

FRESH
ART INTL

research
guide



black in america

issue 7 | 2020



FRESH ART INTERNATIONAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT CREATIVITY IN THE 21ST CENTURY

This Research Guide is a digital publication featuring conversations and themes illuminated in the **Fresh Art International podcast**. A resource for individuals, communities, and schools, the podcast combines interviews with field recordings and rich sound effects that inform and inspire each conversation. Keeping in mind both the curious and the cognoscenti, Fresh Art promotes and supports public access and awareness of the arts through a free digital archive. The podcast brings you informed, balanced, and diverse stories through the lens of today's art, film and architecture. Extending to public talks, workshops, residencies and educational resources, Fresh Art engages with cultural communities at the center and fringe of art scenes around the world.

Research Guide: Black in America Issue 7 | 2020

Based on the episode **Black in America**
Original publication date: September 3, 2018

Issue 7 is produced with the generous support of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

Featuring original content produced with the following sound editors:

Modern Portrait of Black Florida, May 14, 2018; Anamnesis Audio

Jefferson Pinder on Symbols of Power and Struggle, December 2, 2011; Ira Kip

Theaster Gates on Meaning, Making, and Reconciliation, November 7, 2012; Leonardo Madriz

Sanford Biggers on Time and the Human Condition, May 5, 2016; Guney Ozsan

Amy Sherald on New Racial Narratives, July 14, 2016; Jesse McQuarters

Fahamu Pecou on ART X HIP-HOP, February 14, 2014; Jeff T. Byrd

Founder/Artistic Director Cathy Byrd

Consulting Curator Allison Glenn, Associate Curator, Contemporary Art, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Publications Editor Sarah Rovang

Graphic Designers Julia Rudo, Mary Robnett, Freya Schlemmer

Sound Editor Alyssa Moxley

Published 2020

Fresh Art International

freshartinternational.com

info@freshartinternational.com

© 2020 Fresh Art International

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any information storage and retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher. Cathy Byrd has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988, to be identified as the author of this work. Images herein may be subject to additional copyright protection. All images included in this publication are sourced from **Fresh Art International** except where otherwise noted. Cover image: Jefferson Pinder, *float*, Lake Michigan, Chicago, IL, collaborative performance work, 2019.

introduction

Notions of Time or On Chronopolitics

A preoccupation with temporality exists across the practices of many of the artists and curators featured in this research guide. In one instance, Thelma Golden so beautifully articulates that the legacy of the Studio Museum is one that “...play[s] an important role in thinking about the future, and what the future could look like through showing and supporting the artists of the present.” The intersection of the past with the present is considered within the performance practice of Jefferson Pinder, through collaborative performances, such as *float* (2019), that use time and place as a framework to consider the ways the past still reverberates in the present. Sanford Biggers explores time through material intersections, including the use of 19th-century quilts, wooden figures sourced from Harlem’s 125th Street, bronze, and the bullets he uses to create process-oriented, multimedia artwork.

Ushering in an expansive discourse on race and Blackness in the United States, the artists in Hamza Walker’s 2008 *Black Is, Black Ain’t* exhibition at the Renaissance Society both assumed and discarded notions of Blackness at a time buzzing with post-black rhetoric. Perhaps, then, to be Black in the United States—which is distinctly different from the nuanced experience of being Black in the entire hemisphere of the Americas—carries with it a constant negotiation with the temporal domain.

And to whom do we owe this enrapture with time?



Listen along
with the episode.



Johanne Rahaman, *Bikes Up, Guns Down*, Carol City, 2015. From the *BlackFlorida* project. Courtesy of the artist.

As Rashida Phillips states in “**The Nowness of Black Chronopolitical Imaginaries in the Afro/Retrofuture**,” her essay on time and coloniality, “Black liberation movements...reappropriate[d] notions of time that hacked dominant, Western linear time...to create visions of the future for marginalized people who are typically denied access to [its] temporal mode.”¹ Phillips would be the first to argue that the temporal domain can manifest in the physical, as explored through Johanne Rahaman’s lens-based practice. With *BlackFlorida*, a desire for landscapes that recall Rahaman’s home in Trinidad is recorded and mapped onto the present. This methodology of photographing the shared resonance of Blackness in everyday communities in Florida speaks to the Caribbean diaspora so present in this peninsular state. A similar longing for home is explored in the interdisciplinary work of Theaster Gates, which brings with it a responsibility and weight not unlike that which we see in Pinder’s material choice.

The idea of articulating notions of Blackness as a singular theme, position to speak from, mood, experience, or lifestyle is an overwhelming task with the potential for underwhelming outcomes; because, as Deborah Roberts’ collaged works so clearly articulate, Blackness is expansive. So what does it mean to be Black in the United States right now? There are hard facts tying race to injustice that must be addressed. COVID-19, or the novel coronavirus, continues to ravage BIPOC (Black Indigenous People of Color) communities globally. Being Black in the United States means that, depending on the color of your skin and gender expression, you’re likely to experience discrimination, it’s not likely that your family can seek proper recourse for wrongful death by the rampant killing by police, and **firearms remain a leading cause of death** in your community.²

Just as the experiences of artists and curators compiled into this research guide are varied and complicated, so are the perspectives, thoughts, and ideas of those speaking of and from the Black experience in the United States. I remain hopeful for a future where Blackness is synonymous with *moving beyond* monolithic notions and essentializing rhetoric, *moving toward* conceptions of rhizomatic identity formation, *moving within* temporal domains that incorporate non-linear time as a register, and *moving into* a third space that allows for fluidity, nuance, and openness.

Allison Glenn
Consulting Curator

1 Rashida Phillips, “The Nowness of Black Chronopolitical Imaginaries in the Afro/Retrofuture,” *The Funambulist: Politics of Space and Bodies*, Issue 24 Futurisms, July-August 2019.

2 Everytown Research & Policy, Report: *Gun Violence in America*, April 19, 2020, accessed August 8, 2020. [[link](#)].



about the cover

Our cover image for this issue features an enigmatic aerial view of Jefferson Pinder's *float*, a performance that happened on July 27, 2019, marking one hundred years to the exact minute that 17-year old Eugene Williams, a young Black teenager, was stoned to death by white beachgoers for floating over to the "white side" of Lake Michigan. This single incident was the spark that ignited Chicago's Red Summer (**Chicago's Race Riot of 1919**). To create *float*, Pinder worked with an interracial group of 78 performers. At the exact moment that 17-year old Eugene Williams was killed, they entered the water with black innertubes to float offshore at Chicago's 31st Street Beach. In the year 2020, it might be difficult to understand how a young man could be murdered due to the direction of the water's current. This excruciatingly painful, racist incident was an indicator of the tensions that continued to mount in the

Windy City during the Great Migration, a movement of six million African Americans out of the rural Southern United States to the urban Northeast, Midwest, and West between 1916 and 1970. Legislation and policies enacted during that period, including systematic housing discrimination that effectively confined citizens of color to certain neighborhoods, still shape the urban fabric of contemporary Chicago.

Photos: Aerial view and detail of Jefferson Pinder, *float*, Lake Michigan, Chicago, IL, collaborative performance work, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.



special COVID-19 acknowledgment

COVID-19 and the mandate for social distancing have altered the way that creators from around the globe make and share their work. While it remains to be seen how these changes will affect the art world in the long run, this guide provides critical information and inspiration during this difficult time. We designed this publication for creative thinkers, makers, educators, and learners across fields who seek the challenge of complex conversations around issues and ideas, art and culture.

As with many public health crises, this pandemic has **disproportionately affected** low-income communities of color. Simultaneously, against the usual calls for limiting gathering and social distancing during the pandemic, even **public health officials agree** that the just cause behind the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020 outweighs concerns over increased virus spread and exposure. With that in mind, we've added resources below targeted towards those who feel moved to join the current protests on the street, or to support protestors and bail funds through financial contribution. We encourage those who choose to engage in protests to take safety precautions: wear masks and do your best to observe social distancing.

Produced in Summer 2020, this guide is designed to be used for individual study or research and as part of remote curricula while in-classroom learning continues to be suspended or shortened in many countries across the world. All the opportunities we suggest for sparking discussion and creation can take place in the digital realm and with no in-person interaction required. Several of the educational elements directly address the relationship of COVID-19 and creativity.

Get Informed

The Coronavirus Outbreak, free (no paywall) coverage on *The New York Times*
COVID-19 News from the Art World, *Hyperallergic*

Stay Safe

How to Practice Social Distancing, Isaac Chotiner, *The New Yorker*
How to Wash Your Hands, *The New York Times*
It's Time to Make Your Own Face Mask, Farhad Manjoo, *The New York Times*

Pitch In

How You Can Help..., Kanyakrit Vongkiatkajorn and Laura Daily, *The Washington Post*
Find Your Local Food Bank, *Feeding America*
Coronavirus Tech Handbook, an open source list for makers
Schedule Your Blood Donation with the Red Cross, *Red Cross*
Defeat Donald Trump & The NRA in 2020, *Gun Sense Voter*
Donate to Black-Led Social Justice Organizations, *Showing Up for Social Justice*

Keep Learning

Resource Guide to Distance Learning, *Fresh Art International*
Art Resources During the COVID-19 Pandemic, *Southwest Contemporary*
Teaching Art Online Under COVID-19, Kaitlin Pomerantz, *Hyperallergic*
Art Education and the Coronavirus (COVID-19), *The Art of Education University*
Art History Teaching Resources

Protest Safely

How to Protest Safely in a Pandemic, James Hamblin, *The Atlantic*
Coronavirus: Protest in a Pandemic, *Science Versus* podcast
COVID-19 Resources, Black Lives Matter
Where to Donate for Black Lives Matter, *New York Magazine*

contents

3

fresh voices

Learn about the artists, curators, and creative thinkers we meet in this podcast episode.



8

take note

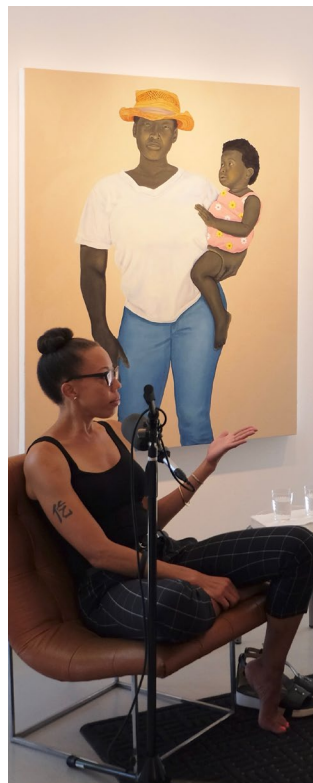
Become familiar with the people, places, institutions, histories, landmark exhibitions, and art concepts that we introduce.



19

conversation

Follow along with a transcript of the episode “Black in America” (edited for this guide).



39

black in america bibliography

Suggestions for further reading to strengthen your engagement.



42

start a conversation

Questions to spark discussion.



43

write on

Invitations to respond in writing.



46

make it your own

Projects to ignite critical thinking and creativity.



fresh voices

In the episode that informs and inspires this guide, you hear from the following artists, curators, and creative thinkers. Speakers are listed in the order that they appear:

Thelma Golden

New York, New York

Director and Chief Curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem since 2005, Thelma Golden's influential curatorial career spans over thirty years. At both the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Studio Museum, Golden has intensified and complexified ways of representing Black art and identity in a museum setting. Countering traditional art museum exhibitions that have historically reified white privilege and cultural dominance, Golden's curatorial projects forefront Blackness. She has situated Black subjects within a critical art historical context (*Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in American Art*, 1994, at the Whitney) and provided a platform for emerging artists (*Freestyle, Frequency, Flow, Fore, Fictions* at the Studio Museum). Many of the younger artists that Golden engages have resisted being categorized as "Black artists" (though many still confront issues of race and identity in their work). Golden terms **this position** or attitude "post-black." Golden has been spearheading the Studio Museum's new building campaign, to bring the institution into its **first purpose-built space** designed by architect **David Adjaye**.

Hamza Walker

Los Angeles, California

The Director of LAXART, an independent nonprofit art space in Los Angeles, Hamza Walker was recognized in 2001 by *The New York Times* as one of **the most influential curators** in the United States. Throughout his long curatorial and authorial career, Walker has used the space of the museum to interrogate race as a social fact. Encapsulating a theme that runs through his work, **Walker writes**, "race is a concept of all too human proportion, one that arguably does not exist outside the dark and dubious ends towards which it has been put to use." From 1994 to 2016, Walker served as Associate Curator and Director of Education at the Renaissance Society (University of Chicago), where he organized numerous influential shows including **Wadada Leo Smith, Ankhramation: The Language Scores 1967 - 2015** (2015 cocurated with John Corbett), **Teen Paranormal Romance** (2014), and **Suicide Narcissus** (2013). The Renaissance Society, founded in 1915, had served as an early venue for avant-garde and modern art in Chicago. Continuing that cutting-edge approach to art (but resisting the Renaissance Society's historically white slant), Walker's shows recognized the power of diverse artists including Kara Walker and Felix Gonzalez-Torres. We hear about how Walker's early education influenced his conceptions of race and identity, propelling the thorny and at times contrarian impressions of Blackness on display in the 2008 Ren show **Black Is, Black Ain't**.

Johanne Rahaman

Miami, Florida

Trinidad-born documentary photographer Johanne Rahaman uses her Florida-based practice to question what it means to be Black at the threshold of the Caribbean. Her ongoing series, *BlackFlorida* captures the richness of the state's Black communities through portraits of natural landscapes, rural and urban architecture, and people of all ages and professions. Similar to featured artists Amy Sherald and Deborah Roberts, Rahaman uses portraiture as a way to counteract both the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of Black people in the media and popular culture. In **Rahaman's words**, her candid and poignant photographs offer a "snapshot of everyday moments, highlighting entrepreneurship, beauty, sensuality, aging, mortality, youth, and resilience." Deeply rooted in place, *BlackFlorida* is **catalogued alphabetically** by community, revealing the unique and granular character of each neighborhood, town, and county. Importantly, her work takes on climate justice, showing how pollution and challenges to water rights manifest structural racism and contribute to economic circumstances in many of the communities she documents. This deep awareness of place stems from Rahaman's upbringing in the Lavantille Hills community of Trinidad, and the influence of keen sociological observers such as **Zora Neale Hurston**, the renowned writer from Eatonville. Rahaman's day trip with Cathy Byrd to Perrine, Florida, conveys the nuanced relationship between history, environment, culture, and individual personality that comes through so powerfully in her photographic work.

Related episode: Modern Portrait of Black Florida

Jefferson Pinder

Chicago, Illinois

Myth, history, and symbolism collide in Jefferson Pinder's interdisciplinary art, which spans performance, video, and sculpture. Recognizing that the African American experience is a deeply embodied one, **he writes**: "History is found in the bodies of the living." Pinder's works often involve acts of physical endurance in the face of exhaustion, arbitrary obstacles, or seemingly futile tasks. The artist's first major national exposure came through the 2008 show *Frequency* at the Studio Museum (see Thelma Golden, above). His 2011 conversation with Cathy Byrd encompasses several of his most iconic performance works, including *Lazarus*, *Marathon*, and *Mule*. **Flashpoint**, Pinder's recent body of work, responds to today's racially-motivated police brutality and Black Lives Matter protests by contextualizing the events within a much longer history of American racial violence and Black liberation movements.



Jefferson Pinder, *Lazarus*, 2009, performance video still. Courtesy of the artist.

Related episode: Jefferson Pinder on Symbols of Power and Struggle

Theaster Gates

Chicago, Illinois

For artist Theaster Gates, the built environment of communities is his medium, and the space and land on which those communities are founded is his canvas. With a multidimensional practice that extends to sculpture and performance, Gates leverages his background in preservation and urban planning to create real change on the scale of the neighborhood. Always attentive to “**the notion of Black space as a formal exercise**,” Gates’s work raises timely and unsettling questions about race, land ownership, and societal values. In this conversation, Gates speaks about the personal history and tactics behind his community engagement work both in the United States and in Kassel, Germany, where he created **12 Ballads for Huguenot House** for dOCUMENTA(13) in 2012. For this project, Gates restored an abandoned hotel using material and labor sourced from Chicago’s South Side. As with many of Gates’s other architectural interventions, the project was both about the space itself and the programming that would animate it. Gates describes Huguenot House as a “central hub for the spiritual life” for dOCUMENTA(13), where music, open conversation, and community uplift became part of an intentional but organic whole. Gates is also featured in Fresh Art’s Research Guide **Creating Connections/Sparking Engagement** (Issue 4, 2020).

