

In Yo' Face

start

Picture this: a poster whose central image is a composite portrait of those notorious Caucasian criminals Charles Manson and Ivan Boesky. Each face is emblazoned with an incriminating caption: THIEF for Boesky, MURDERER for Manson. With the mug shots are two pieces of text. One reads, "Surprise, Surprise. In raw numbers, European-American whites are the ethnic group with the most illegitimate children, most people on welfare, most unemployed men, and most arrests for serious crime. Surprised? Quote by Charles Murray, author of *The Bell Curve*." The second quote comes from the mouth of a babe: "Mama, I thought only black people were bad." —African-American male, five years old.

The child is actually the son of artist and photographer Renée Cox, the poster's creator. Call it counteractive education and proactive media. Cox, her collaborator Tony Coles, and their crew, the Negro Art Collective, conceived the piece for *Creative Time*, a New York-based arts group that regularly commissions provocative artists to throw art up in public places. Sadly enough, however, her ironic take on racial demonization did not amuse her sponsors.

"They wanted to know why I had to use Manson and Boesky's faces," she says. "Why couldn't I, for example, use a picture of my son? Well, first off, I would never do that to my son, and secondly, that misses the point. I'm doing this to empower black people with information. In doing research, I went to 125th Street in Harlem with a clipboard and asked people—largely black and Hispanic—who they thought made up the welfare rolls in this country. Seventy-five percent of them answered, 'Black and Hispanic people.' I think that's an atrocity. But I understand why people think that, because when you see a picture in the newspaper of someone on welfare, it's usually a black woman holding two turkeys."

Putting her passion for images where her outrage is, Cox, 37, is clearly at war. It wasn't always so, however. Raised, by her own admission, to be a "JAP" (Jamaican-American princess) in the exclusive and predominantly Jewish town of Scarsdale, N.Y., Cox was an anomaly in high school because her family was among the first to integrate the community in the '70s. After discovering photography in high school, Cox went to Europe and made a career as

a fashion photographer, later shooting for *Esquire*, *Mademoiselle*, and a host of other glossy haute-couture rags.

During a dinner with some Macy's clients the week Nelson Mandela was released in 1990, Cox came to a race-consciousness crossroads. "I wanted to talk about how incredible it was that this man who was imprisoned 27 years for his beliefs was free," she recalls.

"People said, 'Oh, Renée, that's boring, let's talk about Donald and Ivana

commercial work is that I know how to seduce visually. I think the work is multilayered, but the first thing I need to do is grab you, get your attention. If I get you to look at it, then I can get you to think."

Sometimes Cox seduces with nudity—her own, or that of buffed black male models. Her icon series is all about "flipping the script on images that were held up to me as great art when I was studying art history. They really wrote us out of art history," she explains. "The chapter on Africa

into what bell hooks talks about in her books. We need to regain our self-love, put ourselves up on a pedestal, and say, 'Aren't we fabulous?'"

Cox once reclaimed love for her own body in 1991 by going to the South Bronx naked and draped in chains. Standing nude in a dilapidated field, she saw herself making a clear statement about modern-day slavery. "The chains may have been broken," she says, "but we're still in the same goddamn predicament—even if the chains are invisible. Our folks are still living in places like the South Bronx."

So how did the brothers and sisters in the Bronx feel about that, Renée? "I only got respect, though I have to admit I went up there with nine people," she says. "Because of the way we perceive black males in the media, I was sure they were going to rape me, kill me, leave me for dead. I thought, I'm going to need protection. But it wasn't like that at all. There were 50 or 60 people there by the time I was finished, and some of them were the kind of brothers you'd cross the street to avoid. Ten guys jumped out of a speeding jeep. They asked somebody in the 'audience' what the hell I was doing. When it was explained to them, they were, like, 'Go ahead, girl, much respect.' There were no shenanigans.

