

DRAFT PANEL TEXT

Mapping Black Identities

Galleries G373, 374

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Mapping Black Identities

“What informs black artists’ works is the black experience, which is global.”

-Frank Bowling, 1969

This exhibition champions the voices and experiences of Black artists from the United States, Africa and its diaspora. Taking inspiration from the recent acquisition of artist Frank Bowling’s map painting *False Start* (1970), the work in this and the adjoining gallery challenges the Western notion that Black identity is monolithic. The works on view evoke a multiplicity of Black identities through an intersectional conversation that takes into account race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion and more.

Mapping is a colonial practice directly tied to painful histories of conquest, domination and discrimination. It also reflects the desire to represent something that is larger than oneself and give recognizable form to the world. In this exhibition mapping functions as a powerful way to reclaim spaces of systemic White Supremacy (a system of oppression that maintains the privilege of white peoples) —such as the museum—that have traditionally excluded or overlooked work by Black artists. By focusing on the personal, historical, formal, and conceptual conversations between artists and their works, *Mapping Black Identities* amplifies underrepresented voices and creates connections around the concept of Blackness across time and place.

This exhibition is co-curated by Mia’s Contemporary Art Department, including Esther Callahan, Curatorial Affairs Fellow; Gabriel Ritter, Curator and Department Head; Nicole Soukup, Assistant Curator; and Keisha Williams, Curatorial Department Assistant and Artist Liaison.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (b. 1977, British)

Shelves for Dynamite, 2018

Oil on linen

Promised gift on loan term loan, Private Collection – Minneapolis, L2018.228.1a-c

Draft Label:

Writer and painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye creates figures from imagination and memory that deliberately distance the viewer from any personal narrative, time, or place. Paintings and written word run parallel to each other with indirect connections – titles, short stories and poems – considered “an extra mark in the paintings”. According to Yiadom-Boakye her painting and writing have twin roles creating a symbiotic relationship between imagination and visual imagery. She describes her subjects as “suggestions of people...They don’t share our concerns or anxieties. They are somewhere else altogether.” While rooted in traditional portraiture with subjects often arranged in poses drawn from the history of European and Euro-American art, Yiadom-Boakye’s process is decidedly contemporary with paintings typically completed in a day to best capture a moment or her stream of consciousness.

“Maybe I think more about black thought than black bodies. When people ask about the aspect of race in the work, they are looking for very simple or easy answers. Part of it is when you think other people are so different than yourself, you imagine that their thoughts aren’t the same. When I think about thought, I think about how much there is that is common.” (Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, 2017)



Photo by Anton Corbijn

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye additional information:

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye lives and works in London and is the daughter of Ghanaian parents who moved to London in the 60's to work as nurses for the National Health Service. She has a B.A. from Falmouth School of Art in Cornwall. In her time there she says "she came closer to identifying something she has felt since she was a little girl: a sense of what it means to grow up Black in a white society."¹ Lynette knew that she wanted to make figurative paintings; she wanted to make black people visible and to make them seem normal, not celebratory." The images are intentionally simplified, as she wishes for the figures to be the focus as a way to carry their own narrative.

Her predominantly black cast of characters often attracts attention. In a recent interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist she explained, "Race is something that I can completely manipulate, or reinvent, or use as I want to. Also, they're all black because...I'm not white." However Yiadom-Boakye maintains, "People are tempted to politicize the fact that I paint black figures, and the complexity of this is an essential part of the work. But my starting point is always the language of painting itself and how that relates to the subject matter."

Her images are not truly portraits. They have no models and no sitters. They are character studies of people who don't exist.² She sources her images from a mix of found images, memory, sheer imagination and spontaneous improvisation. When we ask, "Who is this?" The answer is both literal and liberating: No one. Nor will the titles help to identify them, as they run parallel to the works themselves, such as the title for this triptych: "Shelves for Dynamite". While historically titles have scaffolded a work, providing context to the visual imagery, Yiadom-Boakye's titles are intentionally allusive, and she says they should be considered "an extra mark in the paintings".

She describes herself as both a writer as much as a painter creating short stories and poems that sometimes accompany her paintings. In a recent interview she explained that she believes the painting and the written word have a twin role. She doesn't paint about the writing and write about the painting, it's in fact the opposite. She writes about what she can't paint, and paints about what she can't write.

Interestingly, the artist does not include shoes in her paintings. She dislikes attaching her figures to a specific historical moment, something that is unavoidable when depicting shoes. Lynette works fast, doesn't make preliminary sketches, but improves her work on the canvas. She completes most paintings in one day and uses a mixture of brown and blue to create the depth in her figure's skin tones. She takes inspiration from artist Walter Sickert who also used the wet-on-wet technique and typically completed his paintings within 24 hours. Other examples of her work: dancers series.

¹ Kazanjian, Dodie. "How British-Ghanaian Artist Lynette Yiadom-Boakye Portrays Black Lives in Her Paintings." *Vogue*. May 26, 2017. Accessed February 5, 2019. <https://www.vogue.com/article/artist-lynette-yiadom-boakye-paintings-portray-black-lives>.ources:

² Smith, Zadie, and Zadie Smith. "Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's Imaginary Portraits." *The New Yorker*. April 05, 2018. Accessed February 5, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/06/19/lynette-yiadom-boakyes-imaginary-portraits>

Emma Amos (b. 1937, American)

*Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray's
Photograph - 1926)*, 1995

Acrylic on linen with African fabric borders and photo transfer

Promised gift on loan term loan, Private Collection – Minneapolis, L2018.48

Draft Label:

Spanning 40 years, her series of work *Black Bodies* examines the Black body as a source and site of power and beauty. Drawing inspiration from the Civil Rights movement, modern Western European Art, Abstract Expressionism and feminism, Amos explores the politics of culture and issues of racism, sexism and ethnocentrism through her art. In Amos' painting of the athlete, singer, actor and Civil Rights Activist Paul Robeson is juxtaposed with photographer Nicholas Murray's black and white photograph of Robeson from the 1920s and photo transfers of a Greco-Roman frieze. This arrangement emphasizes the sculptural nature of his form with Classical images of masculinity, suggesting the ideals that images promote are wholly constructed.

"For me, a black woman artist, to walk into the studio, is a political act." (Emma Amos, 1998)



Photo by Becket Logan

Emma Amos additional information:

Artist and educator. Emma Amos (b. 1937 Atlanta, GA) is a distinguished painter, printmaker, and weaver. She was the youngest and only woman member of Spiral, the historic African American collective founded in 1963, as well as a member of the important feminist collective, Heresies, established in the 1980s. She worked as a textile designer for Dorothy Liebes (known as the mother of modern weaving) before she established herself as an artist.

Influenced by modern Western European art, Abstract Expressionism, the Civil Rights movement and feminism, Amos explores the politics of culture and issues of racism, sexism and ethnocentrism through her paintings and works on paper.³ This work is part of Amos's Black Bodies series. Spanning 4 decades, this series highlights her continued celebration of the Black body as a source and site of power and beauty. In her artist statement Amos states that her work reflects her investigations into the otherness often seen by white male artists, along with the notion of desire, the dark body versus the white body, racism, and her wish to provoke more thoughtful ways of thinking and seeing.

