

WISH YOU WERE HERE ARTIST STATEMENT

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“Unless we learn the lesson of self-appreciation and practice it, we shall spend our lives imitating other people and deprecating ourselves.”

- Aida Overton Walker

Wish you were here focuses on the work of Aida Overton Walker, the celebrated African American vaudeville performer who challenged the rigid and problematic narratives of black performers. She was known as the Queen of the Cake-Walk which was a dance craze that swept America & Europe in the early 1900s. The Cake-walk was originally performed by slaves who mocked and mimicked their slave masters and high society. The dance involved couples in square formations, strutting, prancing and high kicking. It is unclear whether the slave masters understood the connotation but nevertheless enjoyed the performances so much that they held contests for the performers.

After emancipation, this dance grew in popularity. It continued to be performed in dance contests by African Americans to white audiences, with the best performers awarded cake.

The dance was adopted in minstrel shows, seen as a low art form by white audiences. But in 1902 things changed. Aida Overton Walker reinterpreted the dance into one of elegance, skill and accuracy in her performance in *In Dahomey*. She received acclaim and praise for her rendition and soon became the ‘queen of the cakewalk’. She became so famous that she performed at Buckingham Palace in 1903 for Prince of Wales’s 9th birthday where she taught high society how to do the famous dance. Although she was limited in freedoms and expressions, she was very outspoken in how she wanted to be represented. She challenged the status quo depicting black women as cultural producers and drew attention to the limiting embodiments of her status as a performer.

During the turn of the century postcards depicting Cake-Walk dancers were distributed around Europe, especially in France, where negrophilia was taking over the Avant Garde. The postcards were often grotesque and offensive with the allure of spectacle where the performers lacked agency.

Wish you were here uses the figure of Overton-Walker to re-imagine these postcards as one not of oppression but of self-care with a mandate for people of Afro-Caribbean descent to take up space. The images explore the concepts of ownership, entitlement and mental wellbeing. Each image is layered with symbolism to illicit a conversation about the boundaries of how we see ourselves both in real and imagined realities.

By embodying Overton-Walker as guide, ancestor and advocator, the series uses satirical commentary and depictions of radical self-worth in an attempt to disrupt the roadblocks affecting our collective mental health.

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