The way in which photography has played a key role in shaping our ideas about ethnicity and selfhood is the theme of a new exhibition at the International Photography Center (IPC), co-curated by Coco Fusco, associate professor in the visual arts division of the School of the Arts and an interdisciplinary artist, and Brian Wallis, director of exhibitions and chief curator at the IPC.

“Photography is a means of recording human likeness that has been used most often to describe and construct an idea of who Americans are and what America is,” says Fusco. “We wanted a show about race to be about how photography tells us what race is and which race we belong to.”

The exhibition, “Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self,” is showing at Manhattan’s International Photography Center. It features 350 historical and contemporary images from a wide range of genres dating from the mid 19th-century to the present. In addition to photographs, vintage postcards, film stills, digital images and daguerreotypes (an early photographic process with the image made on a silver-coated metallic plate) are on display.

In connection with the exhibition, a symposium further exploring these topics will be held in the present. In addition to photography tells us what race is and which race we belong to.”

The exhibition was organized by Jerome Greene Hall, Room 101, on Feb. 5, featuring noted faculty and students from Columbia University. The title of the exhibition is “Images of Race and Identity at the International Center of Photography.”

The exhibition is divided into five thematic categories that explore racial iconography. “The show’s premise is that visually and conceptually, racial thinking as we know it is organized into a binary system,” says Fusco. “This means that the ways that we see race in a photograph can be mapped out in oppositional terms such as good/bad, beautiful/ugly, advanced/ backward, etc.”

One category is “Looking Up, Looking Down,” which shows how photographers use certain strategies to elevate the subject’s stature or denigrate it. The section “All for One/One for All” includes photographs that suggest that some people can stand in for all Americans or can embody an “ideal” American, while others can only represent specific ethnic or racial types. One work represented here is Roger Shimuzu’s “24 People For Whom I Have Been Mistaken, 1999. The photo includes the faces of 24 well-known Asians, but not Shimuzu himself. “It offers a comic reading of the effect of racialized reading—the tendency to assume that ‘all Asians look alike,’” says Fusco.

Another category is “Humanized/Fetishized,” which contrasts photographs designed to emphasize a subject’s individuality with those that objectify their subjects, replacing “things” for people or treating people like “things.” Substituting an object for a person reinforces the notion that race is something fixed and concrete, rather than a compelling but fluctuating fiction, explains Fusco. Examples of this category are Gordon Parks’ “Emerging Man, 1952, which is a visual metaphor for the desire to break out of existent invisibility, and Man Ray’s “Black and White, 1926, which juxtaposes a white woman’s face with an African mask. “What is important about Man Ray’s piece to this exhibition is that the blackness is replaced/onto an object,” explains Fusco.

The fourth category, “Assimilate/Imperialize,” depicts a common strategy in the late 19th- and early 20th-century photography—the presentation of some non-whites as good candidates for assimilation. Conversely, it was also popular for whites to go to photo studios to dress up as non-whites—such as blackface minstrels. The final category, “Progress/Regress,” extends the question of race beyond the body into space, showing how ideas of race can be projected onto natural and man-made landscapes. These works offer a visualization of social Darwinist ideas, often demonstrating how some racial groups represent progress and America’s future, while others are portrayed as throwbacks that evoke a pre-industrialist past.

After the exhibition closes at the International Photography Center, it will travel around the country through 2005.

The exhibition, which runs through Feb. 29, can be viewed at the International Photography Center, 1133 avenue of the Americas at 43rd Street in Manhattan. The show is also complemented by a website (http://www.icp.org/osd/preview/index.html).

Above and left: two sections of The Orchid Pavilion Gathering, 1621, Sheng Mao-yeh.