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ARTSEEN | MARCH 2016

# NONA FAUSTINE *White Shoes*

By Jessica Holmes

“Once you leave New York City, America begins,” or so the old maxim goes. The notion that the city is a threshold, that it stands apart from the rest of the country, is a potent cultural marker, one that many New Yorkers subscribe to. As citizens of the largest city in the nation, and the historical gateway for arriving immigrants, we often envision ourselves as more cosmopolitan, more progressive, and more tolerant than those who live in most other places in the United States. But the city we know, founded by Dutch traders in 1624, is a very old one, with centuries of history entombed far below its concrete canyons. Consider, for instance, this little-discussed facet of the ancestral underbelly: for 200 years New York was the slave-trading capital of the United States, and

slaves were routinely kept until 1827, when the institution was abolished in the state.

With her first solo exhibition, *White Shoes*, at Smack Mellon Gallery in Brooklyn, photographer Nona Faustine confronts this shameful period of New York's past and blows it wide open, and in doing so also insists the viewer confront residual prejudices and effects of that history that still persist today. The series of ten formally composed and dramatic images provide a loose narrative arc, each shot at a location in Manhattan or Brooklyn that once played a role in New York's system of bondage. The Brooklyn Botanical Gardens, Tweed Courthouse, and the New York State Supreme Court are amongst the locations whose antecedents become shaded with new meaning. Faustine, a stout African-American woman with an arresting, youthful face, poses nude at each site, usually wearing only a pair of white, high-heeled shoes. As a born-and-raised New Yorker who still resides in Brooklyn, her connection to the places she shoots is immediate and palpable.



Nona Faustine, *A Proper Place*, 2015. Archival pigment print, 26 × 40 inches. Edition of 5 + AP. Courtesy the artist and Smack Mellon Gallery.

ON VIEW  
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The opening image, *Like a Pregnant Corpse the Ship Expelled Her Into the Patriarchy* (2012), is unflinching, and establishes the tone for the remainder of the show. Faustine lies splayed out on a cluster of massive stone pylons at the Brooklyn waterfront, a port where slaves ships once docked, the gray and murky water surging around her. Her torso is riddled with bits of seaweed and moss; she would become one with the surroundings if not for the bright white shoes on her feet. It is as if her near-lifeless body has been abandoned on the stones and forgotten. She appears similarly sprawled like a corpse in *Sacred Earth* (2014), where she lies beneath a gnarled, old-growth tree rooted in the Brooklyn

Botanical Gardens. The bucolic park was once the site of Dutch farmland controlled by the Lefferts, one of New York's earliest dynastic, slave-owning families.

With these yin-and-yang images—one of the land and one of the water—Faustine's body becomes a literal component of the landscape. She is a channel for, and a physical manifestation of, the countless and nameless women who were subjected to the tortures of slavery, ancestors who did not arrive through Ellis Island, who were never provided a choice of whether they wished to settle in the New World. The images have a precedent in work by earlier photographers like Gordon Parks, whose inclusion of ancient trees and other lush flora in his photojournalistic work is sometimes thought to symbolize the connection of the black body to the land. This connection is occasionally debated—can bodies that were brought here by force have possibly formed an inherent connection to this land? Can their descendants? But as Lauret Savoy has written, “to live in this country is to be marked by its still unfolding history. *Life marks* seen and unseen. From my circumscribed pinpoint I must try to trace what has marked me. The way traverses many forms of memory and silence, of a people as well as a single person.” One can see Faustine wrestling with these questions in her photographs, uncovering the past that has left its imprint while simultaneously claiming a rightful foothold in the city that bore her.

One of the most affecting images in the “White Shoes” series, entitled *A Proper Place* (2015), shows Faustine in a humble park at the corner of Chrystie and Rivington Streets, in Manhattan's Lower East Side, once the site of an African burial ground. She stands at the center of the photograph, with an empty playground behind her, wearing only the white shoes and a blue scarf draped like a wimple across her head. Her body is on full display and highly vulnerable, charging the photograph with danger—the menace to which a contemporary black body is exposed on a daily basis. The disconcerting image also reflects the inherited memory of past traumas from a fraught history. One need only look at the surviving “ethnographic” photographs and daguerreotypes of black bodies (usually female) made by white photographers in the mid and late 1800s to see that Faustine's stance and resolute, solemn gaze echoes the way in which most of these women were constrained into posing for their captors. This posture is not merely homage, but an artist's direct connection with a historical anguish that

still festers. *White Shoes* is not an easy exhibition to digest, nor is it painless, but Faustine’s voice emerges loud and clear, and is crucial for our times.

**Jessica Holmes** is a New York-based writer and critic. She is an Art Editor and ArTonic Editor for the *Brooklyn Rail*.

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