Her work in the 80's and 90's seeks to remind viewers that the power of images is culturally determined, and it is necessary to be conscious of and question the value systems that give these images with meaning. Our 1995 painting *Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray's photograph - 1926)* addresses with these concerns. The work depicts the painted figure of singer, actor, athlete and Civil Rights activist Paul Robeson. Amos paints Robeson's nude body as it appears in Murray's photograph, taken after Robeson had concluded his football career and graduated from law school. Murray's original black and white photograph appears seven times in a vertical row flanking Amos's portrait, opposite a row of photo transfers of a Greco-Roman frieze. Amos's emphasis on the sculptural nature of Robeson's form, and its juxtaposition with images of classical masculinity, suggest that ultimately all images—and the ideals they promote—are constructed.

Amos has written that she hopes her paintings "...dislodge, question, and tweak prejudices, rules, and notions relating to art and who makes it, poses for it, shows it, and buys it."⁴ While consistently dealing with fraught themes of the representation and (in)visibility of black bodies, in Amos's works the black body as form and force remains exalted and empowered.

³ <http://emmaamos.com/about/statement/>

⁴ <https://ryanleegallery.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Amos-Press-2017.pdf>

J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere (1930-2014, Nigerian)

Mkpuk Eba, HD694/74, 1974

Gelatin silver print

The Christina N. and Swan J. Turnblad Memorial Fund, 2014.74

Draft Label:

For his *Hairstyles* series, photographer J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere has documented more than a thousand Nigerian women's hairstyles—at work, in the street, and at more formal occasions. Internationally celebrated in the worlds of fashion photography and social documentary for its focus on Nigerian femininity, the work gives hairstyles their due as artworks in and of themselves—some of them so sculptural they need thread to hold them together. For the women themselves, the hairstyle's significance as markers of individuality and cultural pride remain intact.

“All these hairstyles are ephemeral. I want my photographs to be noteworthy traces of them. I always wanted to record moments of beauty, moments of knowledge. Art is life. Without art, life would be frozen.” (J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere)



Corbis

J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere additional information:

J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere was raised in a small village in rural southwestern Nigeria. In 1950, he bought a modest Brownie D camera, and a neighbour taught him the rudiments of photography. As he established himself as a photographer in the 60's he began to take series of photographs dedicated to Nigerian culture. This body of work, now consisting of thousands of images, has become a unique anthropological, ethnographic, and documentary national treasure. Most African photographers of his generation only worked on commission; this project, unique of its kind, flourished without any commercial support.

Ojeikere was a forerunner of the practice of documentary photography in Nigeria. Beginning in the 1950s, he produced an impressive portfolio of two thousand negatives documenting the ways women styled their hair into monumental headdresses. The Hairstyle series as we know it consists of close to a thousand photographs and is the largest and the most thorough segment of Ojeikere's archive. Ojeikere has stated: "To watch a 'hair artist' going through his precise gestures, like an artist making a sculpture, is fascinating. Hairstyle are an art form." He photographed hairstyles every day in the street, in offices, at parties.⁵

Over a career that spanned more than fifty years, Ojeikere exhibited internationally in major venues such as the Venice Biennial, Tate Modern, Studio Museum in Harlem, and Documenta, among others. In Ojeikere's hands, photography became a means to record the transient creativity that articulated Nigerian social and cultural life. Ojeikere's fascination with the medium of photography pushed him to explore formal and creative possibilities beyond the documentary genre. During his career he also worked as a photojournalist for the Ministry, a "campus photographer" capturing university students, and a commercial photographer. Beyond his own practice, Ojeikere has been an ineluctable influence for subsequent generations of photographers, whom he nurtured and supported as a mentor.⁶

⁵ <http://www.magnin-a.com/en/artistes/presentation/63/j>

⁶ <https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the-met/2014/jd-okhai-ojeikere>

Delita Martin (b. 1972, American)

Between Sisters, 2018

Acrylic, charcoal, colored pencil, decorative papers, hand stitching

Gift of funds from Lucy Mitchell, Julie Steiner, and Kaywin Feldman and Jim Lutz

Draft Label:

Delita Martin's colorful works combine printmaking, drawing and painting to reconstruct the identity of African American women that serve as icons of strength and community. Finding inspiration from oral traditions and vintage and family photographs, Martin's work explores the art of storytelling. By transforming her subjects into matriarchal symbols, she offers greater understanding and appreciation for the role of African American women in their families and communities. Her most recent body of work *Between Spirits and Sisters* explores the Sande Society of West Africa's Mende people, an initiatory association all Mende women become part of as they transition into womanhood.

"In this work, I am also exploring the different signs and symbols that help define the space the women reside in...This body of work transitions the women and their place of residence into a spiritual realm, where the symbolism is less defined, the shapes are more organic, and the icons are left for the viewer to ponder and creating a space for the women to be birthed into." (Delita Martin, 2018)



Photo by Karen E Segrave

Delita Martin additional information:

Delita Martin is an artist currently based in Huffman, Texas. She dedicates much of her work to reconstructing the identity of African American women.⁷ Working from oral traditions, vintage and family photographs as a source of inspiration, Martin's work explores the power of storytelling.⁸ She works to fuse the real and the fantastic through her use of layering with printmaking, drawing, sewing collaging and painting. In her work, she combines signs and symbols to create visual language that offers other identities and other narratives for women of color.

Her most recent work, which these works are part of is form the *Between Spirits and Sisters* series. The duality of women in this body of work project the spirit and its connection to the physical world, which reinforces the bond amongst women and how they co- exist in the physical and spiritual realms. The mask seen in the works are her interpretation of the Mende mask, specifically created for young girls being initiated into Sande. These masks are created as a reminder that human beings have a dual existence viewed as one body.⁹ In this series of works Martin hopes to transition women and their place of residence into a spiritual realm, where the symbolism is less defined, the shapes are more organic, and the icons are left for the viewer to ponder and creating a space for the women to be birthed into.

Another example of her work: The Dinner Table, an installation at Art League Houston is another example of her work which looks at the trauma that black women face, a reminder of how black women are constantly silenced. The images of the women on the plates are forced to always remain as observers to the dinner table, never invited for a seat.

⁷ <http://www.blackboxpressstudio.com/Asset.asp?AssetID=46754&AKey=5XCHL8AH>

⁸ <http://galeriemyrtis.net/delita-martin-bio/>

⁹ <http://galeriemyrtis.net/delita-martin-statement/>

Deana Lawson (b. 1979, American)

Eternity, 2017

Pigment Print

Promised gift on loan term loan, Private Collection – Minneapolis, L2018.228.2

Draft Label:

Eternity, a highly stylized portrait, challenges socially accepted images of women's bodies. Lawson portrays her model as regal and powerful - a corrective to Western art history that has largely misrepresented and ignored the portrayal of Black bodies in this affirming manner. According to the artist, the figure represents the "Mitochondrial Eve", the genetic origin and mother of all humanity and symbol of maternity, femininity and fertility. Like many of Lawson's portraits the composition is carefully constructed with items that have personal significance to the artist. Here, everything from the location, room décor, the model's pose, down to the hand-sewn fringe has been carefully selected and composed by the artist herself. The photograph was created by and in collaboration with another woman, the model, which makes it unlike most sensual images of femininity found in art history.

