things like, 'Renée Cox doesn't know what to do with herself,' 'Renée Cox is really narcissistic,' and so forth. Needless to say that does hurt sales.

I'm only human, so I have to admit that at a certain point it did get under my skin. And I decided at that point that I was going to embark on a project on the Maroons. I was going to go down to Jamaica and I was going to do portraits of the Maroons, and I wasn't going to put myself in the series, and it was going to be a total turnaround.

So I got some books on the Maroons and started reading up on them and then I went down – I already went down to Jamaica fairly often, so the next time I went down I made sure that I went up to Moore Town – which you could call the capital of the Maroons of Portland. And I went

there and I met with Colonel Harris – who is still alive – and he is the patriarch of the Maroon world. The Maroons have an independent sovereign state, they are not really part of Jamaica. And Colonel Harris is a storehouse of information – he’s super smart. So I went and I talked to him and I told him what I wanted to do – but it wasn’t clear what I wanted to do. I just knew I wanted to do portraits of the Maroon people, at that point. So I spoke to him for maybe three hours and got a full dose of the history and it and he turned me on to some other people in the Maroon community.

I went to the bar – well, it’s not really a bar, it’s just the one store there – and I went and I bought drinks and stuff for the people who were there. And then I started talking with people.

Basically, with this kind of body of work, it’s really about creating a rapport. For students, I would say, that’s the key thing. Taking the photographs, usually that’s pretty easy. But it’s the people element, it’s the rapport, it’s getting to know the people and having them to trust you. Because the Maroons are a proud people. They don’t have a lot of money, but they’re still really proud and they have a lot of dignity. So it’s not about just coming in there with a camera and photographing them like you’re in a zoo or something like that – that’s not the answer. I wasn’t interested in doing anything like that.

To be honest, I went up there – on that first trip – I must have gone up there two or three times that week. And going up there is no walk in the park, because the road – there’s barely a road! It’s in the Blue Mountains. The city that’s closest to it is Port Antonio. One of my very good friends has a hotel there and a recording studio, so I’ve been going there since the 1980s. But I hadn’t ventured up into the hills until I had the idea to photograph.

The drive up there is a ten-mile drive, but it’s a drive that takes you an hour because the road is non-existent. You go too far off on one side, and you’re going to fall off into a gully and die – It’s tricky! I took friends up there and they freaked out – it’s so remote.

Nanny Falls

So the first visit I went up there three or four times. Then I went back for a second visit and went up there three or four times. So the third block of time I went up there I started shooting, at that point I had made friends with some people in the community and I had let them know what I wanted to do.

On my third visit I came with many gifts – I went to Old Navy and came away with several hundred dollars worth of clothes – for the children primarily – so there were the kids and their parents were appreciative also. So that trip I spent primarily focused on photographing the people, because that was what I had come prepared to do.

But on that third trip also started talking to my friend, Mana. I had pushed out of the bad review from Roberta Smith – and I’m saying to myself: ‘You’re Renée Cox. What do you mean you’re just going to go there and just do portraits? That’s crazy! Wait, no, you have to be in the work – that’s your M.O. You cannot let them mess with you like that. They don’t bother Cindy Sherman about that, so why am I going to acquiesce?’ And the answer is, ‘No way!’ So then I decided to

take on the role of Queen Nanny. So that was the first little intervention. But there was much work in preparation behind me taking on the role of Queen Nanny.

Bump Grave

We don't really know for sure, but they say that Queen Nanny is buried at Bump Grave. That is where I did the picture of me as the school teacher with all the kids behind me – that's where they're standing, on Bump Grave. But they don't know for sure.

On that third trip I focused on the people. But the next trip, now I'm prepared. I go down with a little crew – an assistant and somebody who's a stylist/makeup/hair/gopher – everything! At that juncture I go down and I've rented a costume, I've rented a Red Coat, and I've got a designer friend of mine [his name is Efferson] to give me some clothing to wear that would fit into the environment. So then we start shooting and putting together different scenarios for Queen Nanny. And go back with the crew basically two more times.

Q: What kind of set up did this work require? Did you storyboard your pictures?

It's loose, really loose. It's not like a Joel-Peter Witkin or something like that with a whole page plan. For the most part, it's all in my head. I don't like to use a storyboard because then you get locked into something -- or your brain locks into something.

The key thing I like to keep myself open to – I have to have spontaneity, because those are the best shots. I like the nature of working with a small crew and passing by a location and saying, 'Oh wow, that works!'

Sometimes you can get all anal about it and think, I'm going to set this up or I'm going to set that up' – and you can. But then you're talking, you better have Gregory Crewdson money – and I don't have that! So I have to work with spontaneity and let things happen.

So we just started shooting. And then with the kids. Based on the fact that I'd been there over time, people were cool with their kids. Meaning they weren't saying 'Why are you photographing my kid?' or something like that – Everybody was open to it.

Note: Cox exhibited the "Queen Nanny" series in the Jamaica National Biennial 2007 where it won the Aaron Matalon Award.

