



**ARTIST**

Samantha Box

**TITLE**

Coco visits her mother's grave

**DATE**

2007

**DIMENSIONS**

9 in H x 13.5 in W

**MEDIUM**

Inkjet Prints

**CATALOGUE NUMBER**

2015.034

**CURRENT LOCATION**

1620-8D

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**SAMANTHA BOX**

**BIRTHPLACE**

Kingston, Jamaica

**GENDER**

Female

**CITIZENSHIP**

United States

**CULTURAL HERITAGE**

African-American

**LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP**

Artist-in-Residence, 2015  
Kathleen O. Ellis Gallery, 2018  
Be Strong and Do Not Betray Your Soul

**LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS**

Contact Sheet 187  
Contact Sheet 198

**BIOGRAPHY**

Samantha Box has documented New York City's community of LGBTQ youth of color, the social issues affecting these young adults, and the structures of family, intimacy and validation that bind and protect them. The resulting body of work, *INVISIBLE*, is a continuing multi-chapter exploration into the lives of this young community. *INVISIBLE* has been widely recognized and exhibited including in 2010 at The Sanctuary for Independent Media in Troy, NY; in 2011 as part of the Open Society Foundation's *Moving Walls #18* exhibition; and in 2013 as part of the The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art's *Queers In Exile* exhibition. Images from *INVISIBLE* are part of the permanent collections of the Open Society Foundation, EN FOCO, and The Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Box's work has been featured on *Wired's The Raw File* and on *TIME* magazine's *LightBox* blog. Box was born in Kingston, Jamaica, was raised in Edison, New Jersey and is now based in Brooklyn, New York.

## ESSAYS

The function of freedom is to free someone else. — Toni Morrison People often speak of the resilience of queer and trans youth of color. Resilience presents the idea of emotional maturity against oppressive hardships. Some regard resilience as a certain numbness—a system of beliefs called upon to survive one's life. James Baldwin describes this as living within a kind of unexamined pain. Many queer young people are rejected from their homes, schools, society and come together to form "houses"—kinship communities where they originate and announce the terms. These houses reinvent safety, constantly negotiating the margins. A leader is pushed forward, modeling the sense of leadership that their previous lives could not afford them. I began to envy freedom the first time I laid eyes on a Kiki Ball. Glamour, vision, and family. And stillness—while we waited for a collection of youth to deliver a performance of gender and resilience from their souls. I inhaled this complex life, this giving of self, and this commitment to living. And I humbly began to recognize the deficit in my own freedom. Intersections acknowledged; this experience with freedom is their most important resource. Queer bodies in contemporary art continue to teeter between trending fetish and exploited realms of desire. There have been and will continue to be photographers that set out to "spotlight queer youth." In recent years, a slight but significant shift has occurred. Artists such as Mickalene Thomas and Zanele Muholi, who center queer bodies, have been featured in major international exhibitions. The art world is seeing art made by queer people for queer people. The ideology of inclusionary politics has received a persistent nudge, and art created by queer people and about queer people is gradually ascending. But not without complication. Samantha Box has photographed queer youth of color for over a decade. For her viewer, her portraits prioritize the intentions of her subjects. We are introduced to the Kiki Ballroom scene as more than a mechanism of survival, but a viable source of family. Samantha's photography offers an implicit ether of examination; her work is evidence of her own investigation as an outsider, deconstructing the implications of her positionality. Her images display a brief stillness inside of emotional chaos, centering radical queer lives. Light is used as the entry point—in a complex juxtaposition of oppression and hope. Hands and eyes are emphatic depictions of love. Queer bodies are no longer saturated with inquisition. And family is now able to become emotionally nuanced. In view of her work, we unlearn the norms of reality blocking any threshold for desire. Instead, we enter worlds where lush, spirited living is maintained. To witness the resilience of queer youth of color offers insight into living as an option; thriving within persecuted lives that are viewed as unfounded. This relationship to living isn't measured against how near one is to death. It is celebrated by how valuable one's relationship is to freedom. Freedom becomes the ability to see beyond the satiation of resilience, deserving a deeper investigation. Erica Cardwell Erica Cardwell is a writer, activist, and educator living in Astoria, Queens. — Samantha Box lives in Brooklyn, NY, and completed her residency at Light Work in September 2015. [www.samanthaboxphoto.com](http://www.samanthaboxphoto.com)