"With a history of certain voices not being included in the history of art, I think it is time to claim that space, to have bodies who might not have been celebrated within the institution. It is important for someone—if I was 16 years old and I was to go to a museum and see Kerry James Marshall, that would have influenced profoundly in my whole identity. So it becomes about gaining a wider audience and if that means through an institution, by all means I welcome that." D.L. (TIME, Mar. 02, 2017)



Deana Lawson, *Self Portrait* (2012)

Deana Lawson additional information:

Deana Lawson (1979) is an American artist, educator and photographer whose work revolves primarily around issues of intimacy, family, spirituality, sexuality, and Black aesthetics. Lawson makes portraits of black people in South Carolina, Jamaica, Swaziland, Soweto, South Africa and around the artist's Brooklyn neighborhood. She confronts viewers with a complex, densely layered, multifaceted vision of black identity, as embodied by strangers and neighbors alike, with whom she has established an intense rapport, however brief.

Her photograph *Eternity*, is seen as central in her recent work. In this image the model is a representation of the “Mitochondrial Eve”. The Mitochondrial Eve refers to mitochondrial DNA, which is passed down the matrilineal line from generation to generation and the theoretical common ancestor that we all share. As in all of Deana’s portraiture, her sitters are meant to be seen as royalty – and as a corrective to a Western art history that has misrepresented and largely ignored the portrayal of black bodies as powerful, regal, elemental.¹⁰ These themes can be seen through the color purple in this image as well as the gold frames Lawson’s work is often placed in as she believes it confers nobility on her subjects.

For Lawson, the details of the room are as important as the figures standing or seated in it. In this work, the sitter’s powerful sensuality is amplified and complicated by the domestic setting, something carefully crafted by the artist. Like all of Lawson’s work each detail has been carefully and theatrically staged. The home belongs to the woman who babysits Deana’s children. The clock is an antique that Deana purchased years ago and has brought with her on her international travels, hoping to find just the right photograph to place it in. The garments the sitter wears were purchased and altered by Deana herself.

The subject of “*Eternity*”, was spotted on the A train in New York City. Deana was transfixed by her, and remembers the rest of the passengers stealing looks her way. The total artwork was created in collaboration with the model, which separates this sensual feminine image from most we find in art history, as this is an image of a woman created by and in collaboration with another woman. A kind of shared self-portrait.

Lawson says that her images often come to her in dreams. In the *New York Times*, Arthur Lubow writes “On a conscious level she is composing an alternate mythology to the disparaging images of black people that persist culturally, seeking out what’s extraordinary in ordinary lives. What’s more, she is part of a broader movement that recognizes the attractiveness of bodies that don’t conform to the conventional standards of beauty, whether prescribed by race or gender.”¹¹

Brother and Sister Soweto is another example of her work at Mia which can currently be seen in the photography galleries. In both of these images you can see the figures standing in a real space with two walls of the room meet directly behind them, forming a triangular, wedge-like space— something Lawson does in a number of her photographs, allowing them to be the center of a world that they created.

¹⁰ See supporting documentation

¹¹ <https://hyperallergic.com/432562/deana-lawson-sikkema-jenkins-and-co-2018/>

In a Hyperallergic article about her work her photographs are described as impenetrable. Lawson presents images that you cannot reduce it to a story or a commentary about blackness: Lawson's portraits are views from inside rather than outside. The individuals depicted are her family members, even if there is no blood relationship. You feel a certain unspoken bond between the subject and the artist. By encouraging her subjects to look directly at us, they resist objectification. Lawson's photographs speak directly to this ethical issue: what is your relationship with these individuals? How do you see yourself seeing them? Do you acknowledge their resistance, or do you ignore it?

Frank Bowling (b.1934, Guyana-born British)

False Start, 1970

Acrylic and spray paint on canvas

The John R. Van Derlip Fund

2018.56

Draft Label:

In *False Start*, Bowling maps an expansive yet intimate geography that charts his path from Bartica, Guyana to London and New York. Rejecting the graphic formalism of pure abstraction, his Map Paintings (1967-1971) are structured around references to postcolonialism—the social and political power relationships that sustained colonialism—his own Afro-Caribbean roots, and the broader African diaspora. The composition of *False Start* features prominent outlines of the continents of the Southern Hemisphere—Africa, Australia, and South America—rendered in fleshy tones of white and pink. Through its omission of Europe, the image challenges Eurocentric historical narratives while drawing attention to the expansive footprint of colonialism and imperialism.

“What distinguishes or creates the uniqueness of the black artist is not only the color of his skin, but the experiences he brings to his art that forge, inform, and feed it and link him essentially to the rest of the black people.” (Frank Bowling, 1969)



Frank Bowling additional information:

For over five decades, Frank Bowling's practice has been defined by the integration of autobiography and postcolonial geopolitics into abstraction. Born in British Guiana in 1934, Bowling moved to London in 1953 and studied painting at the Royal College of Art from 1959–62. Emerging at the height of the British Pop movement, his early work emphasized the figure while experimenting with expressive, gestural applications of oil paint.

In 1966, Bowling moved to New York to immerse himself in Post-War American Art. It was in this environment that Bowling became a unifying force for his peers. In 1969, he curated the seminal exhibition "5+1," which featured his work alongside pieces by Melvin Edwards, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, William T. Williams, and Daniel LaRue Johnson. In addition, he was a frequent contributor to art publications, including *Arts Magazine* where he became a contributing editor and wrote incisive texts on race and artistic production. At the same time, his long friendship and intellectual sparring sessions about painting and politics with the renowned critic Clement Greenberg helped refine his approach to art-making.

After settling in New York, Bowling's practice shifted towards abstraction. As the art historian Mel Gooding remarks, "for Bowling, the complexities and complications of New York art were compounded by the problematic issues of personal expression and public representation that much occupied the thoughts and discussions of his Black friends and associates in a largely segregated art world."¹² Concurrent with his move towards abstraction, Bowling sought inventive ways in which to continue incorporating personal content into his work. After producing a series of silk-screened paintings in the mid-1960s that featured autobiographical images from Guiana, the artist began his groundbreaking series of "Map Paintings" (1967–71), including "False Start" (1970).

These large-scale chromatic canvases marked a dramatic shift in Bowling's pictorial language. Featuring continental landmasses spray-painted with stencils, the works reoriented Bowling's critical approach as he strived to combine an investment in abstract painting with political and personal concerns. As the curator Okwui Enwezor explains, "by staking a ground around the idea that abstraction need not be disunited from content, especially as it intersects cultural experience and historical subject matter, Bowling boldly experimented with diverse modes of building a painted surface."¹³

¹² Mel Gooding, "Frank Bowling: The Map Paintings," in *The Map Paintings: 1967-1971* (London: Hales Gallery, 2013), 8.

¹³ Okwui Enwezor, "Director's Forward," in *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Haus der Kunst and Prestel Verlag, 2017), 13.

Laying the canvas directly on the floor *False Start* was prepared by spreading puddles of thinned acrylic paint across the surface of the canvas (often with wooden brooms) to create lustrous, coalescing veils of color. In earlier experiments Bowling had used shadows cast by his studio window onto the floor as a means to create abstract shapes, but when he noticed that a particular shadow seemed to assume the shape of the South American continent he realized that he had happened upon a motif that could work for, and support, his painterly investigations.

