

DEANA LAWSON

INTERVIEW
CONDUCTED BY PHONE
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HELEN MOLESWORTH: When did you first meet Noah Davis?

DEANA LAWSON: I forget the year, but he had just opened the Underground. Kahlil¹ invited Henry² and me to have a barbecue at the space.

HM: How did you get to know Kahlil?

DL: I met Kahlil when he used to live in New York. I forget how Kahlil and I had met, but when he became aware of my work, he bought *Dirty South* [2010]. He said, “My brother is so into your work, you have to meet him.” Months passed. Then he moved to LA and that summer I came out to LA; it had to be 2014.

HM: How did you know Henry Taylor?

DL: I met Henry through A.C. Hudgins when Henry had his show at PS1 [in 2012]. You know, A.C. is famous for his fabulous parties on the Upper West Side.

HM: Indeed!

DL: Henry happened to be in town doing a residency at PS1. He didn’t say much and I really didn’t say much. We just kind of regarded each other like, “Oh, that’s Henry Taylor.” “That’s Deana Lawson.” Check. [*Laughter.*]

HM: That’s so funny! When you were at the barbecue in the backyard at the Underground, was it before the garden had been fully planted?

DL: Absolutely. Yes, it was before it had been fully planted. I don’t know if they’d even had a show yet.

HM: Do you remember talking with Noah about the Underground Museum at that point?

DL: I do. He was super excited when I first met him and all he could talk about was how he wanted to do a show of my work in conversation with Diane Arbus’s, and I was like, “Sure!” I mean, obviously, she is so highly regarded and is one of my heroes, so I found the juxtaposition really amazing. I should say this too: I

remember that it was a beautiful day. We were smoking cigarettes, Henry was smoking some weed, and I wasn’t a vegetarian at that point, so we were grilling chicken and beef burgers. I also met Onye that day.³

HM: The whole crew was there.

DL: Yeah, and it was Onye who mentioned the relationship with you and MOCA. I was still learning everything about LA. All Noah talked about was this relationship with MOCA’s collection. I thought it all sounded amazing.

HM: The first time I saw your work was in the back room at the Underground; *Dirty South* was hanging on the wall, and I asked who made it and that’s when Noah told me about your work. I remember going home and Googling you and thinking, “We gotta get some of these for MOCA.” One of the things I’ve always heard about you and Noah—and I don’t know if it’s true—is that he told you to print your photographs really big. Is that true?

DL: Yes. It’s absolutely true. I kind of laughed it off at first, for some reason. I don’t know why, but I had a fear about going too big with my work. Then I had my biggest exhibition to date at Sikkema Jenkins gallery, and I almost decided not to go that big. But when I thought of Noah, I thought, “Just do it,” and I’m so happy I followed the instinct. So, yes, he was the first to tell me to go super large, and it stuck with me. I should also tell you the story about how I applied for a grant from the William H. Johnson Foundation. This was years before—you know the story, right?

HM: I don’t. Go for it, tell me.

DL: Noah knew about my work way before I even knew he knew about my work. I applied to the William H. Johnson Foundation, which gives grants to emerging African American artists. I had applied twice, and I didn’t get the grant either time. The second time I applied I remember thinking, “I’m not applying anymore.” I felt that I would never get a grant like that because the nature of my work, the subjects I was photographing, just didn’t fit their scope. Years later, I

think it was at the barbecue, Noah said, “I was the person organizing the slides for the William H. Johnson award, and I saw your work and I called my brother right away, and I was like, ‘Yo, this artist here, we have to meet her.’” [*Laughter.*]

HM: Oh wow!

DL: It’s so interesting in retrospect, because I truly remember being so heated about the William H. Johnson grant and yet that’s how Noah was introduced to my work. So there was this set of human eyes regarding my work, even when I was really upset and thought that the whole gesture of applying was pointless.

HM: One of the things I’m really struck by about Noah is his generosity to other artists, and your story confirms that for me. Here you have an artist who’s doing a day job, you know, he’s working to make some money and instead of being checked-out, he’s super present. He’s actually looking at the work and thinking about it, and projecting into the future: “We have to meet her.” Do you recall other things he said to you about your work?

DL: He was really struck by *Daughter* [2007], the young woman wearing the body stocking. He said when he saw that photograph in my application, he knew the work was singular. It stood out for him. I don’t wanna go off on a tangent, but he had the gift of foresight, you know?

HM: Yes.

DL: Some people just have that clairvoyant-like gift. I recently bought a house in West Adams; a lot of artists seem to be interested in West Adams right now. I was thinking about Noah’s painting *Black Wall Street* [2008; p. 21], and I think maybe there’s a potential for West Adams to become what Noah was painting. [*Laughter.*] I remember how passionate he was in that meeting about me and Diane Arbus. He had this huge, thick bible-like book of MOCA’s collection, and he was flipping through it. He really wanted to get my thoughts on what pictures I wanted to use, what I had in mind. I don’t know why he was so fixated on my images being large. To this day

¹ Kahlil Joseph, Noah’s brother.