Related episodes: Theaster Gates on Meaning, Making, and Reconciliation, When Art Sparks Social Engagement, Franklin Sirmans Introduces Prospect 3 New Orleans

Sanford Biggers

New York, New York

Raised in Los Angeles, artist **Sanford Biggers** lives and works in New York City. His work explores cultural and political history and current events in a distinct narrative style. Influenced by Zen Buddhism and popular Black culture, Biggers’s artistic strategy melds wabi sabi, a Japanese aesthetic concept that celebrates ephemerality and imperfection, with hip hop-inspired sampling (see entries in Take Note). These tactics are particularly apparent in Biggers’s well known work that uses antique quilts to create painted and sculptural forms. Contemporary acts of police brutality against Black people sparked his visceral 2015 **BAM** series. For this project, he resculpted wooden African statuettes with bronze, wax, and bullets, exhibiting the fragmented sculptures along with videos named after individual victims, shown in displays designed to evoke mobile phone screens—a growing public platform for witnessing and reporting police brutality. In 2020-2021, **The Bronx Museum of the Arts** presents *Codex*, an exhibition of a new series of mixed media paintings and sculptures featuring pre-1900 quilts.

Related episodes: Sanford Biggers on Time and the Human Condition



Sanford Biggers, *Ooo Oui*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Sanford Biggers

Amy Sherald

Baltimore, Maryland

Artist **Amy Sherald** gained international public attention in early 2018 when her portrait of former **First Lady Michelle Obama** was unveiled at the Smithsonian's National Portrait Gallery. Born in Georgia, Sherald grew up a minority in a mostly white community. Critical of the traditional representation of Black bodies, the artist embeds a strong sense of self in the everyday people she depicts, choosing to paint their skin color in her signature grayscale, to invite a reading beyond racial identity. Sherald invites many of her subjects to look directly at her when she takes the photos on which the paintings are based. Reversing the gaze, pictured larger than life, and surrounded by bold color field backdrops, they are set free from the constraints of their past to create new racial narratives.

Related episode: [Amy Sherald on New Racial Narratives](#)



Amy Sherald, *Precious jewels by the sea*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Hauser & Wirth. Photo: Joseph Hyde. Image Source: Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art © Amy Sherald

Fahamu Pecou

Atlanta, Georgia

Fahamu Pecou is an interdisciplinary artist and scholar whose works combine observations on hip-hop, fine art, and popular culture. His paintings, performance art, research, and writing address concerns around contemporary representations of Black masculinity that engender the stereotypical understanding and performance of Black male identity. As a guest editor for **Art Papers Magazine** in 2014, he invited writers to explore nuances of the hip-hop scene in “Art x Hip-Hop” (Issue 38:01). In 2017, the **Collection Société Générale**, Paris, France, presented his retrospective exhibition *Miroirs de l’Homme*. **Trapademia**, a series of recent paintings shown in Los Angeles and New York (2019/2020), was inspired by trap, an Atlanta style of hip-hop from the late 1990s. Pecou’s 2016 film project **Emmett Still** directly engaged Black Lives Matter and the history of racial violence in the U.S. by evoking the 1955 lynching of Emmett Till, against an original soundtrack that blends music from Pecou and collaborators including Killer Mike (read more below) with historic audio clips.

Related episodes: [Fahamu Pecou on ART X HIP-HOP](#), [Contemporary Black Portraiture](#)



Fahamu Pecou, *MC means move the crowd*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist, Jardin Rouge, Marrakech, and Backslash, Paris.

Deborah Roberts

Austin, Texas

At the heart of American artist Deborah Roberts’s mixed media practice is a drive to understand and challenge dominant social constructions of race, gender, and beauty. Responding to the images of contemporary fashion magazines and the canon of Western art history, Roberts questions how notions of “ideal beauty” are formed, and the ways these narratives have traditionally excluded women of color. The myriad symbolic layers of Roberts’s work are matched by the complexity of their making—she combines collage, hand-drawing, painting, and sculptural forms to create amalgamations that plumb the process (often painful, but full of possibility) through which young Black girls and boys form a sense of selfhood. Roberts’s 2018 solo exhibition at the Spelman College Museum of Art featured a series of collages centered around Black girlhood.

take note

“Black in America” introduces the following people, places, institutions, histories, and concepts:

concepts

Anti-Essentialism

Within racial theory, the idea that race cannot be attributed to or reduced to an empirical feature (such as skin color), nor can someone’s identity be reduced purely to their race. Anti-essentialism instead holds that race is socially constructed, and only one part of a complex network of aspects of identity (see Intersectionality, below). Curator Hamza Walker describes the curious balancing act of his high school education—where his teachers weighed the precept of self-determination, which validates the idea of Blackness and Black identity, against anti-essentialism, which teaches that cultural conceptions of race can be dismantled.

Code-switching

Language and language variants help us to distinguish who is inside or outside of our social groups; it can mark us as belonging or “other.” Code-switching is the fluid shifting, conscious or unconscious, between one mode of expression to another, often within the context of a single conversation. While linguists have studied the deep neuroscience of code-switching that shapes multilingual sentence construction, for many people of color in the United States, code-switching is an essential strategy of getting by in a white-centric society. AAVE (African American Vernacular English) and AAL (African American Language; the term currently more used in the academic space) are widely used and expressed forms of communication. Among Black peers, the desire to code-switch to AAVE/AAL signals a sense of safety, community, and belonging; confronting racially-charged societal conceptions of mainstream American English. It has been widely noted that, within this spectrum of expression, there are many more nuances, variations, and subtleties that can be used to signal position and status. Amy Sherald describes a young adulthood marked by code-shifting as she navigated social spheres in which she was either seen as too Black or not Black enough.

Colorism

Discrimination, or hierarchy, based on the color of one’s skin. Colorism’s reliance on White Supremacy impacts communities around the world, including Southeast Asia (India) and the greater Americas. Colorism is a global phenomenon that, by nature, is an extension of colonialist practices and ideologies. For Black Americans, Colorism has particularly pernicious historical roots. Many enslavers in the antebellum South assigned lighter-skinned Black workers to domestic duties, while darker-skinned individuals were relegated to agricultural and manual labor. This insidious favoritism or preference for lighter skin has seeped into communities of color, where—arguably due to a self-perception tied to colonialism—often internally uphold these “truths”. Fetishism with lighter skin and less-textured hair still exists, globally perpetuated in advertising and cosmetic product lines that implicitly equate lighter skin with status and mainstream conceptions of beauty. There are also movements against this prejudice in the Black Community; in calls to remove “skin lightening products” from **popular retailers**, to embrace

and celebrate **natural hair texture**, and the mainstreaming of inclusive skincare lines, sparked largely by the overwhelming popularity of **Rihanna's revolutionary Fenty Beauty** line. Deborah Roberts explores standards of Black beauty and **Colorism** in her *Evolution of Mimi* series.

Intersectionality

An understanding of identity encompassing facets of selfhood including race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, ability, and age that shape our experiences of the world in overlapping and often complicated ways. The term was first coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw, a prominent scholar, civil rights activist, and lawyer whose writings are core to contemporary critical race theory. Echoing the teachings of prominent Black feminist theorists such as bell hooks and Audre Lorde, Amy Sberald discusses how her specific experiences as a Black American woman were formative to her development as an artist.

Blight

Artist/activist Imani Jacqueline Brown, featured in another **Research Guide** (see Issue 5, *The Art of Capitalism*), points to the systemic racism embedded in the word. Brown, the founder of an urban housing development collective known as Blights Out in post-Katrina New Orleans writes that blight is:

“A term originally used to describe diseased and browning plants, appropriated in the early 20th century by the state to describe dwellings occupied by poor, generally non-white people. By focusing on cosmetic ‘blight’ when describing various states of individual or community-wide disinvestment, the state can deflect structural economic inequity and racism.”
[source]

Theaster Gates speaks of directing his artistic and community-building efforts towards combating systemic inequities rather than fixing up superficially “blighted” neighborhoods.

Home Court Crawl, a collective action of Blights Out, New Orleans, LA. From 2014 to 2018, Blights Out, a collective of local artists, activists, and architects, generated dialogue, art, and actions to challenge inequitable development and drive land use policy in their New Orleans.



Sampling

An idea that manifests in both visual and musical expression, sampling is the strategic reuse, and sometimes alteration, of excerpts from various cultural sources to form an original piece of art. Sampling is perhaps most familiar in music. For artist/musician Fahu Pecou, sampling is an essential element of hip hop, a way of charting a long musical lineage of “African cultural retentions.” Sanford Biggers compares his reuse of and engagement with antique quilts to the creative sampling of hip hop.

Self-determination

Broadly, the right of a people to sovereignty, autonomy, and political freedom. This became an important principle in international law following World War II, when many independence movements broke free of colonial powers and founded new nations. For former enslaved peoples of African descent in the United States, self-determination is frequently linked to Black Separatism and the Back-to-Africa movement—both ideas that Black Americans should have the right to separate land and nationhood. Curator Hamza Walker describes how his 1980s high school education exposed him to the idea of self-determination, a concept that proved formative in his earliest conceptions of race and identity.

Wabi-sabi

A concept in Japanese aesthetics that finds beauty in imperfection and ephemerality. Drawn from the precepts of Zen Buddhism, wabi-sabi is an acknowledgement that perfection is unattainable and nothing lasts forever. A student of Zen, artist Sanford Biggers has embraced the principle of wabi-sabi in his work, incorporating weathered and degraded historical artifacts, what he describes as “found objects loaded with so much history.”

White Privilege

The broad array of advantages conferred on white people through historic, systemic, and entrenched societal structures based on beliefs about race. As [tolerance.org](https://www.tolerance.org) explains, “White privilege is both unconsciously enjoyed and consciously perpetuated. It is both on the surface and deeply embedded into American life.” The structure of white privilege is reinforced in many ways; and can be often so all-encompassing that white people frequently have trouble identifying the ways in which they are leveraging their racial identity or relying on their privilege to gain advantages. In her groundbreaking 1988 essay, “**White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack**,” Peggy McIntosh describes the phenomenon, “as an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.” White privilege extends to the art world, enabling a system where white artists, curators, and collectors still hold disproportionate sway.



Sanford Biggers, *Object Studies 19*, 2017, detail.
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. Artwork © Sanford Biggers

White Supremacy

The racist belief that white people are superior and should dominate society. White supremacists have sought diverse justifications through history to justify this belief, including specious scientific evidence (which Hamza Walker refers to as “bogus biological science”), misreadings of religious texts, and social Darwinism. The ideology of white supremacy dehumanizes those with different skin colors, and has been used to justify some of modern history’s most infamous atrocities such as three centuries of American slavery and the Holocaust. Fueled by the nationalism and xenophobia of President Donald Trump, contemporary white supremacist movements have surged in recent years. At the same time, social commentators, particularly those from BIPOC communities, have argued that white supremacy is not only the domain of radical neo-Nazis and KKK members, but an insidious belief that trickles down to shape more mundane interactions and decisions, including traffic stops, hiring outcomes, and urban planning.

movements & institutions

Black Art Matters

A frequently **used motto across the web** drawing from Black Lives Matter that seeks to call attention to the undervalued and historically underrepresented work of Black artists globally. Also, a “Docu-series that portrays contemporary Black artists and the politics of their work” [see **BlackArtMatters.net**]. Artist Deborah Roberts describes how the British Nigerian artist/curator Yinka Shonibare embraced this concept by promoting a broad cross section of the artists from the global Black diaspora in *Talisman in the Age of Difference*, a 2018 group exhibition at the Friedman Gallery in London. Along with the idea that “Black Art Matters,” Roberts cites the paradigm of Black Excellence and prominent cultural phenomena such as *Black Girls Rock!* (a revolutionary annual awards show that celebrates the achievements of Black women) as influential in constructing the multifaceted Blackness presented in this pivotal exhibition.

Black Lives Matter

Formed in 2013 in response to the acquittal of a white man charged with Black teen Trayvon Martin’s murder, this **movement’s** “mission is to eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes.” Since 2013, Black Lives Matter (BLM) has witnessed several particularly intense and widespread moments of protest and activism following the police murders of Black civilians. When artist Amy Sherald spoke with Cathy Byrd in 2016, the nation was reeling from **a string of Black deaths** in police custody, including those of Philando Castile and Alton Sterling. BLM is an impassioned thread that runs through many of the works introduced in this guide. For instance, Sanford Biggers’s *BAM* series engages the senseless murder of Black citizens, such as Tamir Rice, a twelve-year old killed in Cleveland by a white police officer in 2014. These conversations remain sadly relevant: in 2020, the murders of Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd sparked an intense nationwide wave of protests in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Logo (public domain), frequently used in social and print media, during the resurgence of the Black Lives Matter civil rights movement, after the publicly witnessed police killing of a Black man named George Floyd on Memorial Day, May 25, 2020.

Black Power

An unapologetic affirmation of Black culture, identity, and racial pride that rose to prominence in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. In contrast to ideas of the mainstream U.S. Civil Rights movement, some proponents of Black Power valued the right to self-determination, which sometimes manifested as Black nationalism or Black separatism, over mandatory integration. The movement underscored the importance of Black-owned businesses as an avenue to economic equality and stressed the urgency of overcoming the structural inequities created by white racism. Black Power also provided an impetus for African American artists to develop new forms of expression, as curator Thelma Golden explored in the landmark exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Ages of Black Power* (read more below).

House of God

A schismatic Pentacostal church that became the birthplace of the “Sacred Steel” musical tradition in the 1930s. Lap and pedal steel guitars give Sacred Steel its unique sound, and the style forms an integral part of the House of God’s dynamic liturgy. According to Sacred Steel musician **Chuck Campbell**, the style began with a guitarist named Willie Eason in Philadelphia who borrowed his brother’s steel guitar at a time when popular Hawaiian music brought the instrument to mainstream attention. Photographer Johanne Rahaman and Cathy Byrd visit the House of God church in Perrine, a Black community in south Miami, where Byrd recorded a peaceful soundscape.

Queer hip hop movement

The promotion and celebration of underrepresented queer artists within the history and current production of hip hop music. Historically, hip hop has been frequently associated with aggressive, heterosexual constructs of masculinity. Queer hip hop artists and their followers resist this narrow construction of gender and sexuality in the genre, instead using the style to combat bigotry and give voice to a broader, more fluid range of Black experience—often drawing on the theories of scholars such as Angela Davis and Patricia Hill Collins. The queer hip hop trio Deep Dickollective that scholar/musician **Tim’ m T. West** organized in 1999 is one example. Fahamu Pecou’s guest edited issue of *Art Papers* plumbed the intersections of art and hip hop, including an article exploring the complexities and nuances of the queer hip hop movement.

profiles

Dawoud Bey

A celebrated American photographer and educator

known for large-scale portraits including American adolescents and other marginalized subjects contextualized within their communities, Dawoud wrote the essay, *Being Themselves: The Portrait Paintings of Amy Sherald*, in the **exhibition catalogue** for Amy Sherald’s **A Wonderful Dream** at **moniquemeloche**, Chicago, June 2016. Sherald grew up in the South, a region Dawoud Bey describes as emblematic of the “fraught social narrative of race” in America.



Art Papers, *Art X Hip Hop*, Jan-Feb 2014, front cover. Guest Editor: Fahamu Pecou. Cover image courtesy of Art Papers. Cover art: Rashaad Newsome, *Fitted Crown*, 2011, edition of 45. Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Gallery, New York. © Rashaad Newsome



John Biggers

Born in Gastonia, North Carolina, **John Biggers** (1924-2001) was a prominent Black artist known for creating social realist murals and paintings critical of racial and economic injustice. The recipient of numerous awards and recognitions, he served as the founding chairman of the art department at Texas Southern University. In 1957, when he was awarded a **UNESCO fellowship**, he became one of the first African American artists to visit Africa. Biggers has long inspired his cousin **Sanford Biggers**, a Harlem-based interdisciplinary artist whose textile work often incorporates antique quilts.

Mariah Carey

American singer-songwriter **Mariah Carey** is one of the most influential vocalists of all time, boasting perfect pitch and a five-octave vocal range. With a decades-long career topping the R&B, pop, hip hop, and soul charts, Carey has received numerous awards and honors. The singer's impact on music and popular culture motivated **Deborah Roberts** to title an exhibition after one of Carey's albums, *The Evolution of Mimi*. Mounted at the **Spelman College Museum of Fine Art**, the show featured Roberts's signature collages, paintings, and serigraphs depicting young Black women.

