

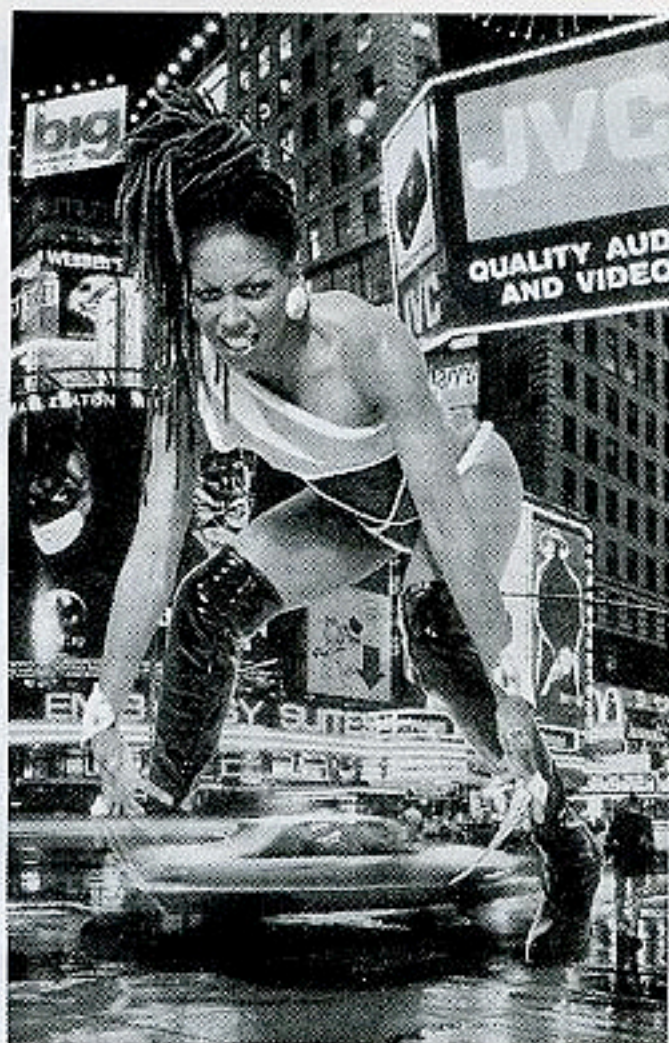
ARTFORUM

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

RENÉE COX

CRISTINEROSE GALLERY



Renée Cox, *Taxi*, 1998,
Cibachrome print, 60 x 40".

Renée Cox recently introduced gallery-goers to Rajé, a superhero played by the artist herself. To borrow a term from the club world she would seem to hail from, Rajé is *fierce*. With dreads piled high on her head, a skintight synthetic outfit in the colors of the Jamaican and Rastafarian flags, and black rubber thigh-high boots, she shows up in wrong-righting, justice-restoring situations in eleven large Cibachrome prints.

Chief among the wrongs she battles is racial prejudice. In *Taxi* (all works 1998), for instance, a Fifty-Foot Woman-sized Rajé crouches over Times Square to halt a speeding cab with silver, Freddy Krueger-like extensions on her middle fingers (Batman and Catwoman peer out from a billboard behind her), redressing the humiliation commonly experienced by African-Americans of being refused by passing taxis. In *The Liberation of Lady J. and U.B.* she leads Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben— younger, sexier, and nearer nude than they appear on the boxes—out of pancake-mix and microwaveable-rice bondage. In *Lost in Space* she levels a zero-gravity punch at a bald, middle-aged, white suit. If her foe represents, for example, every record executive who made sure Little Richard's millions went to Pat Boone, there are few who won't erupt with cheers when the blow lands.

Cox has high ambitions for Rajé, projecting that she will be busy "positively educating the general and mass market" and making "materials entertaining for children of all races." But some of her images of empowerment have a troublingly essentialist undertow. *RAJÉ to the Rescue*, for example, seems to credit the claim, advanced by Louis Farrakhan on rather shaky historical grounds, that Napoleon had the nose of the Great Sphinx blasted off in order to obscure the statue's African features.

As Nietzsche knew, the creation of a superhuman, however beneficent, inevitably involves a measure of exclusivity. Rajé's hyperbolic imagery might leave gay people, for instance, a little uneasy; the Rastafarian-flag-colored Stars and Stripes in the background of *RAJÉ for President* will recall for some that the religion's orthodoxy considers homosexuality punishable by death. Yet the campy energy and earnest humor of this work ultimately rescue it from such sticky identity politics. Much of Cox's work aims to link African-Americans and women in particular with powerful

tropes that inform Western mythology: in *Yo Mama's Last Supper*, 1996, for example, the twelve apostles are black and Jesus female; a photograph from that year is titled *Renée Cox the Man*. These studies have an interesting resonance with Gnostic Christianity, specifically Jesus' cryptic statements on gender in the gospel of Thomas, and other texts that emphasize the prominence of the feminine in the process of salvation through the character of Mary Magdalen. Cox's transgressions are also interesting in light of Grail romances, which are thought by some scholars to contain clues to a greater interchange between medieval Europe and Africa than is generally understood (Graham Hancock, for example, has traced the legend of the Ark of the Covenant to Ethiopia). Such linkages would seem a rich (and perhaps unifying) subject the artist might explore in more depth. If these images are not as personal and affecting as some of her other work, like the nude self-portraits and images of Jamaican men, they demonstrate a Pop sensibility that heroically endeavors to supplant nihilism with optimism, and steps in that peculiarly American direction of self-determination.

—Tom Breidenbach

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