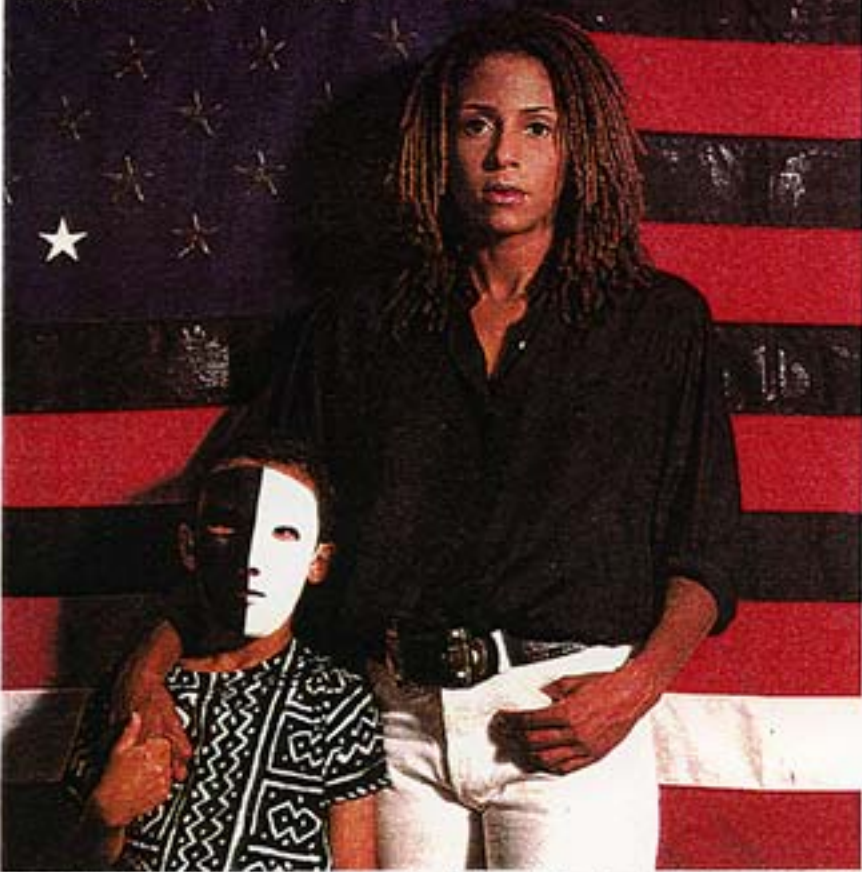
"That's when I realized that there's a great power in being nude. You have much more power in being nude than running around in some stupid little G-string. In a G-string, you'll be raped, but if you step to somebody naked, there ain't nothing he or she can do. It crosses over a whole lot of boundaries."

Black-Owned

By
Greg Tate

FLAG BEARER

Artist Renée Cox (with her son) puts her passport for images where her outrage is.



Trump." *What?* Another incident around the same time happened at *Vegas*. Seeing these 50-year-old women acting like giggly teenage girls, I realized I didn't want to end up like them. I think having a kid affected me as well because I started thinking, What's my legacy? I didn't want to be 30, showing my son pictures of fashion models who were hot 30 years ago."

Though Cox now has a prestigious 57th Street dealer and wealthy collectors jockeying her work, she also desires a popular audience, the masses who dwell beyond the pristine walls of the wine-and-cheese set. "I'm not interested in alienating people with the work," Cox says. "One of the things I learned from doing

is this. So I said, Let me have some fun switching all this high art around." The images she flipped on include such Eurocentric touchstones as Atlas, Michelangelo's *David*, the Madonna and child, and the crucifixion of Christ. Cox's take on the latter appeared in *It Shall Be Named*, which she contributed to 1994's *Black Male* exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. The piece sparked controversy for her martyr's lack of genitalia; apparently some viewers didn't catch the obvious allusion to lynching.

Cox's pictures are large and immaculately framed. In fact, the frames are often as compelling as the imagery. "You usually don't see black people exhibited in that grand kind of way," she says. "I'm

you'll be raped, but if you step to somebody naked, there ain't nothing he or she can do. It crosses over a whole lot of boundaries."