

Mequitta Ahuja (Meh-key-ta Ahh-huuh-jah)

American, born 1976

Tress IV, 2008

Waxy chalk over graphite underdrawing on paper

Gift of Funds from Sheila Morgan 2010.17

Mequitta Ahuja embraces the genre of self-portraiture to explore issues of race, gender and identity. These self-portraits arise from a three-step process that involves performance, photography and drawing/painting. Through this practice she creates source materials which allow her to combine personal narrative, cultural history, and myth in an expansion of self-representation and self-awareness that she calls “auto-myth-ography.” As she explained, “I define Automythography as a constructive process of identity formation in which nature, culture and self-invention merge. Proposing art as a primary method of this process, my works demonstrate female self-invention and self-representation through the deployment of her own tools.” Through self-portraiture, she places her body at the center of an exploratory narrative that blends realism and abstraction in spiritual symbols of beauty, pride, and political consciousness.

In addition to drawing on the Western art canon, Ahuja embraces narratives and imagery connected to her ethnic heritage of being African American and Indian American –weaving her complex cultural experience into the history of art and representation. In her *Tresses* series, she hopes to transform her subject into a “space of infinite creative possibilities or generative possibilities . . . a space of abstraction or imagination.” Ahuja views African American hair as weighted with “personal and cultural history.” By exaggerating cascading hair, she calls to mind its value in the lives of Black people. The celebration of Black hair helps evolve the standard of beauty held in the United States from Eurocentric to Afrocentric.



“With medium and image, I propose that identity, including racial and sexual identities, although narrowly defined by social norms, is both fluid and plural. In response to the history of Black hair as a barometer of social and personal consciousness, I make the image of hair both corporeal and conceptual, giving it the psychic proportions hair has in the lives of Black people.”

—Mequitta Ahuja

Press link for all interviews and coverage of Ahuja’s work:

<http://www.mequittaahuja.com/press.html>

<https://nailedmagazine.com/art/artist-feature-mequitta-ahuja/>

<https://blog.kadenze.com/interviews/mequitta-ahuja-presenting-representation/>

Robert Pruitt (Robert Prue-it)

American, born 1975

Untitled (All the Hype), 2016

Conté pastel, colored pencil, and charcoal, tea-dyed paper

Private collection; promised gift on long-term loan to Mia L2019.166.1

Robert Pruitt embeds symbols of Afrofuturism, Black power, popular culture, and African art history to create imagery free from the bonds of white supremacy culture. Known for his symbolic portraiture, Pruitt grants each subject a high level of individuality through their pose, gaze, colors, and his intentional selection of clothing and accessories.

Symbolism is as important as the individual in his strong cultural narratives. In many of Pruitt's pictures, the symbols are as important as the individuals being portrayed: hair, costume, props all create a deeper meaning within his works.

What do you see when you look at his face? Pruitt often turns the sitter's gaze away from the viewer to connect to a wider ancestral power, both past and present. When the subjects do not meet our gaze, they continue to be filled with strength and self-possession. In *Untitled (All the Hype)*, the Black liberation flag and a can of Royal Crown sit atop the sitter's head, implying royal status in an ironic and humorous way. With this, Pruitt creates a new kind of portrait removed from traditional representations of European royalty.



"I am constantly looking for things that feel like that they don't come from Western culture, from Europe, or mainstream American culture. I look for symbols of what Black people have created in this country that are uniquely ours culturally."

