

**ANCESTORS KNOW WHO WE ARE**  
**INTERVIEW WITH MOIRA PERNAMBUCO**

**Artist statement:** As a creative and an immigrant from South America, born from a mostly African mother and Amerindian (with a splash of Brazilian Portuguese) father, I live between worlds. When the COVID-19 pandemic descended upon New York City, my solo life with only my cherished cats and dogs for company struck me rather hard. I could no longer go out in my city to document its bustling streets, or its sudden stillness. When the streets filled again, it was with unrest. Thousands of New Yorkers were responding to the violence perpetrated on George Floyd's neck and against Breonna Taylor and the bodies of so many other people of color. One role of the artist is to document the now for the yet to come. Were the protests before the pandemic, I would have been in the streets documenting my most beloved city. Instead, I used this time to return to one of my lifelong projects, *Black Boy Beautiful*, *Black Boy Vulnerable*.

—Moira Pernambuco

**Interviewer:** Tell us about yourself.

**Audio Description:** Moira sits in her studio. Camera equipment on shelves, and photos on the wall in the background.

**Moira Pernambuco:** I am Moira Pernambuco. I'm from Guyana. There are three Guyanas. There's British Guyana, there's French Guyana, and Dutch Guyana. I'm from British Guyana, okay, but it's Guyana. I'm bisexual. I am an artist. That's who I am, like the common denominator, that's who I am. I'm a lover of folk. I'm a very strong family person. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** How does your background influence your art?

**Moira Pernambuco:** I come from parents who are educators. They're teachers, right? We fled our country in the middle of the night. I was trying to get information about what was going on politically. We have no running water. The electricity was cut off. I had to stand on bread lines and flour lines to get food for our family. When my mom left Guyana with the five of her children, my father didn't come. This was November, December, January, February—he came three months later. You have to remember, there's no cell phone, there's nothing, is *nada*. I didn't know when my father—he was the bedrock of our family—I had no idea, and he had to leave my dog behind. My tale is not a sad tale; it's just a tale. It's a tale, and I hope I represent them well. I was so happy to see him when he arrived in New York.

**Interviewer:** Who inspires you?

**Moira Pernambuco:** My parents have sacrificed a lot for us, so they are who inspire me. They are, I mean my parents, Dionisio and Lynette, and being married to, in terms of my Amerindian family.... That's what we call it. We're not Native or Indigenous—it's Amerindian. So the fact that he married a

dark-skinned—an African—was a problem in their family. Alongside that, I am grateful. I'm grateful I'm here.

**Interviewer:** Describe one of the artworks in the exhibition.

**Moira Pernambuco:** Every time I hear on the news about a Black male being shot or whatever, being really shot, it breaks me. So my series, I wanted to present ... I wanted to do something. I didn't want to just weep and lament. I wanted to do something to present our Black males in a positive light, and so this is what this series is about, *Black Boy Beautiful*, *Black Boy Vulnerable*.

**Audio Description:** A color photo of a muscular Black man, bare chested, standing, unsmiling, with arms behind his back. A black and white photo of another bare chested Black man, lying on a mattress in a white brick room. He is on his back, knees up and arms folded over his forehead.

**Moira Pernambuco:** For me, this project, I wanted to do something positive coming out of the pain, if that makes any sense.

**Interviewer:** What is your favorite medium and why?

**Moira Pernambuco:** I started out as a dancer. I certainly did. And why? Because it's fluid. It's just really spiritual for me. It's really spiritual. I started as a dancer, as an artist, and then my knee gave out. Anyhow, blah blah, I have complete knee replacement, but dance is my thing. Dance is my thing because it's so freeing. Something about the spirit, it just flows. It just flows. You know what I'm saying? It just flows. Even after I had my complete knee surgery, I couldn't even walk. I couldn't even walk, but at 3:00 in the morning I put on music and I just dance on one foot, one leg, because that's a core of me. I'm a dancer, and alongside that it's photography. Because with dance, you're in the moment. You're in the moment. You just let everything go. You're in the moment. With photography, the kind of photography that I do—I'm a street photographer and I'm a studio photographer—but you're capturing a moment in time that will never happen again.

