

DEANA LAWSON: *Mother Tongue*

February 28 – April 4, 2014

Opening reception:

Friday, February 28, 2014, 5 – 7:30 pm



Deana Lawson, *Oath*, 2013, pigment print, 50 x 40 inches

“Yesssssss!!!” Queen Mother’s wails have always struck a chord in me, it’s one of the most primal calls. - An expression to receive, to open oneself up completely.

- From Deana Lawson’s journal entry, June 12, 2011

“To open oneself up completely” captures the attitude of the subjects of Deana Lawson’s photographs in *Mother Tongue*, her first solo exhibition at Rhona Hoffman Gallery. A dancer poses nude, her body cutting a diagonal through a Jamaican living room (*Otisha*), a couple embraces on the outskirts of a south Florida jungle (*Oath*), and a Haitian woman stares squarely forward as blood runs down her face from the severed pig head she holds above her (*As Above, So Below*). In this new series of images the body channels both personal and social histories; “flesh and blood” form the core narrative of *Mother Tongue*.

Lawson’s oeuvre, grown over the last decade, is a collective portrait that investigates Black aesthetics through the body, the domestic environment, and various settings of ritual or celebration. Her subjects begin as strangers and quickly become collaborators in the photographic process. From behind her large format camera, Lawson coaxes the spontaneous out of the carefully constructed compositions. The resulting images are both self-referential and anthropologically rich. As writer and musician Greg Tate eloquently phrased it “[Lawson’s] practice subtly contests the suppression of Black visual epistemologies—as much through absence as presence, withheld information as much as cultural saturation bombing.” Even in the images where the figure is not present, such as *Hellshire Beach Towel with Flies*, the evidence of the body is still palpable. Here an empty disheveled bed becomes an invitation to receive and to enter Lawson’s world; ambiguous visual clues create unavoidable confrontation in the midst of explicit intimacy.

Deana Lawson’s work has been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; MOMA PS1, New York; the Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago. Her photographs have been published in *The New Yorker* and *Time Magazine*. Recently, Lawson was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, expanding her locations of work to include Jamaica, Haiti, and West Africa. Deana Lawson is currently a Lecturer in Photography at Princeton University. Lawson received an M.F.A. from RISD in 2004.