David Driskell

During his lifetime (1931-2020), legendary American artist, art historian, and curator **David Driskell** established African American art history as a distinct field of study. Driskell was a leading figure in research and discourse on the history of Black artists in America and curated the groundbreaking exhibition *Two Centuries of Black American Art: 1750-1950*. While some critics balked at the capacious and varied nature of the 200 works represented, **Driskell explained**: "I was looking for a body of work which showed first of all that blacks had been stable participants in American visual culture for more than 200 years, and by stable participants I simply mean that in many cases they had been the backbone." Driskell's own artistic practice was similarly varied and expressive, incorporating a wide range of media and techniques, and influencing many of our featured artists. Featured on page 45 of this guide, one of his paintings honors Lois Maillou Jones, whose work was included in his 1976 curatorial project. A mentor to many over his seven-decade career, Driskell gave one of his own father's suits to **Jefferson Pinder** for the artist to wear in his performance of **Lazarus**.



John Biggers, *The Contribution of Negro Women in American Life and Education*, 1953. Commissioned for the Blue Triangle Branch of the Young Women's Christian Association, Houston, Texas (above). John Biggers, *The Contribution of Negro Women in American Life and Education*, detail (below). Photographs courtesy of **Fine Art Conservation Laboratories**.

Marian Wright Edelman

American lawyer and civil rights activist, **Marian Wright Edelman** founded the **Children's Defense Fund** in 1973. Her career began in 1965, when she became the first Black woman attorney admitted to the Mississippi Bar Association. In 2000, Edelman was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award in the United States. The **collages** of artist Deborah Roberts have featured Marian Wright Edelman's hands as emblems of Black women's strength and power.

Ralph Ellison

American novelist **Ralph Ellison** (1914-1994) is best known for his novel **Invisible Man**, which won the National Book Award in 1953. Born in Oklahoma City, Ellison eventually moved to New York City in 1936. There he met Langston Hughes, who introduced him to Harlem's Black literary circle. *Invisible Man* is the story of an unnamed African American man's search for identity and place in New York City in the 1930s. Curator Hamza Walker borrowed the words "*black is, black ain't*" from the novel for the title of his 2008 exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago. At the end of our conversation about Blackness in America, you can follow along as Walker reads an excerpt from the book.

Lauryn Hill

Lauryn Hill is an American singer-songwriter and rapper known for her work with the **Fugees** and for her solo album *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*. Hill's rapid rise to international stardom following the release of *The Miseducation* in 1998 and subsequent self-imposed exile underscore the potential and the challenges facing Black women in music and other fields. Artist Deborah Roberts' collage series **The Miseducation of Mimi** fuses themes in Hill's eponymous album with those in Mariah Carey's album *The Emancipation of Mimi* to capture the simultaneous power and vulnerability embodied by these two iconic musical artists.

John Henry

An important figure in African American folklore renowned for his prowess as a "steel driving man" who contributed to the construction of many early U.S. railway tunnels. The legend of John Henry, a larger-than-life figure of superhuman strength, is most commonly told in ballad form, or through work songs (called "hammer songs"). Artist Jefferson Pinder relates his performances of *Marathon* to the story of John Henry's death, which tells how the celebrated steel-driver won a race against a steam powered drilling machine, only to collapse at the finish line.

Zora Neale Hurston

An author, filmmaker, and anthropologist (1891-1960) best known for the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Eatonville, Florida, the town where Hurston spent most of her childhood, became the setting for many of her stories and novels. Hurston's acute



Donato Rico, *John Henry's Mad*, 1935. Courtesy of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

observational skills, honed by her work in anthropology and ethnography, are evident in the vivid landscapes and vibrant characters of her fictional works. Photographer Johanne Rahaman celebrates the legacy of Hurston in Eatonville in her *BlackFlorida* series, capturing the dignity and perseverance of culture and life in the first incorporated Black community in the United States.

Killer Mike

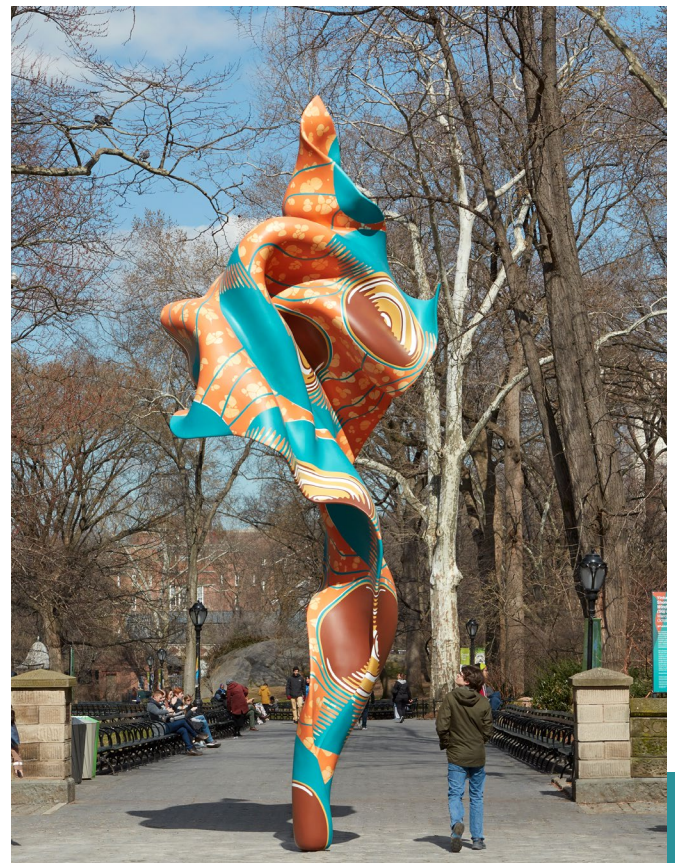
Theorist of art and hip hop featured in Fahamu Pecou's guest-edited issue of *Art Papers*. Killer Mike (the stage name of Michael Santiago Render) is a rapper, actor, and songwriter who uses his writing and performance to spark change and raise awareness around issues including **police brutality**, racism, and inequality. The **self-proclaimed** "Pan-Africanist Gangster, Civic Leader & Activist" and half of the duo Run the Jewels (with artist El-P) has recently launched a satirical political documentary series called **Trigger Warning with Killer Mike** that explores issues facing the African American community.

Mark Anthony Neal

Professor of Black Popular Culture in the Department of African and African-American Studies and the founding director of the Center for Arts, Digital Culture and Entrepreneurship (CADCE) at Duke University. Much of Mark Anthony Neal's scholarship explores intersections of Black music, masculinity, and popular culture, including *Looking for Leroy: Illegible Black Masculinities* (2013) and *That's the Joint: The Hip-Hop Studies Reader* (co-editor, 2011). He hosts the long-running **Left of Black** webcast and shares his work across a variety of social media platforms, which can be accessed from his website **NewBlackMan (in Exile)**.

Yinka Shonibare CBE

A British-Nigerian artist and curator whose work explores facets of race, class, nationality, and cultural identity. His **most widely shown works** draw decorative motifs from African batik fabric, which have a complicated colonial history and connection to African independence movements of the 1960s. In 2019, Shonibare launched a new residency program in Lagos, Nigeria called the **G.A.S. (Guest Artist Space) Foundation**. In 2018, he curated **Talisman in the Age of Difference** at the Stephen Friedman Gallery in London, which brought together "artists of African origin and across the diaspora and artists who empathise with the spirit of African resistance and representation," including featured artist Deborah Roberts. Note Shonibare's title: CBE. Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) is the highest ranking award of its kind, recognizing the artist's prominent contributions in the arts.



Yinka Shonibare CBE: Wind Sculpture (SG) I, 2018. Doris C. Freedman Plaza, Central Park, NY, 2018. Courtesy of Davidson College Collection, North Carolina, and James Cohan Gallery, New York. Photo: Jason Wyche, Courtesy of New York Public Art Fund.

landmark exhibitions

The following list of landmark exhibitions represents a textured timeline of Black contemporary art, offering insight into diverse curatorial perspectives on Black issues and ideas from 1971 to 2022. In these shows, the acute complexities of the Black cultural landscape reveal themselves through multifaceted creative approaches to content, media, and process. On page 45, readers will also find a select bibliography introducing the scholarship that informs these groundbreaking exhibitions.

1971

The Deluxe Show
 Curator **Peter Bradley**
 Venue **The De Luxe Theater**

One of the first US-based, racially integrated exhibitions of contemporary American artists working in abstraction, held in a former movie theater in Houston's Third Ward, and supported by The Ménéil Foundation. Darby English's seminal book *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (see Bibliography) shines a light on the impetus and reception of this exhibition. [\[link\]](#)

1976-1977

Two Centuries of Black American Art
 Curator **David Driskell**
 Debut Venue **Los Angeles County Museum of Art**
 Traveling Venues **The High Museum of Art, The Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, Brooklyn Museum**

The first comprehensive survey of African American art that, following its premier at LACMA, toured three other major U.S. art institutions. The exhibition acknowledged the work of Black artists from 1750 to 1950—a span of years during which their contributions to American art were largely unknown and undervalued. Featuring over 200 works by 63 artists, the show included painting, sculpture, drawing, graphics, crafts and decorative arts. [\[link\]](#)

1994-1995

Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art
 Curator **Thelma Golden**
 Venue **Whitney Museum of American Art**

Presented the work of 29 artists whose work investigated the aesthetics and politics prevalent in representations of Black men. Curator Thelma Golden drew on varied voices and perspectives to question preconceptions faced by Black men.



Deluxe Show poster, 1971. Photograph courtesy of Smith Co. Architects via [Houston Chronicle](#).



the “f” series, 2001-2018

The Studio Museum in Harlem’s director and chief curator, Thelma Golden, organized the groundbreaking exhibition *Freestyle* in 2001, with former associate curator Christine Kim. The exhibition was the first in a series of five shows that illuminated the work of emerging artists of African descent. The “F” Series spanned two decades, shaping conversations around Black contemporary art and helping to springboard numerous artists to national and international visibility. Among those featured in Fresh Art episodes are **Mark Bradford**, **Camille Norment**, **Sanford Biggers**, **Deborah Roberts**, **Akosua Adoma Owusu**, **Trenton Doyle Hancock**, and **Amy Sherald**.

Exhibitions within the “F” Series—Freestyle, Frequency, Flow, Fore, and Fictions—are specified in green type throughout the timeline.



Photos: (above) *The Jumpsuit Project* performance view, *Fictions*, Studio Museum in Harlem, 2017. Created by Sherrill Roland in 2016, *The Jumpsuit Project* continues to ignite conversations around issues related to incarceration. Roland’s performances challenge those who encounter the orange jumpsuit by encouraging them to address their own prejudices towards those incarcerated. Photo: Rebecca Alice Bennett. Courtesy of the artist. (right) Rendering of the new Studio Museum building, exterior view. Designed by Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye, **Adjaye Associates**. The first major phase of the building project was underway at the time of this publication. Courtesy Adjaye Associates via the **Studio Museum in Harlem**.

2001

Freestyle (“F” Series)

Curators **Thelma Golden** and **Christine Kim**
Venue **The Studio Museum in Harlem**

Showcased 28 emerging Black American artists whose work explored contemporary Blackness. The title referenced improvisational music, to consider the concept of individuality. In her catalogue essay, Golden used the term “**post-black**” to introduce the paradoxical notion of rejecting the label of “Black artist” while retaining a deep interest in the nuances of Blackness. [[link](#)]

2005-2006

Frequency (“F” Series)

Curators **Thelma Golden** and **Christine Kim**
Debut Venue **The Studio Museum in Harlem**

Represented the creative energies of 35 emerging artists living and working in the United States, ranging in age from 25 to 46. Folktales and hip-hop, non-western aesthetics and abstract painting, tattoo designs and black athletes influenced more than eighty-five new works in diverse media, exemplifying the non-thematic, non-linear climate of contemporary art at the beginning of the 21st century. [[link](#)]

2008

Black Is, Black Ain’t

Curator **Hamza Walker**
Venue **The Renaissance Society**

Brought together works by 26 Black and non-Black artists whose work examined the definition of race and the history of Blackness in America. The exhibition borrowed its title, *Black Is, Black Ain’t* from Ralph Ellison’s 1952 novel, *Invisible Man*. Curator Hamza Walker noted that the exhibition marked a shift in the rhetoric of race, moving past broader views of multiculturalism to address the complexity of Black identity. [[link](#)]

2008

Flow (“F” Series)

Curator **Christine Y. Kim**
Venue **The Studio Museum in Harlem**

A survey of new work by 20 emerging artists who were either born in Africa or born to African parents, and who lived and worked across Africa, Europe and North America. Coming of age after the mid-century movements for national liberation in Africa, this generation witnessed shifts in political, economic and social realities and saw Africa represented in mass media and popular culture through images of warfare, disease, and poverty, and subjected to celebrity fascination and philanthropic efforts. Their work imagined an Africa beyond geographic borders, engaged with the present realities of the African diaspora, and conscious of persisting post-colonial systems of racial classification. [[link](#)]



prospect new orleans, 2008-present

New Orleans, a city rich in Black history and culture, was devastated by Hurricane Katrina in 2005. In the wake of the storm that disproportionately impacted low-income and Black residents, erased neighborhoods and widened racial disparities in housing and employment, the New Orleans art community gathered to envision their role in rebuilding the city. Independent curator Dan Cameron was a catalyst in the process, leading efforts to design and organize the first three iterations of **Prospect New Orleans**, now a recurring city-wide art exhibition. Modeled on international biennials and triennials such as those in Venice, São Paulo, Sydney, Taipei, and Istanbul, Prospect activates the urban landscape. Contemporary artists from the Global South (which includes parts of Asia, Central America, South America, Mexico, Africa, and the Middle East) and around the world engage with local communities and the city itself, their work occupying traditional and non-traditional venues across New Orleans.

Each iteration of Prospect is organized by a leading curatorial voice.

Fresh Art's first research guide, **New Centers of Critical Gravity** (2015/2020) explores *Prospect.3 New Orleans* and iterations of two other biennial-style art exhibitions in North America. We've followed *Prospect* since the beginning, documenting in situ the sights and sounds of a deeply resonant civic art exhibition. Our archive features episodes recorded from 2011 to present, with curators Franklin Sirmans and Trevor Schoonmaker, and with artists—**Joyce J. Scott** (our premiere podcast episode), **William Pope.L**, **Akosua Adoma Owusu**, **Tavares Strachan**, **Mardi Gras Chief Darrell Williams**, **Jason Moran**, **Remy Jungerman**, and **william cordova**, among others.

Exhibitions within Prospect New Orleans are specified in blue type throughout the timeline.

Photos (clockwise from top left): (1) Mark Bradford, *Mithra*, Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans, Prospect.1, 2008-2009. In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Bradford created a giant sculpture resembling Noah's ark. Courtesy of the artist and Prospect New Orleans. (2) Akosua Adoma Owusu, *Kwaku Ananse*, film still, 2013. A film exploring Ghanain-American filmmaker's personal experience of the colliding identities experienced by African immigrants in the U.S. Shown in *Fore* at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 2012, and in Prospect.3 New Orleans, 2015-2016. Courtesy of the artist. (3) Kara Walker, *The Katastwóf Karavan*, Algiers Point, New Orleans, Prospect.4, 2018-2019. Daily performances on a calliope (steam-whistle organ) housed in a carnival caravan featuring the artist's signature cutouts remembered the site's slave history. Courtesy of the artist and Prospect New Orleans.



