



Dandy Lion:

(RE) ARTICULATING BLACK MASCULINE
IDENTITY

APRIL 6–JULY 12, 2015

Kia Chenelle, *The Waiting Man I*, 2013

In recent years, there has been a noticeable trend on urban streets across continents—the rise of the global Black dandy. For me it's a movement that recalls some-thing of my childhood in New Orleans, where all the men and boys in my family dressed up. I don't remember my paternal grandfather ever leaving the house without a fedora, for instance, and even my younger brother took immense pride in his collection of dress shoes at a very early age. The current alternative world of fine and fly Black men first took hold of me, however, about five years ago, when I curated the first iteration of *Dandy Lion: (Re)Articulating Black Masculine Identity*. Launched at Society HAE's Pop Up Gallery in Harlem in November 2010, in terms of representation of black men, *Dandy Lion* was a breath of fresh air. Since then, the exhibition has traveled to multiple cities in the United States and Amsterdam and has continued to expand, parallel to the sartorial movement itself.

Up until that point, the most ubiquitous image of Black men in media was that of athlete, rapper, or thug. There were very few contemporary conversations about Black dandyism in the popular culture of the day. In summer 2009, however, Italian photographer **Daniele Tamagni** (Italian, b. 1975) published *Gentlemen of Bacongo*, his photographic documentation of Democratic Republic of Congo's sapeur culture. A few months later, Duke University Press released Monica L. Miller's *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Diasporic Identity*, an extensive chronology of the Black dandy from his eighteenth-century European origin to his present-day self.



Rose Callahan

Barima Owusu-Nyantekyi at the King's Head Club, London, 2013

Meanwhile the New York-based style blog Street Etiquette started accumulating a cult following of young and hip style enthusiasts, and across the pond in the United Kingdom the growing attention of sartorial subjects—designers Sam Lambert and Shaka Madoh of Art Comes First—helped to solidify mainstream attention on this pop cultural movement. The international interest can largely be attributed to widespread sharing of photographs of these men around the globe—on Instagram, blogs, Tumblr, and other viable social media outlets. Not only was Black dandyism growing around the world, but also photographic documentation of the movement was expanding.

Historically, within the Black community, the term dandy has been associated with its classical European origins and paints a picture of White men in petticoats, pointed shoes, and multilayered lace blouses with accompanying ruffled sleeves. While both the word and style have their origins in Victorian and Edwardian era Europe, the presence of Black men in classic Western fashion has always disrupted this European aristocratic aesthetic.

DEFINING DANDY LION Throughout history, most notably the past two centuries, and particularly in the West, Black men have used fashion as a tool of rebellion. When self-styled, the African Diasporan man has relied upon his innate sensibilities to express his masculinity, his humanity, his individuality. In styling himself, particularly in dress mostly associated with a certain class, education, and social status of the other [read: Whites], the African Diasporan dandy cleverly manipulates clothing and attitude to exert his agency rather than succumb to the limited ideals placed on him by society. He performs identity. Most importantly, an integral part of this rebellion entails posing before a camera.

Be clear: every brother in a zoot suit and bow tie does not a dandy make. It is the combination of specific elements and accoutrements that distinguishes Black dandies from your everyday dapper don. His clothes are generally well fitting and meticulously tailored rather than loose and baggy. Even when he is not formally attired in a suit and tie, the Black dandy has carefully considered his clothes and accessories. A Black dandy can thus be defined as a self-fashioned gentleman who intentionally assimilates classical European fashion with African Diasporan aesthetics and sensibilities. He is a rebel—a modern-day representation of the African trickster. His style and identity are generally a contradiction, of the stereotypes, boxes, categories, or ideas that society typically applies to him (and in some cases, her).

