

ART 

## BORN IDENTITY

Taking a multitiered approach to her creative endeavors, Cuban-American artist Coco Fusco transforms her visual crafts into expressions of spirituality and philosophy

*Text* TEKA SELMAN *Photography* COURTESY OF COCO FUSCO

**COCO FUSCO IS A MODERN-DAY RENAISSANCE** woman. A Cuban-American writer, artist, playwright, performer, filmmaker and curator, Fusco knows no boundaries when it comes to her creative output. She crosses borders from north to south, east to west as an interdisciplinary activist, marking time from

New York, London and Sydney, to Havana, Johannesburg and Helsinki.

While Fusco has been an active presence in the art world since the early 1980s, she first came to critical prominence in 1992 with *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* (otherwise known as *The Couple in the Cage*),

a controversial collaborative performance with Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña. In a modern-day live museum display, the two caged and exhibited themselves as recently "discovered" Amerindians in a living critique of the notions of difference and exoticism that often plague intracultural interactions. The work,

*Fusco and Bustamante, Paquita and Chata, 1996 by Coco Fusco*





# THE PROJECT

which traveled internationally, caused a sensation wherever it went, triggering everything from museum boycotts in some cities to rampant letter-writing campaigns in others, sparking a documentary film and planting both Fusco and Gómez-Peña firmly on the art-world map.

Since her days as an undergraduate at Brown University and postgraduate studies at Stanford, Fusco has sought to understand the relationship between art, life and politics. A contributor to publications such as *Frieze*, *Third Text* and *Nka: Journal of African Art*, she has written three books; the first, *English Is Broken Here*, continues to pop up on reading lists in colleges throughout America. Well-versed in academic debates on psychology, philosophy, geography, anthropology and art history, Fusco takes a multilayered approach to art, making work



ess about the visual than it is about the spiritual, the philosophical and the political. It is no surprise then that Fusco's friends include the likes of Isaac Julien, Kobena Mercer, Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Lorna Simpson, artists and writers of color who were shaking the modernist tree in the late 1980s and early 1990s. By breaking apart the model, which saw art as a purely aesthetic enterprise, they helped shape the intense identity debates which, until fairly recently, were the hot topics in postmodern art-world discourse.

Over the past ten years, Fusco has continued to produce salient political performance, using her presence as a conductor for the flow of information. In *Rights of Passage*, for example—which was Fusco's contribution to the 1997 Johannesburg Biennale—she engaged visitors by giving them passbooks upon entry to the exhibition space. Acting simultaneously as a souvenir and a political document, the books became active symbols of the monitoring of black-and-white bodies within the regime of apartheid, and the commercial commodification of post-apartheid South Africa, implicating the viewers through their participation in the event.

Recent collaborations, like *Dolores from 10 to 10* (with Ricardo Dominguez), push the boundaries of performance through Web technology by broadcasting it across cyberspace. Based on a true story, Fusco plays a Mexican factory worker who was locked up for 12 hours without food, water or access to a bathroom after being accused of trying to organize a workers' union. Fusco pulls no punches here in leveling her critique at the "surveillance and the disciplining of female bodies," where Mexican laborers are caught in the middle of an incestuous relationship between the United States government and Mexico in its quest for economic prosperity.

In her latest endeavor, Fusco has returned to her roots as a curator, collaborating with

Brian Wallis of the International Center of Photography in New York. Opening in December 2003, *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self* will be an exploration of the imaging of people of color in America through the ages, from the ethnographic to the artistic. The work of artists, ranging from James Van der Zee to Walker Evans, Glenn Ligon to Robert Mapplethorpe, Catherine Opie to Adrian Piper, and Ana Mendieta to Carrie Mae Weems will be juxtaposed with vintage daguerreotypes and postcards, film stills and prints. And while the project faces the danger of being classified as a cut-and-dried historical survey, such a characterization would be simplistic. In an important shift, the exhibition will seek to represent the true diversity of people of color in America—whether African-American, Polynesian, Latino, Asian or Native American, not to mention the many sundry identities that are an inevitable product of a multiracial society.

Race has always been a tool of seduction for the American public, and with the advent of photography, people of color became widely available for mass consumption. By revealing the ways that everyday Americans "eat the other" through photographic images, Fusco hopes to trouble the act of looking at difference and reveal the pleasure of voyeuristic consumerism that is such a prominent part of American culture. In *Only Skin Deep*, she will ask what it meant to buy a postcard of a topless, grass-skirted Hawaiian woman in 1955, 100 years after Hawaiian women began wearing Western clothing. She will ask if the increased visibility of people of color in America has led to the self-empowerment sought by the Civil Rights and affirmative-action movements. Likewise, Fusco will ask us to examine our contemporary selves and question how we create our own identities for consumption—not only where we fit in the photo album of American identity, but if we need to fit at all. •