Having discovered this motif and recognized its potential as a contrast to his color experiments, Bowling used an overhead projector to create accurate paper stencils of the outlines of South America and his native Guyana—these were later followed by Africa, Australia, Asia and North America. In *False Start* the stenciled images of Africa on the far left (which appears twice) and South America in the center, the ocean in the middle evoking the infamous “Middle Passage” by which captured or purchased African men, women and children were transported to slavery in the New World. Furthermore, the maps would be employed by Bowling to address certain formal problems he faced as he began to explore color as its own subject. Succinctly they acted as an organizational tool—diagrams, that could shape, hold and anchor color to the picture surface—in such a way as to ensure intensity of focus and preserve overall visual excitement.

In *False Start*, Bowling maps an expansive yet intimate geography. Rejecting the graphic formalism of pure abstraction, he structures these paintings around references to post-colonialism and his own Afro-Caribbean roots. The composition of *False Start* features prominent outlines of the continents of the Southern Hemisphere—Africa, Australia, and South America—rendered in fleshy tones of white and pink. Through its omission of Europe, the image challenges Western-dominated art historical narratives while drawing attention to the expansive footprint of colonialism and imperialism. As such, works like *False Start* serve to decolonize the art historical cannon, as well as the inherited imperial worldview.

Sam Gilliam (b. 1933, American)

Carousel Merge, 1971

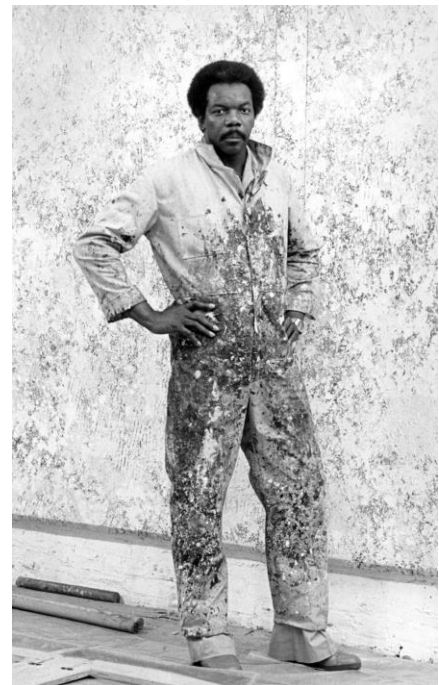
Acrylic on canvas

Loan Courtesy of Walker Art Center, L2018.209

Draft Label:

Throughout his career, artist Sam Gilliam has been at the forefront of finding new ways to invigorate painting and challenge the legacies of abstract art movements of the 1940s and 50s, including Abstract Expressionism and color field painting. His hallmark “drape paintings” dispensed with traditional stretcher bars and instead, suspended lengths of painted canvas from the wall in voluminous folds. Gilliam constructed these works by experimenting with various combinations of folding and crumpling the canvas as well as staining and splattering the paint. Their flexible installation allows for a certain degree of improvisation, which can be likened to the spontaneity of Free Jazz—a major influence for many African American painters at the time.

“I think there has to be a black art because there is a white art...Being black is a very important point of tension and self-discovery. To have a sense of self-acceptance we blacks have to throw off the dichotomy that has been forced on us by the white experience.” (1973, Art News)



Paul Feinberg, Sam Gilliam - 1969, 1969

Sam Gilliam additional information:

For the past twenty five years, Sam Gilliam has been internationally recognized as the foremost contemporary African American Color Field painter. He is most widely known for the large color stained canvases he draped and suspended from walls and ceilings during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Since that time Gilliam's style has undergone a number of phases, and he continues to explore new avenues of artistic expression.

Although not an organized or self conscious movement, one of the most important developments in abstract art to emerge following abstract expressionism occurred in Washington, D.C., and is most often designated the Washington Color School.

The **Washington Color School**, a visual art movement describes a form of image making concerned primarily with color field painting, a form of non-objective or non-representational art that explored ways to use large solid areas of paint. The Washington Color School originally consisted of a group of painters who showed works in an exhibit called the "Washington Color Painters" at the now-defunct Washington Gallery of Modern Art in Washington from June 25 to September 5, 1965. The exhibition's organizer was Gerald "Gerry" Nordland and the painters who exhibited were Sam Francis, Sam Gilliam, Gene Davis, Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, Howard Mehring, Thomas "Tom" Downing, and Paul Reed. This exhibition, which subsequently traveled to several other venues in the United States, including the Walker Art Center, solidified Washington's place in the national movement and defined what is considered the city's signature art movement, according to art historians and journalists alike.

The Washington Color School artists painted largely non-representational works, and were central to the larger color field movement. Though not generally considered abstract expressionists due to the orderliness of their works and differing motivating philosophies, many parallels can be drawn between the Washington Color School and the abstract expressionists. Minimally, the use of stripes, washes, and fields of single colors of paint on canvas were common to most artists in both groups. A common technique used in the Washington Color School was "soak staining" or just "staining", where one would pour a thinned painting medium onto canvas and let it sit over time. The result would be a stain in the canvas with no visible traces of conventional application, such as brush strokes.

Around 1965 Gilliam became the first painter to introduce the idea of the unsupported canvas. Partially inspired by women hanging laundry on clotheslines he observed from the window of his Washington studio, Gilliam abandoned the frame and stretcher, and began to drape and suspend large areas of paint stained canvas. This innovative and improvisational technique was phenomenally successful and of widespread influence. Gilliam received numerous public and private commissions for his draped canvases, earning him the title "father of the draped canvas." These paintings were sometimes suspended from ceilings, arranged on walls, or on floors. They represent a third dimension in painting, and impart a sculptural quality. Though installed by the artist, Gilliam's draped canvases could be rearranged at will, and he has frequently embellished these works with metal, rocks, and wooden beams.

While at the height of his popularity as the creator of draped canvases, in 1975, Gilliam suddenly discontinued producing them and began creating dynamic geometric collages influenced by musicians Miles Davis and John Coltrane.

*This work was commissioned by Martin Friedman for the Walker Art Center's Edward Larrabee Barnes building while the brick tower was under construction.

Joe Overstreet (b. 1933, American)

Evolution, 1970

Acrylic on canvas with metal grommets and cotton rope

Promised gift on loan term loan, Private Collection – Minneapolis, L2019.7.7

Draft Label:

After 1945 many African American artists resisted the pressure to paint images that told stories of the black experience, but abstractionists such as Joe Overstreet found ways to resolve their art and their activism so that the very act of making abstract art was political in itself. Key to this was unapologetically reclaiming the African influences, such as the highly stylized treatment of the human figure, employed by earlier European modernists (such as Pablo Picasso) as their own direct cultural inheritance filled with deep personal meaning for African Americans.

In works like “Evolution,” Overstreet sought to activate the space around the painting and the viewer by detaching the canvas from its wooden stretcher and suspending the painting in space using a series of ropes and grommets.

“I want my paintings to have an eye-catching ‘melody’ to them—where the viewer can see patterns with changes in color, design and space. When the viewer is away from the paintings, they will get flashes of the painting that linger in the mind like that of a tune or melody of a song that catches up on people’s ear and mind.” -2009



Arthur Mones (American, 1919-1998). *Joe Overstreet*, 1992

Joe Overstreet additional information:

Born in Conehatta Mississippi, grows up and studies art in Berkeley CA. Then in 1958 moves to New York.

- closely tied to both the Bay Area art scene and the Beat poets
- heavily influenced by improvisation of Jazz, particularly free jazz.

