



Show Me What Love Looks Like:

A Conversation with Asha Iman Veal About Curating Love

By Christina Nafziger

What does love look like? What does it have the potential to look like? How do we understand love in all its forms, multitudes and nuances? These are some of the questions grounding the exhibition “LOVE: Still Not the Lesser” at the Museum of Contemporary Photography, Chicago. Through the eyes of 12 artists, we see love as a central point of being, a connecting principle that spans across borders, locations, generations, genders, relationships and more. Recently reading “All About Love” by bell hooks (which I highly recommend), I have been inspired to see love as not something that is frivolous or idealistic, but rather something that is worth investing in and taking seriously as a concept—which brought me to this incredible exhibition.

In this interview, I speak with multitalented and brilliant curator of the exhibition, Asha Iman Veal, about James Baldwin, intergenerational love, self-love and pleasure, love stories and more. We discuss the works in the show, the potential love has and what led her to the concept of love within visual art. I ask: why love? The answer is not so simple—it is complex, expansive and endless.

In this intimate conversation, we also dive into Asha Iman’s winding path towards curation, which actually began in journalism, made a pitstop in creative writing, and eventually brought her to teaching, museum work and visual art.

For Asha Iman Veal, “love” is not the lesser. It is the lens through which she looks at art, the root that tethers her research and the force that powers her exhibitions.

Let's begin with your background and how you came to work as a curator at the Museum of Contemporary Photography here in Chicago. The road is so different for everyone!

My name is Asha Iman—that's my first name. My last name is Veal, and I'm Associate Curator here at the Museum of Contemporary Photography. I have a show called "LOVE: Still Not the Lesser" that's been up since August 17th and [closed] December 22nd.

I'm from Northern California. I did my undergrad at NYU at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. I essentially was studying nonfiction narrative storytelling in lots of different forms. So for a long time I was only ever planning to be a writer. I wanted to be a print journalist, so I started working in newspapers in my hometown of Sacramento. I called this newspaper, pre-internet, to see if they needed an intern. And they said, why don't you write a little story? And I did. And they said it was good. It was a little column about studying for SATs or something.

I love the age where you have no awareness of people's jobs or internal hierarchy. It's such a good mentality.

Yeah, the pre-internet world was good because you could reach people, whereas now you wouldn't get through to anyone. I ended up writing for them for two years. I got to interview Kurt Cobain's aunt or cousin, who wrote a book about teen suicide and mental health. Then I had another internship at the Sacramento Business Journal doing fact-checking. Then, I went to NYU thinking I would do print journalism. I saw this program, the Gallatin School of Individualized Study. It's not like being undeclared—you get to make up your own major.



Top: Jorian Charlton, *Untitled (Cynn & Melisse)*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and Cooper Cole Gallery, Toronto.

Bottom: Jess T. Dugan, *Candles*, 2020 Inkjet print. Courtesy of the artist and CLAMP, New York, NY and Turner Carroll Gallery, Santa Fe, NM.

That's really cool! So, you went to NYU first before you got an MFA in creative writing—that's sort of surprising. How did you go from creative writing to curatorial work in the visual arts? Does your writing practice feed into your curatorial work?

Right! When I graduated undergrad, senior year, I was in this narrative nonfiction storytelling class. I was doing a lot of literary journalism. I was also studying playwriting and observing filmmaking and documentary a little bit, too. My mom had taken me to a lot of cultural spaces in Sacramento growing up, but I didn't yet know that my life would be in visual arts the way it is now in museums.

I had this class with two filmmakers and it was about Vietnam. Our goal was to make a documentary with the student film crew and these two professionals in Vietnam who had both been vets from different countries. So we went on this trip to Vietnam and for some reason I was by myself with this older filmmaker. He said to me, what are you going to do now that you've graduated? And I said, I'm a writer. And he said, you're not going to be a writer. I was pretty confused. I was like, no, I'm pretty good. But he said, no, you like people. You're not going to be in front of a computer by yourself your whole life. And he was 100% right.

That's such an interesting story!

Yeah. I just remember it stuck with me, and now I'm like, yeah, he was right. So long story short, at that point I did my MFA the same time I was working in different arts and cultural organizations in New York City, and I had a horrible MFA experience—it just was not the

right program for me. I think because of that experience, I realized I wanted to teach one day at a university because I wanted to be one of the professors that makes people feel good. Then I leaned heavier into my work in arts organizations.

From what I know about you, it sounds like you've worked at so many different organizations. Can you tell me about those experiences? Were you working at multiple places at the same time?

Definitely. I still have two jobs—I teach at one place and I curate at another place. I think if you're an enthusiastic, excited person, there's a lot you want to do.

I can relate—when I'm looking at different artists' work, I realize there are so many different things I'm interested in! So, after your MFA program, did you stay in New York for a little bit and write? What brought you to Chicago?

