ART SCENE

Rajé
A Black Woman Superhero

By Greg Tate

The fine arts photography of Renee Cox is saturated with her obsessions: sexuality, stereotypes and her own self-image. She has recreated “The Last Supper” with strapping, dreadlocked disciples and herself as Jesus; she has presented herself nude post-pregnancy, but looking fit enough to enter a bodybuilding competition.

Cox’s latest exhibition, “Rajé: A Superhero, The Bold Beginning of a New Era,” which ran at the Cristinerose Gallery in New York this winter, displays Cox as an Afrocentric superheroine who liberates Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from their grocery-shelf plantations and magically transforms them into the stunning figures of models Roshumba and Rodney Charles. Cox’s high-flying creation also defends The Sphinx against Napoleon, who history records as having shot cannonballs at the mysterious figure’s Negroid nose.

The format for this graphic

Renee Cox displayed as as Afrocentric superheroine
who liberates Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben from their grocery shelf plantations.
novel is large form cibachrome prints and includes a Barbie-like Najo doll behind
glass as well. As someone who has been following Cox's work for a number of
years, I have been consistently intrigued by her integration of theatrical perfor-
manace, conceptualist conceits, and charged racial politics. In a time when many of
her peers are using so-called coon imagery in ironic and critical ways Cox is going
another route in the war against stereotypes by pre-
senting black and female figures as models of beauty,
resilience and spirituality. That she has been able to
do so with wit, lyricism and an exquisite aesthetic
sense is a testament to her highly evolved level of
craft. She spent years in the field as an international
fashion photographer and studied at the New York
School of Visual Arts and in the Whitney Museum of
Art.

The Najo images were designed using advanced
computer design programs and have the sheen and
hallucinatory power of the ads one would find in
glossy magazines. Cox's iconic and heroic depictions
of black figures are clearly at odds with the more
acceptable and prevalent imagery seen in many down-
town galleries these days of blacks as victims of his-
tory. For this reason, her work resists being easily digested by the fine arts main-
stream. As a counterattack on visual white su-
premacy, Cox reads as a one-woman Amazon
army — a right-on swaggering, fist raised super-
woman with a camera and a clear sense of passion.
Cox would like to move from the gallery wall to an
animated cartoon series in the hopes of "educat-
ing all children about African and African-
American history."

Says Cox, "I think my work is very impor-
tant . . . Right now it's popular for black artists
to reappropriate stereotypes. There's the idea
that because we spew it out it becomes differ-
ent. Like teens saying nigger. But I don't think
that genre represents a real change. Folks are
still comfortable with us in positions of serv-
tude. I think presenting a black woman super-
hero as an agent of change, ruffles a few feath-
ers and shakes up the status quo."

*Greg Tate is a freelance art critic.*