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"Checking In With Rashaad Newsome, the Artist Bringing Harlem's Vogue Scene to Chelsea"

By Stephanie Eckardt

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Rashaad Newsome, *Catwalk (Star Revlon)*, 2016. Three-color lithograph with silver leaf, 3D-printed and collage elements, 29 3/4 x 42 inches. Image courtesy the artist.

The New Orleans-born artist's new solo show at the De Buck Gallery is rife with with personal history, and style.

What is your work about? It's a question that [Rashaad Newsome](#) has been resisting for as long as he's been producing and exhibiting his art—which, for the New Orleans-born artist, has been for about the past 15 years.

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Photo by Mark Hartman. Produced by Biel Parklee.

"As an artist, you never want to limit the different ways the work can read," he explained last week at New York's De Buck Gallery, where his new solo exhibition, "Stop Playing in My Face!" opens next week. "But I think it's a necessary question," he added with a laugh. In fact, it's one that got him started on the works that make up his new show.

What his work is about, Newsome decided, was agency—and especially how to give it back to the black community. He's doing exactly that primarily through cataloging and crediting the vogue performances of the '70s Harlem ballroom dance scene, before Madonna and *Paris Is Burning* became the gateways for a mass audience. ** Over the last 10 years, Newsome's amassed a series of choreographed videos breaking down the performances, one of which even features a young, [pre-Hood by Air Shayne Oliver](#).

Primarily, though, the stars are the scene's former fixtures, almost all of whom are trans women of color. Though they've been present in most of Newsome's work, the exhibition opening next week at De Buck puts them front and center.

"These images really were inspired by images of trans women that I've worked with for the past ten years," Newsome said of the show's collages, which feature women taken from his past

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vogueing videos. "But the trans body is not physically present in the work," he added. "It's conceptually present." That's because the source materials for his cut-outs are not progressive fashion editorials but men's magazines, like *King* and *XL*, and luxury and auction catalogs where trans bodies rarely make it into the pages. That invisibility, Newsome said, is something he wanted to call attention to.

The trans bodies in his collages, then, are patched together with images of sexualized cis women, luxury watches, and over-the-top jewelry. It's an idea that stretches back to Newsome's early days as an artist, when he moved to Paris and became taken with its ornamental and ceremonial architecture. "I was really fascinated by how heraldry is essentially an image made of images, and all the images read as ideas of power, position, rank, and pedigree within popular culture," he said. "And so what I did was apply that design formula to today."

The juxtaposition also brought Newsome back to his primary concern: "How do these two bodies exist in the world, and how do they access agency?" he asked. "I've been really interested in agency outside of academe, agency as a mode of survival: like the person who may not have had the privilege to discover Gloria Steinem or Bell Hooks at university, but they understand that the world that they are living in doesn't necessarily validate and support them, and so they're creating that validation and support for themselves."



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Part of that, Newsome said, is calling himself on the carpet, since feminist theorists like Hooks are “really where I found the tools to talk about my work,” he said. This time, Hooks is literally in it, too, as one of the voice-overs in a video, along with the voices of Janet Mock, Marci Blackman, Samantha James Revlon (the trans dancer who inspired the show’s title), and even Lena Dunham (from her cameo in *Scandal*). Together, Newsome explained, “all those different perspectives” soundtrack a 9-minute performance by ballroom legend Leiomy Maldonado, voguing and holding court over a 3-D rendering of one of the show’s architectural collages.

“The architecture is also a way to kind of think about the building of the self; when you don’t exist in the world you have to kind of become your own architect,” Newsome said, pointing to elements of the collage like stained glass church windows, a synagogue in Turkey, and a cathedral in Spain. Some of his references lie closer to home, too: The enormous, Dutch-style frames have a black paint job and are topped off with leather, a nod to Southern car culture, which was the first creative outlet he found growing up in New Orleans.

Most of all, Newsome’s work is decidedly personal, which is partly why he doesn’t get overly neurotic about finding inspiration around a community he doesn’t identify with. “I don’t think that I’m making trans art,” he clarified. “The art I’m making in this show is inspired by trans people who I’m close to.” And from the sound of it, by those whom he’ll be joining on the dance floor the night of the opening, too.

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