

WEEKLY

Blackness as Performance
By Jonathan Curiel
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Two years ago, scholar and performance artist Coco Fusco donned intricate hair and flesh makeup to morph into a Planet of the Apes psychologist named Dr. Zira, then took the stage at the Studio Museum of Harlem and had the audience laughing and nodding along as she critiqued the behavior of homo sapiens.

Humans exhibit complicated and contradictory standards, Fusco intoned, showing slides and video as she pointed to society's approval of chicken farms that "hoarded" scores of animals for slaughter and society's disapproval of cat lovers who "hoarded" animals for care and companionship. Channeling the film character's exact cadence and intellectual dispassion — including academic language like "impulsively acquisitive behaviors" — Fusco also critiqued alpha males' violent tendencies. All the while, she implicitly addressed an issue that the original Planet of the Apes movies also tackled by implication: race relations.

"The character Zira is a kind of go-between and a cultural translator — a chimp who studies another mammal group, humans — so she's interested in interspecies communications, which in a lot of science fiction is a metaphor for race relations," says Fusco, the author of six books and a visiting scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "She's a transgressor — she steps outside the thought box of her own religion and society to think of humans as potential equals. She challenges dogma. She's a pacifist. She's a feminist. So her character had all these qualities that I could identify with very strongly, and that I thought would be interesting on stage. And also, because she's an academic and a researcher, the language she uses to understand social issues can be used ironically."

Fusco reprises her Dr. Zira character for "Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art," the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts exhibit that is a stunning revelation about the black experience in America and overseas. The astonishment derives not from the subject matter — race, race relations, and race perceptions — but from the audacious ways that African American artists have, for more than 50 years, performed work on public street corners, in small private spaces, and at mainstream venues. The artists have kept pushing the boundaries of their craft — provoking, shouting, and sometimes staying silent in a bid to prod their audiences, however small, into critical thinking.

Among the many standout works of video, photography, and sculpture at "Radical Presence" is Ulysses Jenkins' Mass of Images, a four-minute film from 1978 where he wheels himself around a room of TVs and takes us through a history of offensive photos — including whites in



Coco Fusco, in her role as Dr. Zira from the Planet of the Apes series

Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art Through October 11 at YBCA, 701 Mission, San Francisco. Coco Fusco performs Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist on Wednesday, Aug. 19, 7:30 p.m. Tickets: \$8-\$10; 415-978-2787 or ybca.org.

blackface — while shouting at the camera, "You're just a mass of images you've gotten to know, from years and years of TV shows!"

There is also a clutch of photos from David Hammons' 1983 Bliz-aard Ball Sale, where he tries to sell different-sized snow balls to passersby on a wintry New York street, and William Pope.L's 2000 video work, *Eating the Wall Street Journal*, in which Pope.L literally eats the right-leaning newspaper while wearing a jockstrap atop a 10-foot-high toilet. Zachary Fabri's 2007 video work, *My High Fructose Corn Syrup Fix and White Flour Constipation*, sees Fabri — at traffic intersections in Reykjavik, Iceland — drinking and spitting out soda as he spasms and convulses, then pours flour on the street and prostrates himself there. And Xaviera Simmons' 2012 photo project, *Number 14 (When A Group of People Comes Together To Watch Someone Do Something)*, shows her boarding a train in Sri Lanka while wearing shorts and a shirt, only to cover herself. Her fellow riders help apply the layers of conservative fabric that transform her appearance.

Billed as the first comprehensive survey of performance art by black visual artists from the United States and the Caribbean, and organized by the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, "Radical Presence" spotlights artists who are well known in art circles but don't get the pop-culture attention given to Dave Chappelle and other black entertainers who address similar issues. In Chappelle's *Show's* first season in 2003, Chappelle wore wigs and adopted different accents to play outlandish characters, such as a blind, black KKK member who preaches hatred before a room of white racists. That's what Fusco will do at YBCA on August 19, when she performs the work called *Observations of Predation in Humans: A Lecture by Dr. Zira, Animal Psychologist*. The work originated in Fusco's university courses, when she was lecturing to students who were struggling with a straight academic approach to Afrofuturism, which covers the intersection of history, science, culture, and black identity.

"I had been teaching classes on Afrofuturism, in which I was trying to get students to think about how sci-fi films and literature and futuristic paradigms, even in music and performance, could be leveraged to address race relations issues," Fusco tells *SF Weekly*. "This was before Ferguson and any of that. And I found that my students responded very well to the *Planet of the Apes* films. When I teach the class to undergraduates, I show the original five films, which I think are the ones that are more obvious and more effective social critiques than the other films that came later. And noticing how the students responded — they really kind of got it — I found that for young people who are somewhat anxious and tentative about being honest about their views on race and race relations, and have this kind of weird compassion fatigue before the fact — they're like 20 and nothing's ever happened to them, and they're already tired about talking about race. For that kind of student, these films worked really well. They opened the students up, and they could see how a fiction that wasn't necessarily a reportage on race could take you into some dimensions of the problem that you wouldn't ordinarily see."

Fusco's long history of performance art includes the 2006 work *A Room of One's Own: Women and Power in the New America*, where she dresses in army fatigues and uses Virginia Woolf as a springboard to talk about female interrogators in U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fusco performed that work around the world, including at London's Victoria and Albert Museum and Oslo's Kunstnernes Hus. Fusco, who has a doctorate in Art & Visual Culture from London's Middlesex University and a master's in Modern Thought and Literature from Stanford, is one of the few American performance artists who have earned high acclaim in both the art world and academia. In 2013, she was awarded both a Guggenheim fellowship and a Fulbright fellowship,

and in 2008 and 1993, her work was presented in the Whitney Biennial. Fusco says her performance art and her academic work are complementary. In a lecture hall, Fusco covers material over weeks and months, trying to embed ideas that will percolate with students in the long haul. On a stage, Fusco lives in the moment.

"It's often assumed that I have this agitprop approach to art-making, and I don't," Fusco says. "I'm drawn to social issues but I don't try to turn my art into some kind of vehicle to clobber people over the head, and I don't expect it to produce an instant change either. I don't think that's the way art works."