

# Black women have always been beautiful. Celebrating that is power

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Jeneé Osterheldt



A Molotov cocktail defiantly sits on display at the ICA.

Betye Saar's "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail" is a powderkeg of political commentary.

The wine jug is labeled with a mammy — a racist symbol of black female servitude most famously embodied by Aunt Jemima — on the front. On the back, a black power fist. An oily red bandana is stuffed in the mouth of the bottle, waiting for a spark.

Saar's 1973 piece was meant to set the stereotype aflame, freeing black womanhood.

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Forty-five years later, there's still a need to let it burn.

Just last month, President Trump called Omarosa Manigault Newman, a black woman, a dog. He consistently depicts any black woman who speaks out against him, from Oprah to Jemele Hill to April Ryan, as inferior. He's called Maxine Waters "wacky," "deranged," and a "low IQ."

Disdain for black women in the highest office is a reflection of the historic disrespect. Malcolm X wasn't lying when he said the most disrespected woman and unprotected person in America is the black woman.

The criminalization of black girls starts as young as age 5. Last year, a study by Georgetown Law found adults view black girls as less innocent and less in need of comfort than their white peers. For black boys, that bias starts around age 10.

When adults don't think black girls need protection, it clears the way for black women to become the most likely to be murdered. The Centers for Disease Control found black women were almost 3.5 times more likely to be murdered than white women.

Seeing Saar's bottle bomb is bittersweet. It's part of "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85," the first exhibition to highlight black women and art of the second wave feminist era.

The show, organized by the Brooklyn Museum, is on display at the Institute of Contemporary Art through Sept. 30.

When these pieces were being made, they were a resistance to oppression, sexism, and racism. Yet these works do not serve as reminders of a revolution won. They are affirmations of our steadfast strength, beauty, and power in the face of persistent oppression.



Suzanne Kreiter/Globe staff

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“A show like this is a response to what it is to be in an exclusionary world,” says Jessica Hong, the ICA’s assistant curator who coordinated the presentation. “I’m seeing a desire for openness, to have these conversations and continue to do the hard work.”

Before Hong can finish her thoughts, two women stop to thank her for bringing this show to Boston.

“If we’re represented we’ll come,” says Kim Parker, 43, an assistant director of teacher training at Shady Hill School. She and her friend gushed about the show to Hong.

For Parker, a show like this was long overdue.

“Lots of these museums don’t realize the power of this representation,” Parker tells me. “As a black woman, I’ve always known we are powerful and nuanced, but in these times when black women are so heavily policed, it’s important for other people to understand that as well.”

Today, our liberation cocktail isn’t just in Saar’s flamethrower. It’s in Serena’s one-shouldered tutu dress she wore at the US Open. It’s in Rihanna and Pat McGrath shifting the homogenous culture of cosmetics. It’s in Gabriela Taveras being the first woman to wear the Miss Massachusetts crown. It’s in Ayanna Pressley being the first black woman elected to the Boston City Council and now poised to become the first from Massachusetts in Congress.



Craig F. Walker/Globe staff  
Magazines with photos of black women on their covers.

It's in more than a dozen black women covering September issues of major magazines. There's never been this much melanin on mag covers all at once: Beyoncé on Vogue, Rihanna on British Vogue, Nicki Minaj on Vogue Arabia, Zendaya on Marie Claire, Ruth Negga for Marie Claire UK, Tracee Ellis Ross on Elle Canada, Letitia Wright for W, Lupita Nyong'o on Porter Magazine, Issa Rae on Ebony, Naomi Campbell on Essence, Slick Woods on Elle UK, Yara Shahidi on Hollywood Reporter, Aja Naomi King on Shape, Tiffany Haddish on Glamour, Teyana Taylor on Playboy, and Jacqueline Woodson on Writer's Digest.

These are not just pretty pictures. They are the liberation of Mammy and Sapphire and Jezebel.

Much like the art on display at the ICA is a resistance, these covers are a disruption to the lies we've been sold that say we have no agency in defining ourselves.

This is a response to the work Ebony and Essence and Jet did decades before the mainstream took note. This is a response to everyday black girls and women picking up their phones and celebrating themselves with hashtags like [#melaninpoppin](#), [#blackgirlfly](#) and

[#blackgirlmagic](#). This is a response to [Kerry Washington](#), [Zendaya](#), and [Lupita](#) calling magazines out when they Photoshop their Afrocentric features to appease the white gaze.

These women aren't modeling. Editors are consulting them on the direction. It's a power shift.

Beyoncé didn't just grace the cover of *Vogue*. She controlled the cover and the narrative. She hired Tyler Mitchell, the first black photographer to ever shoot a *Vogue* cover.

"Until there is a mosaic of perspectives coming from different ethnicities behind the lens, we will continue to have a narrow approach and view of what the world actually looks like," Beyoncé said in *Vogue*. ". . . There are so many cultural and societal barriers to entry that I like to do what I can to level the playing field, to present a different point of view for people who may feel like their voices don't matter."

Fashion and art are never as simple as clothes to wear and something cool to hang on the wall. Tanisha Ford, author of "[Liberated Threads](#): Black Women, Style, and the Global Politics of Soul," explores how black women use fashion as a form of protest. At 2 p.m. on Sunday, Sept. 9, at the ICA, she'll speak on the resistance and how it relates to "We Wanted a Revolution."

"We are now having a more honest conversation about black women, body politics, and hair politics that centers beauty and fashion and doesn't see it as trivial," she says. "I like that there are a generation of people who are trying to pick up the reins of their foremothers."

A Molotov cocktail is in our spirit. It's in the twist of our hair, the color on our lips, and the clothes that we wear. And we'll keep blazing barriers until freedom is ours.



Suzanne Kreiter/Globe staff

A mother and child took in the new exhibit at the ICA.

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