

AMONG OTHERS BLACKNESS AT MoMA



MoMA

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Darby English and Charlotte Barat

BLACKNESS AT MoMA

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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BLACKNESS AT MoMA:

Charlotte Barat and Darby English

A LEGACY OF DEFICIT

The Black Man is the one (or the thing) that one sees when one sees nothing, when one understands nothing, and, above all, when one wishes to understand nothing.

—Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, 2013

This essay tracks moments in which, over a succession of historical contexts and power relations, The Museum of Modern Art approached or encountered racial blackness. Until very recently, most black artists, their work, and representations of blackness swirling in MoMA's immediate orbit were nevertheless blocked from consciousness here. Indeed Achille Mbembe's paradoxical notion, quoted above, about a cultural process dedicated to maintaining ignorance rather than to reversing it fits MoMA's historical situation vis-à-vis race to a T. We hope to advance the conversation about this known fact by exploring its full historical scope. If we were simply describing MoMA's paltry track record in this department, this would be a much smaller book. No, it's worse: there are things MoMA has bought or shown in order not to understand them at all. And a nontrivial number of them have blackness in common.

It's not *all* bad news: since its founding in 1929, MoMA has made a number of innovative contributions to the cultural fields that black life transects, and has brought key artists to the audiences they deserve. The assumption is false that this Museum, a frequent target of criticism because of its authority and capital, has had no meaningful involvement with black artists, or with issues stemming from racial blackness. It has; in truth, MoMA's historical relationship with black artists and black audiences is an uneven one, alternating between moments of pioneering initiative and episodes of neglect and worse. Equally true: MoMA's undertakings in these arenas from 1929 until today are marred by the use of supposedly colorblind criteria of "quality" and "importance" in judging art. For black people, women, and other cultural minorities, this has meant much doublespeak and little opportunity. So one of the questions we ask here is, How have MoMA's criteria functioned to render it open to some and closed to others? Are the stringency of these criteria and the vigilance of their application part of the reason why, when blackness manifests at MoMA, it does so in brief episodes and clusters? (The multi-racial structure of this book experiments with an alternative model.)

By their very nature, art museums are selective, judging some work better than other work for a variety of reasons. Too, they are necessarily institutional, which lends all their judgments a power of decree. But at the end of the day, regardless of the power and influence they claim or acquire, art museums are human systems: unstable, grounded in bias, habitual, and difficult to modify. Their views of the terrain they survey are incomplete at best; that is how, late in 2018, more than 75 percent of 10,108 artists represented in the country's most important museums were white men.¹ Even though changing over time, the cultural norms of The Museum of Modern Art, a bulwark of artistic achievement, have only lately encompassed racial blackness. And this to a minimal degree.

All museums are emblematic of an urge, ever present in modernity, not merely to classify and order but to homogenize. The goal has been to create entities whose unity mirrors that of cities, states, ethnicities, sexes, classes, and other putatively bounded human communities. Many museums were created with the aim of making wholes from parts that no unity could otherwise contain. This is a project in which no art museum has or could ever succeed, because art, as nothing else, reveals the variety of the conceptions and forms that human expression again and again proves, *especially when it is creative*. The sheer variousness of art embarrasses and sometimes explodes the unities upon which every premise of the art museum depends. In this sense the museum is in conflict with art.

The conflict only deepens when something about an artwork's creator differs from the going norm: white, male, and oriented to art's established routines. The slightest divergence from that model can deliver discussion of an artist's work to topics bearing no actual relation to what she or he made. "Black artist = black art," an equation black artists have troubled from the first, improbably remains a default institutional position in the second decade of the twenty-first century.² But it's not a given, it's a practice. And it remains one because institutions continue to eschew the risk of troubling it. At their peril.



