

REFLECTIONS BY BLACK ARTISTS in Assemblage and Collage

While American artists like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg have long been considered the progenitors of assemblage and collage art in the US, there is an extensive history of Black American artists working in the medium. In recent decades, the representation and inclusion of 20th-century artists in cultural institutions and art collections have substantially increased. That said, to understand the Black American experience – as expressed through the art of assemblage and collage – means understanding the where, why, what of who Black artists are.

Tightrope, 1994 (not on view), Emma Amos

Acrylic on canvas with African fabric borders and photo transfer
Gift of funds from Mary and Bob Mersky and
the Ted and Dr. Roberta Mann Foundation Endowment Fund,
2020.43

Hello

Welcome to the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. Before we begin, I would like to speak to a few guidelines to remember as we walk through the galleries. First, no food or drink is allowed in the galleries nor smoking (of course!) I would ask that you “respect the space,” taking care to stand about 1 foot (or as indicated by artlines drawn on the floor) from the art. I’d like to ask if there are any of you who require an elevator rather than walking up stairs. Finally I’d like to say I am pleased that you have chosen to visit us. Our museum has over 90,000 works of art from diverse cultures and societies worldwide.

This tour will focus on Black artists working in the expressive art mediums of assemblage and collage. These thoughtfully layered works reveal the deeply personal stories of the artists and move viewers to contemplate their own relationships with the subject matter and reused materials. The artists in this collection use their work to react to and comment on current social and political issues and contribute to the long tradition of assemblage and collage art made by Black American artists. Through the manipulation and reconfiguration of found and reused materials, these artists (like their predecessors) produce images of defiance that build up and unite their shared personal and cultural histories.

Not painting. Not sculpture. Not printing. Assemblage – and also collage – is a three-dimensional artwork technique made of found objects or non-traditional materials. This term was coined by the French artist, Jean Dubuffet when he described his own work (and then, was picked up as the catch-all for this new approach). Assemblage has been a favorite style, in particular, for Black folk artists such as Thornton Dial and Lonnie Holley. Trained African American fine artists also have employed assemblage and collage. Typically a sustainable practice that repurposes discarded items into artworks, this practice challenges commercialization and the gallery system by mystifying the worth of artworks. Black contemporary artists have gravitated toward this practice it seems because the flat surface of the canvas is not enough to hold all of what they have to say. The beauty of assemblage is in the melding of ideas from one disparate object to another. When objects come together, so do ideas. As we will see, artists can conjure long-held controversial ideals when they dare to combine objects that seem drastically different.

Let’s begin ...



Blues and Pinks 3, 2020, Carrie Mae Weems
Archival inkjet prints
The Alfred and Ingrid Lenz Harrison Purchase Fund
2020.59a-f

Carrie Mae Weems is considered one of the most influential American artists of our time. She has investigated family relationships, cultural identity, sexism, class, political systems, and the consequences of power. Determined as ever to enter the picture – both literally and metaphorically – Weems has sustained an on-going dialogue within contemporary discourse for over thirty years. During this time, she has developed a complex body of art employing photographs, text, fabric, audio, digital images, installation, and video.

Focused on presenting images that are arresting and irrepressible, her eye is trained on spotlighting - with a moral force - the acts of violence that erupted during a peaceful protest in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963 where children and youths gathered to support equal rights for Black Americans. The ugliness of the police brutality that occurred is disturbing - those pinks and blues may speak to girls and boys. However, more importantly, their association with bruises – what happens when blunt force hits skin “sneaks up” on the viewer – reminds one of the harm inflicted.

Her apparent and seemingly casual “assemblage” of the photography and the tilting is her way to jar one, to unsettle one, through a dynamic approach that forces a viewer to puzzle it out and place each photo in context to the other. The tilted framed images “skip through” the actions being executed.

There is tenderness evoked in her use of colored overlays yet these images demand reconsideration of what is happening. Democracy is eroding right before one’s eye’s. By combining her photographic eye with an assemblage-like approach - stitching together the images to form the story - she asks the viewer to stop, reflect and think about the actions taken, the meanings behind the protest and the necessity to give voice to the lived African American experiences that are usually not spoken of and rarely seen.

In short, she seeks to have a passionate dialogue that elicits emotions and resonates deeply with viewers. She wants to enlighten and educate through her work.

“I work toward what I consider is a spirited, informative, and meaningful conversation.”



Anne Klein with a Baby in Transit, 2009, Willie Cole
Shoes, wire, washers and screws
Gift of funds from the Brenden Mann Foundation
2009.57

Willie Cole is best known for assembling and transforming everyday domestic and used objects into powerful works of art that speak to a “blackness” that is not obviously inherent. Irons, shoes, hair dryers, matches, discarded appliances, hardware - you name it, Willie Cole looks to imprint his world and showcase through the suggestive approach of assemblage which - in doing so - transports one to reference those that were enslaved.