2008-2009 *Prospect.1 New Orleans*
Artistic Director **Dan Cameron**

Activated spaces and places in New Orleans that had not yet recovered from Hurricane Katrina. The *Prospect* premiere brought the international art world to the Crescent City to experience high profile site-sensitive interventions, performances, and events featuring work by Janine Antoni, Robin Rhode, Mark Bradford, Kalup Linzy, Wangechi Mutu, and others. [[link](#)]

2010-2011 *Prospect 1.5 New Orleans*
Artistic Director **Dan Cameron**

Responded to the local community's sense that P.1 failed to illuminate the New Orleans art scene. Forty-seven local artists presented exhibitions, events and symposia in twelve venues. [[link](#)]

2011-2012 *Now Dig This!: Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*
Curator **Kellie Jones**
Debut Venue **Hammer Museum**
Traveling Venues **MoMA PS1,**
Williams College Museum of Art

Chronicled the vital legacy of African American artists in Los Angeles. The civil rights and Black Power movements informed art that reflected a changing sense of what constituted African American identity and American culture. In the first decade of the new millennium, social, political, and economic changes in Southern California drew transplants from around the country. Responding to those transformations, Black LA-based artists formed a cultural community that became vital to the city's thriving arts scene. [[link](#)]

2011-2012 *Prospect.2 New Orleans*
Artistic Director **Dan Cameron**

Featured work by 26 artists from nine countries, including local creatives. New Orleans history and culture inspired site-specific performative works by Dawn Dedeaux—a multimedia, multi-tiered work staged within a historic mansion and courtyard in the heart of the French Quarter and William Pope.L's magic lantern show that traversed the city in the back of a truck pulled by volunteers. [[link](#)]

2012 *Fore ("F" Series)*
Curators **Lauren Haynes, Naima J. Keith** and
Thomas J. Lax
Venue **The Studio Museum in Harlem**

Presented 29 emerging artists of African descent who, at the time of the show, lived and worked across



Joyce J. Scott, *Still Funny*, "Negro/Asian," 2011. Among works shown at the Newcomb Art Museum, Tulane University, during *Prospect.2 New Orleans*, 2011-2012. Courtesy of the artist and Goya Contemporary.

the United States. Born between 1971 and 1987, the artists in *Fore* worked in diverse media, often blending artistic practices in new and innovative ways. More than half of the featured works had never been exhibited publicly; some were site-specific and responded directly to the Harlem neighborhood and its social landscape. [[link](#)]

2012-2015 ***Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art***
 Curator **Valerie Cassel Oliver**
 Debut Venue **Contemporary Arts Museum Houston**
 Traveling Venues **The Studio Museum in Harlem, NYU's Grey Art Gallery, Walker Art Center, Yerba Buena Art Center.**

First comprehensive exhibition of performance art created by Black visual artists. Provided a critical framework to discuss the history of Black performance traditions within the visual arts beginning with the “happenings” of the early 1960s, throughout the 1980s, and into the present practices of contemporary artists. [[link](#)]

2013-2014 ***Black in the Abstract Part 1: Epistrophy***
 Curator **Valerie Cassel Oliver**
 Venue **Contemporary Arts Museum Houston**

Among presentations in a six-part exhibition series *Outside the Lines*, an evolving visual dialogue on contemporary abstraction. *Black in the Abstract, Part 1: Epistrophy* traced the histories of Black artists working in abstraction from the 1960s to the 2010s, featuring eighteen artists engaged in the dissolution or fragmentation of the figurative. [[link](#)]

2014 ***Black in the Abstract Part 2: Hard Edges/Soft Curves***
 Curator **Valerie Cassel Oliver**
 Venue **Contemporary Arts Museum Houston**

A companion to *Black in the Abstract, Part 1*, informed by the historical framework of minimalist painting. *Part 2: Hard Edges/Soft Curves* investigated the interwoven histories of Black artists working within the monochromatic and geometric, or “hard edge,” impulses across the span of half a century [[link](#)]

2015 ***The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now***
 Curators **Dieter Roelstraete** and **Naomi Beckwith**
 Venue **Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago**
 Traveling Venues **Studio Museum, Institute of Contemporary Art Philadelphia**

Linked the vibrant legacy of the 1960s African American avant-garde to current art and culture. It was occasioned in part by the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the

black performance

Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art is just one example of **Valerie Cassel Oliver's** curatorial voice. We sat down with Cassel Oliver in Houston, Texas, to talk about the exhibition and witnessed firsthand **Trenton Doyle Hancock's** performance of *Devotional*. Recorded in the U.S. and abroad, *Fresh Art* episodes with Cassel Oliver and Hancock, as well as **Papo Colo, Jean-Ulrick Désert, Theaster Gates, Satch Hoyt, Tameka Norris, and William Pope.L** illuminate the role that Black cultural history plays in performance art.

Photos: (right) Jean-Ulrick Désert, *Negerhosen2000 / The Travel Albums, 2003/2007*, postcard from Kassel, Germany. *Radical Presence* featured an installation of postcards documenting Désert's peripatetic project. Courtesy of the artist. (below) Valerie Cassel Oliver feeds jello to Trenton Doyle Hancock during his performance of *Devotional* at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, April 15, 2013. Image source: CAMH.



Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians (AACM), a still-flourishing organization of Chicago musicians whose interdisciplinary explorations expanded the boundaries of jazz. Alongside visual arts collectives such as the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists (AfriCOBRA), the AACM was part of a deep engagement with Black cultural nationalism both in Chicago and around the world during and after the civil rights era. [\[link\]](#)

2015-2016 *Prospect.3 New Orleans: Notes for Now*
Artistic Director **Franklin Sirmans**

Considered the ways that “the peculiar institution” of slavery and immigration during the 18th century created a city that remains a complex social arrangement. In established and ad-hoc art spaces, 58 artists participated in exhibitions, performances and site-specific installations highlighting “the New Orleans experience” and revealing some of the ways that history, race and culture connect the city to the Global South. [\[link\]](#)

2017-2018 *Fictions (“F” Series)*
Curators **Connie H. Choi** and **Hallie Ringle**
Debut Venue **The Studio Museum in Harlem**

Emphasized the development of narrative content in contemporary art by examining the practices of 19 artists of African descent. Art inspired by Black culture, drew on sources such as everyday objects, childhood memories, current and historic events, and the body—often creating parallel or alternate narratives that complicated fact, fiction, and memory. [\[link\]](#)



Ebony G. Patterson, detail of installation view at the Newcomb Art Museum, Tulane University, during *Prospect.3 New Orleans*, 2014-2015. Photo © Scott McCrossen/ FIVE65 Design. Courtesy of the artist and Prospect New Orleans.

2017-2018 *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*
Curators **Erin Dzeidzic** and **Melissa Messina**
Debut Venue **Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art**
Traveling Venues **National Museum of Women in the Arts, Museum of Fine Art, St. Petersburg, Florida**

Highlighted the contributions of women artists of color within non-representational art making. As the first museum exhibition to address this long overdue subject, *Magnetic Fields* inspired more broad and inclusive presentations of American abstraction in future scholarship and curatorial practice. [\[link\]](#)

2017-2018 *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965-1985*

Curators **Catherine Morris** and **Rujeko Hockley**
 Debut Venue **Brooklyn Museum**
 Traveling Venues **California African American Art Museum, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, ICA Boston**

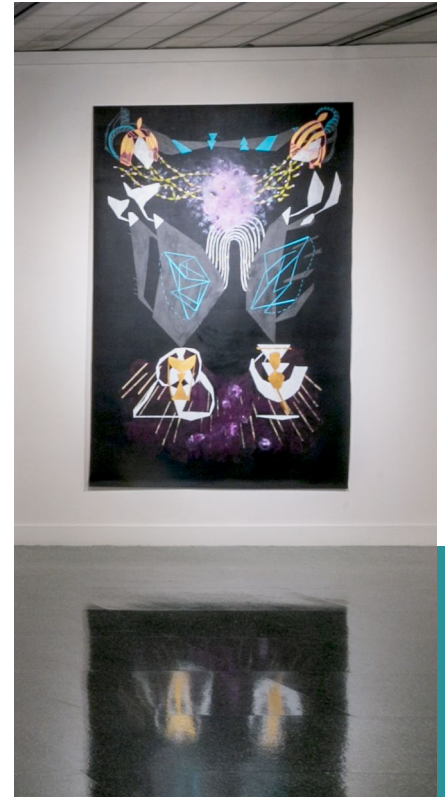
Examined the political, social, cultural, and aesthetic priorities of women of color during the emergence of second-wave feminism. The exhibition was one of the first to highlight the work of Black women artists such as Emma Amos, Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O’Grady, Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, and Betye Saar—sparking new conversations around race, feminism, political action, art production, and art history. [[link](#)]

2018 *Out of Easy Reach*
 Curator **Allison Glenn**
 Debut Venues **Stony Island Arts Bank, DePaul Art Museum, Gallery 400 at University of Illinois-Chicago**
 Traveling Venue **Grunwald Gallery at Indiana University-Bloomington**

An exhibition countering conventional accounts of art history that have overlooked the artistic contributions of women of color. *Out of Easy Reach* investigated the contemporary expansion of abstraction by American, female-identifying artists from the Black and Latinx Diasporas through work by twenty-four artists made from 1980 to 2018. The show revealed the ways that abstraction can serve as a tool to explore personal and universal histories, with a focus on mapping, migration, archives, landscape, vernacular culture, language, and the body. [[link](#)]

2018-2019 *Prospect.4 New Orleans: The Lotus In Spite of the Swamp*
 Artistic Director **Trevor Schoonmaker**

Inspired by the grace and resilience of the lotus plant. The title also alluded to the city’s unique cultural landscape; the politically engaged saxophonist Archie Shepp described jazz as a triumph of the human spirit, a lily that grows “in spite of the swamp.” In P.4, 73 artists and collectives from 25 countries animated traditional and nontraditional venues, including parks and promenades along the Mississippi River, and one intersection of historic Bayou Road. [[link](#)]



Caroline Kent, *Procession*, 2015.
 Installation view in *Out of Easy Reach*
 at the Grunwald Gallery, Indiana
 University-Bloomington, 2018.
 Courtesy of the artist and Grunwald
 Gallery.

2018-2020

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black PowerCurators **Zoé Whitley** and **Mark Godfrey**Debut Venue **Tate Modern**Traveling Venues **Crystal Bridges Museum, Brooklyn Museum, The Broad Museum, de Young Museum, MFA Houston**

Highlighted the significance of Black artists from 1963 to 1983, at the apex of the civil rights and Black Power movements. The exhibition showcased over sixty prominent artists whose work represented the political and cultural landscape of the time. Curator Thelma Golden's Spotlight Talk took place at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art when the exhibition traveled there in 2018. [[link](#)]

2021-2022

Prospect.5 New Orleans: Yesterday We Said TomorrowArtistic Directors **Naima J. Keith** and **Diana Nawi**

Referencing New Orleans jazz musician Christian Scott's socially conscious 2010 album *Yesterday You Said Tomorrow*. The present, where past and future converge, is at the heart of this concept. Rescheduled for 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic, *Yesterday we said tomorrow* seems a prescient title. The exhibition will address the social body and the individual, suggesting the deferral of structural and political change. This is our lived experience in the year 2020, when social isolation, performance, and resistance define daily life as layers of history and culture are disrupted, the political landscape is in disarray, and public life feels forever altered. [[link](#)]

Soul of a Nation, installation view at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2019. Image source: Crystal Bridges Museum.



conversation



prologue

Cathy Byrd: Today, we're talking about what it means to be Black in 21st-century America. The meaning and expression of Blackness in art has a history of intricate connections to civil rights and social movements. In the United States and abroad, painting and drawing, filmmaking and photography, performance and protest have long represented diverse creative perspectives on the volatile subject of race and identity in this country.

Thelma Golden, now Director of the **Studio Museum in Harlem**, is known for sparking debates about race through exhibitions that consider the past, present, and potential future of Black identity. In 1994, she curated **Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art** at the **Whitney Museum of American Art** in New York, the city where she grew up. In 2001, Golden's first curatorial project at the Studio Museum was **Freestyle**, an exhibition designed to spotlight the work of emerging Black artists. In her catalog essay, Golden used the term "**post-black**" to characterize the work of artists adamant about not being labeled as Black artists, though their work was deeply interested in redefining complex notions of Blackness. **Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power**, another landmark exhibition, was the backdrop for Thelma Golden's 2018 talk at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art. Organized by the Tate Museum in London and co-curated by Zoe Whitley and Mark Godfrey, **Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art** in Bentonville, Arkansas was the first United States venue. The exhibition illuminates the enduring influence of Black artistic practice from 1963 to 1983— one of the most politically, socially, and aesthetically revolutionary periods in American history. Golden reflects on her role and the evolving narrative.



Soul of a Nation, installation view at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2019. Image Source: Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art.

conversation



Listen along
with the episode.

Thelma Golden: When I came to The Studio Museum in Harlem, I felt like I could play an important role in thinking about the future, and what the future could look like through showing and supporting the artists of the present—thinking about emerging artists and defining the space in which those artists might live. That has taken the form in a series of exhibitions beginning in 2001, all beginning with the letter F: *Freestyle* first, then *Frequency*, *Flow*, *Fore*, and most recently, *Fictions*—all exhibitions which have taken the pulse on what Black artists are thinking about, making work about, responding to, reacting to, inspired by, infuriated by in their work as they're making it today. The first one I worked on with **Christine Kim** and the following exhibitions have been curated by the amazing and stellar group of curators who have worked at the Studio Museum in these years. From the beginning of this century, these exhibitions have allowed us to think about Black artists in the broadest way, to understand and engage with the work and the artists in the fullest sense of possibility.



Eric Wesley, *KICKING ASS*, 2000. Installation view, *Freestyle* exhibition at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001. Image appears in *WHAT MAKES A GREAT EXHIBITION?*, published by the **Pew Center for Arts & Heritage**, 2006.

CB: Seven years after *Freestyle*, a 2008 exhibition in Chicago about the cultural production of race presented evidence of shifting rhetoric on the subject of Blackness. **LAXART Director Hamza Walker** organized *Black Is, Black Ain't* during his tenure as curator for the **Renaissance Society**. Walker invited artists to demonstrate his observation that contemporary art had pushed past broader social views on inclusion and multiculturalism to address the complexity, contradiction, and subjectivity of race in America. Black and non-Black artists presented a communal reading of so-called Blackness at odds with the idea that race is socially and politically irrelevant. In late 2013, when the Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago presented a *Black Is, Black Ain't* symposium, Hamza Walker was there to set the stage. He told his own story about how he came to understand race when he was growing up. At his high school in the 1980s, for example, race was a subject taught in social studies. Other inherent contradictions in his education, both on the street and in the classroom, influenced the shape of his 2008 curatorial project.

How do you *teach* race?
And by the same token,
how does one *learn* race?

Hamza Walker

Hamza Walker: Race was a fact as self-evident as our very being, its meaning derived from the value accorded to difference. That value, in turn, served as the basis of a fate and an identity over which Black subjects, until relatively recently, had no control. For the greater part of history, the dominant conclusion was that Blacks were inferior, whether deduced through **bogus biological**

science or deduced empirically by **pointing to the ghetto**: a socially engineered destitution whose machinations are historically rooted to the extent that their present-day effects are routinely mistaken for causes in their own right. In 1980, at age fourteen, our understanding of race was a

highly heterogeneous mix of ideas and ideologies of which school was only a part, albeit an important one. **Self-determination** was weighed against embryonic, but no less crucial, nuggets of anti-**essentialist** thinking. Looking back at that class in 1980, I realize how teachers and students alike were neophytes.

How do you *teach* race? And by the same token, how does one *learn* race? Part of its teaching at that time was, in fact, its *unlearning*. It was when I did this show that I realized I'm the child of Mr. Williams's quandary insofar as I came to sympathize with it wholeheartedly. Teaching as unlearning: a paradox I took to be reflected in the title: *Black Is, Black Ain't*.

CB: All critically important, the exhibitions *Black Male*; *Freestyle*; *Black Is, Black Ain't*; and *Soul of a Nation* are among others that inform an ongoing dialogue about how art perceives and expresses Blackness in America. Here we revisit conversations with artists that touch on this complicated subject.

[sounds of automobile traffic]

CB: We're driving by **Coconut Grove** and you just told me some history of it I didn't know.

Johanne Rahaman: Coconut Grove is the oldest Black community in South Florida.

CB: Born in Trinidad and based in Miami, **Johanne Rahaman** looks at Blackness through the lens of her camera, creating a modern photo portrait of Black communities across Florida. She invites us to join her quest one day to see what she's discovering.

Today, we are on a field trip to see one of the communities that Johanne is photographing in her project called **BlackFlorida**. Tell me what led you to want to take this on four years ago.

JR: [When] I started doing *BlackFlorida*, I wasn't doing a project. I was basically taking care of myself and connecting with communities that reminded me of home. I started going into **Liberty City**, **Little Haiti**, **Brownsville**, because they all reminded me of the place I grew up in Trinidad: the **Laventille Hills**. That was the start of it, and friends were noticing the work that I was posting on social media and [they] encouraged me to take it seriously as a project, which I did by the end of 2015.

It's *BlackFlorida* because my focus is on the Black communities of the state. Why I decided to do the entire state, I'm not sure. I guess I don't know how to do anything small. The purpose of the project is to reclaim the narrative of what is life in Black communities; to focus on the nuances that are often overlooked in the media.

07:23

Johanne Rahaman



Johanne Rahaman, West Palm Beach, Florida 2015. From the *BlackFlorida* project. Courtesy of the artist.

CB: What made you choose photography as your way of recording this cultural community?

JR: Photography is my creative outlet. It's my passion. It's what gave me an opportunity to travel when I couldn't travel home. Photography was the tool that I used to capture and reminisce on home.

CB: And what has been the response of the communities? Of course, I observed you this morning in **Flava's**, a local establishment that is definitely a cultural hub.

[restaurant sounds and background conversation at Flava's]

JR: Our communities are absolutely overjoyed at the project and the narrative of Blackness in Florida. They've claimed it as their own, which for me is the most important thing. It's fully collaborative. I couldn't just walk into any place and photograph in **Perrine** or **Richmond Heights** or **Palatka** or **Jacksonville** without someone allowing me to see it through their eyes. So, it's their project. It's our project.