whole of Sweeney’s discourse according to the difference between an indistinct, anonymous, and ahistorical “primitive negro” maker and the “modern sculptors and painters such as [Pablo] Picasso, [Amedeo] Modigliani and [Constantin] Brancusi” who, it is said, hold this shadowy figure in the highest esteem.¹⁹ When *African Negro Art* closed, in May 1935, before touring the country, it was one of MoMA’s most popular presentations to that date. It was also the first to draw notable numbers of black New Yorkers to the Museum. In fact, feeling that “the exhibition would be of great interest to the Negroes of New York,” MoMA had launched a significant marketing offensive, generating “an increase of almost 6% in the attendance at the Museum.”²⁰ Besides engaging community leaders, MoMA also undertook to photograph the exhibition’s objects to broaden their impact: the Museum created seventeen portfolios of 477 photographs each, by no less a photographer than Walker Evans, and donated seven of these to the 135th Street, Harlem branch of the New York Public Library and to historically black universities. A number of photographs were also enlarged and circulated free of charge to fifteen colleges with black students.²¹

The exhibition occurred in the context of a broader conversation about black American artists’ relationship to African forerunners and counterparts. That conversation was led by the philosopher Alain Locke, who had edited *The New Negro* (1925), an anthology that had served as a kind of charter for the Harlem Renaissance. One of his own contributions to that book had been his essay “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” which implored young black artists to seek inspiration in African art.²² There and elsewhere, Locke had argued that unlike a Picasso or a Modigliani, who used African art as but a “liberating idiom or an exotic fad,” black artists could, through African forms, reclaim a part of their cultural past lost to the displacement of their ancestors through the slave trade.²³ He saw MoMA’s achievement in *African Negro Art* as a step in the right direction, to say the least: in fact his approval of the project compelled him to help Sweeney in locating objects in American collections, and to pen a laudatory review hailing the curator as the “presiding genius” who “gleaned this vast territory and pressed the essence, giving America . . . its greatest show of African art.”²⁴ Yet Locke’s vision was subtler than Sweeney’s. Indeed, he sought a culturally integrated situation: if the lessons of African sculpture were impressed upon black American artists, “its blood descendants,”²⁵ then “a distinctively racial school of American Negro art” would result.²⁶ That is, Locke imagined a reconciliation of two distinct strivings: aliveness to heritage and adaptation to the here and now. Ultimately, however, the here and now he imagined was not shared by a multiracial cadre of modernist artists; it was black.

African Negro Art served as a touchstone for several Harlem artists including Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, at the time respectively twenty-three and seventeen years old. “The show made a great impression on me,” Lawrence would recall;²⁷ it led him to make “a couple of [wooden] pieces . . . the nearest thing I’ve ever come to sculpture.”²⁸ Norman Lewis, then twenty-five, obtained permission to draw in pastel from the works on display.²⁹ At the time, a vogue for Africanism as a cultural style was raging in Harlem. A cartoon published in the black *Amsterdam News* (fig. 3) bespeaks the complexity arising from the experiential distance between contemporary black New Yorkers and living African civilizations as displayed in *African Negro Art*: wearing an expression somewhere between surprise and perplexity, a turned-out black visitor to the exhibition bends forward to address a pedestal-mounted, seated male figure whose head resembles his own. What does “black” mean, the cartoon seems to ask, when two such putatively similar figures find themselves so far apart.

MoMA’s experiments with African art left no lasting marks on the collection. Two wooden masks—an Ivory Coast and an Itumba—were acquired between 1936 and 1939 for the purpose of “comparison with 20th-century paintings by such artists as Picasso and Modigliani.”³⁰ Both had been deaccessioned

by 2016. There was, however, a longer exhibition history. In 1952, a small exhibition, *Understanding African Negro Sculpture*, revived the themes of the 1935 show; to “help explain the plastic qualities of [African] sculpture,” each of the seven exhibited objects was accompanied by photographic studies showing it from different angles or highlighting details.³¹ *The Art of Assemblage*, in 1961, included among its 250 objects one anonymous work from Cabinda (today’s Angola), *Two-Headed Dog*, loaned by the Musée de l’homme, Paris.