Last year I went down to Jamaica and I showed the work there [in the Jamaica National Biennial 2007] where it was received really, really well. I got an award, the [Aaron] Matalon Award, from the former Prime Minister, Edward Seaga. And ironically enough, I came to find out, just there, that nobody had touched this topic. Like nobody. I mean people may have done one painting. But nobody took it on as a body of work or even the Maroons for that matter.

And I was glad. Because usually I don't research that aspect before I begin, because I don't care and I don't want to be stopped. So I prefer not to know that and I just go ahead and do what I'm going to do.

Q: Following on the idea of research, what did you learn about Queen Nanny by being there and trying to imagine yourself as her in her own environment?

Well, this may sound a little bit weird, but I learned that her presence is still very much there. I'm not a cosmic person or anything. But I can say... I may sound a little bit like Shirley MacLaine. But at one point, there's one photograph that totally did not look like me. I'm wearing the Red Coat and I'm standing at Nanny Falls and I swear there is something going on there... in the photograph. You feel that presence there. It's strong, it's there – You know what I'm saying?

Q: In the photograph “Nanny Warrior,” where you are reaching out with the machete in one hand, touching the trunk of the tree with the other, I have to say I don't equate that image with you either. When I look at it I can feel you are enacting a presence. It's visceral. The idea of guerrilla warfare, the idea of disguise, the way she is rooted like the tree – I felt the image allowed me to understand Queen Nanny's story.

And I can tell you, in terms of production, that photograph was very spontaneous because it wasn't necessarily planned. I'm down there, I have the costume, the right sort of traditional cotton clothing that I had rented from a theatrical rental store. And literally the villa I had rented was directly across the street from all that foliage and it had those big trees and palm trees. So literally I said to my assistant, I'm going to go up to where that tree is – not more than 100 feet – and I'm going to do this. And we just shot it, bang like that – really quick. And that's always a beautiful thing when that happens! [*Hearty laugh.*]

Q: Can you explain about the rented villa that's featured in the picture titled Lolivya, where the word is written on the exterior wall?

Lolivya – it's written in patois – and it means 'Lola lives here.' So that's the villa I rented. And so again it was another shot where I said, 'Oh my god, we have to do Nanny at home.'

Because for me the whole thing was about creating imagery of Nanny – taking artistic license, because there were no images of her to speak of. So what Nanny would have been in the past, and, more importantly, who would she be today?

And *Lolivya* is this weird past and present. But I wanted to have an image that was like, 'Yes, come on in ... But you play by my rule' – You know what I'm saying?

Q: Regarding your reference to Cindy Sherman fictional self-portraits. I know that way before Cindy Sherman there was Julia Margaret Cameron who photographed her subjects in costumes, portraying people other than themselves. So this practice was pretty much born with the art of photography. Could you talk about your right to take on characters and to appear totally nude in your work? What was the thought process that brought you to this expression?

That came about from when I went to grad school. Grad school was really good for me in the sense that it allowed me that two-year space to figure out what I wanted to do with my

photography. I mean, yes, I have the chops, I have the skills, I know how to light something, and all that sort of stuff. But that's not enough – you know what I'm saying?

When I first got to grad school I was doing this weird stuff. I had this friend of mine and I had her wrapped up in all kinds of Saran Wrap and I had all this bizarre things. And then I started chopping up the photographs and kind of putting them back together and all this sort of madness. But fortunately I didn't lose a lot of time on this – that was the first semester. So by January I was asking myself, 'What is this stuff?' 'Where am I going,' 'What am I doing?' Then I started doing these totems and all of this. But then suddenly I had the idea to deal with issues around race and empowerment. So my first intervention was actually "Liberty in the South Bronx." That was really the first serious piece that I did, in my opinion. That was the beginning of the journey.

There's a great empowerment in being nude, in being completely naked, that I discovered on that particular shoot. I mean people don't mess with you when you're naked. Guys are totally respectful when you're naked – You take more chances wearing a g-string or a midriff top. But when you're naked, people are like 'Woah - This one is serious. She's not trying to titillate us. It's here. Now what's she gonna do?' And I like that. It's the opposite of what you would expect. You'd think maybe when you get dressed up people are going to be intimidated, but then you strip all that away and you're totally naked and you're empowered. Because most people -- especially in our puritanical, Victorian leftover society -- people are afraid of the body.

Q: As a feminist your own body becomes an instrument of power?

And once I discovered that, then I thought, okay, I can do more with this. And then, actually, the way my work has gone has been very autobiographical. For me, it's almost like a call and response.

So I did that, and then a year and a half later I found myself in the Whitney [Independent Study] Program, and I'm pregnant and when I tell people that I'm pregnant, they freak out.

Q: So your second pregnancy during her Whitney Museum of American Art's Independent Study Program received a generally negative reaction?

Yes. I hear: 'You're a female artist and oh god, you're pregnant, blah, blah, blah...' But for me, it was like I was going to continue on. And no, I'm not going to hide myself in a muumuu! I'm pregnant, so let's take advantage of this particular situation. That was my second pregnancy and I didn't intend on having any more children so I was thinking, let me document this. And let's give some power to being pregnant. Let's be pregnant and strong! Let's be mothers and strong. Let's be mothers and kick ass!

