



DONNA BASSIN

- *My Own Witness* -

” *While the American flag has become a complicated symbol, some of my sitters have reclaimed and re-imagined it to express distress, defiance, and/or respectful hope for democracy’s return.*

While each portrait is distinctive, they visually connect through the shared black velvet backdrop and chiaroscuro lighting, linking each individual to the collective, perhaps encouraging a commitment to stand together and face the darkness in the shelter of each other.



"No comment."

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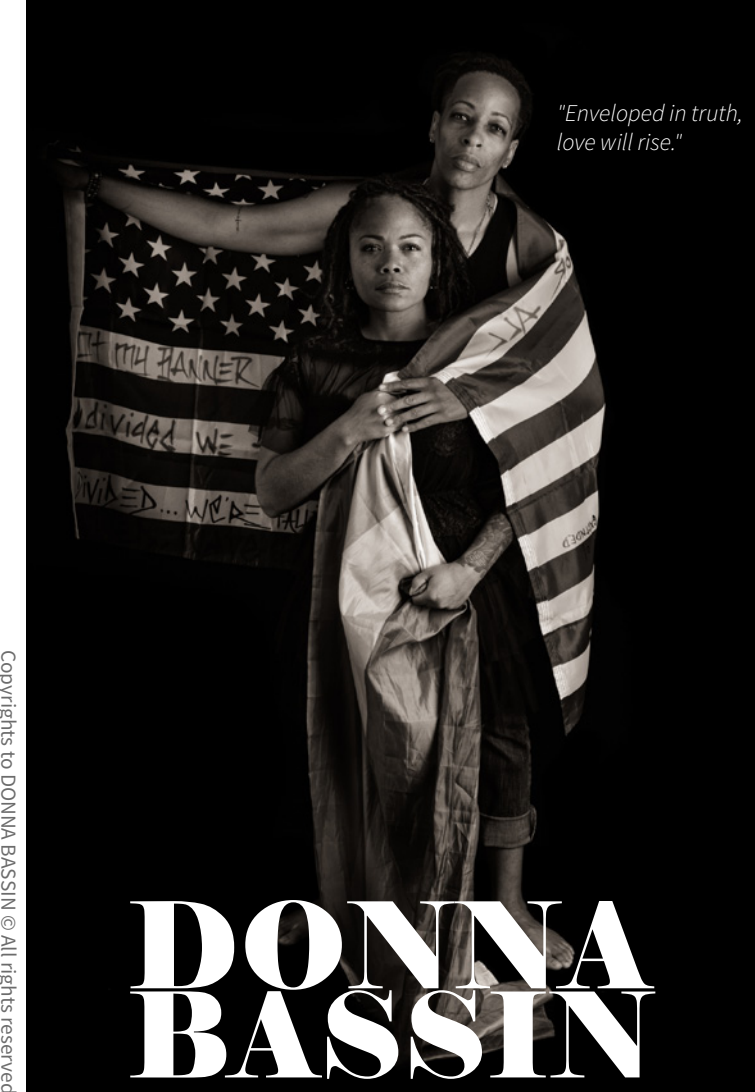
"My name is Shontel, and I love being black. I love everything about being black: the music, our hair, and our culture, just to name a few. However, it seems like lately America doesn't seem to love black people as much. When we try to say our BLACK lives matter—they tell us ALL lives matter. Which is hurtful because of course all lives matter, but black lives are the one being lost everyday at the hands of police brutality. I want America to see to black lives are important, and to change it to all lives is silencing our voice."

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"Living in America has been a bittersweet experience for me. I hate the lack of opportunities and the lack of freedom here in the U.S. Being a black American Muslim, I have experienced many unfair and unjust things- being denied jobs because of my race and religion and being profiled by the police. Every day I fight that struggle, constantly trying to prove to the world and society that I am not the "stereotype." Although it is a tiring battle, I refuse to give up the fight. My ancestors before me didn't, and neither will I."

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"Enveloped in truth, love will rise."

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”What is a portrait, if not an acknowledgment of a human encounter: an opportunity to imagine the life of another?

As a photographer, activist, and practicing trauma psychologist, I feel the urgency for the artistic expression of the grave injustices in our society and attempts to repair and transform.

In my collaborative portraits, I strive to merge the close listening of a clinical exchange with the visibility of photographs. I began the "My Own Witness" series in the aftermath of the 2016 presidential election.

In this post-election crisis of democracy, I have encountered rage, grief, and fear as systematic racism, misogyny, sexual exploitation, homophobia, xenophobia, and police brutality have been progressively exposed. This series of collaborative portraits was motivated by the writings of Emmanuel Lévinas, Judith Butler, and Teju Cole.

They see face-to-face encounters as a moral activity to compassionately experience the lives of others. My aesthetic choices were inspired by the character-revealing portraits of Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Sally Mann, and Zanele Muholi.

