

Ashley Ross:

10/27/03



By Iina
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10/27/03 is photographer Ashley Ross's first exhibition as an emerging artist at the Museum of the African Diaspora. The show was on view from December 14, 2022, to March 5, 2023. Ross's work explores the complexities of growing up in a religious household. Ross weaves a story of indoctrination and legacy within the Black family structure through portraiture, personal mementos, and annotated family photos.

As one enters the intimate exhibition space, with its dark gray walls and wooden floor, the first thing that catches the eye is an array of black and white photographs. The large photo in the center, *Who's That Young Girl Dressed in White?* (2021) draws the viewer into the room to further unravel or unveil the story. The black and white symbolic image captures the portrait of a young girl standing in a field of tall grass, dressed in a flowing white dress, as a metaphor for purity and innocence, suggesting a sense of openness and vulnerability. At the same time, the surrounding natural environment implies a connection to the natural world and a sense of harmony. The girl's face is not visible as she looks away from the camera, adding to the image's sense of mystery and intrigue. The photograph's composition is simple yet powerful, with the girl's figure placed prominently in the center of the frame against a blurred background. The use of black and white photography adds to the photograph's timeless quality, evoking a sense of nostalgia and memory. The photograph's title, *Who's That Young Girl Dressed in White?*, invites viewers to speculate about the girl's identity and story. Ross's use of light and shadow creates a sense of depth and contrast that draws the viewer's attention to the girl's dress and the textures of the grass around her. Overall, *Who's That Young Girl Dressed in White?* is a hauntingly beautiful photograph that showcases Ross's skillful use of composition, lighting, and storytelling. It is a standout piece in Ross's exhibition and will leave a lasting impression on all who see it.

Ross's pictures challenge traditional notions of Black spirituality. She questions who decides a Black person's spiritual worth and asks whether that worth can exist in hostile or traumatic settings. This strong message speaks to the broader issues of identity and belonging that many people struggle with. The exhibition showcases artists of color seeking autonomy and freedom from a culture that has marginalized them. Through her work, Ross creates a space for individuals and communities to explore the nuances of their identity and spirituality while highlighting the enduring impact of history and culture on contemporary experiences.

The exhibition is inspired by Ross's upbringing in the Apostolic Christian church. It visually depicts her conflicting internal monologue regarding her early religious upbringing and her sense of identity. Using the date 10/27/03, which represents both the start of a spiritual rebirth and the conclusion of a child's apparent perception of life as they know it, adds a poignant and individual touch to the exhibition. The staged black and white pictures in the exhibition contrast with documents from the artist's archive in many ways, such as using a more formal and posed tone, while the records from the artist's archive have a more sincere and personal feel. This contrast in style highlights how Ross explores her experiences with religion, spirituality, and family, using formal photography and personal documents to convey different aspects of her journey. The staged pictures are more stylized and creative, while the documents from the artist's archive are rawer and more unfiltered. This contrast in style helps to highlight the different ways in which Ross approaches her subject matter, using other techniques to convey various aspects of her story. Ross's exhibition narrative contrasts with the fragmented records from the artist's archive. This narrative contrast helps give a more nuanced and layered understanding of Ross's experiences, as viewers are invited to piece together the different elements of her story. In the photograph *Polaroid of my mom over Passages 1* (2021), Ross has captured a close-up of a Polaroid image of her mother, who is holding a Bible in her hands. The image is slightly blurred, giving it a dreamlike quality, and the edges of the photograph are frayed, suggesting the passage of time.

The photograph can be interpreted as a representation of the complex relationship between spirituality and memory within the Black community. The image of Ross's mother holding the Bible suggests that religion and spirituality have been central to Black identity and culture for generations. At the same time, the blurred, dreamlike quality of the photograph suggests the impermanence of memory and how personal and collective histories can be distorted or lost over time.

Polaroid of my mom is a powerful representation of reclaiming Black spirituality and memory, emphasizing the importance of family, tradition, and personal history in shaping one's understanding of identity and spirituality. The photograph invites the viewer to reflect on their relationship with memory and spirituality and to join in the ongoing project of reclaiming and redefining these crucial aspects of the Black experience.

Through these visual imaginings of her childhood and illustrative depictions of her parent's relationship and religious views, Ross presents a compelling narrative that dares viewers to reflect on their own experiences of spirituality and identity.

Overall, *10/27/03* is a profoundly unique and thought-provoking exhibition that effectively mediates the intersection of spirituality and identity within the Black family structure. Ashley Ross's use of allegory and archives invites viewers to explore their experiences and understanding of the complex interplay between religious and secular values.



***Who's That Young Girl Dressed in White?* (2021)**



***Self Abridged Passages* (2021)**



Holding On to Legacy (2021)



Mother's Shield (2022)



Polaroid of my mom over Passages 1, 2021

Iina Anand Upalekar is an artist and design entrepreneur from India, currently residing in San Francisco. Pursuing an MA in curatorial practice and exhibition design at the California College of the Arts, she has a keen interest in global art worlds and creating abstract art that challenges conventions. Her passion for Indian mythology, feminist theory, and contemporary arts has been fueled by her advocacy work for international women's rights. Iina aspires to create exhibitions that showcase diverse voices and experiences while inspiring audiences to view the world through a fresh lens.

Ashley Ross resides and works in the Bay Area, California. Her characteristic work investigates the cultural and familial aspects of Black existence. Using family archives and allegorical portraiture, her work explores and establishes connections between how traumas and experiences contribute to and shape our identities.

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