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## The Faces and Conversations of MoAD's Winter Opening Reception

By [Pendarvis Harshaw](#) Jan 24



The event last Tuesday at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD) in San Francisco was billed as the Winter 2020 Opening Reception. But it felt more like a family reunion, with art as a fantastic background, or rather, a talking piece.

On the first floor, where the entrance flows into a lobby and bookstore, there were two perpendicular lines of people: one with folks hanging up coats and bags, the other with people awaiting refreshments, many of them in conversation with whoever was adjacent to them. A quick scan of the room showed a gang of familiar faces, and pieces of Laylah Amatullah Barryn's artwork from the exhibit *Baye Fall: Roots in Spirituality, Fashion and Resistance*.

I shook hands and exchanged hugs as I made my way through the building, all the way up to the third floor. That's where I saw the work of Kwame Brathwaite's *Black is Beautiful*. The exhibition, which opened in December and runs through March, is comprised of large-scale photos of the Grandassa models, as well as smaller lifestyle photos, images of jazz album covers, and portraits of Brathwaite and his family.

I made one loop and then headed down to the second floor for the main attraction of the evening: the work of MoAD's current Emerging Artist Program awardee Chanell Stone. Her series of self-portraits set in urban landscapes explores the connection between the lived-in environment and black bodies. "I want black people to reconnect with nature," she told me. "Especially the nature that's right in front of them."

Stone uses a Pentax film camera to create images representative of what it's like to be connected to nature despite residing in spaces enclosed in concrete, focusing on New York, her hometown of Los Angeles, and Oakland, where she currently resides.

The conversation about inner city residents' connection to nature, or lack thereof, is evergreen. But it's especially relevant now, given last week's headlines of jet fuel being dumped in Los Angeles and a study showing higher temperatures in historically redlined neighborhoods.

On the same floor as Stone's photography is *Don't Shoot: An Opus of the Opulence of Blackness*, a group exhibition including work by Angelica Ekeke, Adrian Walker and Idris Hassan, among many others.

A conversation with Melonie Green, co-curator of *Don't Shoot* along with her twin sister Melorra, led me to understand what went into the exhibition. "We've been a part of panel discussions, talk-backs, town halls," said Melonie. "It gets to a point where you're tired of talking. That's why we created the other part of the installation, where people could put up their words"—referring to a chalkboard with prompts about how being in a majority white space makes one feel.

Melonie explained that she and her sister (the two are also executive directors of the African American Art & Culture Complex) asked themselves, "What actions do we want people to take?" That led to adding a photo booth with empowering messages for African American attendees, and notes on how to be an ally for those who don't identify as such.

Melonie credited MoAD's new Executive Director Monetta White for making a positive impact, evidenced by the attendance that evening. "There's something special about the entire building being filled with a fresh vibe," she said, going on to acknowledge that, as a museum which some still see as off-limits to them, "there is more work to be done."

Melonie ended our chat by inviting me to the upcoming artist talk on Jan. 30. And she wasn't the only one giving info about upcoming events.

Traci Bartlow told me about her upcoming exhibition, *My Life in Nudes*, which includes unpublished behind-the-scenes photos from HBO's *Real Sex: Episode 24*, which featured the Punany Poets and was filmed in Oakland in 1999.

Philip Martin Gallery

Jarrell Phillips told me about his photography show *The Souls of Black Folk: Joy, Grace and Glory*, a firsthand look at the African diaspora showing at multiple branches of the San Francisco Public Library, starting with the Western Addition branch on Feb. 8.

Marijuana entrepreneur Chelsea Candelaria told me about a 420-friendly movie night coming up on Jan. 31, presented in collaboration with one of her retail partners, New Life.

Toshia Christal and Alie Jones are curating an upcoming SOMArts show called Unbound Roots, opening March 12.

And even the DJ has events coming up: on Jan. 31, DJ Aebl Dee spins at the Oakland Museum as part of the museum's Friday Nights at OMCA series.

A number of the artists I bumped into, like photographer and designer Ron Calime and visual designer Ayana Ivery, are part of the *Art of the African Diaspora* show opening this weekend at the Richmond Arts Center. Formerly known as *The Art of Living Black*, the annual show features the work of over 100 artists at venues all around the Bay Area over the coming weeks.

Before leaving, I shook the hand of famed Black Panther Party Minister of Culture Emory Douglas. I hugged artist and co-creator of *The Black Woman is God* Karen Senefru. I met Maryom Ana Al-Wadi, who fought for a Black Studies program and the development of the College of Ethnic Studies at SF State over 50 years ago, and I was introduced to Sean Smith, a current student at SF State involved in the Black Student Union.

To think, when Chanell Stone sent me a message about the opening, I replied that I'd come but only stay for an hour or so, figuring that'd be enough time to take in the art.

But you know how it goes: come for the art, stay for the people.