Images of Becoming
A bold collection of black diaspora photography at the Nasher

BY CHRISS VITIELLO

One measure of an art exhibition is whether or not the world looks different when you walk out of the gallery or museum. Having habituated to the artwork, your eyes are suddenly sensitized to see new aspects of familiar environments. This aesthetic effect soon wears off, though. Deeper, more permanent recalibrations are uncommon.

However, Becoming: Photographs from the Wedge Collection, a new exhibition at Duke's Nasher Museum of Art, might just be one of those shows that changes you. A selection of 110 photographs from more than 60 artists from North America, Africa, and throughout the African diaspora, organized by Toronto-based collector Kenneth Montague, becoming shows black identity in all kinds of flux. And it may leave you questioning who you are, where you've come from, and what you want to become.

Montague grew up in the 1960s and 1970s in Windsor, Ontario, just across from Detroit. Realizing at a young age how underrepresented African Canadian identity was, he began collecting local photographic work. After moving to Toronto in the 1980s, he created an art space in a wedge-shaped room in his home, and his collection grew to cover how black identity has been shaped by place, origin, economics, politics, war and culture. Wedge Curatorial Projects, an arts organization with international reach, connects artists and curators and now manages the vast collection.

This show still has Montague's touch, though. His personal notes are on the gallery card for every work. By bearing witness to black migration's subcultural moments, Montague is expressing his own complex and layered identity. Becoming is as emotional as it is intellectual.

You'll feel the joyful energy of the Malian dancers in Malik Sidibe's "Nuit de Noël" (1963), arms at their sides but foreheads touching. Two boys pretending to bounce colorful circles in the logo on the side of a Wonder Bread truck in Pete Doherty's Wonder Truck (2003) will bring smiles.

There's plenty of painful imagery too. The exhausted faces of two South African inmates stare piercingly out from two pictures taken by Michael Subotzky from his Die Vier Hekte (The Four Corners) (2005–6) series, part of a study of the country's post-apartheid years. In Hank Willis Thomas' jeremiah and Logan (2005), the photographer's relatives cry for his cousin Songha, whose murder on a Philadelphia street in 2000 Thomas re-created using action figures in stop-motion animation in the Nasher's recent Building the Contemporary Collection show.

Many more pictures will have you waxing nostalgic. Jamel Shabazz's shots of folks on the street and subway posing in leather jackets, white jeans and huge sunglasses bring early 80s New York back to life. Addicts of the Hipstamatic iPhome app will gather around a value of anonymous albums of Instamatic shots from the 1970s. People lean on avocado refrigerators, mowing the lawn with Mow Mover's on their lawn chair to front of a jungle-like wall, a scotch in one hand in his lap and a leather-bound book held open directly in front of his face. Johnson's image is difficult to parse because the particular remains unknown. Does the book contain ancient, universal wisdom or obsolete information? Is the person goofing around during an afternoon of poolside drinking, or engaged in high-level medical studies?

Sassn's "Arusha" (2005) is as inscrutable as Johnson's enigmatic figure. A woman stands in front of a lush palm tree, in a black floral print dress, her face almost entirely hidden in shadow. One eye is visible, staring back from between curled lashes, but there's not enough data to read her expression. Her posture is as ambiguous. This could be a seductive eye. The way the foliage wraps around her curvy outline supports this notion. But she also projects a calm defiance from the shadows; the eye might be regarding us with suspicion or defensiveness.

Both of these images are open to interpretation, which, rather than rendering them meaningless, endows them with agency. Since we are always changing, identity shouldn't be reducible to a still image. The self is inherently unknowable.

Becoming takes the baton from the Building the Contemporary Collection and Die Americans shows, grounding in real, photographic imagery the complex issues around black identity that painters, sculptors and performace have dealt with in more fantastical and conceptual ways. And it also makes for a cool-ass visit.