Every Friday, I invite people to come to my studio to explore their experiences in these moments of United States history; to bear witness to themselves in these dark and broken times. I ask my sitters to turn themselves "inside out" and use pose, gesture, gaze, props, and story-telling to express their emotional truths. In the process as subjects, they assert their identity – "here I am" – and their resistance to being exploited and marginalized. As my co-creators choose to discover, unveil, and reveal through image and text (each sitter writes a short narrative about their portrait), they claim ownership of self and provoke others to viscerally connect with them.



Some sitters explore feelings of profound vulnerability or helplessness. Some use this experience to assert and express identities increasingly being suppressed by the outside world. Others uncover ferocious strength they did not know they had as they look anger and hatred in the eye.

While the American flag has become a complicated symbol, some of my sitters have reclaimed and re-imagined it to express distress, defiance, and/or respectful hope for democracy's return. While each portrait is distinctive, they visually connect through the shared black velvet backdrop and chiaroscuro lighting, linking each individual to the collective, perhaps encouraging a commitment to stand together and face the darkness in the shelter of each other.



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Top Left:
"The resulting image reminds me of how many young girls and boys go through the same identity crisis growing up. I'm not seen as an American because of my skin tone, and I'm not a Mexican in my family's homeland because I was not born there. I'm proud to be Mexican American, I however long for the day everyone realizes there's only one race with many beliefs."

Top Right:
"I'm a soft-spoken woman; mother of three, educator and self-identified lesbian. An Afro- Cuban, Polish-Jew, Filipino in America. As a visual artist, I choose to explore and connect the intertwining relationships between social justice, equality, human and women's rights, police brutality, femininity, modern-day slavery, and culture. I use my art as a conduit for bold, fearless, thought-provoking, unapologetic issues. My current body of work is similar to this powerful project. It draws attention to others' purposes, journeys, and experiences in America. The image conveys a timeless truth; as a woman of color, I feed the nation."



"I am a Caribbean gal, who has been residing here in the United States for 27 years. Recently, in this country, I have seen a stark increase in acts of hate, fuelled by racism, discrimination, and bigotry. I struggle to address the barrage of questions related to such acts, posed by my 8-year-old, as I worry about her future. In the hope of preserving her innocence and teaching TOLERANCE, I answer her questions and address these issues by highlighting the "positive" in people who love us regardless of our race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual preference. Focus on those who appreciate our kindness, our thoughtfulness, respect our differences, and celebrate our similarities!"



"Why... How could I... pledge allegiance to such a diabolical structure - proven since its inception - to dishonor the blood that flows through my very human veins. A system that fails to so much as a nod at my divinely ordained beating heart. Here I stand, bearing witness to my own crucifixion or flight. * "tasdaq for all" * "not my banner" * "divided we fall...divided, we're falling...divided; we've fallen" * "disclaimer: my humanity was excluded during the making of this flag"

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Top:
"I try to live my life in a way that is creative, helpful, and in the spirit of my Christian faith. That faith tells me that I should be a good steward to the earth, love my neighbor (which includes everyone), welcome the stranger, and stand up for those who are less fortunate than me. I grow fearful of what we may become when I see this religion promoted by groups of people who support political agendas that damage our environment, persecute those they disapprove of, vilify foreigners, and endeavor to remove security for the sick and elderly, in the name of God."

“As a photographer, film-maker, author, and practicing psychoanalyst, I feel an urgency for artistic recognition of the ruptures in our society and attempts towards a repair.

The Afterlife of Dolls, a solo photographic and sound installation at the Montclair Art Museum, was a response to my work at Ground Zero.

This project was featured on PBS' State of the Arts and received both a Golden Bell and Gradiva Award. I collaborated in the formation of a veterans' art initiative called Frontline Arts and directed and produced two award-winning documentaries – ***Leave No Soldier*** and ***The Mourning After*** – about post-traumatic stress in the veterans' community.