The men photographed in *Dandy Lion: (Re)Articulating Black Masculine Identity* are exceptional in both style and manners and provide the opportunity for a paradigm shift in how men of African descent are seen. More importantly, the images provide a platform, through an artistic medium, for the self-articulation of sartorial Black men. The photographers and filmmakers whose work is on view here come from various regions around the African Diaspora. Their subject matter is young Black men—in urban and rural, literal and abstract landscapes across the globe—who defy stereotypical and monolithic understandings of masculinity within the Black community. *Dandy Lion* confronts the “thug” narrative and asserts alternative identities.

The subjects are all Black men, yet, like the exhibition's photographers, they come from diverse ethnicities and cultures. Their nationalities range from British, Jamaican, and African American to South African, French, and Congolese. Also, the project is not specific to place; images were shot in various places around the Diaspora, including locales throughout the United States, Africa, and Europe

QUINTESSENTIAL DANDIES Perhaps more than any other contemporary photographer, **Rose Callahan** (American, b. 1973) has profiled bona fide dandies of all races, the world over. For over a decade she and her partner, Nathaniel “Natty” Adams, have delved into the exquisite and ornate private world of the quintessential dandy, interviewing dandies in their homes, at the tailor, and in the gentlemen clubs they frequent. Featuring a limited selection of images from her book *I Am Dandy*, Callahan's portraits in the exhibition capture the personalities and statures of some of the world's most notable well-dressed men.

Working primarily with medium and large-format film, **Russell K. Frederick** (Panamanian-American, b. 1970) has spent the past two decades documenting Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brooklyn. The most iconographic of the bunch is a group shot of several well-known New York dandies photographed as a tribute to world-renowned photographer Jamel Shabazz in a shoot that I organized with Barnabas Crosby for Ariel Wizman's film *Black Dandy*. **Hanif Abdur-Rahim** (American, b. 1972), whose work *A Revolution in Etiquette—Connoisseurs of SWAG* served as the exhibition's original statement image, reflects the historical nature of the Black Dandy phenomenon. Four Dandy Lions stand together in an almost military formation, clearly prepared to battle stereotypes and any other individuals who may try to out-style them.



Hanif Abdur-Rahim Ubiquitous SWAG, 2010

OCCUPATIONAL DANDIES One of the most notable professions of a true dandy is that of an artist. These were the figures that W. E. B. Du Bois encouraged to participate in racial progress by using their gifts to uplift society. **Laylah Amatullah Barrayn** (American, b. 1979) caught well-known Black Arts pioneer Che Baraka in his studio, and **Jati Lindsay** (American, b. 1974), known for photographing up-and-coming jazz artists, captured drummer Emanuel Harrold backstage. In one image, Lindsay is decidedly present, adding himself as one of the art form's historical stewards. **L. Kasimu Harris** (American, b. 1978) shows Malcolm Jenkins with his pregnant wife along the banks of the Mississippi River. Jenkins is not only a professional football player but also the successful founder of Rock Avenue, a New Orleans-based bow tie company. Amsterdam-based **Richard Terborg** (Dutch, b. 1984) has a series of images profiling the professional and personal life of Eritrean-Dutch fashion stylist Dualleh Abdulrahman.

HABITATS AND LANDSCAPES Several of the artists photographed Dandy Lions in their “element”—the natural and human-made environments where they hold court.

Alexis Peskine (French Brazilian, b. 1979) juxtaposes old Europe Paris with an antiquated wild field in the heart of Ethiopia. Known mostly for his documentation of gang life in New Jersey, **Akintola Hanif** (American, b.1972) places his plaid-wearing dandy in the middle of an industrial mining yard, and in a way, deconstructs the popularized notions of what cities like Newark and men like Dawan are made of. In the triptych *Stranger in Moscow*, **Arteh Odjidja** (British, b. 1983) expresses the isolation, yet prominence, of a well-to-do Black man in Russia. Focusing on the fantastical that exists in rural landscapes in the American South, **Allison Janae Hamilton** (American, b. 1984) depicts a literal and figurative Dandy Lion, perched in a field of flowers, adorned in a skin-tight leopard suit and top hat.

