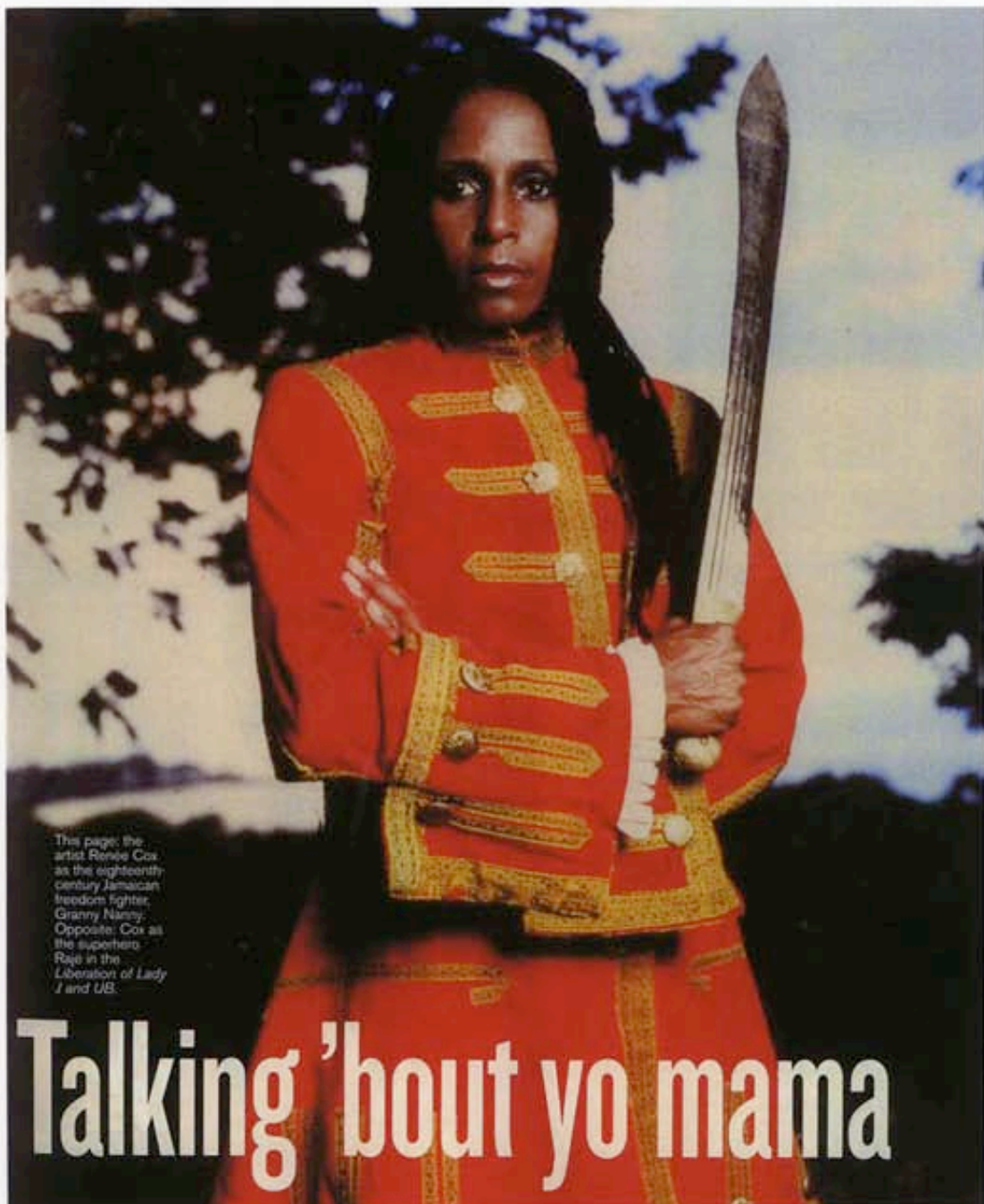


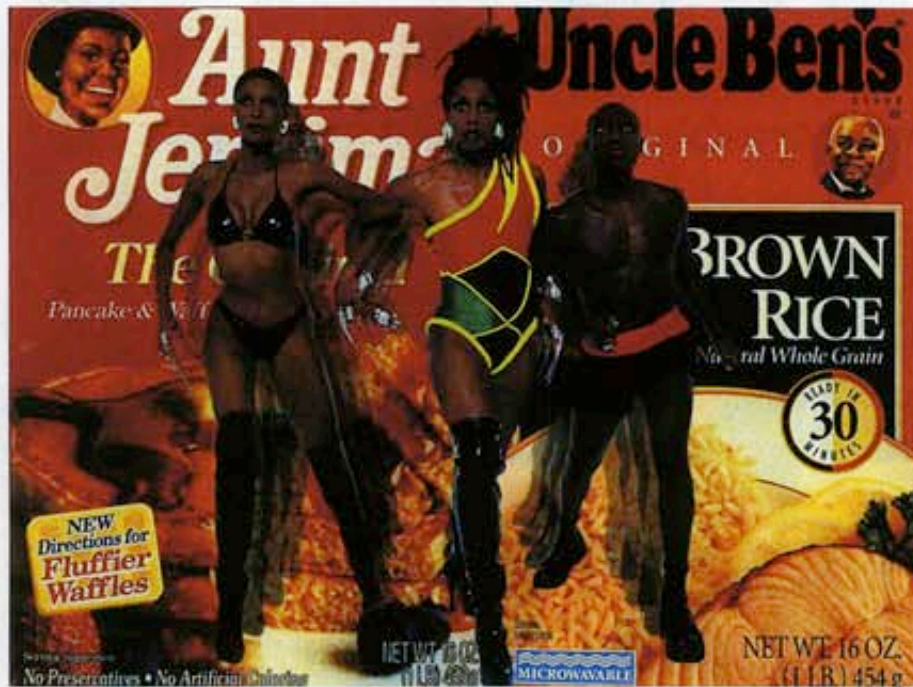
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This page: the artist Renee Cox as the eighteenth-century Jamaican freedom fighter, Granny Nanny. Opposite: Cox as the superhero Raje in the *Liberation of Lady J* and *UB*.

Talking 'bout yo mama

The artist Renée Cox is not afraid of controversy; her unwavering commitment remains to create art that challenges how we look at people of color **by Nicole Blades**



Thinking outside of the box requires an openness to new ways of seeing the world and a willingness to explore. So when the artist Renée Cox decided to rescue Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from their respective places on a pancake box and a rice box in her piece *Liberation of Lady J and U.B.*, it came as no surprise.

For Cox, a forty-something Jamaican-born artist raised in New York, outside the box is exactly where she lives and works. With her creative use of photographic self-portraits to express her ideas and challenge the status quo—taking on ignorance, racism, misogyny, and exploitation in the process—Cox has, many times, landed smack-dab in the swirl of controversy. In 2001, for instance, her work *Yo Mama's Last Supper* thrust her into the news with a *New York Times* front-page story in which New York City's then-mayor Rudolph

Giuliani called the work "disgusting" and "anti-Catholic." The piece features Cox, nude, standing in place of Jesus in a rendition of Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*; she is flanked by 12 black men posing as the Disciples. Giuliani was so outraged by Cox's artwork that he called for a "decency panel" to be organized in order to keep it and work like it out of local museums that receive public funding. The fracas placed Cox and her art in the spotlight, and the extra attention more than tripled the monetary value of the work.

As words like *indecent*, *obscene*, and *disgusting* were hurled at Cox and her work, the photographer held her ground. "This is BS, because everyone has the right to their own interpretation," Cox says, summing up her reaction to the Giuliani flap. "The real problem was: Here you have an African-American woman at the center of the table. That is [seen

as] contrary to everything this country is about. We're not even supposed to indulge in those kinds of thoughts. I am not interested in being in some kind of subservient position. We're educated, strong. Why shouldn't we envision ourselves in positions of power and not just running around with G-strings on and shaking our ass? There's more [than that to black women]—a lot more.

"I showed *Yo Mama's Last Supper* in Venice in 1999, and the press that I got was: That was a beautiful piece. That was it. Nobody was freaking out, and I was close to Vatican City. It wasn't until it came over here that Giuliani and the Catholic Church were tripping. 'Oh, because you're nude.' I didn't invent nudity! Nudity in art has been going on since antiquity. Cave drawings had nudity. Look at the Greeks; they really worshiped the body. There's nothing pornographic or offensive about it. Why am I

Renée Cox:

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In the *Maroon Series*, Renée Cox poses as the early Jamaican warrior Granny Nanny as she might have been today, as a mother or a person participating in a cleansing ritual.

nude? Because I have nothing to hide.”