² Henry Taylor, artist and Noah’s close friend.

³ Onye Anyanwu, film producer, Noah’s sister-in-law, and Kahlil Joseph’s wife.

⁴ Megan Steinman, director of the Underground Museum.

I wanna ask him, “Why was it important for my work to be large?” other than the obvious, you know?

HM: It’s always been interesting to me because, having seen *Dirty South* and then having seen your two shows at Sikkema Jenkins, I know he was right about the scale.

DL: Yes! [*Laughs.*] He was.

HM: There’s something you do with that crazy inky black background and, at that scale, the depth of it feels so overwhelming. In your last show, the figures were so arresting, and there was something about the composition, the way the figures are placed, that was very painterly. The scale shift from midsize to large highlighted the painterly quality of your compositions.

DL: There’s something about giving that magnificence and blackness its proper scale and weight in space. And what you’re saying about the pictures being painterly, well, Noah’s a painter, so that completely makes sense now.

HM: Do you have a relationship to his paintings?

DL: Right before I met him, I saw his show at Michelle Papillion’s gallery, in 2014. That’s where he showed his *Pueblo del Rio* works [2014; pp. 129, 130, 131–133], right?

HM: I believe so, yes.

DL: They were beautiful. I was struck by the muted color palette. They seemed almost desaturated. Oh! And then there was the small book he published—were they collages?

HM: Yes, the title of the book is *Seventy Works* [2014].

DL: That book really knocked me out. It was such a small book, but so striking.

HM: Your recent show at the Underground had a lot of the same pictures that you showed at Sikkema Jenkins last year. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about what it’s like to show at the Underground?

DL: The most important thing was that the Underground supported me with a one-month residency. That allowed me to make the work that, to this day, is one of my strongest pictures: *Sons of Cush* [2016]. That was made in L.A. Then there’s the spiritual plane—both Noah and I have an affinity for the color violet. You can see it in my picture *Eternity* [2017], and my bedroom is painted violet. And on the night of my opening at the Underground, Karon had a beautiful violet dress and she told me it was Noah’s favorite color. The whole thing seemed like it was meant to be. I decided to print images that I had printed for the Whitney Biennial larger for the Underground show—for Noah, of course. And it wasn’t only that, we painted the walls purple, and then the space took on a whole other life. And the opening! Karon helped to secure the crystals for the show and we did a blessing for the show before it opened. And then, that day, there was a torrential downpour and the lights went out.

HM: Yep.

DL: And I was like, “Aw, Noah is here.”

HM: Yep. That was a legendary evening! Have you ever done a blessing for an opening before?

DL: No. I think I was trying to get at that by placing the crystals in the Sikkema Jenkins gallery—balancing my energy, or balancing the frequency of that space, trying to make the space my own. But I hadn’t done a blessing. And not only a blessing, but a blessing with three people: me, Karon, and Megan⁴—that made it all the stronger. We burned sage and everything, it was clear that the ancestors were there.

HM: I was there that evening, as you know, and I don’t know if I could say I felt the presence of the ancestors—I’m not sure that that’s necessarily available to me—but I definitely felt Noah’s presence and energy in an extremely palpable way. I felt there was a sense of rapture that night. It comes from the energy of your work, and I think it also comes from Noah’s energy.

DL: Absolutely.

HM: And Noah’s generosity.

DL: I think Noah had a knack for identifying what matters in this moment—which conversations, which sort of relationships, with communities and individuals coming together. That’s one of the greatest things about the Underground. It’s not just the art, but who comes to the space, and so forth. One thing about being an amazing artist is taking risk and Noah did that with the Underground. He knew what risks to take. He could’ve just been painting, but he thought beyond his own work: he thought about making a space for not only his work, but for other artists as well. I think that’s super amazing for someone his age. He had an incredible amount of wisdom. He was nonnegotiable in the best way possible. Henry would tell me about when Noah was in conversations with galleries, or what have you, if he didn’t want to do something, he didn’t do it. I admire

an artist who has a certain amount of conviction and autonomy, who is not swayed by a market pressure. He didn’t give an “S” in a way.

HM: Right.

DL: But he did. [*Laughs.*] He knew what not to give an “S” about and he knew what was meaningful. I also admire the stories I’ve heard about him, that are kind of wild too. I mean, he’s free, you know?

HM: I think that’s beautiful. The idea that he was free is a beautiful place to stop.

Noah Davis and Moses Davis, Los Angeles, c. 2010–2011