I was in New York for seven years, for undergrad and my MFA while working at the same time. I knew I needed to leave and switch it up. It was also around 2008, 2007. It was around that time too when I fell into visual arts. Our city really is so amazing. I just started going to see art all the time and visiting any museum I could. I started self-training in contemporary art, and it was really when I became familiar with the work of Kara Walker and Doris Salcedo that it fully clicked a hundred percent—all my interests, in art, storytelling and advocacy were coming together. And the rest was history.

Learn more about the curator at www.ashaimanveal.com.
Learn more about the exhibition at www.mocp.org/exhibition/love-still-not-the-lessen.

I love that you dove into art by using your own resources, creating your own art education by going to museums. What better way to learn? I wanted to talk a bit about your LOVE exhibition. I know you curated the show “Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part.” I wondered if there is a connection between that exhibition and “LOVE: Still Not the Lesser?”

Yeah, very much so. It’s almost a second installment of the project in a way. A lot of the ideas and dialogue about community and affirmation is exactly what the love show is about. The show is primarily, but not entirely, global artists of color speaking in this kind of way.

What brought you to or led you to the concept of love?

At the beginning of the exhibition in the wall text, there are two quotes from James Baldwin. One is, “I use the word love here, not merely in the personal sense, but as a state of being or a state of grace,” from “The Fire Next Time.” The second is, “Has everyone been in love? Not on the basis of the evidence. If they have, they’ve forgotten it. If everyone had been in love, they’d treat their children differently. They’d treat each other differently.” That’s from a documentary called “Meeting the Man James Baldwin in Paris” in 1970.

Love has probably always been on my mind, even before I knew it. Maybe love is always on every human being’s mind from the time that they have any sort of conceptual thinking, right? I would not be surprised if the majority of the actions that we take in our lives are actually motivated by love, whether that’s feeling love or lack of love or self-love or whatever. Almost everything we do is based on love or societal love in some way. People believe they’re acting in love with extreme patriotism; in religion people believe they’re acting in love, all sorts of things. I think in Greek culture and language, there are like six

different ways of thinking about love or types of love.

Most languages have multiple words for love. In bell hooks’ book “All About Love,” she talks about how she has felt like the concept of love wasn’t taken seriously or to talk about love openly was frowned upon or not seen as important. I love that you are exploring this topic so openly because I think it’s an important one. Love is a real thing to be researched and explored.

Thank you for saying that. It seems so important for me to have the concept in my mind and to show the ways that these artists are working and where they’re coming from with love. As Baldwin says, what if everyone had been loved enough? What if every single human being had been loved enough, but also what if they felt that love and knew it, too? How would we actually treat each other?

It’s such a powerful question to ask.

I think love doesn’t have to be all about hugs and kisses; it really can be the way that you choose to move through the world. It can be the way that you interact with everyone, but also the way you hold yourself. This is the thing I wanted people to begin thinking about as soon as they walk in the door of the exhibition: what is this love? It’s not only this thing that you get from a romantic partner; it’s a lot of different things. As soon as you walk in to the show, on the right there’s the work of Mari Katayama, who is a gorgeous woman. She speaks about her body as living sculpture. What is it to understand yourself as a site of love and desire? Sometimes people will say that it is vapid or vain or unnecessary for women to think about beauty or view themselves as beautiful. But we live in a world where, particularly for women, people judge the hell out of you, and there’s no way it does not affect you as a person. Mari Katayama is reclaiming that part of herself, saying, I am beautiful. I’m going to show myself, and I’m powerful and strong. I’m a site of desire and



Top: Tom Merilion, Study For Figure Shadow 2, c. 1980, From the series Between Light & Dark, 2019-2022. Courtesy of the artist.

it's my autonomy over that desire. It's not for someone else's satisfaction or pleasure or use, my body is not for your availability, but I'm also proud of it. And it's beautiful.

That piece is so powerful. The way the work is grouped in that gallery is really beautiful. I love that that room has so much to do with self-love and desire, fulfilling your own desire within yourself, and exploring pleasure and self-pleasure in nuanced ways.

Yeah, a hundred percent. I think about that as my fem sensuality room. I love that the artists are centering themselves, their agency, their body, and thinking about self-love. In the larger room there are portraits by Jess T. Dugan, and one photo shows two people the second day after their daughter was born. What does it look like to build your family? There are things that we don't see, and, as Jess self describes, also having

a multigenerational family and being someone who is trans-masculine. They're saying, I want people to see me holding my baby. I want people to see me with my partner. I want people to see my mother and her partner.

In the same room, there's Jorian Charlton's work, which is thinking about young love and Black love. It's important to see young Black people in love and sharing tenderness again in a media climate where those aren't the first images that people would think about in terms of partnership or in terms of a lot of things. To see these young, dark-skinned women as being sites of beauty and desire and being cared for...