—Robert Pruitt, 2011

Gallery link for more examples of his work:

<http://koplindelrio.com/robert-pruitt/>

Hyperallergic article about his exhibition "Devotion" at California African American Museum (CAAM):

<https://hyperallergic.com/474099/robert-pruitt-california-african-american-museum-devotion/>

https://medium.com/@love_vigilante/the-revolutionizing-hypnotic-afrofuturistic-art-of-nina-chanel-abney-and-robert-pruitt-c0ba37a9925d

<https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/robert-pruitt-at-caam-1369861>

<http://www.robert-pruitt.com/about-2>

<https://artx.net/mediapost/robert-pruitt-the-future-is-now/>

Zanele Muholi (Zah-nel-ee Muh-hol-ee)

South African, born 1972

Siya Kolela, Makhaza, Khayelitscha, Cape Town, 2011

Gelatin silver print

The Robert C. Winton Fund 2014.75.1

Lumka Stemela, Nyanga East, Cape Town, 2011

Gelatin silver print

The Robert C. Winton Fund 2014.75.2

Visual activist and artist Zanele Muholi worked for more than a decade to create the series “Faces & Phases,” a visual record of Black lesbians in their home country of South Africa and a monumental chapter in Muholi’s mission to remedy black queer invisibility. The series started in 2006 and they dedicated it to a good friend who died from HIV complications in 2007, at the age of twenty-five. Of creating this series, Muholi stated “I just realized that as black South Africans, especially lesbians, we don’t have much visual history that speaks to pressing issues, both current and in the past.”

Although South Africa legalized same-sex marriage in 2006, discrimination and violence against queer women remain widespread. In 2006, Muholi began their Faces and Phases project, of undeniably powerful portraits of lesbians —now numbering around three hundred—and often exhibited in tightly arranged grids.

The documentation is direct and intimate, challenging historical representations of African women as exotic or hyper-feminine in order to redefine stereotypes around gender and sexuality and raise the profile of gay and transgender individuals in Black communities. According to Muholi, “Art needs to be political—or let me say that my art is political. It’s not for show. It’s not for play.” Documenting the lives, styles, and personalities of Black lesbians, Muholi shows their power and strength as an antidote to queer invisibility.



“To be counted as equal citizens in our country, we Black lesbians need to make ourselves visible in whatever way we can. We need to resist prejudice in all its forms especially when it displaces us because of our sexual orientation and gender expression.”

—Zanele Muholi

**Note: Muholi uses They/Them pronouns

See an interview with Muholi about “Faces & Phases” here:

<https://aperture.org/blog/magazine-zanele-muholis-faces-%C2%9D-phases/>

Kwame Brathwaite (Kwa-mee Brath-wait)

American, born 1938

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

Archival pigment print

The Shared Fund 2019.67

Untitled (Sikolo with Careolee Prince Designs), 1968 (printed 2017)

Archival pigment print

Private collection; promised gift on long-term loan to Mia L2019.157

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, he made photographs that defied negative stereotypes and depicted a new vision of Black people. Together with his brother Elombe, Brathwaite cofounded Grandassa Models in the early 1960s, a Harlem-based modeling group that celebrated the beauty of Black women's bodies and natural hair through fashion shows and photography. The Grandassa Models were one of the first to openly promote the powerful slogan "Black Is Beautiful," defying the white, European-dominated fashion trends of the day, thus redefining beauty on their own terms.

The portrait is of Sikolo Brathwaite, the artist's wife and muse, wearing a headdress inspired by South African beadwork. This portrait embodies the "Black is Beautiful" ethos, and shows Brathwaite's celebration of African ancestry intended to unify the Black experience around the globe.



“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.”

—Kwame Brathwaite, 2018

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.

The portrait is of Brathwaite's wife and muse Sikolo Brathwaite. Her headdress, inspired by South African beadwork, was designed by Careolee Prince whose work was also worn by Nina Simone. Both works come from his "Black is Beautiful" narrative "an embrace of African ancestry and unifying the black experience around the globe."

Paul Mpagi Sepuya (Paul Em-paa-gi Seh-poo-yah)

American, born 1982

Untitled, 2018

Archival pigment print, with color and black-and-white laser print collage on paper

Private collection; promised gift on long-term loan to Mia L2019.165.5

Untitled (2018) comes from a body of work developed by Paul Mpagi Sepuya over three years, inquiring into the roles of the artist, the camera, and the gaze in relation to the Black male body. In these images, the artist's physical body is continually fragmented, constructed, and reconstructed in his process of rethinking portraiture as a method of identification and recognition. This collage, which combines images of classical Greek sculpture, the Black male nude from the history of photography, alongside the artist's own self-portrait, presents the homoerotic as a layering of both identity and desire.

