Strange Fruit

SHASHI CULLINAN COOK

AYANA V. JACKSON

Many artists and designers have recently been fossicking in Southern Africa's colonial photographic archives because they provide abundant possibilities for reflecting on History and identity. In *Archival Impulse*, Ayana V. Jackson restages colonial-era photographs of black men, women and children in a series of digitally-collaged images in which she assumes the positions of the original sitters. Jackson (2013) describes this process as 'identifying reoccurring motifs in the original images, interrogating them, performing them, and last, reconstructing them'. Jackson tints the photographs, imbuing them with a clearly artificial aura that references the hand-colourisation and faded sepia of her sources.

'Death' (2011) is the only piece from Jackson's *Poverty Pornography* series included in this installation at Gallery Momo. In the image, the artist depicts herself hanging nude, roped by the neck, her lustrous brown body superimposed over a greyscale grove of trees. The work references Lawrence Beitler's iconic photograph of a lynching in Indiana in the 1930s that inspired the poem, and later the song, 'Strange Fruit'. Billie Holiday's famously bitter and mournful rendition of the song resonated for me with Jackson's work. Like the song, which compels me with its poignancy while its lyrics appal, Jackson's work fascinates me while indicting my act of looking.

Archival Impulse deconstructs photographic conventions that are rooted in colonial-era constructions of civilisation and savagery. These conventions feed into 'poverty pornography' — Susan Sontag's description of images of strife and disaster that tend to perpetuate 'blackness' as 'victimhood'. By assuming the role of both photographer and subject, and casting herself as the 'other' or victim in canonical photographs, Jackson (2013) hopes that she can 'fight images with images' and reclaim some of the agency lost in this ostensibly one-sided relationship.

Jackson appears nude or semi-nude in many of the artworks in the exhibition. She wears her body with confidence and agency, but representing the naked black female body (even your own) is a decision which tends to incite debates about objectification. This is also complicated by the fact that Jackson is a strikingly attractive woman. The combination of her handsomeness and the aesthetic photographs is almost problematically seductive, and is undercut only by the deadpan fire of her gaze and the artwork titles. These ensnare the viewer between attraction and discomfort by indicating a critical stance towards objectification. For instance, 'Case #33' is a series of elegant head-and-shoulder portraits referencing the container in which Sarah Baartman's remains were stored. Other titles such as 'Drop your right hand/Why can't I turn around?' (2012) supply imagined dialogues between the original sitters and photographers, drawing attention to the sitter as a person, not an object.

Jackson's earlier work includes photographs taken in Ghana, Kenya and South Africa, as well as images of Mexican people of African ancestry. Because the artist is U.S. American, there are inevitably questions about her presumptuousness in photographing people of different nationalities under the banner of 'blackness'. Indeed, Jackson explains that the decision to use her own body came after being grilled about these issues while at the Berlin University of the Arts. Many artists have chosen to put themselves in front of the camera to implicate their own bodies in the politics of photographic representation. Ingrid Mwangi and Robert Hutter's 'If' (2004) is strikingly similar to Jackson's work. While Jackson's choices are not novel in some regards, her artistic decisions in this tricky terrain are conceptually well-considered and visually powerful - yielding, in Holiday's haunting words, a 'strange and bitter crop'.

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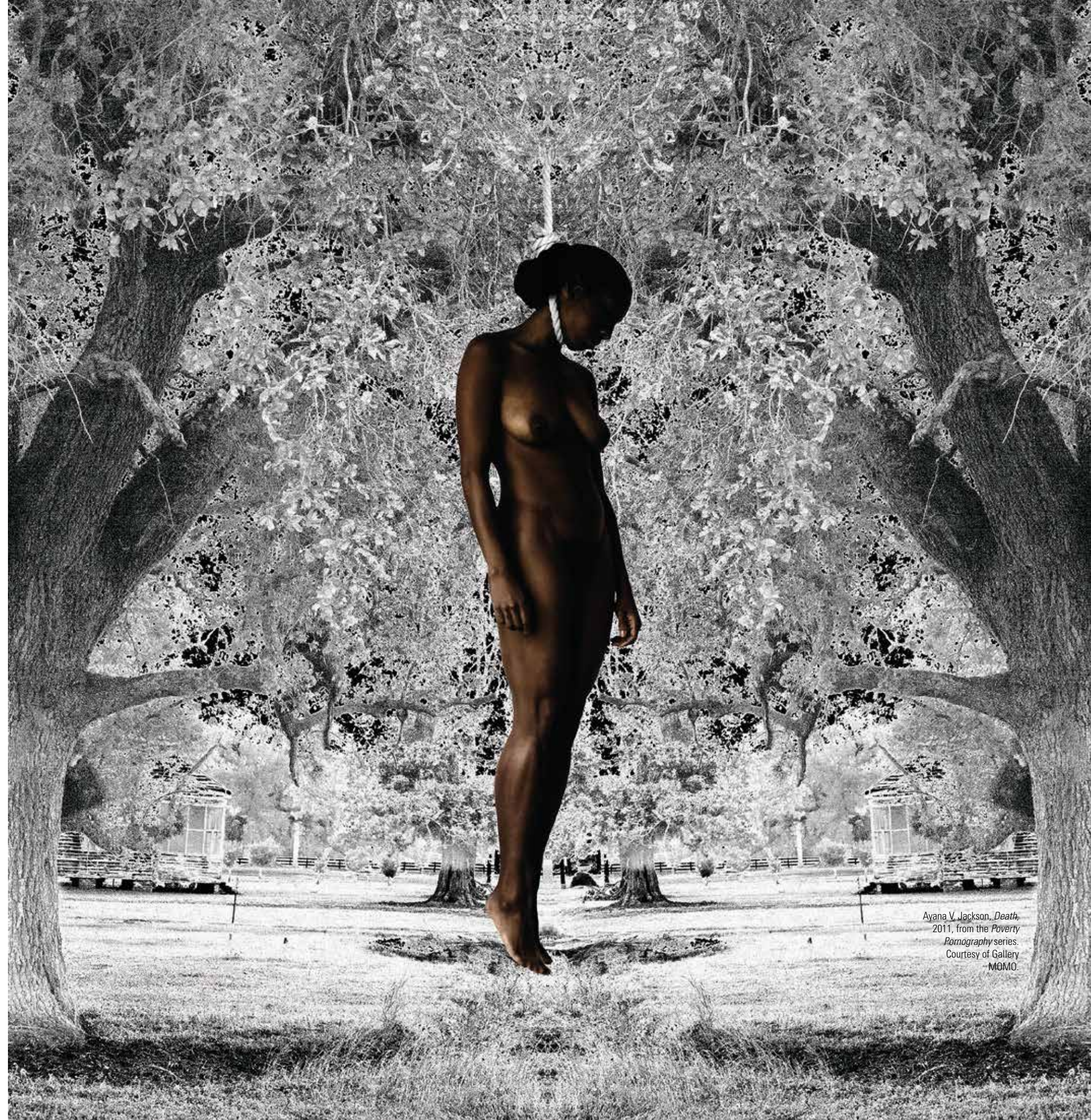
Ayana V. Jackson, *Death,* 2011, from the *Poverty Pornography* series. Courtesy of Gallery MOMO.