Yeah—those are the cutest photos! Each moment is so palpable. And seeing Jess T. Dugan's work front and center is so powerful. I love Jess's work, and I was surprised at how moved I was by their candle photo. All of the photos

are intimate, but that candle photo is intimate in a different way. It is such a quiet photo that it really pulls you into the intimacy of, like, the space they live in.

That's cool to hear.

Can you talk a bit about your process curating this specific show and how different artists relate to the concept of love?

Yeah. I'm thinking about love in different ways. One artist in the show, Mous Lamrabat, thinks about love as a land. It really does go back to that Baldwin quote—what if there was a place where who you were could just be beautiful and expressed and free? And thinking about all the experiences that we have that people don't see that make us who we are, whether it's the culture we come from, the cultures we take in, the ways that we experience the world, how all this becomes one person. How, if you love people, you acknowledge all of who they are and you don't try to fit them into a box. Because that's not reality.

I think for me, the artists in this show and also in "Beautiful Diaspora," I'm taking different people from around the world who wouldn't be assumed that they should be at the same table sharing the same experience in a way that's comfortable and easy, and that makes all sorts of sense. That's what I'm essentially trying to do every time I do a show.

I have always felt that there is safety in a multiplicity of difference as opposed to being the only person who is different. I'm interested in a multiplicity of experience and how that plays out in different places, literally around the world and for different individuals. How does that become a sort of nonfiction narrative visually as a curatorial strategy?

That's super interesting. I love how much your work is rooted in storytelling. And

I totally agree—we're all the same in our differences, if that makes sense.

Yeah, definitely.

Could you talk a bit about Mous Lamrabat's "Peace Room?" It's such a great installation.

In "Peace Room," each piece is double-sided with a different image on each side, and we hung them like flags. Mous was born in Morocco and moved to Belgium when he was very young with his family. He's thinking about his experience and what it means to be a third-culture kid, which is the experience of not having been born into a space where your identity or your community was automatically defined for you. You're having to always negotiate these spaces. In his portraits, there are so many different allusions. I asked him, what are your favorite love stories and love movies? Mous wrote back to me, "My favorite love story is 'Poetic Justice' with Tupac and Janet Jackson, and my favorite love song is Mary J. Blige and Method Man, 'All I need to Get By.'" And you can see in his work all of these references to Black American hip-hop from the nineties. He's looking at all of these elements, like McDonald's arches, where he worked in Belgium when he was in high school. So you're seeing his memoir, you're seeing someone's autobiography and these small elements of what made them who they are.

There are also these interior codes from Moroccan culture that are just all over the place in terms of garments, hats, language, etc. His work is showing the love of all the people who've made him and the cultures who've made him and all the people you can coexist with. It's what it is to just be yourself.

There's a piece with four men wearing basketball jerseys: three Jordans and a Rodman—the All Star team, which I didn't know. Anytime I walk in that room I think about all those allusions and codes and the different people that can take so many different references to it. No matter who you are or where you come from, you'll find



Top: Love installation image - main gallery of MoCP. Two portraits by Jess T. Dugan. Photo by Tom Nowak.

something that is like your secret reference.

That’s so cool. It definitely speaks to that multiplicity that you were talking about earlier. I was wondering if you could tell me more about Chicago-artist Kierah “KIKI” King’s video piece in the show?

I very much adore KIKI and their work. They graduated from Columbia College Chicago in the dance program, and as a choreographer started making dance films in 2021, which is also when I was introduced to their work. For the “LOVE” show, MoCP commissioned their video piece “Fruitful Devotion.”

Are there any pieces in the show we didn’t cover that you’d like to mention?

Tom Merilion’s work in the show is about the end of his mother’s life. Sylvani Merilion was an amazing woman who had been a studio assistant for the Bloomsbury group way back in the day and helped found IKON Gallery, the largest

contemporary art gallery in Birmingham. She was a teacher, an art school professor. When she was young, although her practice was in painting and drawing, she would also take photos of Tom’s father, John, to use as sketches or figure studies. So when Sylvani was admitted to the hospital towards the end of her life, Tom gave her a camera to use. But then she died in just six weeks. While his mother was in the hospital, Tom was taking photographs of his father—who at that point was 90 years old. So in Tom Merilion’s “Between Light & Dark” we see John’s body from the time he was nearly 30 (Tom’s mother’s photos) and then when he was 90 (Tom’s photos). Woven throughout the installation are photos from Tom’s mother’s archive as well. It’s a really powerful project across all three of them [Tom, his mother and his father] across time.

It’s such an intimate and emotional piece because of the subject matter, but also because of the cross-generational art practices within the family. This isn’t an outside person documenting and learning about this couple. It’s their son learning about their parents. It’s really powerful.