**Interviewer:** Why do you create art?

**Moira Pernambuco:** It's like breathing for me. It's breathing for me. I'm not sure if I have said this to you before, but I'll say it again that my mom, my mom's mom—Druscilla is her name. Well, was her name, still is her name, but she's passed on. God rest her soul or Black Goddess rest her soul. All of my parents' children were in honors classes, right, and we were probably the only people of color or Black, mixed, whatever, at FDR High School in Brooklyn. With my twin, she and I were in the same class and for some reason, I don't know why, I took an elective. Because in order to graduate, you've got to take an elective one year each time, freshman, sophomore, junior, whatever, senior, and I chose photography because my knee was in a lot of pain. My sister—my twin sister—was the head of the, I mean, she was the star of the tennis team, so I wanted to tag along with her and the coach said no, you can't. Go to your doctor because you're limping. I mean, I looked all cute with my outfits, but he said no, you got to go to the doctor, at which point I discovered I couldn't play tennis. So I wanted to do something other than study, right? So I found photography for some reason, had my little 110 camera, and that's what I had. It was my family's camera. And then, I think it was December—I told you this already—that we picked up my grandma from Jamaica, Queens—my mom's mom, who had just come to the country—and everybody's opening gifts and I just turned and I saw her and I captured her. From then, I've been photographing folk.

**Interviewer:** What memorable responses have you had to your work?

**Moira Pernambuco:** It's been a struggle. It's been a struggle, and I don't want to go commercial. I really don't. I can do it easily. For me, I just want to honor my parents, honor my family—my African and my Amerindian family.

**Audio Description:** Group photo of people smiling with arms around each other. Photo of a man standing in a doorway, reaching out to cows on the other side. Photo of a Native woman sitting on a bench in a valley below a hill.

**Moira Pernambuco:** I just want to leave a record.

**Interviewer:** What does it mean to be Black and Native or Afro-Indigenous?

**Moira Pernambuco:** I have a leg here. I have a leg there. I have another leg there. As Indigenous and African, I don't know where I am. I'm still trying to learn about who my folks are, and coming from that part of the country, that part of the world that I come from, there aren't records! So I just make do with what I can make do with, because I want to know who my African ancestors are.

**Audio Description:** Black and white archival photo of a Black couple in wedding outfits. Multi-generational group photo of Native people standing and sitting in front of grass roofed huts.

**Moira Pernambuco:** I want to know who my ... I know more about my Native only because I met them but, even then, there are no records, right?

**Interviewer:** What role can art play in society?

**Moira Pernambuco:** The chair you're sitting on, the bookcase behind you, the frame behind you, all of this is art. We're technicians. We are creators. You drive in that car, you go to the stop sign, whatever. We are creators. Without art, without persons who create—creators—I don't know what the world would be. That's one. I don't know if this is timely, but we instruct. We take the, you know, with the horse, you have blinders, you take it off. With the mirror, you stand in front of a mirror. You see yourselves, okay. Art is informative. I think when we're born, we can't walk, we can't talk. Parents have to take care of our, whatever, movements, but we're creative. We have imagination. The human species has imagination. You might not understand it because they're babbling as toddlers or whatever, children, babes in arms, but art is ... Look around. Art is everywhere. The clothes, that headphone you're wearing, this beaded thing—it's art. It's primary to humans, if that makes any sense?

**Interviewer:** What brings you joy?

**Moira Pernambuco:** I'll tell you what brings me joy. My animals, yes, for sure. But when everything is quiet, like wee hours of the day, 2:00 in the morning, there's nobody there, alright. The animals have settled down and it's just me, it's just me and my ideas, that brings me calm and that brings me joy. Yeah, yeah, for sure. Without a doubt, without a doubt. And you know what? Printing, create, shooting ... I don't know, but photographing and printing and seeing, seeing the image come to life, that brings me joy for sure, like nothing else. Like nothing else, yeah.

**Audio Description:** Logo: National Museum of the American Indian. Smithsonian.