For 20 years, Sepuya has employed his studio as a place of portraiture and a site of homoerotic social relations. His work explores the potential of Blackness in the “dark room”—a space the artist understands as “both the historical origin of the photographer’s craft, as well as the privileged yet marginalized site of queer and colored sexuality and socialization.”



“I’m thinking about something more than just gay pin-up, in talking about homoeroticism. I’m thinking about how homoerotic friendship is really structured in a radically different way than heterosexual or binary social relations. There is no male gaze and female subject, distinct separation of platonic and erotic, creative and destructive relationships and desire. Roles that can be directed and manipulated, played with, by both artist and subject. And the outside viewer.” —Paul Mpagi Sepuya, 2018



GALLERY / 7 IMAGES

Paul Mpagi Sepuya: Double Enclosure

Sepuya's hushed photos feel like scrapbook snapshots, documentations of raw intimacy being shown. Nothing is hidden. Sepuya's male models are frequently nude and half-fallen curtains, tripods, and stools – all the traditional tricks used to make portraits, well, *portraits* – are visible. Sometimes, you can even see Sepuya's reflection in a mirror, the artist squinting into his camera's viewfinder and pressing down on the shutter. In an age when we use filters and editing tools to obstruct our true selves, Sepuya's inclination for minimalism and honesty feels deeply radical.

His approach extracts the softness of masculinity. Here is the male body nude and fragile, sensual and innocent. Of course, Sepuya is often his own subject. You can't promote vulnerability without practicing it yourself. Sepuya explains to us what it means to capture his friends and lovers in his safe space.

On gleaning inspiration from seminal queer photographers...

"Mapplethorpe said something about picking up the camera because he needed to make the pornographic images for his collages that he couldn't afford, or was tired of stealing. Genet talks about one of the primary impulses of the homosexual is thievery. I think they're both right. I wanted to create the images in my adolescent fantasies, if I am honest, and that was very informed by the collision of pornography, fashion, and teen culture on the early internet and magazine stands in the 1990s. I went to undergrad to study photography wanting to copy David LaChapelle, and discovered something else more complicated along the way. A lot of starts and failure and finally asking, why am I drawn to making pictures of these people? Models were interesting but actual relationships were the motivation."



Mirror Study (0X5A1317), 2017© Paul Mpagi Sepuya



Study for an Exchange, J.O. with Four Figures (2203), 2015

On using friends and lovers as models...

"I only make portraits of people I am interested in, and that comes from friendships, relationships, and mutual desire and interest in the work. The portraits have become transformed and contextualised by current projects. But I have to say, my personal life isn't revealed in any detail to the outside viewer. I have a project called Some Recent Pictures that is somewhat of a container of diaristic photographs and notes but its volumes are bound and unable for any viewer to go through. If you are outside of my group of friends I wonder what people assume, or think they know about any particular person or relationship. I'm only interested in establishing that the work comes from and requires an intimate space for its creation."

On homoeroticism...

"I'm thinking about something more than just gay pin-up, in talking about homoeroticism. I'm thinking about how homoerotic friendship is really structured in a radically different way than heterosexual or binary social relations. There is no male gaze and female subject, distinct separation of platonic and erotic, creative and destructive relationships and desire. Roles that can be directed and manipulated, played with, by both artist and subject. And the outside viewer."