Until *African Textiles and Decorative Arts* (1972) and “Primitivism” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (1984), the Museum’s strongest advocate for non-Western traditions was René d’Harnoncourt, director from 1949 to 1968 and the cofounder, with Nelson Rockefeller, of the Museum of Primitive Art, across the street from MoMA, in 1957. D’Harnoncourt’s 1948–49 exhibition *Timeless Aspects of Modern Art* advanced his thesis that modernism was not an isolated historical phenomenon by juxtaposing Western modern art with objects from other eras and cultures (fig. 4). This time, the exhibition used physical proximity to assert the theoretical fact of “close relationship.”³² No didactics were used; again and again, a viewer encountered, in a given pairing or grouping, “an invitation . . . to undertake his own explorations.”³³ The idea was to demonstrate affinities and analogies; the show would be “a reminder that such ‘modern’ means of expression as exaggeration, distortion and abstraction have been used by artists since the very beginning of civilization.”³⁴ At this point the Museum was still working overtime to create a sympathetic public for abstract art. You might make abstraction an easier pill to swallow by linking it to deep historical time, and to places associated with deep culture—images and objects that nonetheless bore all the strangeness of the newest nonobjective art.



It was 1934, almost five years after the Museum’s founding, before the work of a black American artist was exhibited there. That year, Earle Richardson’s lush portrayal of four black cotton workers (fig. 5) was the sole painting by a black artist included in a MoMA exhibition of works realized under the Public Works of Art Project (PWAP), the first of the New Deal’s art programs. Established in December 1933, the PWAP aimed to bring relief to the artists of the Great Depression, giving roughly 3,500 artists an average of \$34 per week—“craftsmen’s wages”—to create works to embellish tax-funded buildings and parks.³⁵ Although it was structured to welcome any qualifying artist with a demonstrable need of employment, only 500 women, some 30 Native Americans, and roughly a dozen black artists were enrolled.

In May 1934, the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, D.C., had presented an exhibition of over 500 PWAP works selected by sixteen regional committees. Asked to depict the “American scene in all its phases,” artists had projected a vast nationalist image of the rural and urban United States, north, south, east, and west.³⁶ This vision included people of all colors, both thriving and indigent. Believing in “supporting the artists during the horrible depths of the Depression,” as the longtime MoMA curator Dorothy C. Miller would recall, Barr volunteered to bring the show to MoMA.³⁷ Roughly half of the works on view at the Corcoran were sent to New York; from these, Barr made a further selection of about 150 works—including that by Richardson, a native New Yorker.

To Barr’s eye, Richardson’s painting evidently outshone works by black artists Samuel Joseph Brown, Malvin Gray Johnson, and Archibald J. Motley, Jr., which had also come to New York for his consideration. Perhaps the choice reflected stereotype-driven contemporary expectations. Richardson’s

4 *Timeless Aspects of Modern Art*, November 16, 1948–January 23, 1949. Installation view. Left to right: “Gabun [Gabon] Funerary Figure,” 19th c.; Pablo Picasso, *The Painter and His Model*, 1928; “Sudanese Wooden Figure,” 19th c. Photographic Archive, MoMA Archives, New York

5 Earle Richardson. *Employment of Negroes in Agriculture*. 1934. Oil on canvas, 48 × 32 ½ in. (121.8 × 81.6 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Transfer from the U.S. Department of Labor, 1964

archived correspondence, photographs, brochures, press clippings, and ephemera related to black artists, retrospectively demonstrating her and Barr’s familiarity not only with contemporary black artists from Douglas to Hayden but also with scholars (Locke, Porter, et al.), patrons (the Harmon and Rosenwald foundations), and people on the scene (Halpert, Betty Parsons, etc.).¹⁵⁰ An example of this familiarity: in 1944, when the *Times* art critic Edward A. Jewell told MoMA about the “Negro sculptress” Selma Burke, whom he had just “discovered,” Miller responded, “I am glad to have [the artist’s] present address and would like to see her new work. I don’t know why Mr. Jewell thinks he ‘discovered’ her. She is quite well known and taught sculpture at the WPA Harlem Art Center.”¹⁵¹

