

 *airJamaica*

History Alive in Santo Domingo

Sky Writings

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Mercury Rising

BY PATRICIA MESCHINO

Fuelled by criticism from

NYC's top pol, Jamaican-born photographer Renée Cox was the subject of a wild media feeding frenzy. But two-inch headlines aside, what's really going on in her mind and art?

In October 1999, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani attained infamy in art circles by threatening to cut off funding to the Brooklyn Museum. The mayor was outraged by the museum's "Sensations" exhibit, specifically African artist Chris Ofill's portrait of the Virgin Mary embellished with elephant dung. Judge Nina Gershon rejected Giuliani's censorship crusade in federal court: the city was ordered to pay the museum's legal fees and refund the money it withheld from the institution while the mayor faced personal as

well as city liabilities and was barred from taking further adverse actions against the museum.

In February of this year the mayor once again aimed his perceived powers of suppression at the Brooklyn Museum, this time their "Committed To The Image" exhibition of African American photographers; Giuliani's precise target was Renée Cox's "Yo Mama's Last Supper." Cox's five-panel photograph adheres to Italian painter Leonardo DaVinci's seating arrangement of the world's most famous meal; her 12 dinner guests, however, are black and dreadlocked and Cox, arms outstretched, completely naked, poses as Christ. Giuliani saw Cox's photograph in a *New York Daily News* article (not at the museum) decried the work as "disgusting," "outrageous," and "anti-Catholic." The former first amendment lawyer-turned-politician, who faced a contempt of court charge if he re-attempted

reducing the museum's funding, then announced he would appoint a committee to legislate "decency standards" at taxpayer-funded museums, which would permit only works "showing decency and respect for religion, for ethnicity, for race."

At a press conference held at the New York City offices of The Creative Coalition, which attracted an impressive cast of actors, lawyers and activists speaking in

defense of First Amendment rights, the feisty, Catholic-raised Cox speculated that Giuliani's criticisms run deeper than her challenging interpretation of the Last Supper. "If he says nudity is the problem, go to Italy then, the home of Roman Catholicism and shut it down immediately because they have religious nudes all over the place." Cox argues that her portrayal of Christ in "Yo Mama's Last Supper" (taken from a larger series of photos called "Flipping The Script" which recasts iconic images of Atlas, Adam and Eve, the Pietà and Michelangelo's David with people of colour) is no more sexual than the Renaissance era nudes the photo evokes. Ironically, "Yo Mama's Last Supper" was first exhibited in 1996 in a Venice, Italy, church, in the vicinity of the Vatican and not a single objection was raised. "So what else is the problem?" Cox queried. "That I'm a woman? Why can't I enjoy the fantasy of being seated at the head of that dinner party? What, am I

(ABOVE) RENÉE COX IN HER SOHO APARTMENT. PHOTO BY SEAN ERAKES.

