



ARTIST

Ellen M. Blalock

TITLE

Untitled, from the series, 'A New Rite'

DATE

1984

DIMENSIONS

9 in H x 13 in W

MEDIUM

Chromogenic Color Prints

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1984.003

CURRENT LOCATION

2024-4C

ELLEN M. BLALOCK

BORN

1958

BIRTHPLACE

Philadelphia, PA

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Light Work Grant, 1984
Light Work Retrospective Exhibition, 1985
Artist-in-Residence, 2002
Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 2003
Diverse Voices Exhibition Other, 2009 –
Present) (Light Work Board Member

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 43
Contact Sheet 122
Exhibition Catalog: Light Work Retrospective

BIOGRAPHY

Ellen Blalock, of Syracuse, NY is working on a series of color photographs using the female form as a starting point to explore the rituals and passages of womanhood and motherhood, and the pain of repression, accomplishment, and ceremonial initiation. While her images address formal concerns of color, assemblage, composition, and beauty, they are strong statements about the struggle and compromise of a unique culture striving to maintain a recollection of its heritage within an unsympathetic environment.

Blalock has exhibited her work at Syracuse University, the Lowe Art Gallery, and Two Flights Up Gallery in Syracuse. She participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in July 2002.

ESSAYS

Ellen Blalock uses her artistic vision and the mediums of video and photography as expressions of her ideas as they relate to society and the issues that plague African-Americans in an increasingly predominantly, white minority-run country. Blalock, given the gift of a rich and passionate history, allows the voices of her ancestors to resonate through her ideas and creativity. This series explores the human condition through the African-American experience, and strikes a chord in one's soul. The Father series brings the teen father into focus. We read and hear about the impact of parenting on teenmothers, but what of the fathers? Father. The word, for many, means caretaker, protector, nurturer, parent, and unconditional love. But does the fact that one can spill sperm, or 'shoot a load,' mean they understand the full impact of fatherhood? The struggles of young African-American men have grown to gargantuan proportions. For years, sociologists have studied the trends of teenagers having children, and the impact it has on their lives. Studies have shown that children born to children have less of a chance to succeed in life, and often repeat the cycle of the birth parent. In turn, social programs have been created to teach these teens how to meet the needs of a newborn baby. Blalock, through her human-mechanical eye and empathetic soul, focuses on these man-boys with the product of their lust, youthful exuberance, recklessness, immaturity, and rite of passage from boys to men. She captures their words, voices, attitudes and expressions, hopes and dreams, and love for their children through video and photographs. A scenario: A student in college, now working a minimum wage job trying to support his tiny princess, asks his employer for more hours. Time passes, dreams fade, jobs lost, unskilled, but still trying. Will he stay? He hopes, they hope, we hope, but sometimes he can't see that, in this situation, dreams can fade even more quickly and harsher. 'I want to be just like my father. Yeah, my Father is in prison right now, but he's a good father. He's been in prison most of the time I was growing up, but, I love him...Yeah, I want to go to college for a couple of years...I want to be a doctor.' 'Dawg. This is my Dawg,' says one young man looking at his infant son with pride. He never sees a time when they will be apart. This is quite possibly the one person he can depend on to love him unconditionally. These young men struggle to understand the responsibility of being a parent, and are disparaged by a society that fails to comprehend, or see them as young men; a society that asks, 'What has any young man to offer a baby when they have not yet completed this part of life's journey?' A teen father may deny a child parentage, not because he wants to, or because of lack of feeling for the child, but because he wonders: 'How can I take care of this' when I cannot take care of myself?' This may be attributed to the social morals held by this culture where these young men are viewed as children. Historically, in other societies, mates are taken and households are set up when boys turn thirteen or fourteen. It is considered their rite of passage to becoming men. Procreation is reality. However, society insists that the teen father cannot, or should not, be a part of the child's life, basing these decisions partially on an economic perspective. It fails to take into consideration that these young men do have the capacity to love and honor the gift of birth, and see this as a life-changing event. The disparaging of teen fathers only serves to show a lack of respect for these young men and increases their inability to cope with an extremely difficult situation in life. The support that should be shown to them may help change the perceptions they have of themselves and their abilities, helping them to be a positive force in their babies' lives. Blalock's work allows these men to be heard. Her photographs resonate with the many stories and paths taken, and not taken, by teen fathers trying 'to do the right thing.' Mark Wright 2003 Ellen Blalock lived in Georgia before recently moving to Syracuse, NY. She participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in July 2002. Mark Wright is a poet and playwright who lives in Syracuse, NY, and works for the Cultural Resources Council. Ellen Blalock, of Syracuse, NY is working on a series of color photographs using the female form as a starting point to explore the rituals and passages of womanhood and motherhood, and the pain of repression, accomplishment, and ceremonial initiation. While her images address formal concerns of color, assemblage, composition, and beauty, they are strong statements about the struggle and compromise of a unique culture striving to maintain a recollection of its heritage within an unsympathetic environment. Blalock has exhibited her work at Syracuse University, the Lowe Art Gallery, and Two Flights Up Gallery in Syracuse. In organizing the exhibition "Un/Common Threads: Selections from the Light Work Collection," curator Kaylen Williams went beyond a superficial perception of diversity that has become pervasive in the United States. As a 2007 study by the sociology department at University of Minnesota revealed, many Americans happily endorse diversity as a nebulous concept; however, many are still at a loss to discuss the specifics of diversity and its related sub-topics, such as gender, race, ethnicity, economic status, and sexual orientation. (1) "Un/Common Threads" harnessed the power of photographs, using a visual language to voice these all-important specifics of diversity. Williams used the visual language that coalesced among the various images to stimulate dialogue about the complex challenges of a pluralist culture in ways that addressed both broad and personal implications. Exhibiting together the work of artists such as Myra Greene, Dawoud Bey, Clarissa Sligh, Yuri Marder, Hank Willis Thomas, and Binh Danh, among others, certainly highlighted the individuality of their concerns and aesthetic choices. Yet this varied grouping also served a common goal by giving voice to specific, possibly contentious topics surrounding diversity. To emphasize this unity of purpose, Williams combined the "Un/" in the exhibition title with "Common Threads," acknowledging the connections that can occur between diverse artists and the viewers of their work. Many of the photographs in "Un/Common Threads" manage to evoke the idea of connections and also simultaneously turn it on its head by asking viewers to re-examine preconceptions that they may bring with them into the gallery. Ellen M. Blalock's photograph, "Jermane," a portrait of a black teenage father pictured full-frame in an intimate embrace with his baby daughter, may provide a good example of this phenomenon. Those who find themselves jarred by the tender presence of emotion displayed by the young African American father must question and explore the sources of any biases regarding age, race, and gender. This is the inherent power of such photographs—when a viewer accepts involvement in questioning such preconceived connections, he or she is more inclined to get involved in talk of answers that can lead to a deeper understanding of identity and diversity. Many of the artists whose work