Though immediately decorative and, at times, puzzling in their odd beauty, he uses these wide-ranging objects to collectively acquire a metaphorical meaning or become a harsh critique of our consumer culture. His inventive, eclectic use of these objects combines references of appropriation of African American imagery. This piece’s highly provocative title speaks to a contemporary fashion designer however its appearance speaks to African ceremonial sculpture, that which is imbued with spirituality one feels in traditional African imagery. By further burnishing his assemblage he pushes forward the look of those African sculptures that have been an inspiration.

One needs to step back and feel both the seriousness as well as his wit in creating a “Dada readymade” that borders on surrealism. By appropriating pre-existing objects that have little or no true transformation applied to them he has borrowed or recycled them to recontextualize them to create an artwork that is new, different and completely original (while still retaining what that original object was and what it was used for).

His work looks as if it was found however his creation is completely intentional. Now something else yet ... still something other.

“The objects that I use I see as them finding me, more so than me finding them and looking for an object..”



Awka for Chinua Achebe, 2016-17, Melvin Edwards
From the series Lynch Fragments
Private Collection

Melvin Edwards developed a life-long interest in African Art after seeing a Fang sculpture on a teacher's desk one day in college. Fascinated by how it captivated and appeared to speak to him on a subliminal level, he turned away from thinking of a professional athletic career to one of art.

His interest in welding led to sculpture, with his sculpture being inspired by political issues of the day be they civil rights to African American identity. When he graduated in 1965 (at the height of the civil rights movement) he felt that it *"felt logical ... I should be able to participate through my work."*

This particular assemblage sculpture reflects his collecting and piecing together common steel elements to form a *"steel life."* And what is that? It is a life that does not break down. It does not bend. It does not yield to "adversity." His work references the adversity and difficulties that Black Americans has endured as well as explores the themes within slavery. Each work captures the pain, the aggressive nature, the resistance that is inherent in fighting for one's freedom, one's dignity.

Evocative and referential this "Lynch Fragment" work (one of a series) speaks to a history of containment and bondage, creating depth and dimension that is powerfully contained. One can feel the heightened tension that is held by the steel elements.

One last thing - Chinua Achebe was a Nigerian novelist who wrote of British missionaries and colonialism. He spoke to the value of embracing one's African-ness, and how the British influence degraded and had a negative effect on this. He defended Africa and its people to be who they gloriously are.

"Eye to eye, African art is like a deep conversation with family."



Orange County Family House, 1993, Beverly Buchanan
Paint, Sharpie marker, garland, necklace, wood chips,
bark, buttons, bottle caps, license plate, film canister,
thumbtacks, clay pot, glass bottle, thread,
and glue on wood
Private collection

Beverly Buchanan creates artwork that is of singular scale, force and is filled with emotion. She responds to the deteriorating urban environments of cities to work that intertwines with Black oral history to “excavate” African American life in rural communities of the American South and Southeast.

She asks crucial questions – what do you see? why do you think this? where is the human element and how is it expressed? Her work spans the realm of reparative, and she uses site-specific photographs, drawings, photocopied notebooks, paintings, mixed media, and her own writings.

Deeply fierce and independent, her life collided with the civil rights movement and its painful aftermath; she always felt that she could feel the bruises left during her time at a sit-in where she was assaulted by police. She believed that her work needed to be unflinching in portraying the good and the bad of life’s experiences. Her work was “enlarged” by her early struggles during this time and expresses a fortitude and strength.

This particular assemblage shows a shack, perhaps encountered during her times down South. From her perspective it was a visual metaphor. It did not speak of poverty; it spoke of creativity and ingenuity. She casts these small buildings in an iconic way, showing how they were a place called home and thus, special in their own right. By exploring the architecture of the South she gave these sculptural homes a solidness. As a child Buchanan accompanied her father, who was the dean of the School of Agriculture at South Carolina State College, as he ventured out to meet the farmers and sharecroppers in the Cotton Belt; and so these shack sculptures are deeply tied to her upbringing. Curator Lowery Sims rightly notes that her sculptures “seem to defy the exigencies of our immediate history.”

“I believe the entire world is descendant from shacks.”



Between Them, 2019, Deborah Roberts
Pigments, pencil, glitter
and buttons on paper
Private collection

Deborah Roberts has felt that "otherness" has been at the center of her consciousness since the beginning of her artistic career. Her early ideals of race and beauty were shaped by and linked through paintings of renaissance artists and photographs in fashion magazines. Those images were mythical, heroic, beautiful and powerful, and embodied a particular status that was not afforded equally to anyone she knew. Those images influenced the way she viewed herself and other African Americans. It led her to investigate the way Black identities have been imagined and shaped by societal interpretations of beauty. Having one's identity dismantled, marginalized and regulated to non-human status demands action. And so, this led her to critically engage in image-making (as seen in art history and pop-culture) and ultimately grapple with whatever power and authority images were shown.