(BELOW) YOUNG YO MAMA



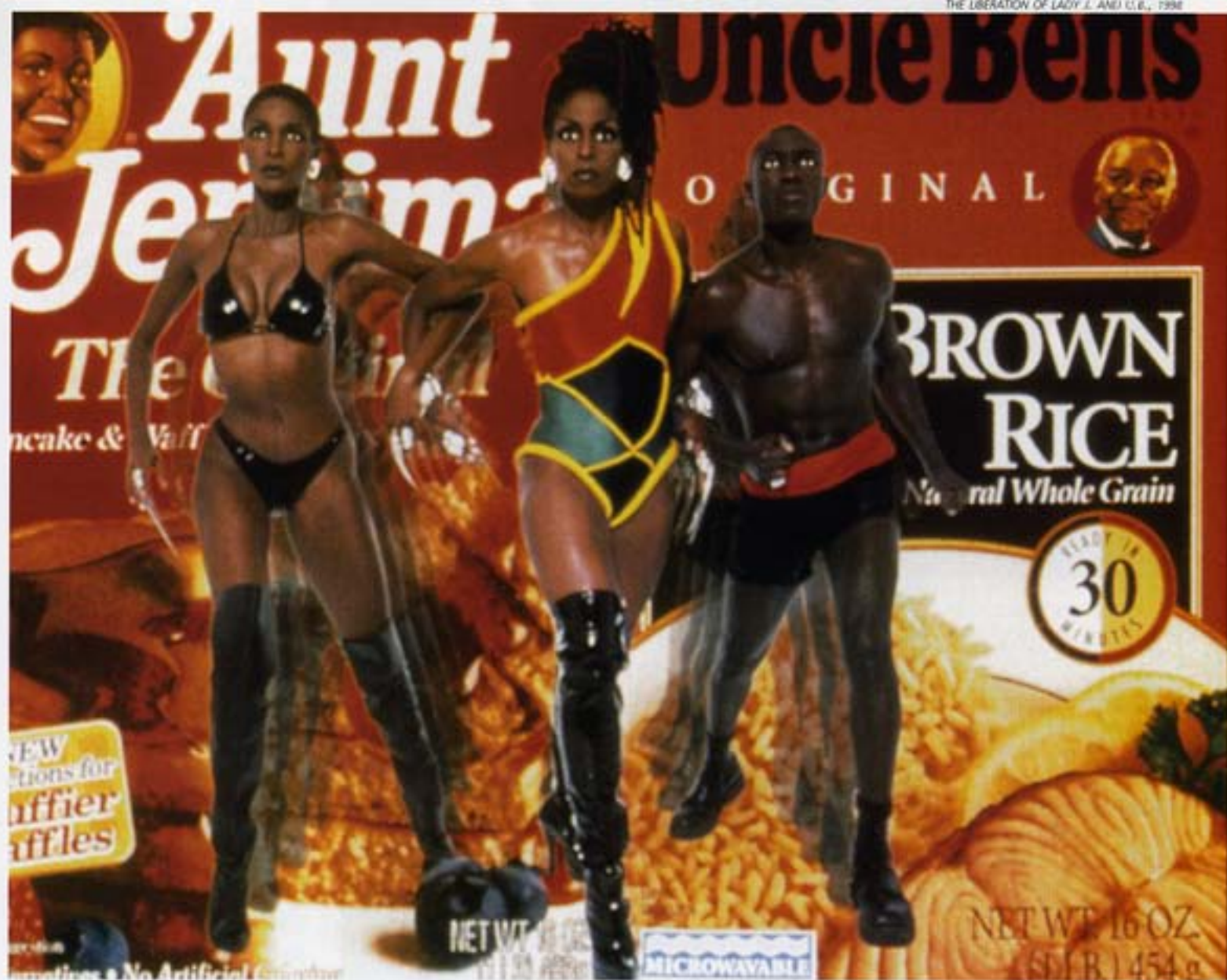
supposed to be curbing it? I think it upsets his white patriarchal rule by putting myself there as the Christ figure. It's a double whammy, a woman and a black woman on top of it. This piece has provoked a discourse around racism because it says what if? What if Christ was a black woman? Nobody knows. Leonardo (DaVinci) didn't know. He did his painting 1500 years after the New Testament was written. He had his friends at that table and the

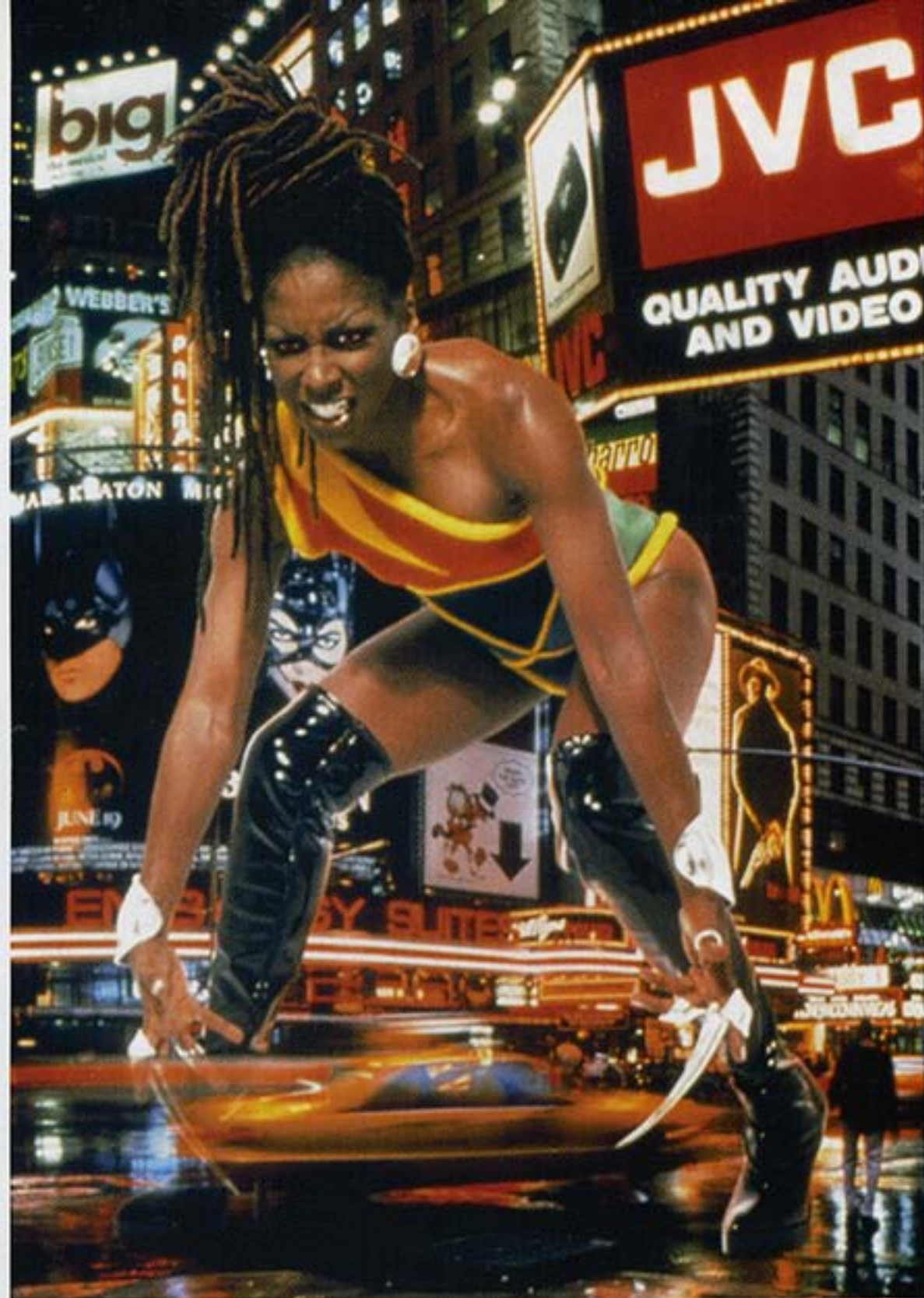
Catholic Church didn't like it because Leonardo was gay and he had his lover there along with street urchins. Over the centuries it has become like he was a photojournalist and that's who was really at the Last Supper! It was his interpretation just as it's my interpretation of what the Last Supper was. The Bible says that we were all created in the likeness of God and if that's true then everybody in this room has the right to do what I did."