Q: Was this before or after Demi Moore's pregnant cover picture for Vanity Fair?

This was before Demi Moore. Let me make that very clear. This was before Demi Moore and all those girls in Hollywood discovered, 'Oh wow, wouldn't it be cool to be on the cover of Vanity Fair pregnant?'

Q: I like your earlier comment about your creative path as a “Call and Response” – So you’re saying that you are going to have a second child and you’re going to make work that’s about what you and your child are each going through?

Yes – I’m making work that is in line with my life. Like I’ve told people, you can drive yourself insane in trying to come up with some genius idea – but I don’t think there are really any genius ideas per se – What I do, I like to use what’s around me. Meaning that, fine, ‘Yo Mama at Home,’ fine, let’s keep going. And that’s kind of like how I operate – you know what I’m saying? – up until today.

My newest body of work is “The Discrete Charm of the Bougies,” which is my “Black Desperate Housewives meets The Valley of the Dolls” -- that was my working title for the series.

Where did that come from? It came because here I was living in suburbia, I’m living in Chappaqua, and I’m around these women who are on Valium and pain killers and drink cocktails. They’re privileged but they’re alienated and they’re isolated. They’re alone. And that’s why Westchester has the highest concentration of anti-depressants in its reservoir system – or something like that.

So I took that idea from the environment that I was in and from the opportunity that was offered me by what I call the universe. Because if I were still sitting in SoHo and wanted to do that, that would be more problematic.

Note: “The Discrete Charm of the Bougies” was first exhibited at the Galerie Nordine Zidoun in Paris from November 1 to December 20, 2008.

Ten images will be exhibited in Paris. One is a “lenticular image” which means that it’s a 3-D hologram, sort of, in a light box. [*Lenticular printing is a technology in which a lenticular lens is used to produce images with an illusion of depth, or the ability to change or move as the image is viewed from different angles.*] I was thinking of doing the whole series in that way, but it’s really expensive.

Q: Now the glorious color of the “Bougies” series brings me back to Queen Nanny in the sense that I was surprised that the majority of work in the Jamaica series is presented in black and white. Can you discuss?

I did use a little bit of color on some of them. But primarily they’re black and white and the reason for that is – everyone uses color. That’s what you expect. I don’t necessarily like to do what everyone expects. And there’s a whole, rich photographic history of black and white photographs of Jamaica in the 1930 and ‘40s. I don’t need to be gratuitous with the color. And I think the black and white speaks better to what the subject matter is. I use the color just as little sparks. Obviously when she’s wearing the Red Coat, you’re going to shoot that in color.

“Water” – Open air baptism still takes place in Jamaica. But to be honest, if you want to create images that are visually seductive... I knew I wanted to do a baptism.

“River Queen” was the same kind of thing. You’re there, the light’s right, there’s the rock, there’s the river, everything’s moving. And it’s like wow. I would get direction from the place, too. I remember when we passed the rock and I stopped my little crew and said, ‘wait a minute, I’ve got to do something on this rock.’ I set it up and then there it was. And it was a great shot.

But I’d be a liar if I told you that I sat in New York and conceived it and drew it. Because again, you can’t guarantee, because you can’t predict what the condition of that river’s going to be.

As I’m working, as I’m shooting, I’m working. I’m looking at what the next shot might possible be. Like the one wear she has the bushel of bananas on her head. I saw these people with bushels of bananas on their heads walking down the road. I asked my friend to get one of those bushels for me. Again, when I set out for that shoot, the only thing that I knew I was going to do was the photograph in front of Nanny Falls. But in that particular situation you’ve got to go with the flow.

The photograph itself is a 60th of a second generally speaking. But it’s the production. It’s everything that goes into the photograph that counts. “Yo Mama’s Last Supper” was my most heavy-duty production because I had to find all my Apostles. Not only do I have to find them but I have to clothe them. I also need props that could be from that time.

I shot it in five pieces. I shot it out in a church in Jackson Heights and I shot it in five pieces. They knew what I wanted to do... but not completely. In order to have it move correctly, and I remember it was pouring rain and one of the Apostles didn’t show – so one of my friends is playing two roles! I shot all of the bits with the guys. And the final one was of me, nude. Because I figured that if I were to be caught, at least I’d have everything else!

I shoot very quickly. I always hated that when I did fashion, too. I don’t shoot 14 rolls of film the same damn shot. For me, I play a game with myself: How little film can I use? And especially that, we were shooting 4x5. You don’t have time to be doing 500 sheets of film. So usually, if I can get it in six, that’s too much! I like to say I want two or three, in case something happens to one, or whatever. I can go as far as do it in two. But you Polaroided it before; you see exactly what it is before you put it on film. And I’m not into editing. Some people edit, they may even move a hand from here to there – I can’t be bothered with that. So that’s one of my things. I like the “guerrilla challenge” of the photographic process: You set up the shot and you get it in two or three frames.

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