

Body of Work

by Girl

Renée Cox's work first stared me down four years ago at the New Museum's "Bad Girls" show. I loved her photograph, a majestic naked giantess with a baby boy slung across her hips like an AK-47, but I've got this bee in my bonnet about naked-lady art. If I may digress: yes, the politics of ownership and desire have changed in the thirty years since feminist artists first exposed the issues in female flesh. Woman-owned and -operated bodies in the visual culture were actually transgressive back then, but here at the end of the century I'll be damned if it isn't still a man's artworld—and any image can be consumed without consulting its intent/content. Naked ladies sell; it's a surefire genre in the art biz.

While Renée Cox's new work was up in Chelsea, there was a small exhibit of 70s (topless) self-portraits by Adrian Piper in a Soho gallery that seems to show a lot of boob art. Did they mount this show to honor a pioneer conceptual artist's exploration of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, or because she was showing her tits? Hmm. Lynda Benglis' infamous '74 buck-naked-with-dildo ad was a brilliant fuck you to the macho art-magazine status quo, but in a sense, her luscious body is still performing for the boys—the girl can't, socio-politically speaking, help it.

Consider the bare ass of Carolee Schneeman, suspended upside down in a harness; Yayoi Kusama in nothing but pumps and polka dots; or Hanna Wilke adorned with tiny

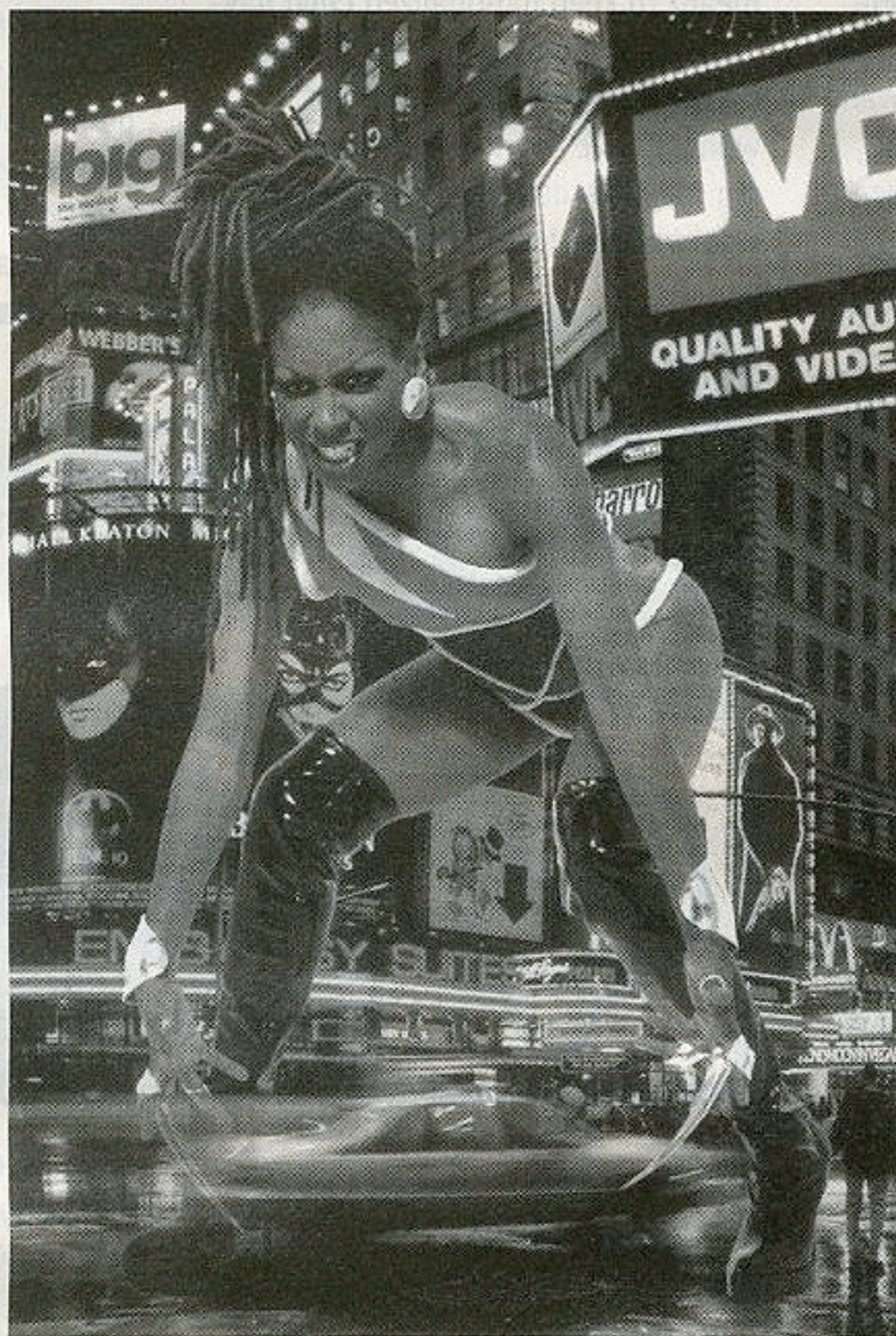
chewing-gum cunts. Does anyone believe that the ability of these women to make art of their own self-exposure didn't come at least in part from confidence in their female desirability? Half the reason these artists' images are remembered is their eroticism, which is not a bad thing—but it's the 90s now, no more

showing her tits.

Now, I'm glad to say, Renée is back, and dressed to slay racism. Her pissed-off alter ego, Rajé, is a live cartoon created with Photoshop and a lot of time in the gym; a fabulous superheroine for whom Black Barbie is not enough. She's slamming bad guys and carving a giant swath of pop imagery for women of color.

Unfortunately, in her Ultra-woman-African-American airbrushed slickness, she resembles no one so much as RuPaul, and these photographs are about as subtle. I totally loved the one where Rajé is leading a mod Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben to freedom, breast implants and buff pecs akimbo; and I loved the view of Times Square with Rajé about to get medieval on Everycab who won't stop for a dark-skinned fare; but when Rajé and her male supermodel escorts are just voguing in front of less witty symbols, like a swastika and barbed wire, the camp gloss becomes suffocating. I found myself thinking more about inner thighs than injustices avenged—not to trivialize the evils of hatred, but these photos do.

For me, seeing the gallery jammed with a black and beautiful art crowd at the opening was more empowering than any of the pictures on the walls; it made my heart glad, like seeing John Leguizamo's one-man show *Freak* thronged with young Latins. The Other is not just there to entertain the mainstream, she's taking center stage and filling the audience too. The more she gets the power of the pocketbook the less we'll need to be hit over the head with a message. •



Taxi, 1998 Cibachrome by Renée Cox

free-love naiveté or second-wave optimism. We know exactly who's selling who. So when I see an image of a "contemporary" naked lady, I have some admittedly knee-jerk ideas about vanity and playing to the paying customer. It makes me cranky. I know the black-and-white nakedness of Renée Cox's solemn mama made her image timeless and classically pure, while it tapped your brain about scale and portraiture and race and family and a whole lot of other stuff, but she was also