Renée Cox's photographs have been featured in several solo exhibitions throughout the United States and in many international group shows including "Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers at Washington, D.C.'s Smithsonian Anacostia Museum; New York City's Whitney Museum of American Art's "Black Male; The Venice (Italy) Biennale (Biennial) and Postcards From Black America in Breda, The Netherlands. Mayor Giuliani's moonlighting as

an art critic, however, has brought Ms. Cox's work a level of publicity that the best PR agents can't orchestrate as well as the sale of "Yo Mama's Last Supper" to a Latin American art collector for U.S.\$25,000. Ms. Cox has been featured on the front page of several New York newspapers and interviewed by local and international print and electronic media. She has lectured on her work and artistic freedom at several universities including

THE LIBERATION OF LADY J. AND J.L., 1996





TAJL, 1990

Columbia, Cornell and New York University where she teaches a Fundamentals of Photography course, and will be the keynote speaker at the fall 2001 SPE gathering of photographic educators in the United States.

One week after her Creative Coalition press conference, I visited Renée Cox at her Brooklyn studio, a large loft filled with her past and present work. Adopting various personas, Cox is also the primary subject in many of her photos.

She flexes her well-toned muscles as superhero Kaji, (akin to a Wonder Woman) donning a red, green and gold bathing suit and over the knee patent leather boots, her waist length dreadlocks piled high on her head as she rescues Aunt Lemima and Uncle Ben (reborn as Lady J and UB) from decades of servitude. There is the dramatic black and white portrait "Yo Mama and Child" where a nude Cox brandishes her infant son as weaponry evidence of

woman's life-giving power. In a triptych displaying her Jamaican roots, Cox depicts a brash dancehall diva, a demure Jehovah's Witness and a proud Rasta queen; intended additions to that series include her portrayal of a wealthy St. Andrew housewife! Her confident, sometimes confrontational images and accompanying explanations present an amalgam of free speech tenets, civil rights struggles and feminist perspectives punctuated

by an occasion alone liner worthy of the sharpest comedienne.

Born in the parish of St. Ann, Jamaica on October 16, 1960, Renée Cox's family moved to affluent Westchester New York suburb of Scarsdale when she was a child. As one of seven black families out of a population of 1,000, her parents instilled in her the importance of being five times as good as anyone else. "That is the burden of the black girl," Cox observes, "and it's a lot of weight to carry around but they were absolutely right, you have to come with the credentials to get noticed!" At one point, her parents planned to return to Jamaica so she was sent to a boarding school in Mandeville. She studied photography at Syracuse University in upstate New York, with her pivotal junior year spent in Florence, Italy studying classical Italian paintings. "I loved those works of art," she says, "but I wanted to see people in there that looked like me but the only times I did we were down there picking other people's toenails or serving some grapes!" Her Florentine sojourn planted a seed in Cox's creative process that was fertilized over the years and eventually grew into her "Hipping the Script" series.