The purpose of the project is to reclaim the narrative of what is life in Black communities; to focus on the nuances that are often overlooked in the media.

Johanne Rahaman

CB: I loved seeing this morning the relationship that you had with the people at Flava's. I could tell how much it means to them that you pay attention; that your eyes are on them. That reminds me of a book we were talking about that had a very big impact on each of us: **Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God***. I love that book and I've been inspired by it for so many years. I want to know about how it has influenced your work.

JR: Zora Neale Hurston's work, her legacy, her life beyond her literature has influenced my life, especially this project. I imagine myself walking in her shoes; and the places that she's been to; and the places that she would have gone to had she had the time to explore more. She's constantly in my head while I'm creating the work that I'm creating. I've spent much time **photographing** in **Eatonville**, which is where she lived a large part of her life. Eatonville is extremely important to the narrative of this project. It's the first incorporated Black community in America. There was **a feature** in the **Orlando Weekly** on Eatonville. The mayor of Eatonville saw the feature and wrote a letter to the editor, thanking them for the feature and thanking me for my work and the images portraying the community in such a beautiful, dignified way—contrary to what is sometimes portrayed.



Johanne Rahaman, Flava's Restaurant, Perrine, Florida, 2018. From the *BlackFlorida* project. Courtesy of the artist.

CB: Let's talk about the fact that your own legacy is going to be these photographs, the legacy of the communities that you're working with. For me, Zora Neale Hurston's novel was my way of learning some history that I didn't know about Black people in Florida. I appreciated how beautifully she told that story, so I love that she's your muse.

JR: She is. Absolutely.

CB: This morning we stopped by the **House of God**. The air around the House of God is very peaceful and calming. It's very interesting the effect it had on me just standing outside the church. Tell me about your first experience.

JR: My first time going to the House of God, I arrived and parked in front of that empty lot next to the building. And when I came out, there were a couple flamingos in the lot. But the thing that stood out the most was the sound of the trees in the wind. And I could hear the church band, the **Sacred Steel** band, which is associated with the House of God. It's the birthplace of the sound called Sacred Steel, which is the steel guitar. It's really loud and it drives the entire congregation. It drives the rest of the band. I came out and heard trees and I thought, "Oh, my God! This is so beautiful." This is so not the image of Black communities that is often told. The songs associated in media with Black communities [are those] of sirens, gunshots; anything that's aggressive noise—

But this is something that you would never hear: green spaces. These kinds of spaces that you try to create in other communities in the suburbs exist naturally in Black communities—really beautiful green spaces with noises like that, like where we're sitting right now. We're sitting in a park, but we could be sitting right out in the street and still hear this type of ambient nature. That was the first thing I heard when I approached the House of God and started recording it. You hear the sound change from the trees rustling in the wind to the sound of the sacred steel band just before entering the church.

[music from Sacred Steel band playing at the House of God Church in Perrine, FL]

CB: From Washington, D.C., **Jefferson Pinder** lives and works in Chicago. His minimalist, physically demanding performances and action videos often reference historical events, evoking cultural symbols embedded in the African American experience and posing questions about the future of race and struggle.

Jefferson Pinder: Doing these physical tasks, in particular doing these physical tasks [while] carrying with you everything that represents your identity—you're making associations. In my work in the **Inertia Cycle**, it was all about my body in the inner-city environment doing a laborious task that was obvious and Herculean. Carrying a telephone pole, pulling a pole, or pushing a car could all be symbols of power and struggle, and also futility.



Fresh Art founder Cathy Byrd in conversation with artist Johanne Rahaman, Perrine, Florida, 2018.

CB: So in *Mule*, you actually had a harness on yourself. You were dragging a 300-pound log through the streets of Baltimore.

It was like I'm pulling the weight of the past; history.

Jefferson Pinder



Jefferson Pinder *Lazarus*, 2009, performance video still.

JP: Part of it was that that ceiling tin and wall tin from homes had been gutted. It was like I'm pulling the weight of the past; history. I always thought the pole was beautiful. I mean, it kind of had this wonderful texture and history to it. I strapped it on me to see what it would be like to move a heavy weight almost like these muscle man competitions where you see these people strapping on a harness and trying to pull a bus or plane. I'm pulling something that's specific and maybe representative of an experience.

CB: I noticed in the three videos of the *Inertia* series, you're wearing this gray suit. I mean, you're a mule, as you describe it in the first piece; you're pulling this 300-pound weight, wearing a suit. And in *Marathon*, you are actually getting dressed somehow as you run. Talk about that. That's a pretty entertaining, high energy piece. How do you describe that?

JP: With *Marathon*, it kind of started out as a vision. You know, you get these ideas as you sort of drift into the night. I had an idea of this continuous run. I thought about the uniform—you know, what I would wear so people would know that I was serious. I thought, well, I want to wear professional clothing. I want to wear something that represents the working man. In *Marathon*, I started out with no clothes. It was all about armament—finding this suit, finding this power along the route and arriving at the location. It's almost like *John Henry*, the Steel Driving Man, who spent all this labor to lay down these spikes in the railtrack and then collapses when he arrives or he wins the race. *Marathon* is all about this continuous run and finally reaching this destination and collapsing. With *Mule*, it was more like a sketch of moving with this weight. For *Lazarus*, the suit actually belonged to my mentor, *David Driskell*. Actually, his father originally owned the suit and gave it to him and he gave it to me.

CB: You said he was a minister?

JP: Yeah, he was a minister in North Carolina, very close to Asheville. It was pretty exciting for me to have all these clothes with this history and this relationship to the past, and to embody this for the pieces that were about a connection to these old memories.

CB: With *Mule*, you seem to be on your own, pulling your weight. And then with *Marathon*, there were various people helping you get dressed. They were basically holding up a tie or helping you along the way. But in *Lazarus*, you really have this sense of an incredible community, because in that piece you start off trying to start an old Volvo, right?

JP: With *Lazarus*, I wanted to step away from self. I wanted to have a presence there, but I wanted the piece to really be about the contribution of others in the project. But it's also delusional. It's not as literal or as strong of a narrative as it seems. It's really a strong metaphor or visual trope of what it means to have a community behind you. And at the very end, when it's not there, it's kind of like an illusion.

CB: If you can picture this piece, he's starting to push the car by himself. So by the crescendo of the piece, I would say the strongest moment of power you sense is when the people are helping you. There were about fifteen or twenty people pushing you.

JP: That's right. For me, the irony of having all of these people move something that's supposed to move you became really what the piece was about. I feel people are always more than willing to help each other move a vehicle when it breaks down in the street, because I think everybody knows what it feels like to be stranded in that way.

CB: Right. It's not requiring you to have a long term commitment to that person. And I think that's what *Lazarus* communicates. They're all helping him. And then they drop off one by one until he's alone and rolling to a stop again.

JP: Right. Or he's alone and it never really happened.

CB: Chicago-born **Theaster Gates** engages in social practice on a global scale. His first encounters with creativity and the music of Black churches influence his work to this day. A potter, artist, and urban planner, among his raw materials figure clay, tar, an abandoned house in Kassel, Germany, and an entire neighborhood in the city where he was born. When he spoke at American University in Washington, D.C. in late 2012, Fresh Art International joined him onstage to talk about how his hometown influences his view of the world.

I've been fortunate to visit both **Dorchester Projects** in Chicago and **Huguenot House [in Kassel]**. Your practice is very centered on urban spaces that are often seen as blighted or totally abandoned. I'm interested in how you communicate with the history of the people who inhabited those spaces and how you seem motivated to work in those contexts and derive your content from that.

Theaster Gates: One of the challenges I have and that many of my colleagues who rise out of places [also have] is that when you gain access to other places, it's hard to let go of the luggage of the place that you're from. Some of my colleagues don't have this. They're happy when they leave their parents. They're happy to leave their suburb. They're happy that the familial tie is a loose one. I don't have that luxury. I've always had the burden of trying to make meaning through making and at the same time reconcile that there's both meaning making and reconciliation of these worlds that I live between. The thing that seems like blight or abandonment or the ills of the city—it's just where I'm from. I don't think about it like, "I'm gonna go work in a poor community." I think, "I'm burdened by the lack of resources in this place where I grew

 21:10

Theaster Gates

I don't only have a couple of tricks. I'm always just trying to bring my tricks with me and my tricks are always attempting to make meaning and reconcile the access that I have with the lack of access other people have.

Theaster Gates



Theaster Gates, *12 Ballads for Huguenot House*, Kassel, Germany. Detail of a building-sized installation that united two disused buildings—one in Chicago and the other in Kassel, Germany—by dismantling parts of each to reuse in rebuilding the other. The spatial re-imagining was realized in twelve thematic “ballads,” for *documenta(13)*, 2012.

up,” or, “This place reminds me of this other place where I grew up and I’m burdened by its lack of cultural resources.” I don’t only have a couple of tricks. I’m always just trying to bring my tricks with me and my tricks are always attempting to make meaning and reconcile the access that I have with the lack of access other people have. So it happens that it’s often the ‘hood. But what was great about documenta [in Kassel] was that it was not my ‘hood. It had nothing to do with “‘hood.” But there was still a kind of chasm. Culture comes every five years—the place has these oasis-like moments [during documenta] where things become vibrant and then they go dead again. I was really interested in asking the question about the possibility of culture living beyond the moment where culture is given a platform? It’s that way of enacting and just really taking the burden on yourself.



Sanford Biggers

CB: That idea of labor as protest feeds into what you decide to do for each project and each context in which you’re invited to work.

TG: I didn’t have success asking permission—asking for political favors or aldermanic help. I didn’t have access to the Black elite or the white elite. It’s only now that I have access to the Black elite because of the Jewish elite. And so the opportunities are just now being created. So in advance of that [support], I’d rather just try to do that thing then, because I already know I’m wasting energy not trying. At least if I try to do the thing I get stronger.

[excerpt of **Theaster Gates performing with The Black Monks at Huguenot House in Kassel, Germany for Documenta 13 (2012)**]

[Content warning: Our conversation with Sanford Biggers includes frank discussions of gun violence and police brutality that some readers might find psychologically disruptive.]

CB: A Los Angeles native working in New York City, Sanford Biggers creates art that integrates film, video installations, sculpture, drawing, original music, and performance. In our 2016 conversation, he reveals the influences of Buddhism and the role of family in his longtime relationship with historical quilts that he alters in his work. Biggers also describes his response to police killings of unarmed Black people across the U.S. that year. The artist reflects on race-based aggression and a performative work that alters traditional African figurative sculptures.

Sanford Biggers: I lived in Japan for three years in the early 1990s. I was just mesmerized by the culture and specifically, I got into different strains of Buddhism. I started to research them. I started to meditate. I would go to temples. In fact, I lived across the street from a temple in Japan and that’s influenced my work for the last fifteen years. These quilts go all the way back to that use of pattern and geometry, which has been a consistent thread in my work since I started showing, but also the philosophy in Buddhism, the idea of **wabi-sabi**, which is this notion of perfection in objects that seem imperfect. I like to use that in my own practice by looking at found objects loaded with so much history. Those degradations are actually their perfection.

CB: The quilts you work with, they're all American?

SB: All the quilts are American, typically from between Maine and Vermont. And many of them are from Pennsylvania. The first twenty or twenty-five that I worked on were donated to me by a collector and a good friend of mine.

CB: Did you grow up sleeping under a quilt?

SB: My parents and my grandparents and so on are all from the South, from Houston, **Nacogdoches**, and **Galveston**, Texas. So we grew up with quilts. I got reconnected to the idea of the quilt, oddly enough, through the **mandala** and that pattern-work. But also through looking at the work of my cousin, the muralist **John Biggers**, who was also very deep into sacred geometry and pattern. And these quilts to me are an extension of that research into pattern and geometry.

CB: And how do you apply sacred geometry?

SB: The quilts already have their own patterns and there's anthologies of the different types of quilt patterns. In my lexicon of imagery that I put onto the quilts, I sometimes use platonic solids and diagrams and wire form diagrams and geometric figures to create a sense of perspective.

CB: The pattern and design; the fabric—all of that is embedded in so much contemporary art these days.

SB: It's an interesting zeitgeist. I've been looking at that too. I don't know where that's coming from exactly. It's something about the materiality. I like this idea of me coming in as a late collaborator in a quilt. You imagine that these [quilts] may have been made by multiple people sometime a hundred years ago. I should note that all my quilts are pre-nineteen hundred. So they have some age to them. I come in a hundred years later and either you might consider it defacing or you might consider it embellishment. But I am a late collaborator in the trajectory of this quilt, which becomes a historical record.

CB: It does, and it brings it back to life in a way.

SB: I also think about **sampling**, especially like early nineties, mid-eighties hip hop when sampling was a big thing and people were taking obscure songs and bringing them back to life, bringing them back to the dialogue. In a way, this is what I'm doing with the quilts.

CB: The human figure is central to his work. Quilts imply the body; covering and comforting is their purpose. It's quite the opposite for the African sculptures he collected for the new video series he titled **BAM**. Their bodies are exposed, fragile, and defenseless.

SB: I like the figurative relationship because I'm interested in the invisibility and hyper-visibility of being a Black male.



Sanford Biggers, *100 Years Too Soon*, 2017.
Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky
Gallery, New York and Aspen. © Sanford Biggers

In America, we've never really addressed our pathology. We're in total denial. What that does is create a dysfunctional relationship. We all know that this violence against Black citizens has been going on for at least five hundred years. But now we have cell phones. People are pulling out their phones and recording it. We have witnesses.

Sanford Biggers



Sanford Biggers, installation detail from *Selah*, 2017. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen.
© Sanford Biggers

CB: What is the source of the sculptural figures that you're damaging?

SB: I've been collecting wooden African sculptures from flea markets and tourist shops around the world. Some of them are pretty authentic. Some of them are total knockoffs that are made in Mexico and Taiwan and so on. I take them and I dip them in the thick brown wax to render them a little bit more obscure. I take them to a shooting range and I sculpt them using artillery, 22 caliber 12-gauge shotguns and so on, and then cast the remnants in bronze. They're a stand-in for every person and every man figure so that you know that it's a body being shot, but you don't know the details of that person.

CB: Watching real bullets dismember the small sculptures is an uncomfortable experience, especially if you've been following news coverage and social media posts about repeated incidents of police violence against people of color in America.

SB: I'd like to speak about it in two ways. One is the very formal and art historical side where I'm going into bronze figurative sculpture, which of course, goes all the way back to the Classical Greek and Roman bronze sculptures and marble works dealing with the figure. And then the other side is the contemporary conceptual and political climate, which revolves around the violence towards Black citizens by the police.

CB: This is such a distressing moment in our history. Why aren't we advancing past this point of misunderstanding each other?

SB: We should be so far beyond this. But I think one of the issues is [that] in America, we've never really addressed our pathology. We're in total denial. What that does is create a dysfunctional relationship. We all know that this violence against Black citizens has been going on for at least five hundred years. But now we have cell phones. People are pulling out their phones and recording it. We have witnesses.

CB: Even though he gives each video the first name of an actual victim, the artist wants us to think more about the broader history of violence.

SB: Some people look at it as when I cast these figures in bronze that I'm memorializing the victim, but in fact I'm memorializing the act as if to say, "never forget."

CB: Sanford formats and presents the videos in a way that connects with how we communicate in the post-Internet era, how we witness and share life and death.

SB: The videos are short format—a minute and ten seconds, a minute and twenty seconds, tops. They're shown on a vertically mounted monitor to resemble a smartphone that would be held vertically. That's the way we're usually seeing all these videos and they happen quickly because these acts happen in the blink of an eye. For example, when **Tamir Rice** was killed,

they hadn't even stopped the police car before they shot him through the window. So these things are happening, you know, in the blink of an eye.

CB: What do you hope people take away from seeing your work?

SB: The video makes people stop and think about the actions that are occurring. The videos have a violence to them, but they're also somehow beautiful. I think that's important because there's a seduction moment and then there's a repulsion moment. Through that, the body sort of catalogs this in a visceral way, so that when you hear about these killings, you start to hear the impact of those gunshots in that video and you start to think about how horrific this is and why is this happening every single week. And also [I want] to have the viewers ask more challenging questions: what's happening in America today? What's America's relationship to the world? Where are we right now?

CB: The summer of 2016 was a tense moment in the U.S. Continued police killings of Black citizens were the somber backdrop for our open conversation with **Amy Sherald** at the **Monique Meloche Gallery** in Chicago. We spoke about the construction of Black identity and how the Baltimore-based artist's intersectional experience of Blackness informs her work as a figurative painter. In 2018, **Sherald's portrait of First Lady Michelle Obama** placed her longstanding creative practice in the spotlight.

