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HAMILTONIAN GALLERY

Blake Gopnik on Frank Hallam Day's Mannequins at the Hamiltonian



COLOR CODED: Frank Hallam Day's exhibit looks at the inequity of beauty. "Even in Cameroon, where all the mannequins are homemade of papier-mache and hand-painted, all were white or pink," he wrote. (Photos By Frank Hallam Day)

By [Blake Gopnik](#)

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Imagine that all around you are images of physical beauty you can never live up to. This isn't just the kind of daily disappointment suffered by all non-supermodels. We're talking about a situation where almost no one in your entire society can ever come close to fulfilling its canons of beauty.

That's the situation Washington photographer [Frank Hallam Day](#) has documented, in a series of images now on view at the Hamiltonian Gallery on U Street. His nine large-scale color photos depict store mannequins he's discovered on his extensive travels in black Africa. Almost every mannequin he ever saw there was white. "Even in Cameroon, where all the mannequins are

homemade of papier-mache and hand-painted, all were white or pink," Day wrote in an e-mailed explanation of his project.

Most of Day's mannequins are battered imports from the West, and you wonder if African shoppers sometimes take malicious joy in watching these white beauties decay. Day shot one mannequin twice in four years, and by the time he took his second photo, she was much the worse for wear.

There are other mannequins where an effort has been made to make them even more "beautiful" than when they left the factory. An attempt to paint new makeup onto one of these ladies leaves her with what one could only call a strikingly personal style.

And then there are a bunch of mannequins whose mix-and-match hairdos and clothes seem to give them a new take on high fashion, somewhere between girl-punk and heroine-chic -- Siouxsie Sioux meets Kate Moss.

But maybe I'm still looking at these mannequins with egocentric white eyes. It could be that, for African shopkeepers and their clients, Day's mannequins are not really much more than human-shaped clothes hangers. They are allowed to get dirty and ugly, because their whiteness has kept them from standing for beauty.

Frank Hallam Day's photos

are on view at the Hamiltonian Gallery, 1353 U St. NW, through Jan. 16. Gallery hours are Tuesday to Saturday noon to 6 p.m. Call 202-332-1116 or visit <http://www.hamiltoniangallery.com>.