curator Kaylen Williams, a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University, selected for "Un/Common Threads" engaged the topic of diversity from a personal perspective. Regarding her impetus for organizing the exhibition, Williams explains, "This project was of particular interest to me because of my own ethnic background of Japanese and Western European ancestors. Many students on campus are, like me, a mix of diverse cultural backgrounds. My Japanese mother was adopted by Americans and never had an opportunity or the encouragement to explore her racial identity." In culling this selection of images from the Light Work Collection, Williams invited viewers of Un/Common Threads to explore the diversity of identity and to participate in the critical mass that follows an expansion of consciousness. Laura A. Guth (c)2008 1. Joyce M. Bell and Douglas Hartmann, "Diversity in Everyday Discourse: The Cultural Ambiguities and Consequences of 'Happy Talk.'" American Sociological Association: American Sociological Review 72, no. 6 (December 2007): 895–914. The exhibition was on view in the Robert B. Menschel Photography Gallery from January 16 to April 19, 2007. It was curated by Kaylen Williams. The exhibition included work by the following artists: Don Gregorio Antón, Dawoud Bey, Ellen M. Blalock, Binh Dahn, Sylvia de Swaan, Lonnie Graham, Myra Greene, Saiman Li, Yuri Marder, Nzingah Muhammad, Osamu James Nakagawa, Suzanne Opton, Kanako Sasaki, Clarissa Sligh, Tone Stockenström, Lida Suchý, Hank Willis Thomas, Linn Underhill, and Carrie Mae Weems. When she curated the exhibition, Kaylen Williams was a graduate student of Museum Studies in the College of Visual and Performing Arts, Syracuse University. She graduated in 2007. Laura A. Guth is an artist and educator. She lives in Manlius, NY.