IN NEW YORK: Close friend of Wilhelm De Kooning, and Amiri Baraka, the Art Director of Harlem's Black Arts Repertory Theatre and School.

- Overstreet was the set designer for Baraka

Early work was more political (ex: *The New Jemima*, 1964/1970 and *Strange Fruit*, 1964)

Noticing an African influence in the works of modern masters such as Picasso, Modigliani, and Brancusi, Overstreet felt that European modernists has missed deeper cultural structure of African Art. In the abstract canvases he produced Overstreet imagined totemic figures, mythologies, and allusions to historical connections in conversation with a contemporary mandate to radically revise the painting surface of the canvas.

1967 (begins use of shaped canvases w/o stretcher bar)

- inspiration from Native American rugs
- "tents"
- nomadic
 - o able to easily transport paintings from place to place
 - o "I felt like a nomad myself, with all the insensitivity in America"
 - o sail-like structures, possibly related to Marcus Garvey's Black Star Line (which took trade and people to Africa from the Americas in the early 20th century)
- Tantric mandalas
 - o Using abstraction to communicate empathy and symbolic meaning

Interested in "Harpedonaptae"

- rope-stretchers of Egypt who discovered the principles of dynamic symmetry and used them to lay out temple plans. He recalled how his father, a stone mason, was interested in the rope stretchers, and how mason's used rope lines to determine the perspective, pitch and level of the earth.

Here, Overstreet's constructs his work through various combinations of staining, manipulating, and re-arranging canvases, essentially discovering the compositions in the process of them taking form. Their flexible installation allows for a certain degree of improvisation, which can be likened to Free Jazz.

Connected with Robert Morris, Claes Oldenberg and Alan Shields

- use of soft forms, unstretched canvas

Igshaan Adams (b. 1982, South African)

I Was A Hidden Treasure, Then I Wanted To Be Known..., 2016

Fabric, fabric paint, metal, beads, rope and tassels

Gift of funds from Mary and Bob Mersky, 2018.57

Draft Label:

The title *I Was A Hidden Treasure, Then I Wanted To Be Known...* comes from a well-known *hadith qudsi*, a record outside the Quran of the words and actions of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. This passage originally references the motivation behind the divine creation of humankind. It can also describe the deep desire for each of us to be known and loved by one another. Embellished with fabric, metal, beads, rope and tassels, the tapestry acts as a symbolic veil for the artist Igshaan Adams' own unearthing of his true identity. It is also an invitation for the viewer to remove their own veils in order to discover their true selves.

“Initially I grappled with deconstructing my hybrid identity, focusing on my multicultural, religious and sexual identities in relation to the domestic and political environments in which they were formed, hoping to understanding the conflict I was experiencing. My focus has since shifted to wanting to know more about the self from a multidimensional, universal and mystical position.”
(Igshaan Adams, 2017)



Photo by Earl Abrahams

Igshaan Adams additional information:

Born in 1982 in Cape Town, South Africa, Igshaan Adams continues to live and work in Cape Town. Combining aspects of performance, weaving, sculpture and installation that draw upon his upbringing, his cross-disciplinary practice is an ongoing investigation into hybrid identity, particularly in relation to race and sexuality.

Raised by Christian grandparents in a community racially classified as ‘colored’ under apartheid legislature, he is an observant but liberal Muslim who occupies a precarious place in his religious community because of his homosexuality. As such, the quiet activism of Adams’ work speaks to his experiences of racial, religious and sexual liminality, while breaking with the strong representational convention found in recent South African art. Drawing from his spiritual encounters with Sufism (the mystical dimension of Islam), his more recent work seeks to go beyond his identity, liberating himself from social categorizations that he more readily identified with earlier in his career.

Adams’ tapestries made from string, beads, textiles and found fabric are meant to explore concerns of cultural hybridity. Unlike the traditional forms of tapestry, the deconstructed and painted patterns break apart visual systems into a controlled chaos evoking themes of death and rebirth that permeate Adams’ work, bringing forth the notion of camouflage and revealing the artist’s true self beneath the veil.

The tapestry, *I Was A Hidden Treasure, Then I Wanted To Be Known...* resembles a camouflaged terrain, or perhaps an abstracted tree canopy. The work’s title comes from a well-known *hadith qudsi*, or extra-Quranic record of the words, actions and the silent approval of the Islamic prophet Muhammad. This passage originally references the motivation behind the divine creation of humankind but can also describe the deep desire for each of us to be known and loved by one another. Embellished with the fabric, metal, beads, rope and tassel, the tapestry acts as a symbolic veil for Adams’ own unearthing of his true identity as well as an invitation for the viewer to remove their own veils in order to discover their true selves.

*A “coming out” of sorts for the artist.

Todd Gray (b. 1954, American)

Akwidaa: Phase Patterns, Unit Structures, 2018

Four archival pigment prints in artist's frames and found frames with UV laminate
Promised gift on loan term loan, Private Collection – Minneapolis, L2018.167

Draft Label:

Todd Gray's photo based work explores issues of black masculinity, diaspora, and contemporary/historical examinations of power. His most recent photo works are comprised of images he created as the personal photographer of pop music icon Michael Jackson (1958-2009). These images of the super star are recontextualized via their juxtaposition with one another and the use of antique frames as a way to structure his photographic compositions in a sculptural manner. Here, the artist pairs images of Jackson with photographs of life in Akwidaa, Ghana where Gray has a studio, exploring the diasporic dislocations and cultural connections which link the U.S. to West Africa.

"The term is called 'mental colonialism,' and it's the idea is that the colonizers, they ban your language, they tell you your culture is worthless, and basically stir up racial self-hatred, and a desire to be white...That's when I realized, Michael Jackson isn't an eccentric—he's a product of white supremacist thinking and American systemic racism. That's when my whole thought, and my whole relationship with Michael changed, and when I decided to use his photographs to criticize whiteness, to criticize systemic racism." (2018)



Photo: Jorge Herrera

Todd Gray additional information:

After graduating with his BFA from CalArts, Gray was asked by [Michael Jackson](#) to become his personal photographer, which he did in the period 1979–1983, during the time of Jackson's landmark albums [Off the Wall](#) and [Thriller](#).

Todd Gray (b. 1954, Los Angeles, CA) works in photography, performance and sculpture. Gray's most recent photo works are comprised of photographs gathered from his own archive and recontextualized via their juxtaposition with one another and the use of antique frames as a structuring device. Gray's work is "fluent in cultural iconography, driven by introspection, and steeped in issues of corporate politics and racial identity" (from Amy M. Mooney, *Black Is, Black Ain't* curated by Hamza Walker ex. cat. The Renaissance Society, Chicago, 2013.)