Her practice takes on social commentary, critiquing perceptions of ideal beauty. Stereotypes and myths are challenged by creating a dialogue between the ideas of inclusion, dignity, consumption, and subjectivity by addressing beauty in the form of the ideal woman, the "Venus."

Look through these multiple layers, double meanings and symbols. Her process of combining found and manipulating images with hand drawn and painted details to creates hybrid figures.

Here, these figures often take the form of young girls and increasingly Black boys, whose well being and futures are equally threatened because of the double standard projected on them at such a young age. The boys and girls who populating her work, while subject to societal pressures and projected images, are still unfixd in their identity. Each child has character and agency to find their own way amidst the complicated narratives of American, African American and art history.

"Never forget those who believed in you. They are why you are where you are.."



***Baja Variant No. 0024 (Everything)*, 2017, Shinique Smith**
Clothing and other fabric, ribbon, rope,
acrylic mirror, acrylic, fabric dye,
wood, metal, and pigments
The Walter R. Bollinger Fund
2017.105

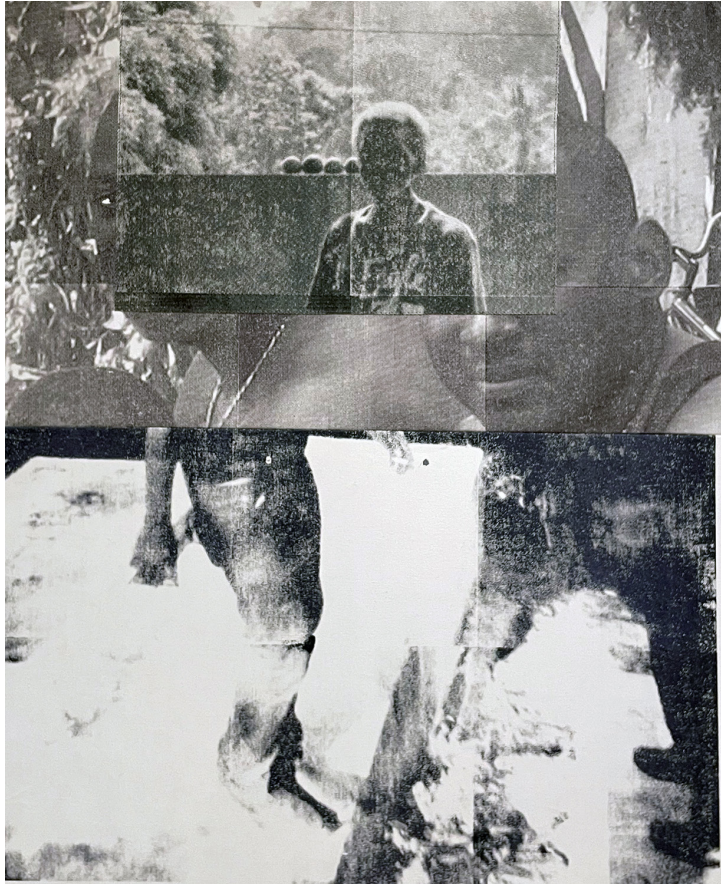
Self-referential. Beautiful textural. **Shinique Smith** is known for her monumental fabric sculptures and abstract paintings of calligraphy and collage.

Born to a young fashion designer who is also a visionary thinker, she was exposed to an array of inspirational, childhood experiences, that include chanting with his holiness the Dalai Lama, attending the fashion shows in New York and Paris and studying ballet, piano and visual art from the age of four years. Attending the famed Baltimore School for the Arts, she began honing her hand through life drawing and tagging with a local graffiti crew.

Her personal histories and belongings intertwine with thoughts of the vast nature of the 'things' that we consume and discard and how these objects resonate on intimate and social scales. Over the last twenty years, she has gleaned visual poetry from clothing and explored concepts of ritual using breath, bunding and calligraphy as tools toward abstraction. Her layered works have ranged from palm-sized bundled microcosms to monolithic bales such as *Baja Variant No. 0024* to her massive chaotic paintings that contain vibrant and carefully collected mementos from her life show a concern with globalness. By incorporating all manners of dyeing, weaving and printing - from techniques drawn fromn China, Korea, West Africa, Indonesia and the United States - she has created work that speaks to the cultural fabrics of lives lived and expressed.

Her practice operates at the convergence of consumption and spiritual sanctuary, balancing forces and revealing connections across space and time, race, gender and place to suggest the possibility of new worlds.

"My work is not necessarily narrative, but individual works have their own story through the objects that are used and the way that they are put together."