We're here today in a place between grief and celebration with the latest shock of killings in America and the emotional tensions that are high at this moment. Amy Sherald does what we need. Her work and the vulnerability it expresses are bringing us together. So we're filled with sadness and anger. At the same time, we're filled with happiness and celebration around this fantastic artist. So you grew up in the South?

Amy Sherald: I did.

CB: That's the heartland of what **Dawoud Bey** describes in his essay about this show as the fraught social narrative of race in America. Talk about a challenging place to grow up.

AS: I was born in 1973, so there was still a lot of residual racism in **Columbus, Georgia**. It is still a very segregated city in a lot of ways. I moved back to Georgia when I was 33 years old. This is after graduate school. I had a new language and a new way of seeing things. I had this academic background behind me so that I was really finally able to understand my environment and then be able to put a language to it. I thought, at 33, you're a woman. I went home and I was interacting in the same spaces that I grew up in as a child, but just with more knowledge and the ability to see the structure and understand it. That's when I began to have these introspective moments of who I was as an individual—going to Catholic schools and being in an environment where there were not a lot of people that looked like me. But then I was confused about my identity, too, because I was light-skinned and my hair was a little light, and people would treat me sometimes like I wasn't Black enough. But then some white people would be way more comfortable around me than they should and say things like, "It's not like you're Black anyway." And it's like, "Yes, I am."



Amy Sherald

It was not even being biracial but having this identity crisis in a way. I reached the ninth grade and all of a sudden had Black friends and then was trying to figure out how to fit in with my Black friends. For me, it was like assuming a language. I came home from school and I was like, “Hey, mom, start talking like this.” My mom was like, “I’m so sorry, but this is not going to happen.” But again, [it was] an issue of not having the language. I always joke around and say **Public Enemy** is what brought me home. Being able to find some kind of identity within music and then rap music and then having relationships with people of color who obviously looked like me, that kind of brought me along. But I was really confused for my whole freshman year of high school because of that.

CB: You’ve called it “**code-switching**,” like a sociological term.

AS: I learned that when I took a sociology class. Yeah.

CB: Isn’t it funny how suddenly we learn what things are called? We’ve lived them our whole lives and now we know what to call them.

AS: But it’s something we all do. It’s not special to me. It’s something we all do. But like it’s something specifically that Black people do. But then also, you know, I’ve done workshops with young Hispanic men and young African American men where they sit down and talk about the commonalities that they have and what it means to have that because it’s a skill and now it’s a skill that would save your life. I feel like a lot of youth now don’t have don’t have that ability to be the chameleon and change who you are in that environment so that you can just survive.

CB: I guess there’s a sense of being alone and belonging at the same time that you’re dealing with. In that changing you did between home and school, outside and inside, and Black and white communities and environments, there’s a certain freedom in it, no?

AS: I think for me it was, because in a way I formed my own identity. It’s not that I think I’m something that I’m not. But in a way, you become what you’re perceived as. Not necessarily in college, but just after college. I went to **Clark Atlanta University** basically for the reason of

having a Black experience, what I considered a Black experience. And because my father went to **Morehouse**. I always felt a little chapped by identity because of the fact that I didn’t have Black friends. I’m not sure that’s the conversation that I would normally have with strangers. But it’s like I have my inner white girl and then I have a Black woman. They all live inside of me culturally. I associate with a lot of different people. My friends growing up were from different countries. My best friend is from Yemen. So I experienced



Amy Sherald, *First Lady Michelle Obama*, 2018. National Portrait Gallery Collection, Washington D.C. Courtesy of the artist. © Amy Sherald.

Africa in Panama. I like living at the intersection of all those spaces because it feels freer and it feels like what a contemporary Black experience should be. That's a hard conversation to have in America. With everything that's going on right now, there's no freedom to experience yourself as you would be without the pre-constructions of race and gender. Because I'm definitely a Black woman; I'm definitely an American. But without all the circumscribed things that happen around me, I wanted to get to know my real true inner self. I like that freedom, because as an artist, I think outside of the box and I want to be able to express myself in any way that I feel like my spirit moves me—respectfully so, without feeling like I'm abandoning a historical narrative that's deeply in me.

CB: The fact is that you're painting your people. You've chosen to depict them with charcoal skin. Excluding the idea of color as race was one idea you had to begin with.

AS: All decisions that are made about my work are one hundred percent aesthetic in the beginning. I didn't start with this conversation that I'm having, but in a way it's a journal of me processing my life and living in this world. The work means different things to me at different times. This week, it resonates with me as something that's deeply needed, and I pray for the day that these images become so unimportant because maybe the issues at some point disappear. But right now we need to see images of ourselves and people need to see images of us that are simply represented outside of the dominant historical narrative. As soon as that goes away, which I kind of am assuming is never going to happen, then the paintings will be boring all of a sudden because they'll just be images of people. But now they mean so much because the Black body is politicized and it's making a statement.

CB: Amy's work makes me pose questions about where I stand on issues of race and vulnerability and why and what I can do to make this world better. The question is how to make what Amy imagines become real and how do we reshape the world to be less toxic and more hopeful? I'm wondering what you hope that viewers take away from seeing your work?

AS: A sense of wholeness. I mean, I appreciate the emails that I get from people who are not Black, who really look at the work and see themselves. I want them to leave with a sense of wholeness. But for me, because I live in a city that's full of such disparity, I'm painting these images in hopes that we can see ourselves in a different way. To be able to think freely and to imagine is a privilege in itself.

I like living at the intersection of all those spaces because it feels freer and it feels like what a contemporary Black experience should be. That's a hard conversation to have in America. With everything that's going on right now, there's no freedom to experience yourself as you would be without the pre-constructions of race and gender.

Amy Sherald



Fahamu Pecou

CB: Atlanta-based artist and scholar **Fahamu Pecou**, also known as rap artist **Fahamu Pecou is the Shit!** addresses concerns around the contemporary representation, reading, and performance of Black masculinity. In 2014, while finishing his doctoral studies, he curated an issue of *Art Papers* magazine, opening up a dialogue between hip hop and art.

We're not just considering art as something that exists in museums and galleries and thinking about hip hop as something that happens in the 'hood, but that, you know, art happens in the 'hood and hip hop happens in the gallery.

Fahamu Pecou

[excerpt from **Fahamu Pecou is The Shit!**, “**All Dat Glitters Aint Goals**,” 2012]

Fahamu Pecou: It's about intersections and where art and hip hop connect to each other. There seems to be an agenda to make these very clear distinctions and separations, but hip hop and art are the same thing. It's not different at all. You go back to the genesis of hip-hop culture. Everything was all there. It was a culture because it had all these moving pieces. It was visual art; it was music; it was dance; it was theater and drama. It was performance; it was scholarship. It was all of these things that were a part of the genesis of hip hop. It was only as it became more popular or more socially accepted as a norm and hip-hop culture wasn't going anywhere, that it began to get fragmented and broken up. The corporate investors saw that the music was more lucrative and so they threw all the money at rap music.

I was interested in bringing back to the conversation the way that all of these different aspects of the culture actually intersect with each other. And in doing so, hopefully [my work will] open up the conversation so that we're not just considering art as something that exists in museums and galleries and thinking about hip hop as something that happens in the 'hood, but that, you know, art happens in the 'hood and hip hop happens in the gallery.

[excerpt from **Killer Mike's** “**Reagan**”: “**We exploit the youth, we tell them to join a gang / We tell them dope stories, introduce them to the game / Just like Oliver North introduced us to cocaine / In the 80's when the bricks came on military planes.**”]

CB: That was Killer Mike's performance of “**Reagan**.” An interview with Mike is just one of the perspectives voiced in the *Art Papers* issue that Fahamu just curated.

FP: I tried to think about the issue in terms of what I want to read, which actually opened up the conversation about hip hop and art to be much broader than I initially conceived on my own. The submissions come from everywhere, including interviews with hip-hop artists. We have an interview with the hip-hop artist Killer Mike, who's a super, super, super dope, very insightful, very outspoken individual. Any time I get to have a conversation with him is awesome. We have an essay that provides a different perspective on the performance that happened this past summer with **Jay-Z at Pace Gallery** in New York. A lot of people challenged that performance on its merits as a performance art piece. But this piece by **Mark Anthony Neal**, a professor at Duke University, uses the opportunity to talk about the way hip

hop transforms the spaces that it occupies and the importance of that. That's a really unique perspective and one that opens up the dialogue about hip hop and art in a different way.

We have contributors talking about the way fashion factors into hip hop and art, [and] the way African cultural retentions factor into art and hip hop. We have pieces that talk about the performative aspects of hip hop and the way that the queer hip-hop movement queers both hip-hop culture, as well as performance space, as well as queer theory. It's a really, really complicated piece, but also a very poignant piece. I feel pretty good in saying that we were able to offer a really broad and challenging perspective on hip hop and art and its intersections in a way that is respectful of both mediums and respectful of the artists who are participating and also challenging to the reader. It makes everybody have a different sort of perspective. That's what I was hoping to accomplish.

CB: Based on the response to your call, there must be a broad group of people doing critical research and writing on this topic.

FP: The response was overwhelming. It was almost immediate; as soon as we sent out the call, within a couple of hours we had dozens of submissions. It was like people were sitting on these stories, waiting on a place to present them. It was pretty awesome.

CB: I'm curious, what's your bigger goal for this whole project? Where are you going?

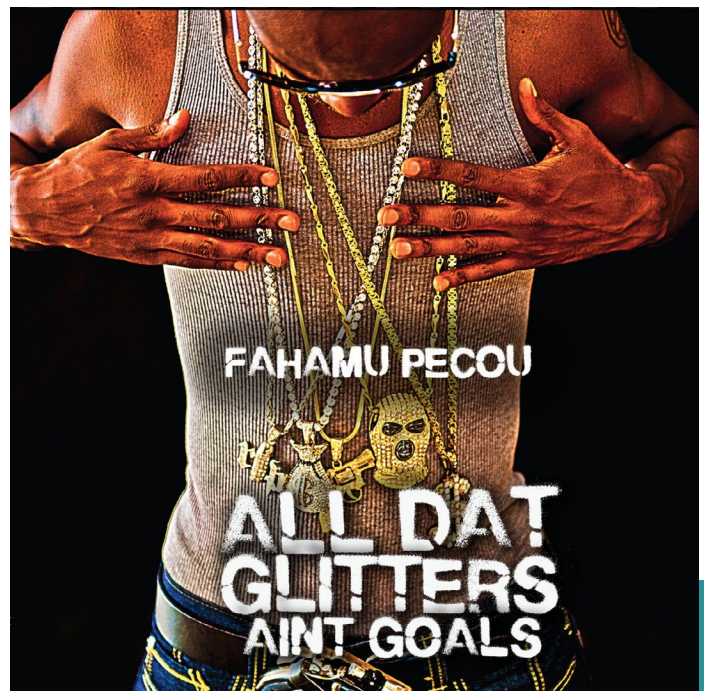
FP: Because my work has always straddled these two worlds—hip hop and art—I'm really interested in establishing myself as that guy: the art/hip hop guy. I would like to play an integral role in driving the conversation that happens there. I felt like rather than wait for somebody else to do it, I'll step in and make it happen.

[excerpt from Fahamu Pecou is The Shit!, "All Dat Glitters Aint Goals," 2012]

CB: A native of Austin, Texas, where she now lives and works, artist **Deborah Roberts's** views on race and identity show up in the fierce young Black girls that figure in her collages. The **Spelman College Museum of Fine Art**, situated in one of Atlanta, Georgia's private women's colleges was the perfect venue for Roberts's 2018 solo exhibition.

Influencing your work is not only art history and popular culture, but Black culture and American history in general. What do you feel is the strongest of those threads that we would see in your work today?

Deborah Roberts: American history and Black culture are two of the primary



Album cover for Fahamu Pecou, ALL DAT GLITTERS AINT GOALS EP. A collection of original music inspired by Pecou's painting series of the same title, 2012. Courtesy of the artist.

things that you see in my work. That's always going to be present. The pop culture references and art history references are just a sideline to the work that I do. American history is unique in the sense that we come from a slavery background. Blackness and slavery go hand in hand in America. Trying to get through that, and to navigate those deep, deep wounds is sometimes very hard and it's going to be very present in my work because we still are having some of these same problems today.



Deborah Roberts

CB: I know that girlhood, womanhood, being a woman, and that ideal of beauty connected to the Venus figure that you've referenced often is something that you push back against in your collages.

DR: [I'm interested in] how we come to be strong women able to take over the household, go out, make the money, be great friends and wives and mothers. I notice a lot of African American women who are artists talk about adult women— beauty, body, hair, lips. When does the love of power come on as a woman? And I thought eight years old is when you come into your own idea of who you are. You get to start picking your own clothes. You get to do your hair style. [These are] things that tell more about who you are right now, and maybe last a lifetime. So I thought between eight and ten years old were the formative years, and that [age] was very important [to represent]. The show at Spelman was the best thing in the world, because not only did it allow young college-age women to see my work, but they saw themselves in the work. I saw so many girls come up crying to me. It was overwhelming. It was cathartic for me. It told me that I'm doing the right thing; at this point in my life, this is what I'm supposed to be doing. I'm supposed to be showing the Black experience of Black girlhood.

CB: That show is called *The Evolution of Mimi* and there's been another set of work called *The Miseducation of Mimi* and other series revolving around this character.

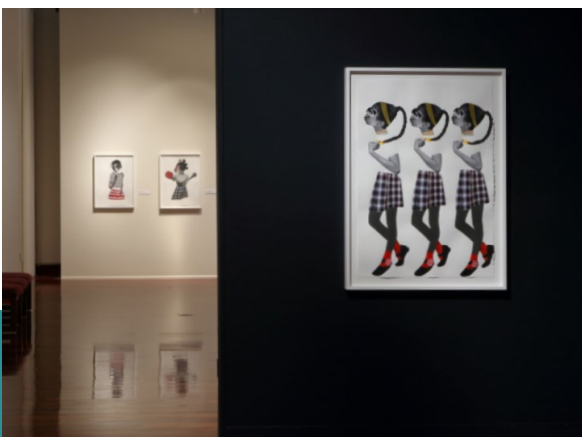
DR: "Mimi" is actually **Mariah Carey** and "The Miseducation" is **Lauryn Hill**. When I started doing this work, I loved Lauryn Hill—the way she talked about being a mother, having to make choices in her career and having children, and just the power of her voice. Then you have Mariah Carey, who was pushed on the national stage. She's biracial. She not only had to prove that she was Black but that she was Black enough and that she lived in two worlds. I think that happens a lot with Blackness, because when you're Black, you're Black. Merging Mariah Carey and Lauryn Hill together was perfect for the girls I wanted to create.

CB: How do you think you have empowered women through the way you have presented these figures?

DR: I use big fists. I got power arms. I have Michelle Obama's

Blackness and slavery go hand in hand in America. Trying to get through that, and to navigate those deep, deep wounds is sometimes very hard and it's going to be very present in my work because we still are having some of these same problems today.

Deborah Roberts



Installation view Deborah Roberts: *The Evolution of Mimi*, Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, Atlanta, GA, 2018. Image Source: Spelman College Museum of fine Art. © Deborah Roberts

fist and hands. **Marian Wright Edelman**; I have her hands, **Muhammad Ali**'s fists.

I just think that when you look at my work, there's a sense of ownership of who I am, that my power was not anything less than anyone else, that I am not lesser. I am in control of who I am and I accept who I am also, which is very important. My girls sometimes have their hands on hips. They're sassy but vulnerable. They're powerful, yet they can be reduced to tears. I think that these girls exude power and strength and a vulnerability that lies underneath that power, that can be easily bruised and touched.

CB: British Nigerian artist **Yinka Shonibare** selected Deborah Roberts's collages for **Talisman in the Age of Difference**, a 2018 group exhibition he curated at the **Friedman Gallery** in London. Roberts's collages shared the space with contemporary art from Africa and the global African diaspora.

DR: When Yinka was thinking about how he wanted to push the notion that "**Black Art Matters**," he brought together a large group of artists whose work is totally different but speak the same language. Sometimes non-Black Americans think that everything that happened to us happened because we're Black, but now Black includes Haitians, Jamaicans, Cubans, Trinidadians, everyone. So "Black" isn't just black color for Black America. That's why I say it's not a color anymore. It is a movement.



black is a movement

Since 2011, we've been recording with artists, curators, and culture producers of the African Diaspora, discovering their work at home and abroad. The voices we share in these episodes reveal what it means to work at the fringe of the global art scene. They describe isolated artistic practices, emerging and recovering culture spaces, experiments in community engagement and visions of possible futures. Creative thinkers, makers, advocates and provocateurs born in Angola, South Africa, Zambia, Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago, Suriname, and Jamaica are among those who share their perspectives on political realities, postcolonial economies, and environmental

vulnerability—demonstrating the individual and collective resilience that enables them to navigate the world of contemporary art.

