

# Michèle Pearson Clarke

## A Welcome Weight On My Body



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# Making Heavy Weights Light

Lily Cho

Sometimes, some things will feel too heavy. There will be too much to bear. But there are other times when the weight is welcome. It will fold you in. It will press against you and hold you close. It will be the welcome weight that lets you breathe. Now, when we know that Black lives are intricately twined with the incessant demand to be able to breathe against a weight, Michèle Pearson Clarke’s photographs offer a ballast against that which crushes. These photographs invite us to feel what she calls the “affective grit” of analogue photography. For Clarke, affective grit is the “friction produced, its granular textures convey the embodied intimacies and emotional realities of Black people, because as we feel differently, we see differently.”<sup>1</sup> In and through difference, there is this welcome weight. Feel it. Let its rough texture be solace and succor.

### Analogic weight

This weight has its own haptics. Analogue photographs, Tina Campt tells us, have a “thingyness” to them. Camp credits Ingrid Pollard with this term. Pollard, when responding to Camp’s recount of a moving and exciting visit exploring Black British photography at the Dyche Collection in the Birmingham City Library, tells Campt, “There’s a ‘thingyness’ to an image... a thingyness you feel incredibly strongly when you work with negatives.”<sup>2</sup> Yes, these negatives, whose traces haunt the processed photographs, command a presence. But these are not simply negatives. These are negatives of portraits of Black people whose lives, and images, have been repeatedly overlooked and forgotten. The weight of these particular negatives is what brings Camp and Pollard to the endurance of their haptics. Feeling these photographs is also a reminder of how hard it has been to see Black presence in photography at all. As Syreeta McFadden argues, the camera had to be taught to see Blackness because, until the 1970s, colour film emulsions and photographic processing standards were normed for white skin.<sup>3</sup> Beyond the technical disappearance of race in colour film, there is also the history of photography’s difficulty with visualizing Blackness in that, as Coco Fusco tracks, photography did not record race, but rather produced it. So it means something that we arrive at thingyness through the brilliance of Black photographers, curators, and critics. It is not just the materiality of the image that matters. But also the materiality of that image as it has come into being through histories of race and difference. In turning to film photography, Clarke is seeking to bring to her work and her viewers the welcome weight of the images that other Black photographers, including Deana Lawson, Dawoud Bey, Myra Greene, LaToya Ruby Frazier and Jalani Morgan, have brought to her. These photographers have chosen to



Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Self-Portrait #2, July 19, 2018*, archival ink jet print, 40 x 40 inches, 2018

work analogically. They have chosen the weight of the film and, in so doing, put themselves up against the burden of historical representations that have used this very medium against their communities. In her compulsion to analogue, Clarke gives to us some of what these photographers have given to her.

To be up against a weight is to feel its presence. Here, in Clarke’s photographs, there is the welcome weight of Black presence.

### Contact and vulnerability

Vulnerability is part of what is touching, what touches us, in Clarke’s photographs. They are vulnerable in their failings. Some of these are photographs that might have been discarded, selected for the trash file, or buried in a contact sheet that would never have been meant for a gallery wall. Here, the subject’s eyes are closed. This is precisely the kind of photo, the kind where the person in the photograph seems to have blinked too soon or too late, that we might be tempted to throw out. And then here, the focus is off. Or here, the light is not great. Look at these photographs and wonder about their failings.

Clarke makes an exhibition of her process, of what she tells me is a course of “purely learning as you do.” There was a light-bulb moment, she goes on to say over beer and tequila on the hot summer afternoon when we looked at these photos together, while she was in school and saw William Eggleston’s contact sheets for the first time and realized that he took twenty-three bad photographs to get to the one that worked—the “good” one that would become iconic. Seeing Eggleston’s contact sheet disrupted the narrative of white



Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Gloria, July 23, 2018*, archival ink jet print, 30 x 30 inches, 2018

male genius, the background to an artistic education in this country. To display a contact sheet is to divulge more than process. It is to insist on the vulnerability, and the mistakes, that are ground upon which a “good” photo emerges.

It is possible that you may look at some of these photographs and wonder if, maybe, these are not very good photos. Indeed, some of the photos you will see were not taken with the intention of being mounted on foamcore or blown up to a 40 x 40 inch print. These were part of a practice in the truest sense. They are attempts. They are part of Clarke learning as she does.

When I say that, maybe, they are not great photos, I am also saying that they are perfectly attuned to the particular art and vulnerability of failure. In these photographs, we can follow what failing better looks like. As Jack Halberstam knows, there is a queer art to failure where “resistance takes the form of investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read *failure*, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the intuitive connections within capitalism between success and profit, as a counterhegemonic discourse of losing.”<sup>4</sup> Refusing mastery is hard. Magnifying that refusal, and reproducing it to cover an entire wall, as Clarke has done, is fiercely generous.

