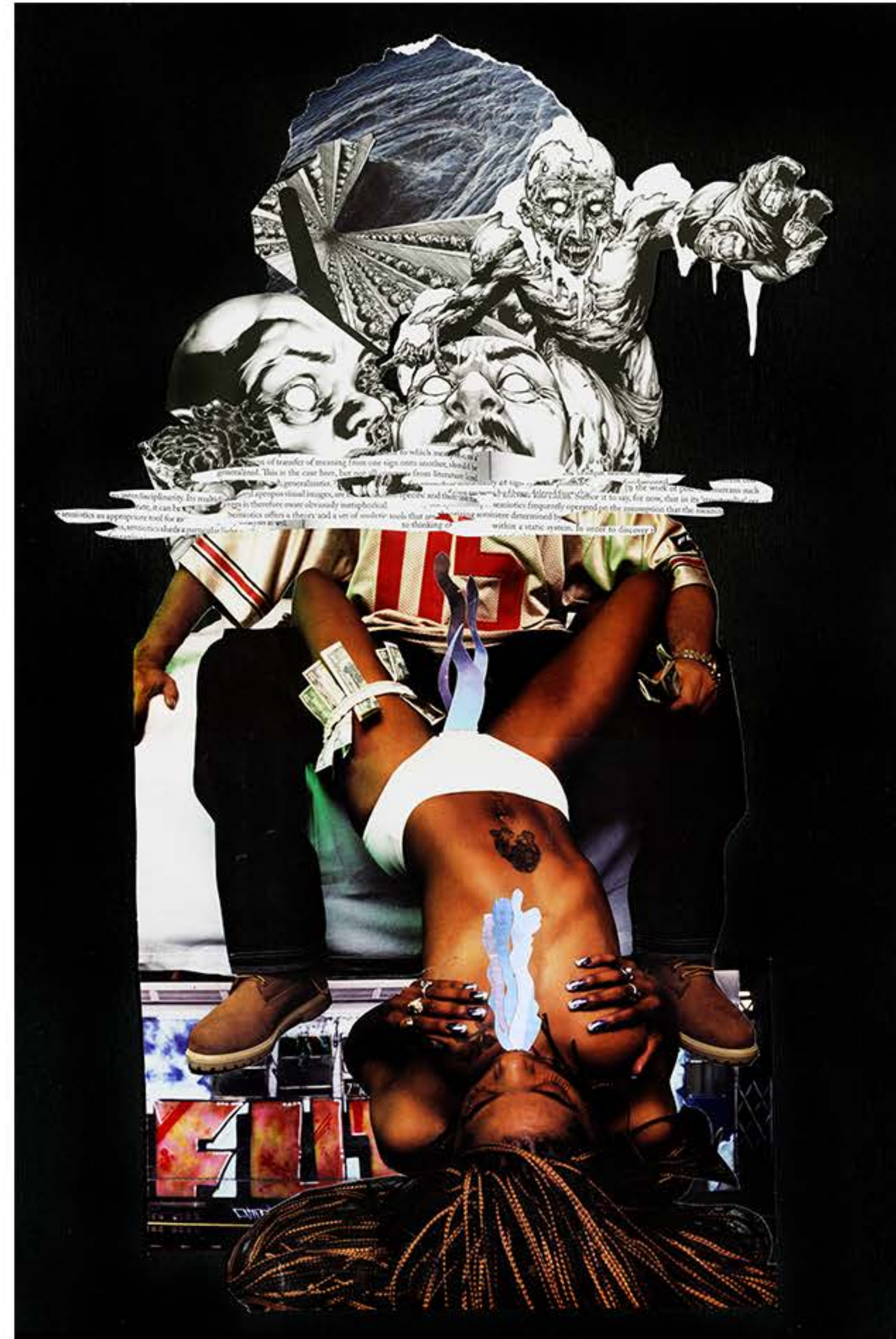


# Carla Aaron-Lopez



*Zombie*, (2012), archival pigment print on BFK Rives, 24 x 36 in.