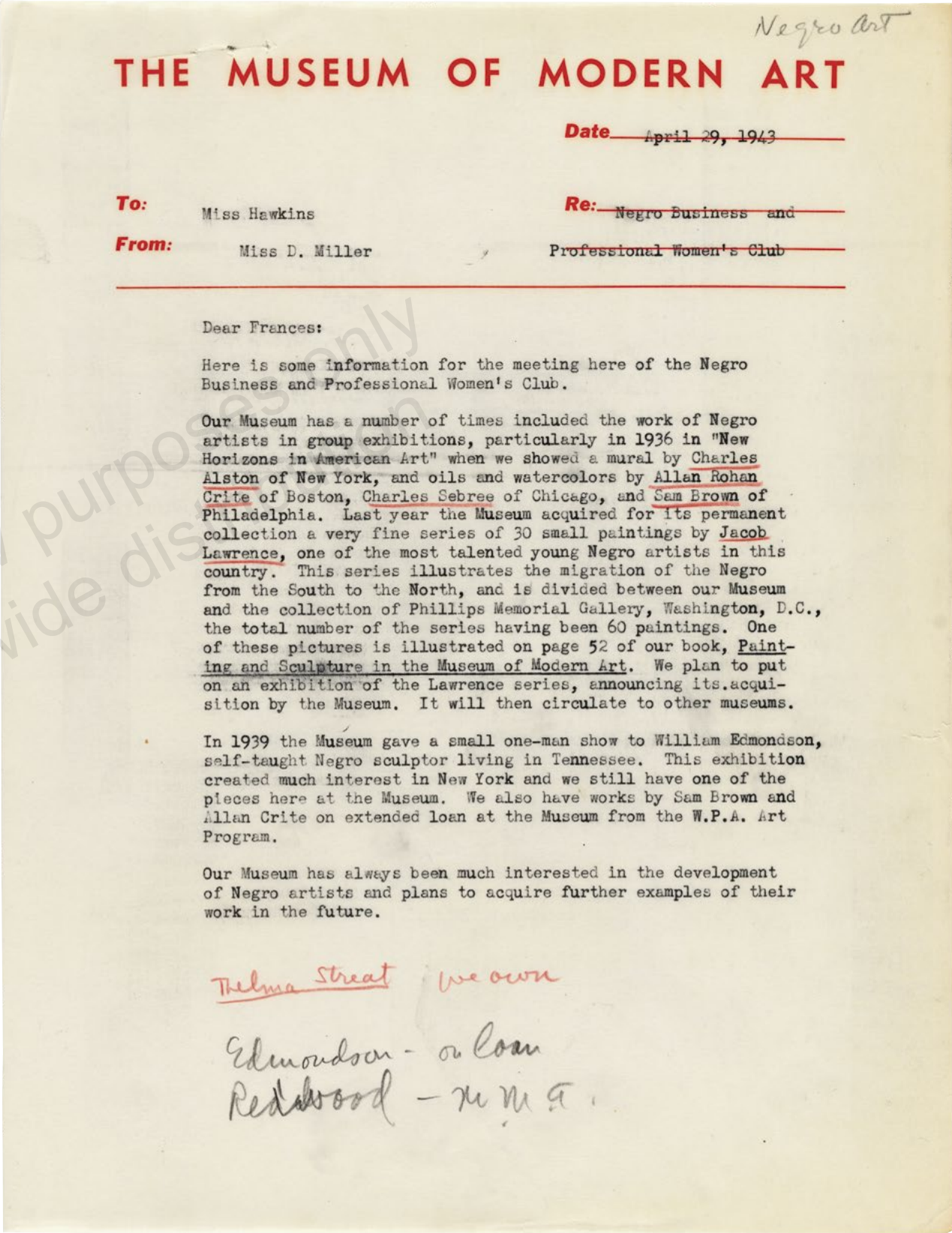
If MoMA’s “Negro Art” file, maintained from the 1940s to 1970, holds a special interest, this is partly because it records many encounters between the Museum and figures and artworks that have stood the all-important test of time, and then some. It includes brochures for the *Negro Art Contemporary* exhibition at New York’s McMillen Gallery in 1941 and for *American Negro Art* at the Downtown Gallery in 1942, the latter with handwritten marks beside an untitled Ronald Joseph work, William H. Johnson’s *Jesus and the Three Marys* (1941), and Motley’s *Black Belt* (1934). The file contains a copy of a letter Miller wrote to the Swarthmore Committee on Race Relations recommending to them Halpert and the Downtown Gallery, Pippin (“one of the most interesting Negro artists I know of”), and Peter Pollack’s WPA-sponsored South Side Community Art Center in Chicago, a city Miller considered “perhaps the most vitally important center in which Negro artists are working today.”¹⁵² Handwritten notes—“Sebree, Streat Johnson, Lawrence (add another), Allan Crite, Pippin (better ones), Barthé . . . , Charles White (add fresco), Cortor (better one), W. H. Johnson”; “Harmon foundation for better examples by: Aaron Douglas, Palmer Hayden, Motley, Charles Alston, Malvin Gray Johnson, Cortor? Charles Davis? Thelma Streat; DT [Downtown] gallery for better Lawrence, Pippin”—suggest many prompts, plans, and imaginings about whose consequences we can only speculate. For Miller’s willingness to recommend black artists to other institutions and foundations does not seem to have been matched by efforts on their behalf at MoMA itself.

