



ARTIST

Myra Greene

TITLE

Untitled (Shoulder)

DATE

2004

DIMENSIONS

14 in H x 11 in W

MEDIUM

Inkjet Prints

IMAGE NOTES

14 x 11" print hinged to 20 x 16" paper

CATALOGUE NUMBER

2005.027

CURRENT LOCATION

2024-1D

MYRA GREENE

BORN

1975

BIRTHPLACE

New York, NY

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

African-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 2004

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 132

BIOGRAPHY

Myra Greene lives in Rochester, New York, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in July 2004.

ESSAYS

"Don't be a hard rock/when you really are a gem, baby girl..." (1) —Lauryn Hill Ever since I opened Myra's recent images, I haven't been able to get that line from one of Lauryn Hill's songs out of my head. I figure Myra would appreciate that; after all, her 2002 exhibition *The Beautiful Ones* came replete with a soundtrack of Angie, Lauryn, India, Erykah, Janet, Jill, Missy, Kina, and Diana. Fierce women. As they say, "sangin'. Beautiful," indeed. I put it on to begin writing this. When I first saw this current series of untitled self-portraits, the images were virtually impossible to penetrate—deliberately dark, dense, and obscure. Myra had sent them around for feedback, and I told her I couldn't really make them out enough to make sense of them. I simply couldn't see them. Myra wrote back to say that several people had said the same thing, but that's how she liked them and she was moving forward with them. At the time I thought, "go on wit' ya bad self—prove us wrong." So she did. The easy, obvious framework through which to discuss the images is 'double consciousness,' the experience of having two identities—one of self and one to present to outsiders—so au courant in the academy, but making that comparison will inevitably overdetermine the work in exactly the way Myra did not want. "Now you see us, now you think you know us." Though double consciousness is a universal concept, we all know who we're talking about when we conjure W.E.B. DuBois: Black folks. Us. Against them. Myra's images, like Lauryn's lyric, are about constructed facades, ambiguous surfaces, the metaphoric walls we erect to protect ourselves from the world around us. Hard rocks. Stonewalls. "Aren't black women obfuscated enough," I asked. "Haven't our bodies been dissected too often already?" What I had learned, what I wanted to tell her but a reality I didn't want to perpetuate: they "ain't never gonna" not "see that black body". But, as Myra countered, "If we are truly in control of our own artistic expression, are we not allowed to say that we are down, quiet, contemplative, or even depressed? Not because of our race, just because we are." Well, yes. Our seemingly eternal conundrum. This is what Coco Fusco was attempting to do in her 2003–2004 exhibition "Only Skin Deep," talk about the complexities in representations of race, not racism. But no one seemed to get it. (2) Belly. Back. Shoulder. Thighs. Face. The body as parts. Carefully modeled and cropped, impenetrable like sculpture. The surfaces like a daguerreotype that's been lightly wiped, to the owner's dismay, or like early calotypes that weren't properly processed, got too much light, and kept developing, developing . . . Though we have to struggle to make them out, we won't give up. They are too precious. Most of us photograph because the medium seduced us. We made a print, watched our "effortlessly oh so modernist" detail of chain link fence shadow or weeds in first snow magically appear in a tray of chemicals, and we were hooked. The surfaces, the textures, the tonalities—an endless array of choices to best convey that artistic vision. Myra pulls out all the stops, manipulating the medium to control her image—photographing, transferring, scanning, printing, tearing. It's messy, imperfect, like everything—tactile. Feel it. The results are dark, rich, warm, caramel, brown, deep. Black and white never really was. Turns out Myra wasn't really obscuring anything within those early prints she described as "murky, sickly," and "depressed. Black beauty" [is] "vibrant, mysterious, and elusive," (3) and Myra's refUnited States! to "lighten up" was as figurative as it was literal. Turns out that black women don't fit any more neatly into the present than they do into history. Myra's self-portraits are a complex, emotional response to self and place. Black in winter white, cold, and alienated. Unpretty (but gorgeous). Everybody thinks Lauryn went off the deep end after her miseducation. Retreated inward, lost us. Naw. Turns out she and Myra both just went and complicated things for all of us. Made you look. Carla Williams (c)2005 1. Lauryn Hill, "DooWop (That Thing)," Sony Music. 2. At a panel discussion at the College Art Association Annual Conference, Atlanta, February 18, 2004, Coco Fusco discussed her frustration at the limited reception of the exhibition's concept. 3. Myra Green, artist statement, 2004. Myra Greene lives in Rochester, New York, and participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in 2004. Her Web site can be found at <http://www.myragreene.com/>. Carla Williams is an independent artist, writer, and scholar in Oakland, California. She participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in 1997. *Un/Common Threads* 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.