Gray Area #5, 2014, Paul Anthony Smith
Color screenprint and
sewn collaged canvas
Private Collection

Paul Anthony Smith creates paintings and picotage (this is an old style of creating stipple patterns in textile printing when highlights and shadows are produced with different sizes of brass pins driven into a wooden block. Also called pinning. Imitated with a modern technology to create an old-fashioned look) on pigment prints that explore the artist's autobiography, as well as issues of identity within the African diaspora.

Referencing both W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double consciousness and Franz Fanon's theory of diasporic cultural confusions caused by colonialism, he alludes to fences, borders, and barriers to conceal and alter his subjects and landscapes. His practice celebrates the rich and complex histories of the post-colonial Caribbean and its people. Memory, migration and home are central to his work, which probes questions of hybrid identities between worlds old and new.

His layered picotage is often patterned in the style of Caribbean breeze block fences and modernist architectural elements that function as veils, meant both to obscure and to protect his subjects from external gaze. While photography typically functions as a way in which to reveal and share information, his picotage has a concealing and purposefully perplexing effect. Forcing these nuanced diasporic histories into a singular picture plane, he encourages layers of unease within these outwardly jovial portraits. Picotage serves as an access point as he interrogates which elements of identity are allowed to pass through the complexities of borders and migration.

He never forgets to remind us in his work that we are always looking, and we are not there. That is very important, because often the viewer feels that they are immersed in that at which they are looking, which can breed a false sense of intimacy with the subject.

"I like to stay focused and work on crafting Paul Anthony Smith. My work is a product of who I am and how I've come to see the world. I like to set the mood."



American Memory Jar, 2022, Renée Stout

Glass jar, doll head, thin-set mortar,
plastic and metal toy guns, cotton on
stems, beads, and rhinestone
cross pendant
Private collection

Renée Stout is fascinated. She became fascinated by the Central African minkisi figural containers she encountered at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum while growing up in that city. Constructed of wood, fur, cloth, and other materials, the minkisi bundles held medicines and other concoctions and were considered powerful mystical receptacles. *American Memory Jar* is just one example of her minkisi assemblages.

Interestingly, when she later attended Carnegie-Mellon University, she pursued realist painting in the style of Edward Hopper and Richard Estes rather than exploring her African-American heritage in her art. She soon realized that her street scenes, devoid of people, were more like portraits of houses, which led her to consider the concept of house as home of the spirit, container of memories and dreams, and, by extension, a symbol of human activity and aspiration.

After graduating she moved to Washington, D.C., where she developed a unique form of Kongo-inspired sculpture. She started with simple, house-shaped boxes into which she put feathers, beadwork she herself created, tiny bones, buttons, and memorabilia of family members, she progressed to creating "divining tables" and room-size installations. At the same time, she began developing an ongoing fictional narrative – the story of the stay-at-home Dorothy and the African explorer Colonel Frank – which she recorded in notebooks and which became another thread tying her work firmly to American and African traditions. Stout's constructions from this period debuted in *Black Art*:

Astonishment and Power, Mingling spirituality and political terror, her work is dense with hidden knowledge, enduring traditions such as Hoodoo and personal enigma. By adorning her *American Memory Jar* with unorthodox, personal accoutrements she "doctors" this object to speak to another endgame. This construction is immersed with contemporary approaches to African traditions i.e. the continued battle the various enslavements; from her perspective resistance is not just urgent, it must also be covert.

"Nobody knows for sure how many thousands in America are warmed by the fire of Hoodoo, because the worship is bound in secrecy"

When artists bring disparate materials together, they allow the viewers to deconstruct meaning from the artwork. Placing unrelated items adjacent to one another forms significance that might not be evident without the placement of those objects in three-dimensional space. Though they could be painted, an assemblage of objects that incorporates a three-dimensionality lends a sort of reality to them, like they could actually exist.

Assemblage – and also, collage – allows for narratives to be told. By collecting disparate objects and placing them together the final work creates new meaning. A broom and a rifle. An electrical socket. A tire. Objects such as these tell the stories of African American life. They tell the stories of African American resistance. They tell the stories of African American resilience. The stories would not be possible without the imagination that allowed the artists to see past what some people see and discard as junk.

Black artists give new life and meaning to otherwise abandoned objects. When these objects breathe new life, they are able to tell stories of an abandoned and discarded people, a people who had been tossed away. The narratives about African American lives are effectively told through found objects as the artists rescue these objects from their abandoned states to see the value in them, much in the same way African Americans have had to be reborn from a destitute state of existence. In reclaiming the found object, its original intent is not restored; it is elevated to an even higher level. So much more meaning is applied to the final assemblage or collage.

The object therefore is not “just an object.”

Thank you for joining me today!