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Thomas Eakins is considered one of the most important American artists. Another Philly artist is protesting his legacy.

Eakins' photography triggered sexual abuse survivor Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter. Now she is reclaiming space for survivors through her own photos.



Philadelphia artist Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter stands in front of Thomas Eakins' Spring Garden neighborhood house on Monday, October 18, 2021. YONG KIM / Staff Photographer

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Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter was working at [Mural Arts](#) in 2021, inside the former home of famed Philadelphia painter Thomas Eakins, when she came across an 1882 photograph by Eakins, posted online, that left her rattled.

Titled *African American girl nude, reclining on couch*, the sepia image focuses on a young child gazing directly at the camera, one small arm tucked awkwardly under her chin as she leans back on a patterned couch, her chest exposed. It was one of many graphic photographs that Eakins, a realist painter, took of nude subjects — children included — as references for his work. In this instance, he [posed the child as an odalisque](#), a figure in art history who's typically enslaved into sex work.

Seeing that small, unnamed girl alone and naked, at the whims of Eakins, repulsed and triggered Baxter, who described feeling like it “shook the ground” underneath her.

“I was an artist also coming to terms with my own [experience of child] sexual abuse [as an adult] with an art therapist, and when you go through traumatic situations and sexual abuse as a child, you don't really have language. For me, to survive, my brain told me that I was in control ... but it became crystal clear that there was no way that a child can give consent,” said Baxter, 44, who now lives in South Philly, pursuing a masters in fine arts at Temple's Tyler School of Art and Architecture with a focus in sculpture.



"The Consecration of Mary" (2021). After learning about the sexually explicit photos of a young Black girl by renowned Philly artist Thomas Eakins, Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter created new artwork based on the images in an effort to protect the girl from his predatory lens... Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter.

After learning about the sexually explicit photos of a young Black girl by renowned Philly artist Thomas Eakins, Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter created new artwork based on the images in an effort to protect the girl from his predatory lens.

It was a pivotal moment for Baxter, a multimedia artist and social justice activist from Francisville who first earned acclaim in 2018 when she rapped about her experience giving birth in incarceration [while shackled to a hospital bed](#) in 2007. She was reunited with her son after serving a seven-month sentence after a conviction on drug and robbery charges.

In October 2021, she published an [op-ed in The Inquirer](#) calling Eakins “Philly’s revered sexual predator” and organized a [petition to condemn Eakins and demand](#) that the city of Philadelphia remove his name from landmarks.

Eakins served as a director at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts before he was fired in 1886 for [insisting on nude models in classrooms](#), a radical viewpoint at the time. He died in 1916 and recent research has shed light on the artist’s [pattern of sexual harassment](#), including [allegations that he sexually molested his niece](#).

Baxter’s campaign also called on arts institutions like PAFA and the [Philadelphia Museum of Art](#) to raise awareness of his behavior in their celebrations of his legacy.

“No one felt the need to remove these images from public access or have a deeper conversation around the impacts of these images and tell a fuller story about Eakins and his legacy,” said Baxter.

In response, PAFA removed the image of the unnamed African American girl from [its online database](#), where it had been readily available to view and download.



Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter's show "Epilogues of the Black Madonna," on view at The Print Center through April 4. Constance Mensh.

When Baxter contemplated how she could respond through her art, songwriting didn't seem like the best medium, but photography did. She created the photo series "The Consecration of Mary," where she inserted herself into Eakins' image, a nude woman draping a blanket over the little girl on the couch as if to protect her from the man behind the camera and shield her from the audience, too.

"It was through this project that I was able to really tap in and get that cathartic healing, because I do look at the child as an avatar of myself, as this extension of myself," said Baxter. She wanted to "restore dignity to a person who didn't receive it in their lifetime, and reimagine those moments as safer and protected, as they should have been."

She has since toured the photo series around the country, and this winter, it landed in Philadelphia for the first time for a solo exhibit at the Print Center called "Epilogues of the Black Madonna," running through April 4. It was selected for the 100th anniversary of the center's ANNUAL International Competition.



Mary Enoch Elizabeth Baxter's show "Epilogues of the Black Madonna," on view at The Print Center through April 4. Constance Mensh.

Evoking a church, the floor in the gallery is covered in red carpet. At the center of the room are three prayer kneelers with cases of daguerreotype-like images in elaborate, velvet-lined cases, some opened and some closed. On one wall, she has an altar to the women in her life, including her mother, grandmother, and aunts, titled *Reverence for the Everyday Black Madonna*.

Baxter displays five large-scale self-portraits on a surface of brushed aluminum, giving each sepia image a metallic sheen. In one instance, she confronts the viewer with a hard, challenging gaze, returning to the patterned couch where she again drapes a blanket.

Only this time, she has removed the unnamed girl from the view.

“Epilogues of the Black Madonna,” through April 4, The Print Center, 1614 Latimer St., 215-735-6090 or printcenter.org.