

WHITNEY

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PRESS RELEASE

THE WHITNEY PRESENTS JEANNE MOUTOUSSAMY-ASHE PHOTOGRAPHS PICTURING A COMMUNITY ON THE BRINK OF CHANGE



Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and the Last Gullah Islands is on view on the Whitney Museum of American Art's seventh floor starting December 5.

New York, NY, December 3, 2024 — Opening at the Whitney Museum of American Art on December 5, the focused presentation *Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and the Last Gullah Islands* features 13 black-and-white photographs and two publications documenting the insular Gullah Geechee community of Daufuskie Island and the other surrounding South Carolina Sea Islands.

Presented for the first time in a New York museum, this moving body of work, drawn from the Whitney's collection, serves as a testimony to the complex history and rich culture of Daufuskie Island, which has experienced rapid change since the mid-1900s. Portraits of children and elders, images of homes and the shoreline, people at work and at rest, and church services together form an impression of a community on the cusp of great change.

Since the early 1970s, artist, activist, and scholar [Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe](#) (b. 1951, Chicago, IL; lives and works in South Kent, CT) has made photographs that testify to the beauty and complexity of Black life, honoring the rhythms of the everyday and marking important rites

of passage for the people who appear in them. After studying with street photographer Garry Winogrand at the Art Institute of Chicago, Moutoussamy-Ashe was admitted to the Cooper Union in New York and got her professional start as a photojournalist for the television station WNBC, while also contributing to popular magazines including *Ebony*, *Essence*, and *Life*.

In 1977, following an earlier six-month independent study in West Africa, Moutoussamy-Ashe traveled back across the Atlantic Ocean to Daufuskie Island, which sits between Hilton Head, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. There and on the other surrounding Sea Islands, she began making photographs among the Gullah Geechee—many of them descendants of the formerly enslaved people who acquired land from white plantation owners when they fled at the conclusion of the Civil War.

For Moutoussamy-Ashe, these places, separated by the Atlantic, were inextricably linked, with the Sea Islands representing connective tissue within the Black diaspora; a place shaped by violent centuries of slavery and a community steadfast in the protection and nourishment of its unique culture and people. The Daufuskie Island photographs honor these entwined histories and the artist's personal perspective. How images are made, cared for, and consumed are enduring concerns for the artist, who maintains, "Photography should force us to question ourselves and to question the environment in which we live."

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and the Last Gullah Islands is organized by Kelly Long, Senior Curatorial Assistant at the Whitney Museum.

"Jeanne's photography is part of a larger practice rooted in a serious sense of responsibility to other people—to the affirmation of lives and legacies that might otherwise exist only in memory," Long said. "This is evident in her essential scholarship on the history of Black women photographers, and in her AIDS activism, in memory of her late husband, Arthur Ashe. But nowhere is it more poignantly or poetically expressed than in her pictures of Daufuskie Island and in her connections to its people, which she nurtures to this day."



The photographs in the exhibition span the late 1970s and early 1980s, and include a group portrait of a wedding party depicting roughly half of the just 80 permanent residents left on Daufuskie Island at that time. The destruction of Daufuskie's cotton crop by the insect the boll weevil in the early 1900s had a long-lasting impact on the island's economy and infrastructure, and local jobs disappeared as pollution from the Savannah River contaminated its once-thriving oyster beds. By the 1970s, real estate developers were circling, emboldened by neighboring Hilton Head Island's burgeoning reputation as a profitable tourist destination. Though an outsider, Moutoussamy-Ashe's respect and gentle curiosity earned her the Daufuskie community's trust, and allowed them to build, together, this important archive of images.

The exhibition also presents two publications featuring a selection of Moutoussamy-Ashe's photographs of Daufuskie Island, first published as a book in 1982 with a foreword by Alex Haley, author of *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*. For the book's 25th anniversary edition, the artist returned to her original contact sheets and expanded upon her earlier selection, organizing the images into four categories: "The People," "Place," "Everyday Life," and "Spiritual Grace." This commitment to protecting and amplifying legacy also led to Moutoussamy-Ashe's 1986 historical survey, *Viewfinders: Black Women Photographers*, and *Daddy and Me*, a 1993 picture book documenting the relationship between the artist's husband, tennis legend Arthur Ashe, and their daughter, during Arthur's decline from AIDS.

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and the Last Gullah Islands is the second installment of a new initiative at the Whitney to rotate rarely seen works from the Museum's collection in a dedicated area on the seventh floor. The inaugural presentation featured prints from the whimsical world of artist, illustrator, and children's book author [Wanda Gág](#).

Public Program

In conjunction with *Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe and the Last Gullah Islands*, the Whitney will present a public program featuring Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe in conversation with Gullah scholar Emory Shaw Campbell on February 26, 2025. Born on Hilton Head Island, Shaw Campbell is an educator and keeper of cultural heritage across the South Carolina Sea Islands. More information about this program and how to register will be available on the Museum's website as details are confirmed.

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ABOUT THE WHITNEY

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for ninety years. The core of the Whitney’s mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Whitney Museum Land Acknowledgment

The Whitney is located in Lenapehoking, the ancestral homeland of the Lenape. The name Manhattan comes from their word Mannahatta, meaning “island of many hills.” The Museum’s current site is close to land that was a Lenape fishing and planting site called Sapponckanikan (“tobacco field”). The Whitney acknowledges the displacement of this region’s original inhabitants and the Lenape diaspora that exists today.

As a museum of American art in a city with vital and diverse communities of Indigenous people, the Whitney recognizes the historical exclusion of Indigenous artists from its collection and program. The Museum is committed to addressing these erasures and honoring the perspectives of Indigenous artists and communities as we work for a more equitable future. To read more about the Museum’s Land Acknowledgment, [visit the Museum’s website](#).

VISITOR INFORMATION

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Public hours are Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, 10:30 am–6 pm; Friday, 10:30 am–10 pm; and Saturday and Sunday, 10:30 am–6 pm. Closed Tuesday. Visitors eighteen years and under and Whitney members: FREE. The Museum offers FREE admission and special programming for visitors of all ages every Friday evening from 5–10 pm and on the second Sunday of every month.

Image credits:

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Jake and his Boat Arriving on Daufuskie’s Shore, Daufuskie Island, SC*, 1981, printed 2022. Gelatin silver print, 15 × 22 1/2in. (38.1 × 57.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from Donna Perret Rosen and Benjamin M. Rosen 2023.114.6. © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *Lavinia “Blossum” Robinson, Daufuskie Island, SC*, 1979, printed 2022. Gelatin silver print, 22 1/2 × 14 15/16in. (57.2 × 37.9 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with funds from Donna Perret Rosen and Benjamin M. Rosen 2023.114.1. © Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe

Jeanne Moutoussamy-Ashe, *The Bride, the Groom, and their Guests, Daufuskie Island, SC*, 1980, printed 2022.
Gelatin silver print, 14 15/16 × 22 1/2in. (37.9 × 57.2 cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase with
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