Double Enclosure by Paul Mpagi Sepuya runs until November 18, 2018 at Foam, Amsterdam.

b. 1982, San Bernardino, CA; lives in Los Angeles, CA

Paul Mpagi Sepuya's photographic ensembles rethink the purpose of the portrait as a method of identification and recognition, offering a reflection on the genre of portraiture rather than explicit representations. His photographs shift our gaze from space to body, to technology, to mirrors, to self, and back again. Often set in Sepuya's studio and visibly centered around his camera, his photographs gesture toward both the method of their making and the indecipherable desires that generate portraits—and figurative images. The photographs in Sepuya's *Dark Room* series (2017–ongoing) capture images reflected in mirrors whose smudges and foggy patches suggest smoke or steam, the traces of bodies or the condensation of breath. In this way, Sepuya's sparsely populated portraits suggest erotic longing and dreaming, creation rather than identification. The shot into the mirror may also allude to the aesthetics of social media, where the bathroom mirror selfie becomes a site of both intimacy and public exposure.

Photography has long served as a space to create or imagine the making of self and community, but Sepuya's intentionally obscured black-and-white self-portraits invite us to question the artist's access to his own self-fashioning. Sepuya has referred to his photographs as representations of his desire, and to the black camera visible in them as a surrogate for himself. In these images, his and others' hands frequently appear on his camera or reaching and grabbing across the frame. Together, he and his friends illustrate otherwise invisible or intangible scenes of queer interracial community formation and the common search for pleasure. Though Sepuya's technical proficiency is undoubtedly on display, the many hands direct the viewer toward some sort of project that, as the artist puts it, "falls outside of 'art.'" Perhaps they gesture toward what black gay poet Essex Hemphill described as "the new world coming," or maybe they invite us to join one already in process. —Jamal Batts

b. 1981, Boston, MA; lives in Brooklyn, NY

Tuesday Smillie's practice extends feminist politics to trans and queer identities by imaginatively expanding narratives of gender. Questions of this order have led Smillie to Ursula K. Le Guin's classic feminist sci-fi novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* (1969), which narrates a planet of androgynous, sexless humans, and registers for Smillie as a proto-trans-feminist text. What proves generative for Smillie are "missteps," where Le Guin's narrative falls into gender conventions and norms, as well as how Le Guin later critiqued her own imagination following backlash from second-wave feminists. In a suite of watercolor drawings, *The Right Brain of Darkness* (2012–16), Smillie documents dog-eared editions of the novel spanning decades, evidence that the text continues to be relevant even if its trans-feminist imaginary falls short of the artist's own.

The perceived collapse of gender norms that trans identity can provoke becomes a subject of and impetus for Smillie's drawings, collages, prints, and textiles. With shadowy charcoal letters on a black patchwork banner, *Sometimes* (2016) offers a rallying cry—"WE FUCK UP SOMETIMES"—that claims failure as a revelatory mode of being in the world. This humble position supposes that blind spots can be conduits to forward-looking politics and recalls theorist Jack Halberstam's "queer art of failure," an idea that reconceives dead ends as detours for a radical imagining of the self and collective action. Smillie's *Street Transvestites 1973* (2015), a textile based on a photograph by Richard Wandel, recreates the banner that Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) hoisted during the 1973 Christopher Street Liberation Day Parade. Smillie embellishes her banner with streaks of black lace and muted baubles that refashion the folds of the banner that appears in Wandel's archival photo, a critical document of trans history and activism. Smillie's banners both recall emblems of historic protests and imagine new slogans, giving form to an evolving archive of radical resistance. —Ikechukwu Casmir Onyewuenyi

Adebunmi Gbadebo (Ah-deh-boon-mee Gba-deh-bow)

American, born 1992

True Blue, 2019

Human hair, cotton, and newsprint

Private collection; promised gift on long term loan to Mia L2019.164.2.1-18

True Blue, part of artist Adebunmi Gbadebo's "History Papers: True Blues" series, examines ideas of land, memory, and erasure. Her handmade papers utilize culturally relevant materials and color to deeply examine these themes and her personal history. Creating a practice of these materials resulted from a counter to her exclusion from the dominant narrative in the art world credited to the whit-male artist. As Gbadebo states, "Thinking deeply about my exclusion from this history and how traditional materials such as paint became the foundation in which the history is told, I realized that in order to counter this canon, I had to reject the canon's materials." In graduate school, Gbadebo decided to stop using traditional art materials, choosing to use human hair from Black people because "our hair is so connected to our culture, politics, and history. It is history, DNA." Using human hair from people of the African diaspora provided her a means to center blackness and the histories of Blackness through her work.

