

# Nona Faustine, White Shoes @Smack Mellon - Collector Daily

**JTF (just the facts):** A total of 10 color photographs, framed in black and unmatted, and hung against white walls in a single room space in the rear of the gallery. All of the works are archival pigment prints, made between 2012 and 2015. Each of the prints is sized 26×40 and is available in an edition of 5+1AP. (Installation shots below.)







**Comments/Context:** While summer and winter come and go in their durable cycles, one thing we can reliably assume about a dense modern city like New York is that it is always construction season. The streets, the buildings, the subways, the power and water grids, the entire place is in a constant state of flux, the old being torn down, fixed, or replaced, and the new being restlessly piled right on top. Places that once had a particular use or function are routinely paved over, and new people with new ideas settle in and start again. And while small plaques and monuments dot the city and remind us of the history of a particular townhouse or park, the churn of urban change moves forward with such unceasing force that most of what used to be has long ago been rolled over and forgotten. The city, it seems, waits for no one.

But for the African-American photographer Nona Faustine, many of the lost histories of this city still have powerful personal resonance. In the background work for her most recent photographic project, she meticulously tracked the history of slavery in the five boroughs, uncovering the locations of ancient slave burial grounds, slave markets, slave owning farms, and the landing spots of slave ships, going back even before the Revolutionary War. She then visited these places in their current form, and made self portraits at the various locations, collapsing time in a sense, or at least connecting her current life back to the lingering ghosts of the past.

Faustine's images aren't simply a before and after look at architecture and social change – their purpose is not to show us a bodega where once a church stood. Her pictures are much more of a search for identity, an attempt to both viscerally remember the past and to come to grips with its influence on her present. At each of these places, she stands naked, except for a pair of white pumps, her ample curves exposed for all to see, often in the obvious cold. Her performative stances bring together a complex mix of emotions and realities, both past and present, where extreme vulnerability (especially as a woman) and a sense of being stripped and devalued are blended with resistance and defiance, of standing up to forces (as embodied by her constraining white shoes) that would push her down. The best of these pictures richly reverberate with all of these layered feelings, making them much more nuanced than just a nude woman standing on the courthouse steps.

Seen together, the heavy weight of Faustine's forgotten histories starts to pile up. We see her lying amid the rocky promontories of the Brooklyn coast, like a slave corpse washed up on the tangled shore. We find her spread eagled in the forests of the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens (once a Dutch farm), left for dead under an aptly named Caucasian Wingnut tree or wearing an African mask amid the leafy undergrowth. She stands in front of Lefferts House, the homestead of one of the largest slave owning families in Brooklyn, wearing a belt of tiny white baby shoes. And she places headless cardboard cutouts of herself on pedestals in a white only cemetery, celebrating the unnamed slaves of the families buried there.

Whether she carries a pair of iron shackles or pushes on the immensity of a marble column (both at the Tweed Court House, which sits on an African American burial ground), Faustine is silently grappling with bygone foes and poignantly trying to make sense of those struggles. Standing in a Lower East Side playground, complete with jungle gym and stainless steel slides, the dissonance of the burial ground underneath is palpable, creating invisible shivers that run through the picture. Again and again, the residue of history rises up to meet the present, and Faustine is left trying to reconcile two conflicting views of who she is.

Like Carrie Mae Weems' self portraits facing various imposing institutions and natural landscapes, Faustine's photographs ask (and confront) similar orientation questions – where do I fit in this picture, and does this place accept me and value what I bring? In Faustine's case, the struggle seems more pitched and vivid. She has both figuratively and literally laid herself bare in coming to terms with the history of her city, and that commitment infuses her pictures with admirable honesty.

**Collector's POV:** The works in this show are priced at \$2700 each, with a smaller 11×14 size (not on view, in an edition of 10) available for \$1800 each. Faustine's work has little secondary market history, so gallery retail remains the best option or those collectors interested in following up.