# Collage and Hip-hop: The Remix of Feminine and Masculine

by Joey Molina

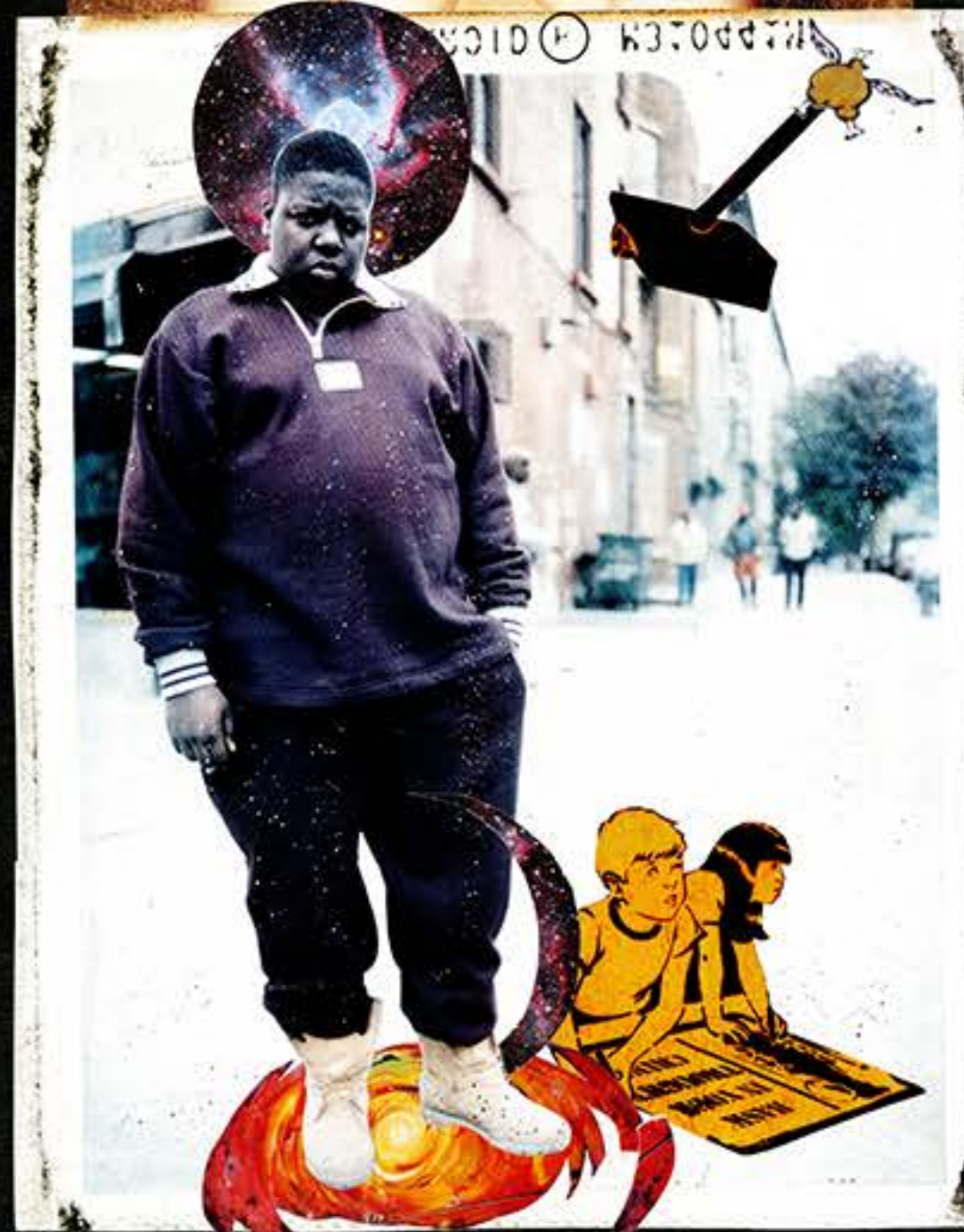
*Long Live the Dirty South* (2011-2013) is a series of collages by Carla Aaron-Lopez. Her work pursues the idea of remix, which refers to the practice of sampling in hip-hop and describes the reorganization of images in collage. Aaron-Lopez describes her affinity with hip-hop and its influence on her work, “when you go to collage, I fancy it to be similar to making a beat.”<sup>1</sup> In these surreal assemblages of images, Aaron-Lopez creates a strikingly obscure reinterpretation of “the Dirty South.” Her attraction to “disgust and unsavory” revels in the possibilities of these shape shifting conglomerates that feature a variety of cut-out pictures from magazines, coffee table books, and flyers. The attention to detail that collage requires—the positioning of images and the use of cutting vs. tearing—relate to creating “depth and texture to each finished piece.” She takes inspiration from hip-hop culture in an attempt to show a different side, where “black underdog” characters become “larger than life.” These “characters,” as she refers to them, exist in a wonderland filled with chimerical scenarios in abstract settings. The fact that Aaron-Lopez uses images from multiple sources that depict various people/celebrities, fantastical landscapes, outer space, food, and ironic ads creates points of identification that transcend stability while freely fluctuating particularly between masculinity and femininity.

**Aaron-Lopez uses images from multiple sources that depict various people/celebrities, fantastical landscapes, outer space, food, and ironic ads creates points of identification that transcend stability**



*Black Angel*, (2012), archival pigment print on BFK Rives, 24 x 36 in.