Todd Gray received both his BFA and MFA from the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts). Solo and group exhibitions include the Studio Museum, Harlem, NY; Renaissance Society, University of Chicago; Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco; National Portrait Gallery, London; Grand Palais, Paris among others. Performance works have been presented at institutions such as the Roy & Edna Disney Cal/Arts Theater, REDCAT; and the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. His work is represented in numerous museum collections including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; National Gallery of Canada; Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles among others. He was the recipient of a Rockefeller Foundation Grant in 2016. Todd Gray's photo based work explore issues of black masculinity, diaspora, and contemporary/historical examinations of power. In recent installations he revisits this archive, pairing images of Jackson with photographs of Ghana where Gray maintains a studio, exploring the diasporic dislocations and cultural connections which link the US to West Africa. Gray has presented this work in academic conferences at Yale and Harvard University and is a 2018 John S. Guggenheim Fellow.¹⁴

¹⁴ <http://www.meliksetianbriggs.com/artists/todd-gray>

Cinga Samson (b. 1986, South African)

Ivory (vi), 2018

Oil on canvas

Promised gift on loan term loan, Private Collection – Minneapolis,

Draft Label:

Cinga Samson's self-portraits present a complex image of black male sensuality and youthful pride. The figure's clothing and posture celebrate an aspirational vision of material wealth and luxury surrounded by rich foliage and bathed in lush patterning. However, the hollow eyes and dark overall palette hint at a more brooding, introspective gaze that rejects superficiality. The empty white eyes "stare" out at the viewer but cannot connect. Perhaps the blank eyes are in fact looking inward suggesting the focus on the interior life of the artist-subject over the external world. The background is partly real and partly imagined: a composite of his own fantasies and the scenic landscape of Cape Town, South Africa and the rural Eastern Cape.

"I wanted to present a man in his beauty as a young man, feeling exotic, even a bit desirable, complex, strange, weird, unusual...Beauty and mystery were the feelings I wanted the man to have, but in the centre the intention is that this is a young man desirable in his own sense." (2017)



Photo: courtesy of Established Africa

Cinga Samson additional information:

Cinga Samson's name pronounced in Xhosa language.

Born in 1987, Cinga Samson is an emerging painter living in Khayelitsha, the largest township in South Africa.

The oil paintings of self-taught artist Cinga Samson address themes of youth, blackness, masculinity and spirituality against the backdrop of post-colonial South Africa. Figurative self-portraits, the works depict the artist posed in front of landscapes that are surreal composites of his own fantasies and the topography of South Africa. The formal composition of the paintings lend them a traditional, almost anachronistic feeling that is interrupted by the artist's contemporary clothes, intricately patterned fabrics often bearing the insignia of fake fashion brands commonly found at local street markets. The artist's focus on beauty is also manifested in the plants, flowers and accessories that his subjects hold or are surrounded by. Samson's works speak to his pride as a young African man, while at the same time a looming darkness permeates the paintings, suggestive of something more ominous.¹⁵

¹⁵ <http://www.blankprojects.com/cv-and-bio/cinga-samson/>

Kevin Beasley (b. 1985, American)

Queen of the Night, 2018

Housedresses, kaftans, du-rags, t-shirts, CD's, guinea fowl feathers, clothes pins, hair rollers, hair extensions (tumbleweave), fake gold dookie chain, resin

Loan Courtesy of Casey Kaplan Gallery,

Draft Label:

Kevin Beasley's sculptures are novel hybrids of assemblage and process art. The artist takes found objects—most often clothing—as his starting point and explores their personal and cultural meanings. This massive wall-like “slab” sculpture consists of clothing—housedresses, kaftans, and t-shirts—feathers, clothespins, hair rollers, hair extensions, and other objects encased in polyurethane resin. While these embedded elements reference the powerful female figures in the artist's personal life, the title of the work specifically references the “Burney Relief,” a 4,000-year-old rectangular clay relief from ancient Babylonia, in the collection of the British Museum in London. Also known as “Queen of the Night,” the ancient relief depicts a winged nude goddess figure with bird's talons, flanked by owls, and perched upon two lions. Beasley's composition reiterates that of the original, replacing the central goddess with a figure anointed with a halo of CDs surrounded by guinea fowl feathers.

“I am constantly thinking about how I get to an understanding of my surroundings (people, places, and such) in all of their nuances. It is how I end up using housedresses and kaftans in some work and then a crushed Cadillac Escalade in another—they are both connected to my navigation of the world because I've had compelling questions about those objects, people who have had an impact on my life, and the effects of society on the way I am perceived/perceive myself.” (2017)

OR

“Each item has some personal connection to me. It's really important that an object comes from me or at least someone close to me. I have some story of where everything came from and why. That's the starting point, and the work sort of opens up from there.” (2014)



Photo: Kristy Leibowitz

Kevin Beasley additional information:

Kevin Beasley was born in 1985 in Lynchburg, Virginia. He lives and works in Queens, New York.

Kevin Beasley's sculptures are novel hybrids of assemblage and process art. The artist takes found objects—most often clothing—as his starting point and explores their personal and cultural meanings. This massive wall-like “slab” sculpture consists of clothing—housedresses, kaftans, and t-shirts—feathers, clothespins, hair rollers, hair extensions, and other objects encased in polyurethane resin. These items weave together Beasley's own memories and experiences, along with historical and cultural references, in order to examine the role of power and race in American society. While these embedded elements reference the powerful female figures in the artist's personal life, the title of the work specifically references the “Burney Relief,” a 4,000-year-old rectangular clay relief from ancient Babylonia, in the collection of the British Museum in London. Also known as “Queen of the Night,” the ancient relief depicts a winged nude goddess figure with bird's talons, flanked by owls, and perched upon two lions.

Interested in the tactile dimension of sound, Beasley connects sound production and the movement of the physical body through his performances and sound installations.

Kwame Brathwaite (b. 1938, American)

Untitled (Black is Beautiful Poster from 1970), 1970, printed 2018

Archival pigment print

Loan Courtesy of Philip Martin Gallery

Draft Label:

For almost 60 years, Kwame Brathwaite has created positive images of African-Americans and promoted the beauty of everyday people. Working as an artist and theorist, Brathwaite made photographs of African-Americans that defied negative stereotypes and depicted a new vision of black people. Together with his brother Elombe, Brathwaite co-founded Grandassa Models in the early 1960s, a Harlem-based modeling group that actively celebrated the beauty of black women's figures and natural hair through fashion shows and photography. The Grandassa Models were the first to openly promote the powerful slogan "Black is Beautiful," defying the white, European-dominated fashion trends of the day by defining beauty strictly on their own terms.

"With photography as my medium of choice, I became an artist-activist...Black Is Beautiful was my directive. It was a time when people were protesting injustices related to race, class, and human rights around the globe. I focused on perfecting my craft so that I could use my gift to inspire thought, relay ideas, and tell stories of our struggle, our work, our liberation." - 2018



Photo: Kwame Brathwaite © / Courtesy of Philip Martin Gallery, Los Angeles

Kwame Brathwaite additional information:

For almost six decades, Kwame Brathwaite has created positive images of African-Americans and promoted the beauty of everyday people. Brathwaite, his brother Elombe, and the two groups of artist-activists the brothers helped co-found — African Jazz Arts Society and Studios (AJASS) and Grandassa Models — were the first to promote “Black is Beautiful.”

AJASS (Founded in 1956)

It was a radical collective of playwrights, graphic artists, dancers, and fashion designers, modeled after New York’s well-established Modern Jazz Society, which was known for hosting its own jazz events and encouraging an appreciation for jazz as an art form. The focus on art and music was right in AJAS’s name. So too was their political leaning: they chose the word *African* when most people were still using *colored* or *negro*. At the time, that word choice stood out; it made the club distinctive and clearly communicated a black-centered ideology.

This collective of young black artists was united by a rapidly deepening commitment to the Black Nationalist teachings of Jamaican-born activist Marcus Garvey, who preached a Pan-Africanist goal of a global movement for black economic liberation and freedom from colonialism across Africa and its diaspora. Garvey argued that blacks in the diaspora needed to return to the cultures and customs of the African continent, breaking the shackles of white colonial culture.