Related Episodes: **Binilde Hyrcan: Ways of Traveling**, **Athi-Patra Ruga on Global Human Rights**, **Donna Kukama on Unfinished Stories**, **Anawana Haloba on Vanishing Cultures**, **Remy Jungerman on Afro-Religious Aesthetics**, **Live from Trinidad: Where Digital Culture Thrives**, **Miami's Caribbean Arts Remix**, **Diaspora Vibe: Art with Caribbean Roots**

Photo: Marketplace, Little Haiti Cultural Complex (LHCC), Little Haiti District, Miami, Florida. Courtesy of LHCC.

CB: How do you think that this exhibition exudes Blackness in a way that it's never been seen before?

DR: It has multiple voices talking about different ideas of Blackness, different experiences. We're talking about **Black Excellence, Black Power, Black Girls Rock!** Everything is altogether in one exhibit with works from several different generations, all talking about the notion of self, and how self was perceived, how the world sees us. I think he did an amazing job.

CB: In this episode we hear from artists whose work directly engages with race and American identity. Through their individual perspectives, these artists generate freestyle expressions of Blackness. They reveal that no matter how history influences the Black cultural space, identity remains a fluid form in the hands of contemporary artists. Let's end with a passage from **Ralph Ellison's** novel **Invisible Man**, read by Hamza Walker.

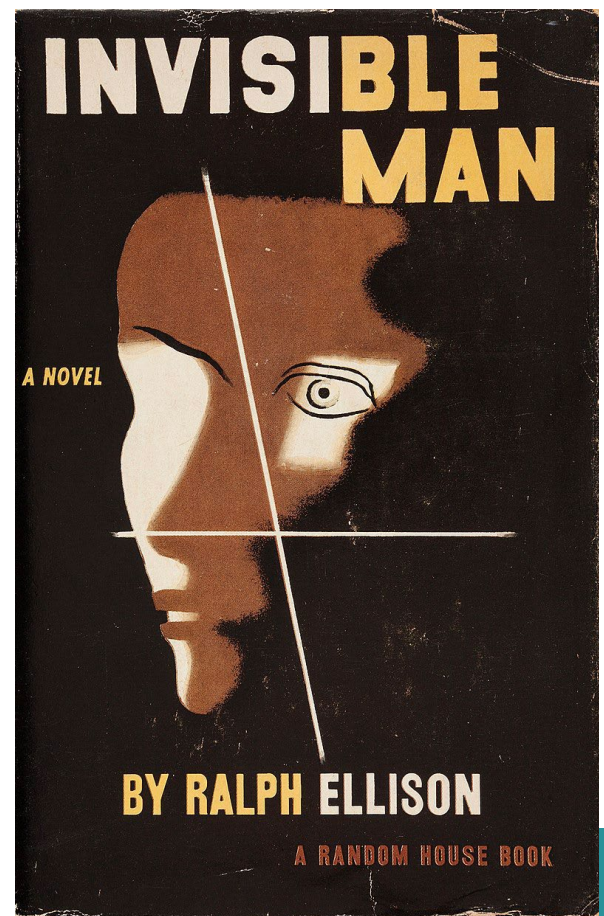
Hamza Walker [reading from Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*]:

"Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the 'Blackness of Blackness.'" And a congregation of voices answered: "That blackness is most black, brother, most black . . ."

"In the beginning . . ."
 "At the very start," they cried.
 ". . . there was blackness . . ."
 "Preach it . . ."
 ". . . and the sun . . ."
 "The sun, Lawd . . ."
 ". . . was bloody red . . ."
 "Red . . ."
 "Now black is . . ." the preacher shouted.
 "Bloody . . ."
 "I said black is . . ."
 "Preach it, brother . . ."
 ". . . an' black ain't . . ."
 "Red, Lawd, red: He said it's red!"
 "Amen, brother . . ."
 "Black will git you . . ."
 "Yes, it will . . ."
 ". . . an' black won't . . ."
 "Naw, it won't!"
 "It do . . ."
 "It do, Lawd . . ."
 ". . . an' it don't."
 "Halleluiah . . ."
 ". . . It'll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE'S BELLY."
 "Preach it, dear brother . . ."
 ". . . an' make you tempt . . ."
 "Good God a-mighty!"
 "Old Aunt Nelly!"
 "Black will make you . . ."
 "Black . . ."
 ". . . or black will un-make you."

 53:40

Conclusion



Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, first edition book cover. New York: Random House, 1952. Image via [Wikipedia](#).

investigate



bibliography

suggestions for further reading

Curated for this issue, our select bibliography of historical and contemporary writing on Black Art in the United States aims to inform classroom reading, inspire individual exploration, and spark a new wave of scholarship, curation, and artistic production.

Arning, Bill, Valerie Cassel Oliver, and Dean Dederko. *Outside the Lines* exh. Cat. Houston: Contemporary Art Museum Houston, 2014.

Bearden, Romare and Harry Henderson. *A History of African American Artists: From 1792 to the Present*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1993.

Beckwith, Naomi and Dieter Roelstraete. *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now*. exh. Cat. Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2015.

Bindman, David and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., editors. *The Image of the Black in Western Art*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press in collaboration with the W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, 2010.

Bloemink, Barbara, Lolis Eric Elie, and Claire Tancons. Ed. Dan Cameron *Prospect.1 New Orleans*. Brooklyn: Picture Box, 2008.

Cameron, Dan, and Miranda I. Lash. *Prospect.2 New Orleans*. exh. cat. New Orleans, La.: U.S. Biennial, Inc./Prospect New Orleans, 2011.

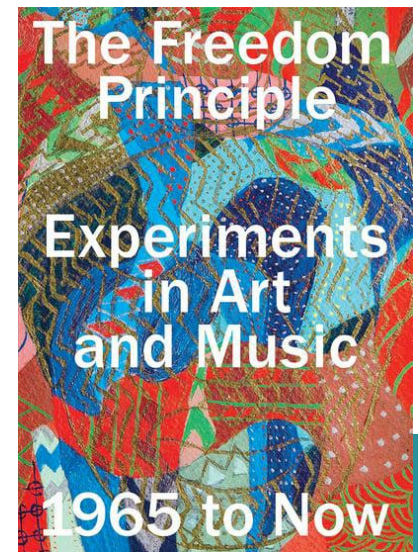
Copeland, Huey. *Bound to Appear: Art, Slavery, and the Site of Blackness in Multicultural America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

Driskell, David. *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. exh. cat. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1976.

Dzeidzic, Erin and Melissa Messina. *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*. exh. cat. Kansas City: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2007.

English, Darby. *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2010.

English, Darby. *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016.



Curators and authors Naomi Beckwith and Dieter Roelstraete fuse histories of music and art into a single narrative. Image via [Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago](#).

Previous page: David Driskell, *Homage to Lois Jones*. n.d. Image courtesy of David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, College Park. Gift from the Sandra and Lloyd Baccus Collection. 2012.13.063 Photo: Greg Staley, 2019. © David C. Driskell/David C. Driskell Center, 2017.

Glenn, Allison M. and Cameron Shaw. *Out of Easy Reach*. exh. cat. Chicago: DePaul Art Museum. Rebuild Foundation, Gallery 400 at University of Illinois, Chicago, 2018.

Golden, Thelma. *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art 1994-1995*. exh. cat. New York: Abrams, 1994.

Golden, Thelma and Christine Kim. *Freestyle*. exh. cat. New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2001.

Godfrey, Mark and Zoe Whitley. *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*. exh. cat. London: Tate Gallery Publishing, Ltd., 2017.

Haynes, Lauren, Naima J. Keith and Thomas J. Lax. Fore. exh. cat. New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2012.

Hockley, Rujeko and Catherine Morris, eds. *We Wanted a Revolution. Black Radical Women, 1965–85: New Perspectives*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

hooks, bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995.

Huggins, Nathan Irvin. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Jones, Kellie, Hazel V. Carby, Franklin Sirmans, Jacqueline Stewart, and Roberto Tejada. *Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980*. Exh. cat. New York and London: Prestel, 2011.

Jones, Kellie. *Eyeminded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art*. Durham: Duke University Press: 2011.

Kim, Christine Y., Salah Hassan, and Achille Mbembe. *Flow*. exh. cat. New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2008.

Lewis, Samella and Ruth Waddy. *Black Artists on Art: Volume 1 and Volume 2*. Los Angeles: Contemporary Craft Publishers, 1969.

Oliver, Valerie Cassel, Bill Arning, Yona Bäcker, Tavia Amolo Ochieng' Nyongó, Naomi Beckwith, Franklin Sirmans, and Clifford Owens. *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*. exh. cat. Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2005.

Oliver, Valerie Cassel and Terry Adkins. *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970*. exh. cat. (Walker, Hamza and Huey Copeland. *Black Is, Black Ain't* exh. cat. Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 2013.

Powell, Richard J. *Black Art: A Cultural History*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

Art on My Mind

visual politics



bell hooks

Renowned cultural critic bell hooks writes about producing, exhibiting, and criticizing art and aesthetics in an art world increasingly concerned with identity politics. Image source: [The New Press](#).

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. Minneapolis: Grey Wolf Press, 2014.

Rankine, Claudia. *The White Card: A Play in One Act*. Minneapolis: Grey Wolf Press, 2019.

Sirmans, Franklin and Yael Lipschutz. *Noah Purifoy: Junk Dada*. exh. cat. Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2015.

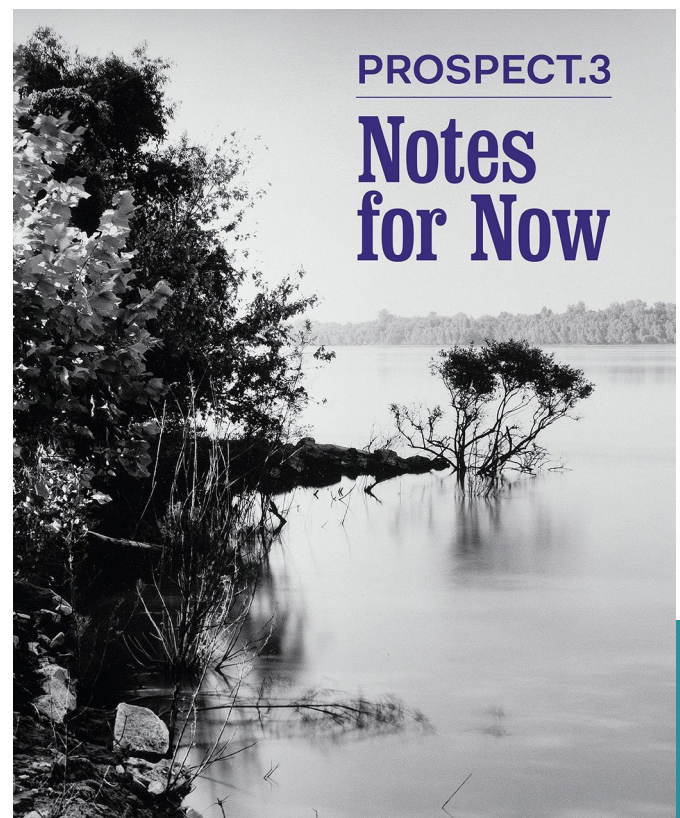
Sirmans, Franklin, Rita González, David C. Hunt, Christine Y. Kim, Rickey Laurentiis, Mary A. McCay, Melissa A. Weber. *Prospect. 3: Notes for Now: a Project of Prospect New Orleans*. exh. cat. New Orleans: Prospect New Orleans/U.S. Biennial, Inc.; Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2014.

Schoonmaker, Trevor, William Cordova, Miranda Lash, Omar López-Chahoud, Wangechi Mutu, Filipa Oliveira, Ebony G. Patterson, Ylva Rouse, Ned Sublette, Zoé Whitley. *Prospect. 4: The Lotus in Spite of the Swamp*. New York and London: Prestel, 2017.

Association for Critical Race Art History (ACRAH) Bibliographies.

Website featuring English-language bibliographies focused on writing about issues of race and ethnicity in art and visual culture.

Thank you to the Black Staff Resource Group at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art for contributing ideas and suggestions to this bibliography.



This 2014 publication documents the art, issues and ideas illuminated in Prospect.3. New Orleans. Image source: [Prestel Publishing](#).

start a conversation

questions to spark discussion

Before you begin: resources for talking about race

As an educator, it can be challenging to create a space for students to talk about race that feels safe, but also open to free expression. These resources were created to help educators examine their own fears, prejudices, and preconceptions around this topic, and to lead productive conversations around race.

- [Talking about Race](#) - National Museum of African American History
- [Let's Talk! Discussing Race, Racism and Other Difficult Topics with Students](#) - Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty Law Center
- [Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces: Historical Context and Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals](#) - NASPA Research and Policy Institute
- [Three SEL Skills You Need to Discuss Race in Classrooms](#) - *Greater Good Magazine*, UC Berkeley

1. For the artists featured in this episode, what is the role of music and sound in shaping their experiences of the world? How do you relate to this?
2. A toxic culture of white supremacy impacts everyone. Whether you identify as Black, Indigenous, a person of color, or white, white supremacy negatively affects all people. What is the role of white creatives in dismantling white cultural dominance? What is their responsibility **to self-educate** and to **manifest anti-racism** in their lives and creative work? What is the difference between **trendy, optical allyship** and sustained, purposeful engagement in the context of the art world?
3. An “intersectional” understanding of identity acknowledges that facets of selfhood including race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, cultural background, religion, ability, and age shape our experiences of the world in overlapping and often complicated ways. Read back through the profiles at the beginning of this Research Guide to learn about the perspectives, identities, and experiences that the artists and curators featured in “Black in America” bring to their work. How do they manifest intersectional perspectives?
4. What does intersectionality mean to you?
5. In this episode, curator Hamza Walker reflects on his experience of learning about race in high school—an experience that deeply influenced and informed his outlook on Black identity and selfhood. What have you been taught about race inside the classroom? How much does what you learned in a formal school setting influence how you think about race in the world at large? In what ways does your “schooled” knowledge and experience of race connect with your lived experience outside the classroom? For an even deeper dive on this issue, listen to **“The Confrontation”** from NPR’s podcast *Invisibilia* to learn about “the most tense and uncomfortable summer program in America.” How would you like the opportunity to participate in a program like this? What parts do you think would be empowering, cringe-inducing, productive, or downright terrifying? Why?

write on

invitations to respond in writing

1. A Portrait of Black America

Sometimes non-Black Americans think that everything that happened to us happened because we're Black, but now Black includes Haitians, Jamaicans, Cubans, Trinidadians, everyone. So 'Black' isn't just black color for Black America. That's why I say it's not a color anymore. It is a movement. - Deborah Roberts

In this episode, artists **Johanne Rahaman**, **Amy Sherald**, and **Deborah Roberts** engage portraiture as a way to capture the multifaceted nature of Black identity. Working in photography, paint, and mixed media collage, the three artists depict the complexities and nuances of Black lives and experiences.

Research

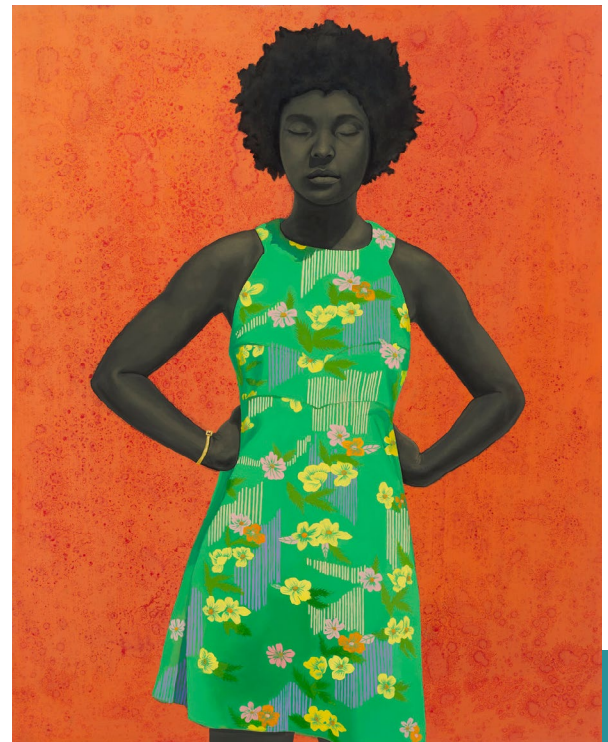
Go back and listen to (or read the transcript) from our conversations with Roberts, Sherald, and Rahaman in “Black in America.” Then explore each of their websites and examine their work closely. Read their bios and artist statements (which can be found [here](#) for Roberts, [here](#) for Rahaman, and [here](#) for Sherald). How do personal history, context, and community inform the work that each artist is creating? How does portraiture convey the primary themes, ideas, and motivations behind the work of each artist?

