

# JoAnne McFarland presents *Queen For a Day*

An Exhibition at BARD Graduate Center Library, July 2019

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In the months I've spent in research as a Visiting Artist at BARD Graduate Center Library, I've focused on what we keep and how we determine value. In particular, I've thought a lot about luxury: what it is, why the desire for it persists, and in times of widening social disparity, how the quest for more and more luxury tracks social anxiety.

The ultimate luxury we have as human beings is our ability to hold past, present, and future all at once. Our capacity to understand ourselves through time both real and imagined is built into our DNA. The objects and information we save remind us where we've been, and serve as bedrock for our aspirations. Museums, libraries, and personal collections elucidate particular ideas that frame a particular time. These times, stacked through millennia, become our civilizations and show us who we can be beyond mere survivors.



Threats to our physical and mental well-being permeate most areas of public life. Hunger for luxurious experiences and luxury goods reflects our yearning to be beyond threat, to occupy this realm of elongated, multi-dimensional existence. Luxury often masquerades as a rarefied form of living with its promise of greatest comfort and release. During periods of intense social threat, like now, the seductive power of luxury is particularly strong, as the desire to be soothed is most acute.



As an artist I focus on what I see as a perversion of the innate human capacity to do three things at once: exist (present), preserve (past), and invent (future), into lifestyles of acquisition designed to muffle aggression rather than confront it. I'm fascinated by how women—routinely victimized by patriarchal systems, collude in their maintenance. In his May 29, 2019 oped in The New York Times: *Why the Fight Over Abortion Is Unrelenting*, Thomas B. Edsall quotes professor Sarah B. Hrdy:



*From Ancient Greece, Ching dynasty China, Victorian England to the American South, the trick has been to convince women that conforming to patriarchal ideals, being chaste, or modest, veiling one's face, whatever, are in her interests in terms of her security, marriageability, and especially in the interest of her children, particularly sons. When the social status of their families and especially that of their offspring, depends on their "virtue," women have an obvious stake in complying as well as in advertising their compliance. Supporting the "right" political candidates can be just one more way of doing that.*



My exhibition's title, *Queen For a Day*, derives from a television show, popular from 1956–1964, in which women recounted extreme hardships in order to elicit sympathy from the audience. This sympathy was measured by a giant applause meter. The woman who won the loudest applause received not only what she needed most, but a cache of luxury goods designed to make her life easier.

The works included in *Queen For a Day* allude to the many strategies used to control women's bodies and spirits. Fragments of text and images incorporated into the dress collages come primarily from the Sears & Roebuck Catalogue of 1902 which



overflowed with come-ons related to securing the American Dream. My *Battle-ground Deck* reflects the countless ways slogans and advertising reinforce patriarchal power structures, and quash independent thinking and creativity.

In America, black women and white women experience dominance quite differently. Fifty-three percent of white women voted for Donald Trump, while ninety-four percent of black women voted for Hillary Clinton. This statistical chasm speaks to the privilege white women enjoy in not acknowledging their complicity in systems that treat them as second class citizens. The works in *Queen For a Day* speak to this toxic bargain that feasts on the universal human desire to live free of worry, and act without fear.

All photos: Bruce White

