

POSING  
**BEAUTY**  
in African American Culture

## POSING BEAUTY IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CULTURE

POSING BEAUTY examines how African American beauty has been represented in images from the 1890s to the present.

CONSTRUCTING A POSE considers the interplay between the historical and the contemporary, self-representation and imposed representation, and subject and photographer.

BODY & IMAGES questions the ways in which our understanding of beauty has been constructed and framed through the body.

MODELING BEAUTY & BEAUTY CONTESTS reflects upon the ambiguities of beauty and its impact on mass culture and individuals.

# ABOUT THE CURATOR

Beauty is personal and political.

—Deborah Willis

Deborah Willis is the chair of the Photography and Imaging Department at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. For nearly three decades she has been the leading historian of African American photography, producing *Reflections in Black: African American Photography from 1840 to the Present*, the first comprehensive book to document the work of black photographers from 19<sup>th</sup>-century studios through contemporary artists. In *Posing Beauty* she applies her expertise to the complex, cultural question of beauty.

Copies of the *Posing Beauty* companion catalogue and *Reflections in Black* are available to read in the galleries.

### Constructing a Pose

“Thus it is the bounden duty of black America to begin this great work of the creation of Beauty, of the preservation of Beauty, of the realization of Beauty, and we must use in this work all the methods that men have used before.”

W. E. B. Du Bois, 1926

### Body and Image

“Beauty was not simply something to behold; it was something one could do.”

Toni Morrison, 1993

### Modeling Beauty and Beauty Contests

“Beauty is power. And the struggle to have the entire range of black beauty recognized and respected is a serious one.”

Barbara Summers, 1998

# **IDENTITY** *Shifts*: WORKS FROM VMFA

Drawn mostly from VMFA's permanent collection, *Identity Shifts* features works that use the human figure or some aspect of the body—including hair—to explore African American identity. Some of these portraits combat racial stereotypes by emphasizing the individuality and character of their subjects. Others challenge simplistic categories by juxtaposing disparate sources, such as European and African art, comic strips, and Cubism. Offering a wide array of perspectives and styles in painting, sculpture, and photography, this group of works underscores the complex layers and shifting boundaries that inform how we construct and perceive cultural identity.