GETTING READY, GOING OUT For the Black dandy, outfits are meant to be declarative; clothes and accessories are worn to be seen. The exhibition begins with a large-scale installation of a photograph by **Rog Walker** (American, b. 1984), a dark, sultry image that focuses on the subject's many glittering rings. Opposite this navy palette is **Kia Chenelle's** (American, b. 1983) series of seven photographs against a dark white background, images of writer Jason Reynolds that focus on the contemplative moments a dandy experiences when dressed and before an audience of one—himself. *Mr. Deverteuil Grooming* and *Mr. Deverteuil on the Go* by **Adama Delphine Fawundu** (Sierre Leonian-American, b. 1971) document the acts of getting dressed and out the door, and the deliberation and meticulousness those activities require. **Numa Perrier** (Haitian-American, b. 1978) presents a video that chronicles the art of tying a bow tie, but absent is her dandy's face. We see only his lips, his hands. Is he dressed? undressed? alone, or in someone's company?



Russell K. Frederick, *Alanzo*, 2010

“I position the black dandy explicitly among other racialized performers and performers of masculinity in order to read the dandy as a complicated figure that can at once, subvert and fulfill normative categories of identity at different times and places as a gesture of self-articulation.”¹

STREET STYLE The first notable person to capture the look of dandies and their quaintrelles was probably James van Der Zee, who documented the vibrant and stylish energy of early twentieth-century Harlem. A couple of decades later, Malik Sidibe and Seydou Keita, both working in Mali, captured the beauty of their West African country-men and women. The street portraiture style shown in the work of **Jamala Johns** (American, b. 1984), **Cassi Amanda Gibson** (Mozambican, b. 1988, lives in Morocco), and **Sara Shamsavari** (British Iranian, b. 1979) has followed along the same lines as these historical antecedents. These artists depict the seemingly mundane in larger-than-life fashion, electing to magnify the colorful patterns, textures, and vibrant ensembles of dandies in London, Paris, and New York. Of course how a Dandy Lion chooses to spend the day before him is just as essential as his choice of clothing on any given morning. In *All Smiles* (2011) by **Devin Mays** (American, b. 1985), a dandy browses vintage albums in a Chicago record shop, an activity that is most certainly a dandy pastime.

LOVE IS AFRICAN Primarily working in a sartorial collective named Khumbula in Johannesburg, **Harness Hamese** (South African, b. 1986) teamed up with Namibian designer and sartorialist Loux the Vintage Guru to create a set of staged moments featuring vintage clothing enthusiasts in southern Africa. Collectively, their movement is known as “Love is African.” Hamese's images speak to the delicate balance and sophistication of masculinity and femininity. This deliberate illustration of gender equilibrium is one of the reasons I decided to include a few images that prominently feature a woman as the main subject in a show about Black men. The South African-born Andile Biyana's power and strength lie in the femininity she wields among brethren. **Jody Ake** (American, b. 1970) exhibits a striking series of rare and delicate ambrotypes. A direct relation to the daguerreotype, the ambrotype is a very difficult and rare method of producing images in modern times. Ake's ambrotypes of Black men in the twenty-first century powerfully use portraiture to portray self-actualization and identity.

LA SAPE Interestingly, a diverse group of photojournalists have captured the splendor and reality of the Congolese Sapeur movement La SAPE—the acronym for Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes (the Society of Ambiance-Makers and Elegant People). **Caroline Kaminju** (Kenyan, b. 1975, lives in South Africa) documents both the public and private spaces of the Sapeur. Notably, both subject and photographer are “outsiders” to South African culture, migrants who have moved there in search of economic opportunities. Instead of focusing on the superficiality of the clothing, Kaminju fixates on the juxtaposition of the elegance of South African's Sapeur community with their humble living circumstances. Seen pictured washing dishes and huddled around a modest television set, these migrant Sapeurs are a long way from home in search of a lifestyle more fitting of a dandy. Instead of objectifying the other, Kaminju empathizes, documenting from a quiet place within the framework instead of shooting from the outside in. **Radcliffe Roye** (Jamaican, b. 1969) traveled to Brazzaville and took portraits of brightly colored suit-wearing Sapeurs in their own environment.