### Seeing relation, seeing through

“Photography develops, rather, *with us, and in response to us*.”<sup>5</sup> Photographs are not developed solely out of mechanical and commercial processes. Analogue photography calls us to the idiosyncrasies of an image’s emergence, and of how its imprinting is contingent upon what Ariella Azoulay calls “the photographic situation” in that photography is an event.<sup>6</sup>



Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Deanna, May 26, 2018*, archival ink jet print, 40 x 40 inches, 2018

Photography exceeds the production of an image. These images are also the relations that make them.

That is the case for any photograph but, as Deborah Willis has so beautifully insisted all through the arc of her artistic and curatorial practice, for racialized photographers there is an urgency to understanding “photography as biography.”<sup>7</sup> Biography, and autobiography, in Clarke’s photographs demand that we see the self developing with, and in response to others. Clarke’s self-portraits turn us back to our own sense of bodies and weights, and to the measures by which we move through the world. The intimacies and vulnerabilities of the Black presence in Clarke’s photographs come out of how she sees relations between herself and the communities to which her practice is bound.

In the portrait of Deanna Bowen that is post-process, there is only Deanna in the frame. But the welcome weight of this photograph lies in Michèle’s relation to Deanna. Deanna allows Michèle to fold her into that image. More than that, she has gifted Michèle two lenses the day of this shoot. Michèle invites us to see Deanna through Deanna’s own lenses. Here, we see Michèle seeing Deanna, and Deanna seeing Michèle through—through a moment when Michèle does not have quite enough, not quite enough equipment, not quite enough mastery, and here in this not-quite-enoughness is the radiance of relation.

Here, in the frictive intimacy of these photographs is a way of seeing each other through and in relation.

Here, then, the affective grit of this weight that is so welcome.

1 Clarke, Michèle Pearson Clarke, “A Dark Horse in Low Light: Black Visuality and the Aesthetics of Analogue Photography.” *Field of Vision Speaker Series* (9 November 2017) Gallery 44, Toronto, ON, Canada.  
2 Campt, Tina, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).  
3 McFadden, Syreeta, “Teaching the Camera to See my Skin.” *Buzzfeed News*, (2 April 2014).

4 Halberstam, Jack, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).  
5 Silverman, Kaja, *The Miracle of Analogy, or The History of Photography Part I* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).  
6 Azoulay, Ariella, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, trans. Relä Mazali and Ruvik Danieli, (New York: Zone Books, 2008).  
7 Willis, Deborah, “Visualizing Memory: Photographs and the Art of Biography,” *American Art*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2003): 20-23.



## Cover image

Michèle Pearson Clarke,  
*Gloria, July 23, 2018* (detail),  
archival ink jet print,  
30 x 30 inches, 2018

**Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography** is a charitable, non-profit, artist-run centre committed to supporting multi-faceted approaches to photography and lens-based media. Founded in 1979 to establish a supportive environment for the development of artistic practice, Gallery 44's mandate is to provide a context for meaningful reflection and dialogue on contemporary photography. Gallery 44 is committed to programs that reflect the continuously changing definition of photography by presenting a wide range of practices that engage timely and critical explorations of the medium. Through exhibitions, public engagement, education programs and production facilities our objective is to explore the artistic, cultural, historic, social and political implications of the image in our ever-expanding visual world.

**Michèle Pearson Clarke** is a Trinidad-born artist who works in photography, film, video and installation. Her work has been shown across Canada and internationally, including recent exhibitions at The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Mercer Union, Ltd los angeles, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago and Ryerson Image Centre. Based in Toronto, she holds an MSW from the University of Toronto, and she received her MFA from Ryerson University in 2015, when she was awarded both the Ryerson University Board of Governors Leadership Award and Medal and the Ryerson Gold Medal for the Faculty of Communication + Design. From 2016-2017, Clarke was artist-in-residence at Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, and she was the EDA Artist-in-Residence in the Department of Arts, Culture and Media at the University of Toronto Scarborough for the Winter term 2018. Clarke's writing has been published in *Canadian Art* and *Transition Magazine*, and she is currently teaching in the Documentary Media Studies program at Ryerson University.

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**Lily Cho** is an Associate Professor and the Chair of the Department of English at York University.

### Cover Image

Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Gloria, July 23, 2018* (detail),  
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Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Renee*, July 17, 2018, archival ink jet print, 12 x 12 inches, 2018



Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Franklin 1*, July 23, 2018, archival ink jet print, 18 x 18 inches, 2018



Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Double Charles*, July 16, 2018, archival ink jet print, 16 x 22 inches, 2018



Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Marc and Carla*, July 23, 2018, archival ink jet print, 16 x 16 inch, 2018