The resulting images offer a poignant observation about hip-hop and its portrayal of gender roles. “Women are always conveyed as number two in Western cultures,” states Aaron-Lopez. She also mentions that in rap music, particularly the early 2000’s dirty south crunk, “the lyrics are violent and push women into a hypersexualized context.” This overt sexuality has been an issue of contention in hip-hop for some time now, but she also sees the genre as a mode of “power and confidence.” She delves into her connection to the genre, “I began to fall deeper in love with the history of hip-hop.” These varying aspects of hip hop culture as depicted in her work “transform into something else.” That notion rings



*Biggie Alone*, (2011), archival pigment print on BFK Rives, 24 x 36 in.

true when considering that postmodern black portraiture "transformed conventional definitions of blackness into alternative, aberrant, yet strangely appealing entities."<sup>2</sup> Aaron-Lopez doesn't necessarily fixate on the hypersexualization of women as much as she takes the black figure, primarily the black female, out of its previous context and reassigns it a different position. She describes her interest in manipulating images, "I am focused on the disfiguration of the cut image from its original state into a new state." Aaron-Lopez's collages are reminiscent of the work of Wangechi Mutu and Marcia Jones. They each share an interest in female bodies as portrayed in media and in designating new meanings to them. Yet Aaron-Lopez seems more concerned with women's social position/roles as objects of desire rather than critiquing messages about body image. In Aaron-Lopez's work, the feminine figure is granted a dominant position in relation to the scale of the image itself and the male figure is portrayed as an enigma. Aaron-Lopez's collages appear as mystical illusions that diminish the gender binary, equating masculine with feminine.

### **This isn't a sexy video scene; rather, it is a war zone in which two gendered figures struggle for space**

A piece that most suggests the fluid qualities of blackness is *Zombie* (2012). Blackness, in its expansive possibilities functions here as a channel for the analysis of gender performance in relation to hip-hop. The way Aaron-Lopez problematizes points of identification resonates with Judith Butler's assertion that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts."<sup>3</sup> Butler defines the fluidity of gender and therefore can be seen as enhancing the ability to understand blackness as a moderator for dissecting gender in visual culture. This is how remix, collage, and women, as depicted in hip-hop, formulate a new vision that opens up an

investigation of images and the role of gendered bodies. The collage *Zombie* depicts a scene familiar to any hip-hop enthusiast: a stripper performing a lap dance. But this isn't a sexy video scene; rather, it is a war zone in which two gendered figures struggle for space. In Aaron-Lopez's reimagining, the black male figure (the gangster) is defaced and replaced by a scene of soulless zombies reaching out to grab the viewer with a background that depicts an isolated and distant realm. The black female figure (stripper) is defying gravity by hanging upside down with her thighs wrapped around his waist in full control. A sense of pleasure and dread can be assumed as she gropes her chest, tentacles sprout from between her legs and fluid drips from her mouth (a trend that follows throughout the rest of the work). As these perplexing pictures contradict their typical presentation, a spectator must make the connections themselves, which is a move by the artist to engage the viewer in critical thinking of gendered bodies and social positions. The intriguing aspect of this piece is how both the masculine and feminine are shredded. Neither of the two figures in the piece is granted a sense of authority; each has been reduced to a character and both are equally obscene. Aaron-Lopez's piece illustrates a self-awareness that inhibits both masculinity and femininity and different ways in which they can exist in the same space.

**She creates characters that inhabit otherworldly spaces. In this forced coexistence new gender negotiations have to take place.**

In *Black Angel* (2012) the black female is front and center of the collage. The feminine figure stands dressed in undergarments draped in black lace as the split between two scenes, her gaze looking back at the viewer. On the left side there's a car amongst a combination of landscape images, and on the right side there is a meticulously organized living room, with numerous objects located throughout, most notably art by Jean Michel

Basquiat. Gendered figures are located all over this collage but the divided sides underscore the binary and they become more apparent and easier to disassociate. Likewise in *Biggie Alone* (2011) Aaron-Lopez takes rapper The Notorious B.I.G. and transports him to her galaxy of connect the dots where he stands remote with a cloud of cosmic imagery behind his head. More characters appear in this scene: a topless woman whose eye peeks from behind another face with tribal face paint and a clipping of two animated children, a boy and a girl, looking up above. The masculine and feminine characteristics of the images remix to formulate a story. The inability to identify with a single character allows the spectator to pinpoint the character's performance of gender. The spectator actively visualizes shapes and patterns that appear to establish gender roles while illuminating the performativity each character embodies in the scene. This alteration and re-contextualization of pre-existing images emphasize the unruliness of gender. There lies a link in Aaron-Lopez's collages and her ability to bring the significance of gender performance in visual culture to the surface. Ultimately, what Aaron-Lopez is doing is a form of storytelling in which she creates characters that inhabit otherworldly spaces. In this forced coexistence, new gender negotiations have to take place.

<sup>1</sup> Carla Aaron-Lopez, interview by Joey Molina, E-mail, March 20, 2014. All other quotes from the author come from the same email exchange.

<sup>2</sup> Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), 176.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519, doi:10.2307/3207893.