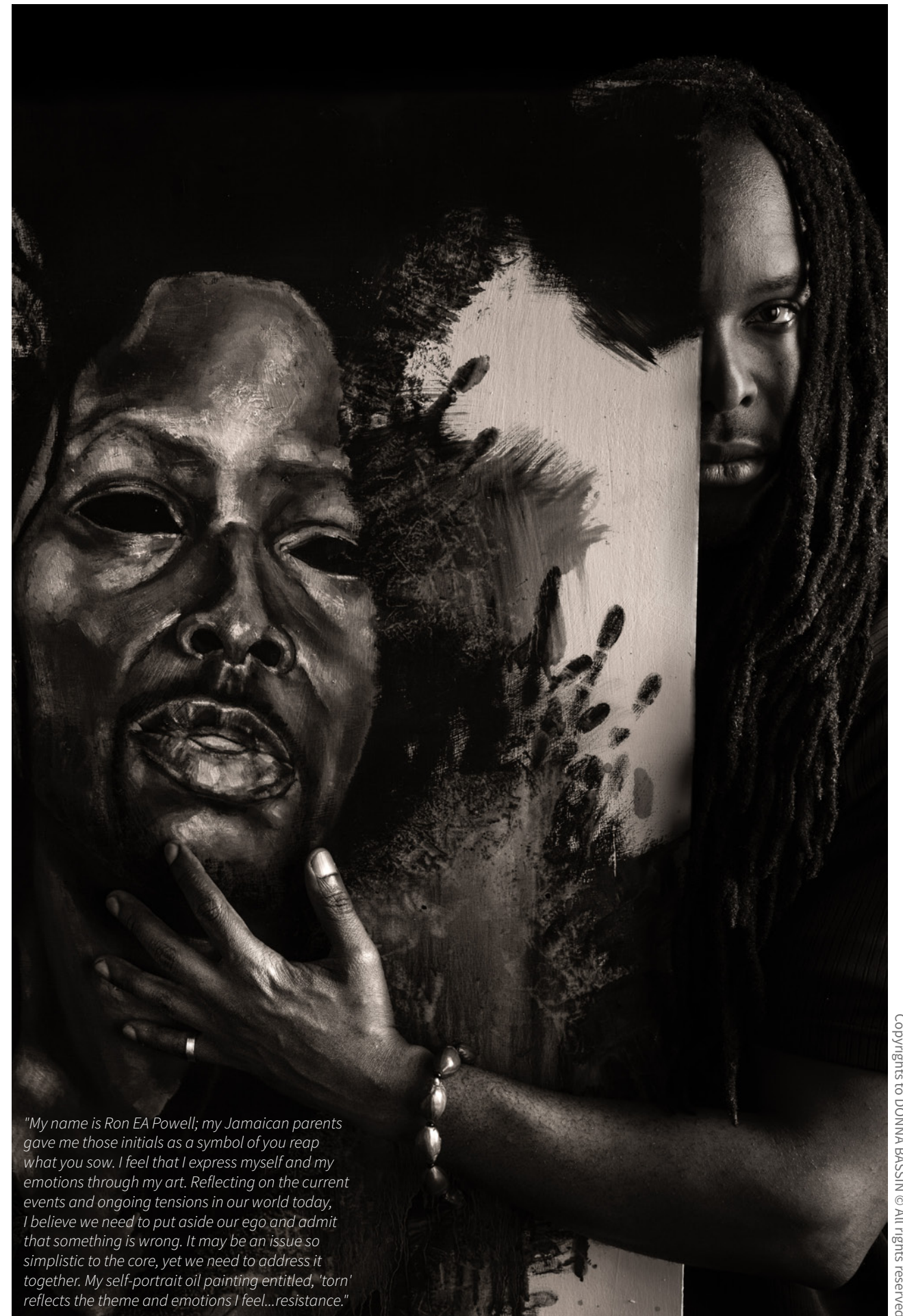
My work has been juried into numerous group exhibitions from New York City to Los Angeles. My photographs have been commissioned for book covers and are in private and museum collections.

I was recently invited to represent New Jersey's women artists in a public art project titled Her Flag (www.herflag.com). My installation, By Our Own Hand, in collaboration with Frontline Arts, will be exhibited at the Montclair Art Museum in fall 2020.



"Hi, I'm Dee. I'm a young, black queer teen who loves happiness, love, and music. And when I see this photo, I see what SOME of America doesn't see, and that is what I call Black Joy. But then, America TODAY begs to differ. I want America to see that love is the key, and it makes the world go 'round... You just have to open her eyes."

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"My name is Ron EA Powell; my Jamaican parents gave me those initials as a symbol of you reap what you sow. I feel that I express myself and my emotions through my art. Reflecting on the current events and ongoing tensions in our world today, I believe we need to put aside our ego and admit that something is wrong. It may be an issue so simplistic to the core, yet we need to address it together. My self-portrait oil painting entitled, 'torn' reflects the theme and emotions I feel...resistance."

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"I was born and raised in what most would call a ghetto, surrounded with minorities — or how I like to think — my people. From kindergarten to high school, I went to school, where most would call a rich, white town. I was an outsider simply because I looked different from the other kids. The worst part about racism isn't the fact that I got called the N word for the first time in Social Studies when I

was just in the 3rd grade. That was to be expected. The worst part about racism is the fact that even in the streets I was raised in, I was still an outsider, still a minority to them. I am Afro-Latino born, but to most light-skinned Spanish people, I was just another black kid, and to the Blacks, I was just some Indian looking outsider. So here I sit — in the middle — not accepted by anyone."

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"I am holding in my skirt a bounty of dolls representing children deprived of childhood and adults deprived of hope. All gathered in my skirt, seeking safety. I want to protect them from a world that preys on their vulnerability. But they are content to be the cushion between me and the threat to humanity I feel from this precarious time in which we now live."

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*"I teach history in the inner city.
I call it American Mythology.
If the goal of history is nation-
building, we are on a shaky
foundation."*





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