

# Resistance & Relaxation



By Sam  
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In a guest-curated exhibition by Tahirah Rasheed and Autumn Breon at the new ICA SF, Black feminist politics materialize into tender artistic and curatorial gestures, and ground us in the beauty of one another. Upon entering the gallery space, *Resting Our Eyes*' themes are laid bare, embodied totally in just its monumental, bubblegum pink title wall alone. The words "Resting Our Eyes" towers over me—its size commanding its importance. Even the title's font is imbued with its themes of "liberation and celebration...through the lens of...physical adornment"—itself an ornate, high serif typeface laid in gold leaf on the wall.

Through curatorial action and the artworks themselves, the intention of the exhibition is clear and specific—they do not dance around or present any vagueness in their themes. The careful and tangible curatorial care with which Rasheed and Breon, tend to this exhibition embodies their own ideas on the same subjects, actualizing the visual vocabularies of the artworks into space.

Within the first sentence of their introductory texts, they plant their thematic roots by referring to the work of Combahee River Collective, which was a group in the 1970s and 80s dedicated to the progression of the particular rights of Black lesbians and Black women. The group itself was equally specific and clear in the declaration of their own goals and are often attributed to articulating the precursors to what we now call 'intersectionality' thanks to the groundbreaking legal scholar, Kimberle Crenshaw. What this specific allusion does in the context of *Resting Our Eyes* is to remind us of their central belief, that when Black women become liberated, we all become liberated across class, gender identity, race, and sexuality. This reminds us why an exhibition of Black women and femme expressions of self, care, and adornment is important.

Among the group of 20 artists whose careers represent both recent and decades-long engagement with these topics, two members of the California College of the Arts community shine—Hank Willis Thomas, who received his Master's from CCA, and Leila Weefur, who served as an adjunct in CCA's Critical Ethnic Studies department. Weefur's piece *Tillage and Fury* (2022) explores the seemingly disparate themes of Black anger and beauty as inextricable, as both rely on "a desire to be seen." Thomas contributed *Kama Mama, Kama Binti (Like Mother, Like Daughter)* (1971/2008)—an image from his larger series, *Unbranded: Reflections in Black by Corporate America* on the reclamation of increasingly commodified Black life. Thomas isolates an image of a mother and daughter outfitted with

matching earrings from its advertisement typefaces, leaving behind the exchanging of tender eye contact with one another. His artistic intervention is arresting; it creates a moment of pause for us to hold emotional space for this embodiment of feminine-centered Black joy and care.

Immediately next to Thomas' works are two pieces from Carrie Mae Weems' *The Kitchen Table* series, which explores the "overlapping roles of mother, daughter, friend, and lover," as well as the tender and subtle expressions of feminine care that materialize in the intimate, domestic sphere. Next to this work is *Carrie at the Euro Salon, Eatonville* (2010) by Deborah Willis, Hank Willis Thomas's mother. It is a photograph of Weems at the hair salon, gazing at herself in a handheld mirror (similar to those in Genevieve Gaignard's nearby piece *Look What We've Become*, composed of 150 found handheld mirrors, filling a large portion of the wall), with our view being completed by a reflection in a larger mirror in front of her. The careful and intentional juxtaposition of these works in particular, referring to one another's themes, and rooted in the interpersonal relationships between the artists themselves, creates a tender moment where we, as viewers, can hold the sweet beauty of their lived experiences within and outside of their work.

Oakland-based artist Sadie Barnette's signature archival family photos and glittered stereo are also not far from home. Her work explores themes of personal familial memory, celebration, and possibility, much of which itself is deeply intertwined with the social histories of the Bay Area where her family found its roots. From a distance, her piece, *Easy in the Den* (2019), subtly glitters and calls me toward it— an archival family photo of a woman lounging comfortably and joyfully in a family living room. The living room in this context serves as an extension of physical ornamentation, a space in which we tend to, curate intentionally, surround ourselves with those we love, and rest. Through process, Barnette herself carefully and lovingly embellishes this piece with her signature rhinestones, reemphasizing care and tenderness through her process.

*Resting Our Eyes* represents rest, adornment, and self-expression as not only necessary, but a vital act of survival and flourishing. Throughout the exhibition, there are also quiet threads reflecting on the tender power of Black inter-feminine relationships which fills the show with a totalizing undercurrent of tenderness and inter-feminine care. *Resting Our Eyes* is the long-awaited, tender embrace that relieves us from the stream of trauma and violence

that act as a representational marker of our time. Its deeply personal spirit is exactly why it is so moving and so effective. Ultimately, *Resting Our Eyes* is simultaneously a love letter, an affirmation, and a celebration of Black women.

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