Analyze

Select one work from each artist to analyze and compare. In making your selection, consider resonances of theme, emotion, style, color, and composition. The goal is to choose a set of three portraits that will make for an interesting visual and thematic comparison. Once you've selected the works, read and respond to the following sets of questions.* You may wish to take some notes as you go, or mark questions that seem particularly relevant to the three works you chose.

Composition

What compositional strategies have Rahaman, Sherald, and Roberts used in arranging the figure(s) in the portraits you've chosen? Is the subject facing forward (frontal), three quarter, or profile? How is the subject framed in space? Can we see the full body of the subject, or is the figure cropped? Is the subject shown in the fore, middle, or background of the picture plane? What objects or environment surround the subject? Is it an individual or group portrait? If a group, how are the figures positioned in relationship to one another?



Amy Sherald, *The Make Believer (Monet's Garden)*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist.
© Amy Sherald

Identity and Personality

Who is being portrayed in each work? How do body language, facial expression, clothing, hair, surroundings, and other objects convey personality and individuality? Does the subject appear relaxed, formal, dignified, lively? What signs, objects, or attributes indicate the subject's occupation or history? What is your sense of each artist's relationship with her subject(s)? How does the title of the work affect your interpretation of each image?

Style

Which media are used in the works you selected? How does that media contribute to the visual impact of the work? Are there aspects of the works that seem to directly draw from, satirize, or consciously resist traditional portraiture? Are the works realistic, abstract, or a blend? Is each figure's context and appearance believable or are they surreal or fantastical in some way?

Color

What role does color play in these three works? How does color (or the absence of color) inform the tone and atmosphere of the images? Which artists are using color symbolically and what is the effect?

Reaction

What emotions do the works evoke for you? Why? Which of the works do you most identify with? Why?

Context

How do the settings in her photographs play a role in the stories that Rahaman tells? What is the effect of Roberts suspending her figures on white backgrounds? Where do the backdrops in Sherald's paintings situate her subjects? Thinking back to our conversations with Sherald, Rahaman, and Roberts in "Black in America" and to the artist bios you read, how do the works you've chosen connect to or exemplify the artists' ideas and values?

*This set of questions draws inspiration from the Huntington and Scott Gallery Programs' curriculum "[How to Read a Portrait.](#)"

Write

Once you've explored the above set of questions, select one or two elements to focus on in a short, analytic essay (1000 words or fewer). Perhaps through your analysis, you've noticed that the color red plays an important symbolic role in each work. Maybe all three of the works you chose depict children. How does their depiction raise questions about the function of adolescence in the formation of identity? Hone your argument and craft a thesis statement around your original observations and insights from the previous section.

2. Museums and Race: Too Little, Too Late?

The murder of George Floyd in 2020 pushed the Black Lives Matter movement back into public awareness. In response to nationwide protests, many museums and cultural institutions released official statements “in solidarity” with protestors. Art museum Instagram feeds were suddenly filled with the work of Black artists—sometimes against the wishes of those artists, or **without asking their permission**. While **some museums** embraced actual policy changes, such as cutting ties with local police departments, others drew criticism for failing to engage or acknowledge BLM directly or admit to the complicity of **their collecting practices** in perpetuating a culture of white supremacy. Many museums are also being held to account for hiring practices, including the disproportionate numbers of white staff and curators on their teams; discriminatory practices and experiences of non-white visitors and guests.

How have institutions in your area entered this dialogue? Choose a local museum in your city or region and review their social media and press releases from 2020. How did that museum react to the surging BLM movement? What was the effect of that response? Visit local news sites or museum news pages to find out how your museum’s reaction was received. Have words and promises been matched by real actions since those initial statements? What do you think the museum might have done differently or better? Write a short opinion piece (500 words) supported with facts, taking a stance on the museum’s engagement with the current protest movements and political climate.

#BlackLivesMatter

MuseumNext is one source for insightful stories about how museums in the U.S. and abroad are responding to the wider issues that continue to spark public protests around the world. On June 9, 2020, Manuel Charr reported on how the Brooklyn Museum became one of the first major public institutions in New York City to open up its lobby space to Black Lives Matter protesters. Read the story [HERE](#). Image source: MuseumNext



make it your own

projects to ignite critical thinking and creativity

1. Quilts, Collaboration, and the Art of Sampling

In “Black in America,” Sanford Biggers introduces us to his practice of altering, adding to, and reinventing antique quilts. Through his work, he participates in a long tradition of African American quiltmaking and of activist quiltmaking. Quilting has long been understood as a craft tradition closely associated with women and the home. Biggers, and other pioneering Black quilt artists, such as **Rosie Lee Tompkins**, have used quilting to blur the line between craft and “high art,” deploying the quilt as an artistic vehicle to tell stories, preserve memories, and engage with a long history of textile art.

Quiltmaking has also served as a form of protest and activism for social causes. For instance, the **AIDS Memorial Quilt** raised awareness of the deadly AIDS crisis in the 1980s. The **International Honor Quilt** project, initiated by artist Judy Chicago in 1980, promoted a feminist message, archiving and celebrating the stories of women textile artists from around the world. Brooklyn artist and teacher **Sylvia Hernandez** has been using quilts to respond to **Black Lives Matter protests**. In 2020, sewing has once again become a prominent form of activism. Sewing masks for family and to donate to frontline workers has become a way that makers across cultural and racial divides are contributing to the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this project, you will design a quilt block with an activist message. Many quilts are pieced together from smaller units, called **blocks**, which are repeated and stitched together to make a larger pattern. If you are working collaboratively with a class or other group, you can “stitch” your blocks together to form a full quilt.

Target of Injustice: Industrial Prison Complex, 2020. Quilt by Sylvia Hernández, Dey Hernández, and AgitArte. At the lower edge of the quilt, the artists pose a question in capital letters: “IF ALL LIVES MATTER ‘CAUSE WE ARE CREATED EQUAL, WHY ARE SOME LIVES MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS?” Image courtesy of Sylvia Hernandez.



Choose a specific cause

Select a cause related to racial inequity. You might choose to focus on access to affordable housing, public health, climate justice, police brutality, immigration policy, reproductive rights, educational opportunities, or pay disparities (to name just a few possibilities). If you are working as a group, consider choosing a larger theme or idea that connects all of the component blocks to create a clear message. Research your cause—what ideas connected to that cause might be difficult to represent? How might your meaning or intent might be misread or misunderstood? How will you make your block’s activist intent clear while being sensitive to those affected? If you’re a white designer working on this project, reflect on the ways in which your own privilege and subjectivity might inform your design process.

Design your block(s)

Read more about African American quilting traditions and designs [here](#) and [here](#). Revisit the quilt work of [Sanford Biggers](#), [Rosie Lee Tompkins](#), and explore the work of the [Gee’s Bend quilters](#) in Alabama and the [story quilts of Faith Ringgold](#). What formal elements, such as the use of geometry, improvisational piecework, and color appeal to you in these quilts? How might you translate some of these elements into your own quilt block? Will there be a text element, either written or embroidered? What about representational elements, added through [appliqué](#) or other methods?

As you undertake the design process, reflect on and discuss: what is the difference between inspiration and appropriation? Imitation and homage? How will you attribute quotes and/or acknowledge the original creator of a design you would like to copy?

If you are working as part of a larger group, set a uniform size and shape for your blocks so that the designs can be combined into a larger quilt at the end.

Create a full scale sketch of your quilt block. You may find it helpful to use [quilt-specific graph paper](#) as a guide.

Create your block

If you have a background in sewing or textile art, you might wish to sew your quilt block out of fabric. If you use fabric squares for all the blocks, you could paint and draw or stencil on them. Otherwise, you could draw, letter, paint, or collage on the surface of uniformly sized paper or cardboard squares to create a mixed media collage installation. If you are working as a team on a larger quilt, what are the colors, materials, and methods that will tie the whole collaborative work together?

Share your quilt

Photograph or scan and upload your quilt block design. Share your activist quilt as a digital exhibition or on social media (Please tag us [@freshartintl](#) or share the link via email to info@freshartinternational.com).

2. Reinventing Monumental Landscapes

In Summer 2020, protests across the United States sparked by the murder of George Floyd led to the removal of numerous monuments depicting figures associated with the history of white supremacy, oppression, and racial hatred. Although this is not the first time that protestors and activist artists have engaged with these monuments (for example, **this “showdown”** between the Soul Rebels brass band and a statue of Robert E. Lee in New Orleans in 2014), the pace and extent of removals in 2020 was unprecedented. Protestors toppled Confederate generals, likenesses of Christopher Columbus, segregationists, and Spanish conquistadors, **along with many others**. Certain state and city governments participated in these widespread symbolic gestures, with some voluntarily removing statues from public places. The U.S. movement resonated internationally, as European nations and their former colonies reckoned with troubled imperial histories and their participation in the Atlantic slave trade.

This radical and rapid reordering of the world’s monumental landscape has left hundreds of plinths unoccupied and transformed through the addition of graffiti, street art, signage in support of Black Lives Matter and calls for a more inclusive and equitable historical narrative. Currently, it remains to be seen how these transformed sites will be used and interpreted in the future. Additionally, will the statues that were removed but not destroyed be placed in museums and recontextualized, **housed in some anonymous government basement**, or melted down and transformed into something else entirely?



Protestors defaced this monument to Confederate general J. E. B. Stuart in Richmond, Virginia, following the publicly witnessed police killing of George Floyd, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on Memorial Day, 2020. The statue was removed on July 7, 2020. Photo: Tyler Walter, via [Wikipedia](#).

Altering the symbolic landscape is only part of the equation, as pro-democracy activists **have lamented in Russia**, where many statues of hard-line communists fell during the collapse of the Soviet Union but authoritarian power structures still remain. In other words, the eradication of monuments is not necessarily synonymous with lasting and enforceable policy change. Yet, against calls to **“defund the police”** and **“abolish ICE,”** the removal of racist monuments provides a powerful and visually captivating symbolic backdrop, underscoring the earnestness and **unprecedented nature** of the 2020 protests.

For this project, you’re invited to choose one of the sites of a removed statue or other public artwork and devise a plan for repurposing, reinventing, and/or reinterpreting the site. (If you need help choosing a monument site, Wikipedia **maintains a running tally** of recent statue removals.)

Research

Investigate the date and circumstances of the statue’s removal. What happened to the statue afterwards? What is the state of the site currently? Are there any plans or proposals for how to reuse the site? What kind of public events has the site been used for in the past? Get more general context about the debate over contemporary monument removal from this **Panel Discussion** from the Society of Architectural Historians.

Brainstorm

In conversation with your peers, brainstorm 5-10 different ideas for transforming the site. At this point, creativity is the key. Discussions of cost and the logistics of implementing your plan can be deferred to the next stage.

Get Inspired & Set Criteria for Success

Read the **preface** to *Monument Lab: Creative Speculations for Philadelphia* (edited by Paul M. Farber and Ken Lum, 2020) to learn about how one city is turning monument design into a collaborative and democratic research project. For further inspiration, read up on the recently completed **Memorial to Enslaved Laborers** at the University of Virginia. And check out **this public art project**, which presents a significantly different angle on the subject: a park plan that leaves in place and makes it easy to learn the history of a real barrier between adjacent Black and white communities in Prince George’s County, Maryland. Pay particular attention to the design principles and audience engagement frameworks provided on pages 4 and 5 in the linked PDF.

What principles and methods from these projects might you bring to your own re-envisioning of a local monument? What audiences are you trying to reach, and which communities do you hope to engage?

Identify Potential Challenges

Read **this article** about how a 2016 attempt to artistically recontextualize a problematic mural at the University of Kentucky failed to stem students’ calls for the removal of the original 1930s artwork. Use this story to raise issues around your own chosen site: is it enough to add to or reinterpret the existing site (which may still feature an empty plinth and/or historic plaques) OR will you need to think more ambitiously about totally transforming and reinventing the space?

Listen to the podcast episode **The Return of Oñate's Foot**, which describes a long-running monument controversy in New Mexico. Who are the various stakeholders in this story? What do you think of the compromise finally reached? Use this podcast to spark questions around the communities and audiences who will be affected by your monument response. How will you deal with potential backlash to your proposal?

Ideate and Evaluate

Based on your discussions and reactions to the previous two stages, revisit your initial brainstorm. There may be some that you've reflected on and wish to discard, but perhaps there are a few that have stood up to discussion and debate with your peers. Choose two proposals to continue refining.

Solicit Community Engagement

Make a plan to invite community engagement. Consider how locals might be involved in designing and even help building the monument you propose.

Submit Your Proposal

After garnering and documenting community feedback to clarify and strengthen your proposal, consider submitting your idea to local arts and council members or to your state representative.

music vs. monument

In 2020, communities around the world are demanding the removal of memorials that perpetuate a legacy of systemic racial and ethnic injustice. Recent acts of violence against Black people in the United States have ignited wide-ranging debates around these monuments. The 21st-century civil rights movement known as Black Lives Matter is the leading force behind massive protests across the U.S. and abroad. Crowds are toppling statues honoring colonizers, enslavers, and Confederate heroes.

Social justice advocates have contested these iconic sculptures for decades. In the episode **Music vs. Monument**, we look back to 2014, for one example. From a rooftop in New Orleans, the Soul Rebels brass band performed a face-off against the towering statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee. At the time of this publication, the plinth stands empty; the City of New Orleans removed Lee's statue in 2017.

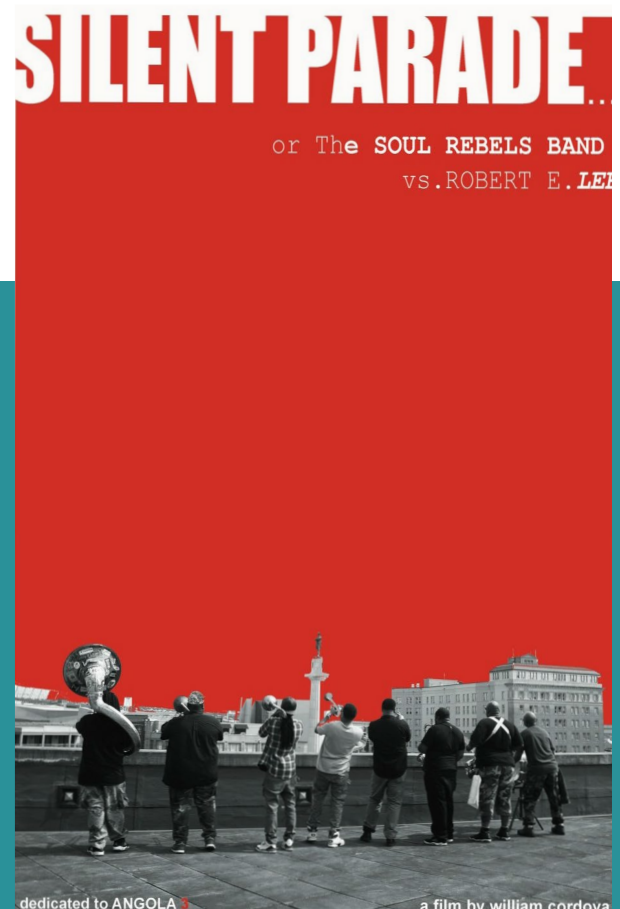
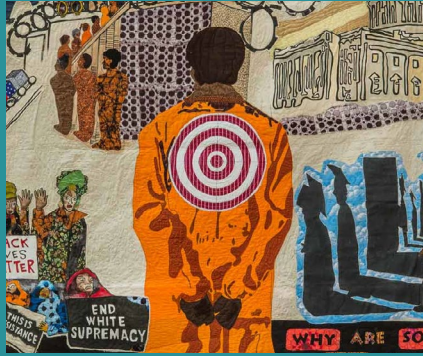


Image: Poster for the Soul Rebel's *Silent Parade*, organized and documented by cultural practitioner william cordova and collaborators, New Orleans, 2014. Image source: william cordova.



In “Black in America,” we hear from artists, curators, and writers who are shaping the current discourse around race, equity, and representation.

connect with us

How are you using this guide? What would you like to see included in future guides? Send us an email at info@freshartinternational.com to share your stories and ideas!

Looking for more Fresh Art content to enliven your classroom or inspire your creative practice? Enter our [Learning Portal](#) to explore Research Guides, Topical Playlists and the Student Edition. Listen to Fresh Art International wherever you go for podcasts. Subscribe [HERE](#).

Connect with Fresh Art on social media @FreshArtINTL:



This issue is made possible by the generosity of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, CBMAA’s Associate Curator of Contemporary Art Allison Glenn, and the Museum’s Black Staff Resource Group.