Cox had been working for ten years as a fashion photographer when a dinner with colleagues from Macy's unexpectedly prompted her to redirect her artistic talents. "Around 1990 when Nelson Mandela was released from prison, I had some classes working in England with the ANC (African National Congress) but I was your basic, unconscious fashion person, the whole world could collapse and who knew? But I remember being moved by Nelson Mandela's story saying, 'Wow, this guy was in jail for 27 years for something that he really believed in, in this heinous place where they have Apartheid. This is amazing.' I remember

bringing it up at the table and people were like 'Oh Renée, that's really boring! Donald and Ivana Trump are getting a divorce!! I was like, you're kidding? Donald and Ivana's divorce is more important than a guy who spent 27 years in prison for a real (expletive) cause? Donald Trump? Yeah he's rich but he's an (expletive) and he's got really bad hair!! I say he's an (expletive) because of the incident with the Central Park jogger (several black youths were accused of raping a white woman) and here you have Trump who was going to put an ad in the NY Times and The Daily News asking for the death penalty for these kids. Obviously, I don't believe in the death penalty but that was almost like sending out the lynch mob. I thought it was irresponsible and I hated him ever since that. So when they mentioned him at dinner I thought, I can't be around folk like this. I gotta get out and do something that allows me to leave more of a legacy, to be in a place where people aren't just interested in the superficial. That's when I decided to apply to grad school, just do art and deal with issues that were important to me."

Cox received her MFA from the School of Visual Arts, in New York, and then enrolled in The Whitney Museum of American Art program where she was the first pregnant woman in the program's 25-year history. She exhibited the first photographs of herself nude and pregnant at the Whitney's Open Studio show in 1993. Cox has continued to use her photography to address plethora of social topics from motherhood to racism, her nude self-portraits a demonstration of self-love and validation. "Too many black folks wait for white people to validate them, and I don't need that validation," Cox explains. "I can validate myself in terms of notions of beauty because it goes against what we're told is supposed to be

beautiful. I don't want to have to answer aren't you exploiting this one or that one, that argument isn't there because it's always me shooting myself. It makes it more inherently mine, obviously and the work is also autobiographical. It starts out with the "Yo-Mama series" which is about pregnancy and motherhood because when I entered the art world I found out that if you were a woman artist and you had kids they say you aren't really serious. Women have inherently taken care of their kids and taken care of business too, so I had to do a body of work around that! That led eventually to the Raje series where I take on this superhero persona." With her literary agent Victoria Sanders, Cox is now developing a book about the Raje character that will be used to teach African American history to all children.

"My premise is if we can all learn about each other's history that would make life a lot easier. My personal intervention in making

change," Cox adds, "is that I'm married to a white French guy for 20 years and I have two mulatto children (sons Ziggy and Tosh). So my thing is to say, if everyone did that, it wouldn't be bad, it could be fun. We would create a new breed of people, they would be like, who you gonna hate? You gonna hate your momma? You gonna hate your poppa? You can't hate anyone and maybe 20 years down the road things will get better because of the mixing."

Motherhood is but one theme Cox provocatively explores in a (as of yet untitled) solo show scheduled for the second week of October at Manhattan's prestigious Robert Miller Gallery. Cox describes the featured work as "The Diary of Mad Housewife meets A Sensuous Woman, or the fantasies of a mother of two who is no longer sexually desirable." A mother of two? Definitely. No longer sexually desirable? Hardly! The exhibition juxtaposes family photos including various stages of

Cox's childhood (at four years old in a cowboy hat, at seven years old receiving her Holy Communion), against daring images of Cox in a corset and fishnets, in scanty lingerie and oh yes, in the nude. "As a 40 year old woman society is saying girl, hang the pumps up, put that matronly dress on, gain 15 or 20 lbs. and call it a (expletive) day! I'm saying I don't feel like that. I still have fantasies, I still feel like I'm sexually viable and why shouldn't I? They expect that to stop for the women, but men can be 80 and still be out there impregnating women. The interesting thing is I do have the kids and the family, but I have those feelings and I do want to enjoy myself in those sorts of ways, too. Kids ground you. They're like 'You didn't make my lunch!', 'Where's my Lucky Charms?' They just keep you, like OK, that is the fantasy and this is the reality. As women we should be able to not succumb to what society wants us to be as we move through the decades of our life."

The tremendous interest in Renée Cox's photography generated by Giuliani's critique of "Yo-Mama's Last Supper" has provided this audacious artist with a prominent platform from which she explodes racial stereotypes, deconstructs preconceived notions of femininity and recasts revered icons of art. Clearly, she is embracing this fortuitous opportunity. "You seize the moment and if you use it properly," she concludes, "I think you can be out here for a while talking about these things until there is a change." Thanks again, Mayor.

Renée Cox's show at the Robert Miller Gallery, 526 West 26th St. New York City, begins the second week in October and she rates the show "between PG-13 and R." For more information call the gallery at 212-980-5454.

CHALLENGE WITH LIBERTY, 1998