Cox’s interest is easily summed up in one word: empowerment. Her intention is to create imagery that she and other black people can relate to. While studying abroad in Europe Cox toured the bastions of art history. In the countless museums and churches she visited, she saw no representations of people of color, save in the rare piece that featured dark-skinned people in the background.

“I scratched my head and said, How come the only paintings [with black people] I see [depict them in] secondary positions, as extras? They are fanning somebody or picking up somebody’s stuff. They’re not players,” says Cox. “At this point now, I have kids. So how do I create images that would be thought-provoking and beneficial to children of color? There are no images, except for basketball players and rappers. God bless them, but what about something else? So what I did was go back to Janson’s *History of Art* and I started looking at all these very famous images from the Renaissance and said to myself, I want to re-create these images using people of color.”

Upon graduating from Syracuse University with a degree from the School of Art and Design, with a focus on photography, Cox worked as a fashion photographer in the 1980s. She decided after more than 10 years that she wanted to explore another aspect of photography, so she enrolled in graduate school, following the master’s degree she earned at the School of Visual Arts in New York with the Independent Study Program at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Thus began her

entrée into the art world—and the tumult that can ensue when that snow globe gets shaken.

Yo Mama’s Last Supper is part of a series that began with a piece called *Yo Mama*. It was a seven-foot-tall photograph of a buff Cox posing nude but for a pair of pumps, holding her then two-year-old son.

“I did the piece as a result of being in the Whitney Independent Study Program and being pregnant with my second child and having people say to me, ‘Oh my God, that’s terrible. How are you going to be an artist with a kid?’” Cox explains. “There was an article in this literary magazine, *M/E/A/N/I/N/G/S*. It was called ‘On Motherhood, Art, and Apple Pie.’ It had essays from various artists about being a mother . . . about how they had to act like their whole existence revolved around art and they had no family or life. It was like, I’ve just paid for grad school and now they are basically telling me my career is over before it’s even started! That’s when I had to take a stand. My message was really simple: You can have your children and you get your body back and go from point A to point B. It’s not an impediment.” Cox has been happily married for more than 20 years.

After *Yo Mama* and *Yo Mama’s Last Supper*, Cox unfurled her next body of work, featuring her alter ego, Rajé the superhero. As Cox explains it, Rajé is the modern descendant of Nubia, Wonder Woman’s African sister, who appeared in the comic books at the height of the Black Pride movement. Like Cox’s other work, the pieces featuring Rajé arose in response

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From the *Maroon Series*: the artist as the eighteenth-century Granny Nanny in a quiet moment, and as a modern-day schoolteacher.

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to the lack of representation, offering an answer to the question, Where are the black superheroes? Rajé, says Cox, is "fierce and fabulous," defending the oppressed and wreaking revenge on those who have exploited and abused people of color—the New York City cabbie who refuses to pick up blacks, the fat-cat record exec who pimps the black per-



formers contractually obligated to him—and rescuing the desexualized slaves Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from their lives on the box.

"I did some research to figure out why Aunt Jemima is on the box. I find out she's been on the box since the 1890s. Yeah, they took the bandanna off, they updated her, but she's still on the box! Obviously, people must feel some sense of security in knowing that we are in positions of servitude to this day. So when Rajé liberates them, she re-sexualizes them, and they come off the box as full human beings."

Cox's latest project, which is being featured as an installation that opened at the Robert Miller Gallery in New York City this February, and a book to be published this fall, is a portrait series featuring "Granny Nanny" who helped lead the Maroon rebellion against the British in Jamaica in the early eighteenth century, and is now a national hero. The Maroons were the slaves who escaped from the Spaniards in the West Indies to set up their own sovereign states in places such as Jamaica and Brazil. When the British tried to re-enslave them, they fought back.

"Granny Nanny was a warrior and a strategist. I wanted to show her determined spirit, but in some of the images I also wanted to answer the question: If Granny Nanny were around today, who would she be? A mother, a teacher, a community leader, a mover and a shaker." But definitely not someone relegated to a life inside the box. ●

Nicole Blades is a Canadian writer and editor now based in Brooklyn, New York. She has completed her first novel, Three Things, and is currently working on two nonfiction book projects.