The above may give the impression of quite extensive dealings between black artists and many principal players at MoMA. Needless to say, however, a proportionate account of the Museum’s dealings with white artists would have to be greatly *more* extensive—longer and more detailed, a narrative of continuous discovery and triumph as well as failure—a tale, in other words, that no single book could tell.

In 1943, Miller declared, “Our Museum has always been much interested in the development of Negro artists and plans to acquire further examples of their work in the future” (fig. 25).¹⁵³ In truth, MoMA’s engagement with black artists was slight, yet the pedagogical thrust of its program caused some to regard the Museum, and particularly Miller, as authorities in the field. Hindsight compels us to see this, too, as a missed opportunity to assume the responsibility onlookers attributed to the Museum. In 1944, for example, MoMA received a letter from a Michigan graduate student seeking information on “the Negro and his art, both American and African.”¹⁵⁴ Any material provided would ultimately go toward a manual for the teaching of this subject—a needed volume. “Unfortunately, we have very little to offer you,” Miller replied. She mostly referred her interlocutor to Mary Brady, then director of the Harmon Foundation (an organization created in the 1920s to support black American artists), explaining that “Miss Brady has a large file of information about all the contemporary Negro artists, so far as I know the only such file in existence.”¹⁵⁵

In December 1945, an interracial cohort of artists including Catlett, Hirsch, Philip Evergood, John Sloan, and Moses Soyer wrote to Miller on behalf of the Committee for the Detroit Art Exhibit during Negro History Week. They were organizing an exhibition, they wrote, “to combat the campaign of racial antagonism that is being carried on in Detroit by . . . America Firsters. . . . May we use your name as a

→
25 Dorothy Miller, letter to Frances Hawkins, April 29, 1943, before a meeting of the Negro Business and Professional Women’s Club in the Museum’s Auditorium on May 2, 1943. MoMA Department of Painting and Sculpture files, “Black Artists/Art”



WHITE

Mabel O. Wilson

BY DESIGN

In MoMA's *Good Design* exhibitions of 1951, Ovals, a fabric by African-American designer A. Joel Robinson, stood out among the sample swathes hung on display in the Museum's gallery (fig. 1), and among a larger selection of design objects in Chicago's massive Merchandise Mart.¹ Robinson created his award-winning modern design for the Manhattan-based manufacturer L. Anton Maix, a company whose fabrics by noted white designers Serge Chermayeff and Paul McCobb were also on view in the 1951 *Good Design* shows. Maix printed Robinson's variable pattern of overlapping outlined and solid colored ovals on fine Belgian linen, a fabric best suited for draperies and adaptable for summer clothing. Robinson, who had trained as an architect but worked in other design disciplines, developed with Maix an innovative production process that arranged patterns in kaleidoscopic formation.² Shown in the Mart and the Museum's galleries alongside selected furniture, lamps, tableware, kitchenware, appliances, and flooring, Ovals's abstract geometry of shifting forms exemplified the industrial machine aesthetic and utilization of new technologies that MoMA was promoting as fundamental to modernism in the disciplines of architecture, planning, graphic design, product design, and industrial design.