EXISTENTIAL DANDY Finally, artists/dandies—filmmaker **Terence Nance** (American, b. 1982) and installation and performance artist **Nyugen Smith** (West Indian American, b. 1976), and artist, scholar, curator **Charl Landvreugd** (Dutch, b. 1971)—broach the existentialism of Black dandyism. While exploring the nature of the Dandy Lion in a very matter-of-fact (or tongue-in-cheek) manner, award-winning filmmaker Terence Nance asks and answers questions about who and what constitute a “Black Beau.” Nyugen Smith’s installation, which is built around a self-portrait, addresses what happens when the oppressed becomes the oppressor and misuses power in former colonial states. Smith’s work corresponds with the character played famously by Paul Robeson in Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Emperor Jones*. A despotic leader, led by greed and a desire for power, fashions himself as “high-falutin” royalty. In Smith’s piece, amid a pile of found objects, the subject’s self-articulated self-importance holds court. Ironically, both Nance and Smith are seen and identify themselves as unconventional dandies. Finally, Surinamese-Dutch Landvreugd, deals with Afrofuturist notions of belonging and not belonging, escaping and claiming territory and the surreal reality of double-consciousness lived by Black men in a predominately White society.

JUXTAPOSING MASCULINITIES For a certain segment of Black dandies, the way in which they fashion themselves can itself be considered a form of genuine protest; as a way to consciously challenge preconceived notions of Black masculinity and the stereotypical connotations that are often married to him. Referencing this type of sartorial protest, Monica Miller asserts, “As a form of cultural resistance, Black dandyism functions as a kind of fashionable weapon of the weak, an everyday form of resistance (to use James Scott’s terms) the enslaved and marginalized use to comment on their relationship to authority.”² What makes a

Black dandy a Dandy Lion is his subtle and not so subtle resistance to the status quo, his desire to set himself apart —not to place himself at a level above his sagging-pants peers, but to defy the limiting expectations placed on him by images perpetuated by the media and society. He also participates as cultural producer, adding yet another level to hip-hop’s elements by using clothing from different eras as his sampling instrument. Dandies complicate fabricated gender roles and identity by presenting themselves as very masculine beings while society often views men who pay meticulous attention to fashion and grooming as effeminate.

Today, the fashion of Black dandies is more a nod to the style of their grandfathers (and mine) than the likes of Oscar Wilde or Beau Brummel. They mix vintage with modern pieces designed on London’s Seville Row, African prints with polka dots and plaid, flamboyant colors with classic lines. A style derived from various eras and cultures is a manifestation of the hip-hop era that has produced it.

The first comprehensive exhibition of its kind, *Dandy Lion: (Re)Articulating Black Masculine Identity* explores a popular conversation in nuanced contemporary sartorial expressions and reveals the fluidity of Black male masculinity. May these well-dressed tricksters, these high-styled rebels, continue to push the envelope, and may talented artists remain nearby, documenting the dandies as they buck a system in dire need of change.

—Shantrelle P. Lewis, Guest Curator



Harness Hamese, Lourens Gebhardt—Fixed Eyes II, 2014

¹ Monica Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2009)

² *Ibid.*, 15.

Participating Artists:

Hanif Abur-Rahim, Jody Ake, Laylah Amatullah Barrayn, Rose Callahan, Kia Chenelle, Bouba Dola, Adama Delphine Fawundu, Russell K. Frederick, Cassi Amanda Gibson, Allison Janae Hamilton, Akintola Hanif, Harness Hamese/Loux the Vintage Guru, L. Kasimu Harris, Jamala Johns, Caroline Kaminju, Charl Landvreugd, Jati Lindsay, Devin Mays, Terence Nance, Arteh Odjidja, Numa Perrier, Alexis Peskine, Radcliffe Roye, Sara Shamsavari, Nyugen Smith, Daniele Tamagni, Richard Terborg and Rog Walker.