The use of cotton, hair, and indigo create layers of historical and racial references. Gbadebo introduced indigo into her work after tracing her own ancestry to the True Blue Plantation in South Carolina, where her ancestors were enslaved to harvest indigo and rice. In more recent history the plantation was developed into a luxury golf course as stated on the golf courses' website "The par-72 course can stretch to 7,126 and sits on the site of historic True Blue Plantation, a famed 19th-century indigo, and rice plantation". This left her with two True Blues to unpack, one connected to her ancestry, the other a space of transformation, selective erasure, and the preservation of white space.

This exploration resulted in this work, a material exploration using hand-made paper meant to resemble aerial maps of land and bodies of water, tracing the spaces that have been erased. Gbadebo's work questions how memory is stored and who inherits historical legacies.



“My work began out of a rejection of traditional art materials, because of their association with Whiteness. Art history teaches us that the masters, the best to have ever used paint or to be worthy enough to be painted, were white men. Not only did I reject that narrative and its materials, but I went on to find a material and a history to root my work in—that positioned the people who looked like me as central.”

The series, "True Blues," consists of a large grid installation of handmade papers that utilizes culturally resonant materials and the color blue to explore themes of land, memory, and erasure. Within the context of art history, the dominant narrative credits the white-male painter as the sole contributor to the canon. Thinking deeply about my exclusion from this history and how traditional materials such as paint become the foundation in which this history is told, I realized that in order to counter this canon, I had to reject the canon's materials.

Human hair from people of the African diaspora provided a means to center blackness and our histories in my work. As a result, using DNA as a material has caused me to look at my ancestry as an entry point to unpack larger histories. My entry point; a family trip to True Blue Plantation, an indigo and rice plantation located in Fort Motte, South Carolina, where our ancestors were forced to work as enslaved Africans. This investigation led me to look at a second True Blue Plantation also located in South Carolina on Pawleys Island, the largest rice and indigo plantation in South Carolina. From the early 1700s to the mid 19th century, True Blue was a major rice and indigo plantation producing an average of 700,000 pounds of rice per year. Around the late 1980s, Plantation Heritage Incorporated developed the land into True Blue Golf Club, bearing the same name. Now there were two True Blues to unpack. One connected to my ancestry; the other a space of transformation, selective erasure, and the preservation of white space. As an artist, confronting how my personal relationship to a color is one of violence tied to enslavement of my ancestors, these spaces became viable landscapes to explore personally, historically, and materially.

Always starting my process with the material, in this work, I use hair sourced from Black barber shops, cotton, denim, and various blue hair dyes bought from beauty supply stores. Using human hair, immediately the work turns into abstracted documentations or portraits, encoded with genetic information carried through the hair. The cotton amalgamation juxtaposed with the black hair imbues the sheets with haunting references to slavery and human labor. Through paper making, beating cotton and black hair into a pulp, the work becomes rooted in African history and Black culture, referencing enslaved human bodies and the fragility and disregard of their lives, seeking to give honor to their existence.

Rice and indigo are both crops only indigenous to Africa and Asia and the American colonists had no experience with these crops' cultivation. Figuring out that the Africans from what is known as the "Rice Coast" (the area from Senegal down to Sierra Leone and Liberia), had a long tradition and, thus, vast knowledge of these difficult crops, these Africans were crucial to transforming South Carolina's low and highlands, essentially, into Carolina Gold. West Africans from Mali, Ivory Coast, and Nigeria possessed rich histories in indigo dyeing, and carried that knowledge of cultivation to the United States. In the 1700s, the profits from indigo surpassed those of sugar and cotton. This information became even more poignant when a DNA test revealed that I shared genes with the natives of the Rice Coast and Indigo dyeing countries of West Africa, confirming on a genetic level that my connection to True Blue Plantation was indeed true.