“Black is Beautiful” is one of the most influential ideas of the twentieth century. It finds resonance today in contemporary political movements like “Black Lives Matter.” Although Brathwaite is well-known for his photographs of public figures like Muhammad Ali, Bob Marley, and Stevie Wonder, what is not as well-known is the history of these images in American culture, and the role that Brathwaite played along with figures like Ali, Marley, and Wonder in crafting black celebrity as a political tool.

Working as an artist and theorist, Brathwaite made photographs of African-Americans that defied negative stereotypes and depicted a new vision of black people.

Brathwaite’s powerful portraits of the 60s are informed by the post-war new consumer landscape. Brathwaite and Grandassa models were often hired by black business owners to attract their consumers through images of everyday people engaged in normal tasks, like buying a bedroom set. The designers of AJASS and Grandassa were among first to incorporate African cloths into American avant-garde fashion.

Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012, American and Mexican)

Black Is Beautiful, 1968

Lithograph on cream paper

Promised gift on loan term loan, Private Collection – Minneapolis, L2017.141.6

Draft Label:

Catlett, a member of the Black is Beautiful movement of the 1960's, said that the purpose of her art is to "present black people in their beauty and dignity for ourselves and others to understand and enjoy." Committed to creating socially conscious art Catlett's *Black is Beautiful* emphasizes issues of race and the struggles of Black Americans. In its simplicity of form, Catlett revealed her skill and technique articulating emotion and individuality through careful use of line and detail. Catlett used a primarily figural style to portray the physical beauty, humanity, and the experience of oppression of African Americans.

"I have always wanted my art to service my people — to reflect us, to relate to us, to stimulate us, to make us aware of our potential." (Elizabeth Catlett)



Photo: 1948, Burning In Water

Elizabeth Catlett additional information:

Elizabeth Catlett (April 15, 1915 – April 2, 2012) was an African-American graphic artist and sculptor best known for her depictions of the African-American experience in the 20th century, which often focused on the female experience. She was born and raised in Washington, D.C. to parents working in education, and was the grandchild of freed slaves. It was difficult for a black woman in this time to pursue a career as a working artist. Catlett devoted much of her career to teaching. However, a fellowship awarded to her in 1946 allowed her to travel to Mexico City, where she worked with the Taller de Gráfica Popular for twenty years and became head of the sculpture department for the Escuela Nacional de Artes Plásticas. In the 1950s, her main means of artistic expression shifted from print to sculpture, though she never gave up the former. Her work is a mixture of abstract and figurative in the Modernist tradition, with influence from African and Mexican art traditions. According to the artist, the main purpose of her work is to convey social messages rather than pure aesthetics. While not very well known to the general public, her work is heavily studied by art students looking to depict race, gender and class issues. During her lifetime, Catlett received many awards and recognitions, including membership in the Salón de la Plástica Mexicana, the Art Institute of Chicago Legends and Legacy Award, honorary doctorates from Pace University and Carnegie Mellon, and the International Sculpture Center's Lifetime Achievement Award in contemporary sculpture.

When she moved to Mexico, Catlett's first work as an artist was with the Taller de Gráfica Popular (TGP), a famous workshop in Mexico City dedicated to graphic arts promoting leftist political causes, social issues, and education. At the TGP, she and other artists created a series of linoleum cuts featuring prominent black figures, as well as posters, leaflets, illustrations for textbooks, and materials to promote literacy in Mexico. She remained with the workshop for twenty years, leaving in 1966. Her posters of Harriet Tubman, Angela Davis, Malcolm X and other figures were widely distributed.

Catlett worked with the Taller until 1966. However, because some of the members were also Communist Party members, and because of her own activism regarding a railroad strike in Mexico City had led to an arrest in 1949, Catlett came under surveillance by the United States Embassy. Eventually, she was barred from entering the United States and declared an "undesirable alien." She was unable to return home to visit her ill mother before she died. In 1962, she renounced her American citizenship and became a Mexican citizen.

Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955, American)

Untitled (Young Woman), 2010

Hard-ground etchings with aquatint on Somerset White paper

Gift of Mary and Bob Mersky, 2016.110.5

Draft Label:

Kerry James Marshall's race-conscious art challenges the historical exclusion of African-Americans in Western art history by centering "unequivocally, emphatically black" characters. In this print, Marshall presents a portrait of a black woman in silhouette. Silhouette is used by many African American artists (such as Aaron Douglas, Lorna Simpson and Kara Walker) to investigate how Black bodies have been both literally and metaphorically made invisible. For Marshall, the silhouetted figure emphasizes Blackness in both a socially critical and positive manner. Here, the young woman's skin tone is seen in stark contrast to the simple lines and white tones of her clothing. In his work, Marshall intentionally flattens, darkens and minimizes form to heighten their meaning.

"The way we understand art history, the way we encounter the idea of art in museums seemed incomplete to me. And a lot of that incompleteness was around the idea of what mastery was and masterpieces in the world of painting were. And so I, like everybody else, I only know what art is because people who wrote art history books and who put pictures in museums told me that's what it was supposed to be. And when I wasn't seeing a lot of pictures of black folks in those paintings that everybody was supposed to be looking at, that was a problem for me. And resolving that problem became a paramount objective." (Kerry James Marshall, 2017)

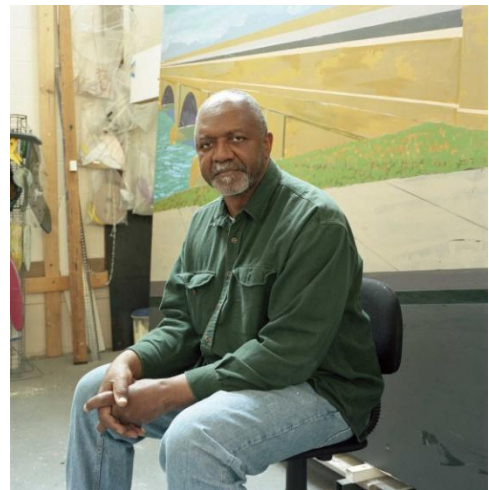


Photo: Broomberg & Chanarin

Kerry James Marshall additional information:

Kerry James Marshall uses painting, sculptural installations, collage, video, and photography to comment on the history of black identity both in the United States and in Western art.¹⁶ He is well known for paintings that focus on black subjects historically excluded from the artistic canon, and has explored issues of race and history through imagery ranging from abstraction to comics. Marshall said in a 2012 interview with Art + Auction that “it is possible to transcend what is perceived to be the limitations of a race-conscious kind of work. It is a limitation only if you accept someone else’s foreclosure from the outside. If you plumb the depths yourself, you can exercise a good deal of creative flexibility. You are limited only by your ability to imagine possibilities.”

Marshall was born in Alabama in 1955, and grew up in Watts, Los Angeles. He is a 1978 graduate of the Otis College of Art and Design and currently lives and works in Chicago. In his PBS Art21 special Marshall said, “You can’t be born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1955 and grow up in South Central [Los Angeles] near the Black Panthers headquarters, and not feel like you’ve got some kind of social responsibility. You can’t move to Watts in 1963 and not speak about it. That determined a lot of where my work was going to go...”

