

On this day

In 1999, President Bill Clinton was acquitted by the Senate in his impeachment trial.



Candela Gallery's newest exhibit, "The Golden Age" features archival prints "The Queen" and "Saint Monroe" by Alanna Airitam. Photos courtesy of Alanna Airitam

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Spectrum Editor

‘THE GOLDEN AGE’: PHOTOS PRESENT AN EMPOWERING NARRATIVE FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS

THE EVERYDAY stress that came along with a fast-paced job and the pressures of being the only black person in her corporate advertising department were toxic for Alanna Airitam. It got so bad that she attributes it to her diagnosis of Hashimoto's disease, an autoimmune condition that affects the thyroid.

"I was getting sick at this job, and I thought 'I could legitimately die in a cubicle,'" Airitam said. "And that's not the way that I plan on going out. I know that I have a lot to offer."

She eventually quit her job of 20 years and decided to take three months off to chase her artistic desires of becoming a photographer.

"We complain about certain things in our life," Airitam said. "I started listening to myself complain about the same things over and over again, but not actually doing anything different."

In those three months, Airitam created "The Golden Age," a photography collection made in response to the treatment of African Americans by police.

The photos, which are on display at Candela Gallery, show black men and women in elegant portraits with royal dressing, and fruits and vibrant flowers.

Candela co-director Ashby Nickerson said she was introduced to Airitam's art

about a year ago while selecting work for a local auction.

"We were immediately drawn to the beautiful portraiture within 'The Golden Age' and Alanna's approach to race and agency overlaid with such a unique process," Nickerson said in an email.

Airitam says that anyone, regardless of their tools or resources, can become a photographer — she got the entire wardrobe for "The Golden Age" out of a Rubbermaid bin.

"You can do this on the cheap," Airitam said. "You don't need hardly anything. You just need your imagination and ... whatever camera you happen to have. That's it."

The project initially started as a way to keep her occupied during her three-month journey. She invited friends over to her house to model for the projects.

"A lot of the people are friends or friends of friends," she said. "Sometimes I can just look at somebody and I just feel a story, like there's something there."

No matter how hard Airitam tried to push a narrative to her models, they always brought a story to the set that showed up in

the art. The models knew who they were at the moment and didn't require any coaching.

Just like trying to grab the wheel of a car from the passenger seat, taking control of the narrative wasn't going to work out, Airitam said.

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Alanna Airitam, photographer

One of the pieces in the exhibit, "Saint Nicholas," is a portrait of a son of a friend of Airitam's. She said the boy stood in front of

the camera and brought his own story simply by looking at the camera.

"I've been very lucky because they just embodied the work," Airitam said. "They just sort of knew who they were in this, and so there really wasn't a whole lot of coaching or anything like that."

When she was at her previous job, many of the stressors she experienced

made it hard to express her emotions, especially when instances of police brutality were in the news.

"Ferguson was crazy at that point. And so there was just nowhere to put all that, you know, when you go into those corporate environments," Airitam said. "You have to leave all of those emotions at the door."

For Airitam, her artistic voice was a form of defiance against police brutality and the negative portrayal of African Americans in the news. She wanted to counter that narrative and make sure there was a more accurate, empowering portrayal of African Americans.

"I thought, 'I'm going to counter that with something beautiful,'" Airitam said. "And I'm not going to continue to watch this nastiness without having a counter to that, just the same as I wouldn't sit here and let somebody tell me that I'm an awful person without fighting back."

The Golden Age is on display at Candela Gallery, 214 W. Broad St., until Feb. 22. For more information, visit candelagallery.com.