Excerpts from:

Leesa Rittelmann
State University of New York, College at Fredonia

Winold Reiss to Kara Walker: The Silhouette in Black American Art

The Silhouette in Contemporary Black American Art

Since the 1990s a cavalcade of cut, painted and photographed silhouettes have figured in the work of dozens of artists who, like Walker, summon its reductive economy of form to interrogate similarly reductive racial stereotypes. Artists like Laylah Ali, Lorna Simpson, Kerry James Marshall and Michael Ray Charles (to name but a few) have appropriated the pictorial idiom of the silhouette to investigate the ways in which the Black American body has been literally and metaphorically reduced to a mere shadow of its physical and historical referent. (p. 289)

Whereas Walker and Simpson consciously address the ways in which silhouettes are implicated in the historical construction of racial stereotypes, the unmodulated two-dimensionality of the work of artists like Marshall, Charles and Ali is equally indebted to comics, American advertising and graphic novels. Such diverse influences notwithstanding, these artists employ flat, reductive, crisply delineated figures in order to explore the history of the visual representation of race in the United States. (p. 290)

¹⁶ <https://www.jackshainman.com/artists/kerryjames-marshall/>

In contradistinction to Ali and Charles, Kerry James Marshall favors the silhouetted form for its ability to emphasize blackness in a more collective, arguably positive manner. Marshall's 1994-95 untitled Garden series, for example, depicts clean-cut, young urban Blacks in epic cityscapes of urban housing projects that include the word "Garden" in their name (Altgeld Gardens, Rockwell Gardens, Wentworth Gardens, etc.). The disparity between the edenic names of the projects and their impoverished reality as spaces that demarcate the marginalization and decay of Black urban culture is heightened by the matte blackness and formality of Marshall's figures. Though they are not silhouettes in the strictest sense (there is some subtle three-dimensional modeling in the faces and black-and-white clothing), the figures' rich black tones, outlines and poses function in a manner visually similar to that of traditional silhouettes. Of his development of the "unequivocally black, emphatically black figure," Marshall explains that he flattens, darkens and minimizes their forms to heighten their rhetorical function and notes that he is "very conscious" of the resistance to extreme representations of blackness within the Black community. His reduction of the "complex variations of tone to a rhetorical dimension" of blackness, Marshall argues, recalls more familiar negative stereotyping but "is never laughable." The difficulty, as he explains it, was to

[...] make them as flat as I possibly could, while maintaining a sense of dimension. That was the challenge: I was trying to see how solidly I could make those figures resonate without putting a lot of definition into them. I tried to figure out a way to construct the silhouette of the silhouette. (Marshall 90) (p. 290-291)

See full essay here:

https://www.academia.edu/12542524/_Winold_Reiss_to_Kara_Walker_The_Silhouette_in_Black_American_Art

For more information on the history of silhouette portraits see:

<https://m.theartstory.org/movement-harlem-renaissance-history-and-concepts.htm>

Nick Cave (b. 1959, American)

Soundsuit, 2010

Metal, wood, plastic, pigments, cotton and acrylic fibers

Gift of funds from Alida Messinger, 2011.12a,b

Draft Label:

Nick Cave created his first *Soundsuit* in the early 1990s as a response to the racial profiling and beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles by police officers, and the subsequent riots. The artist, who has been racially profiled, recalled of that period "...my identity is really only protected in the privacy of my own home." In reaction to that vulnerability, Cave created a second skin that protects the wearer from prejudice. The Soundsuits come in many shapes and forms, like the crochet suit with noisy toys depicted in Mia's work. The suits were intended to be worn and heard as part of performances that Cave choreographs. In acting like a second skin, the suits both protect and project beyond the body, claiming space that marginalized bodies are often excluded from.

"I don't ever see the *Soundsuits* as fun. They really are coming from a very dark place. The *Soundsuits* hide gender, race, class. And they force you to look at the work without judgment. You know, we tend to want to categorize everything. We tend to want to find its place. How do we, sort of, be one to one with something that is unfamiliar?" (Nick Cave, 2016)

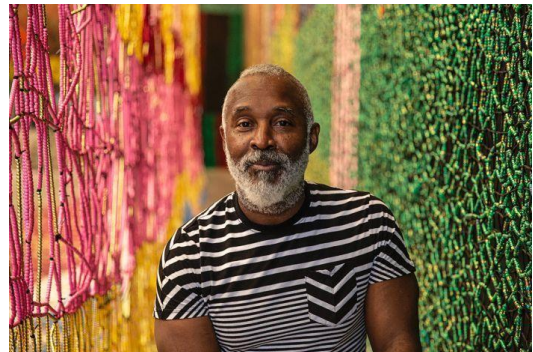


Photo: ABC Arts Teresa Tan

Nick Cave additional information:

Nick Cave creates “Soundsuits”—surreally majestic objects blending fashion and sculpture—that originated as metaphorical suits of armor in response to the Rodney King beatings and have evolved into vehicles for empowerment. Fully concealing the body, the “Soundsuits” serve as an alien second skin that obscures race, gender, and class, allowing viewers to look without bias towards the wearer’s identity. Cave regularly performs in the sculptures himself, dancing either before the public or for the camera, activating their full potential as costume, musical instrument, and living icon. Cave’s sculptures also include non-figurative assemblages, intricate accumulations of found objects that project out from the wall, and installations enveloping entire rooms.

See Art 21 interview here for more information :

<https://art21.org/watch/extended-play/nick-cave-thick-skin-short/>

Julie Mehretu (b. 1970, American born Ethiopian)

Entropia (review), 2004

Color screenprint and lithograph

Publisher: Co-published by Highpoint Editions, Minneapolis; Co-published by Walker Art Center, Minneapolis

The Richard Lewis Hillstrom Fund, 2004.185

Draft Label:

For *Entropia (review)*, Julie Mehretu combines elements of maps, diagrams and architectural drawings with her personal language of symbols. The artist refers to this style of composition as “psycho-geographic” abstractions. Psycho-geography is a tool that merges real and invented places that we can explore in our imagination. The tool allows the artist to create a place where people can freely move through space and time. In creating a fictional, chaotic landscape, Mehretu disrupts the cultural and political powers embedded in landscape.

“I don’t think it’s possible for me, in general, to ever think about the American landscape without thinking about the colonial history—and colonial violence—of that narrative. The abolitionist movement. The Civil War. The move towards emancipation. All of these social dynamics that are part of that narrative, we don’t really talk about in regards to American landscape paintings. So, what does it mean to paint a landscape and be an artist in this political moment?” ---Julie Mehretu, 2017



Photo: Tom Powel Imaging, Inc.

Julie Mehretu additional information:

Julie Mehretu's large-scale paintings, drawings, and prints mix elements of urban landscape with personal, energetic iconography. Mehretu sees her work as an investigation of identity and its links to community, power, and place, and combines found imagery with free gesture to place current and historical events in a new, unfamiliar context.¹⁷

Mehretu has participated in numerous international exhibitions and biennials including most recently the Sharjah Biennial 12: the past, the present, the possible, UAE (2015) and Documenta (13), Kassel, Germany (2012). She has received international recognition for her work, including the American Art Award from the Whitney Museum of American Art and the prestigious MacArthur Fellows Award.

Mehretu (b. 1970, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia) lives and works in New York and is represented by Marian Goodman Gallery.

¹⁷ <https://www.highpointprintmaking.org/editions/julie-mehretu/>