In an effort to popularize modern design principles in the booming postwar consumer-goods market, *Good Design*'s white head curator, Edgar Kaufmann, Jr., also negotiated to have some items from the exhibits, including Robinson's high-end fabric at \$9 a yard, on view in special displays at the Bloomingdale's and Abraham and Straus department stores in New York. Kaufmann, the son of a Pittsburgh department-store family who recognized the importance of modern design's influence on how Americans could live, wanted *Good Design* to directly affect the design and production of household products. Because the exhibition had several platforms—MoMA's galleries, the two semiannual exhibits at the Merchandise Mart (which attracted twenty-seven thousand buyers), and a kit of iconic labels to affix to select goods on sale in department-store displays nationwide—it was an accessible primer for consumers anywhere in the country.³ For Kaufmann, what distinguished an item out of the thousands submitted to him by manufacturers and distributors was that it possess “eye-appeal, function, construction and price, with emphasis on the first.”⁴ By these standards, Robinson's fabric designs advanced modern manufacturing techniques and had the aesthetic allure to succeed in the marketplace.⁵

For the *Good Design* exhibits of 1952, the committee of architects, designers, curators, and industry experts chose Robinson's fabric Ovals No. 1, a hand-printed oval pattern on beige linen. Another variation of Robinson's Ovals pattern (#2, or II; fig. 2) was included in a special fifth-anniversary *Good Design* exhibit in 1955. For this later show, an all-white MoMA special committee that included René d'Harnoncourt, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., and Philip C. Johnson, respectively the Museum's director, founding director, and the founder of the Museum's Department of Architecture and Design (A&D), joined Kaufmann to choose one hundred exceptional objects from the previous exhibitions to highlight “visual excellence” and “progressive furnishings available on the American market since 1950.”⁶

Robinson's triumph in being selected several times by a distinguished museum such as MoMA was heralded in a 1952 issue of *Ebony*, a *Life*-like magazine aimed at black American audiences, as the “first Negro to crack the fabric design field and only Negro ever to win Good Design Awards” (fig. 3).⁷ Although Robinson, then twenty-nine, had trained in architecture at New York University and Cooper Union, he told *Ebony* that he had worked as a bellhop and a bartender because no New York architecture firm would hire a Negro architect.⁸ *Ebony*'s monthly articles, such as the ones reporting on Robinson's successes, functioned as bellwethers of black middle-class progress in the face of the overt and structural white racism that hampered all forms of black economic and social advancement in the postwar United States. *Ebony* heaped praise on Robinson's skyrocketing rise in industrial design. In the early years of his career, unable to secure employment as an architect, Robinson designed several fabrics for Maix, as well as completing advertisements and product and furniture designs. In 1954, according to *Jet Magazine*,



1 *Good Design*, November 27, 1951–January 27, 1952. Installation view. A. Joel Robinson's Ovals textile is among those hanging on the back wall, on the left. Photographic Archive, MoMA Archives, New York



an institution dedicated to contemporary black art and culture, but the accompanying book was never published.

It is revealing that in *Visions of Harlem* Drexler wanted “no photographs of people.” The absence of black residents would have rendered Harlem’s architecture as a sociopolitically neutral vessel, accessible and in “service to both the black and white communities.” This was not the first time Drexler had used Harlem as a tabula rasa for the white architectural imagination. In the 1967 exhibition *The New City: Architecture and Urban Renewal* (fig. 6), he had invited four teams of white architects and planners, from Cornell, Columbia, MIT, and Princeton universities, to imagine a “new city” for Harlem and northern Manhattan. The projects proposed by architects Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, Richard Meier, Colin Rowe, and others were seen in bird’s-eye views, as if the spectator were hovering above Harlem’s main avenues. The architects reconfigured neighborhoods by inserting large white grids and primary-colored geometries outlining block-busting mega-projects. As a reminder of architecture’s limits, Drexler cautioned, “it would be presumptuous to suppose that problems of poverty and prejudice, and the hundred other evils that beset us, can be solved by architecture alone.”²⁷ In the minds and eyes of MoMA’s curators, architecture was above the fray.

Black by Design

MoMA offered designers an experimental platform to explore the arts of architecture and design, but it is important to note that these same disciplines were also mobilized to racially divide spaces in cities and towns across the United States, and in other nations engaged in forms of colonial domination. Racial segregation was implemented through a host of agents and apparatuses in the field of design. In the public arena of housing, “urban renewal” was code for “Negro removal” from the 1930s to the ’70s. The ruthless evictions of black and poor families in the name of slum clearance opened up land for gargantuan experiments in housing and for the national highway system, and left thousands of empty lots awaiting future development. In the private housing market, black Americans were deliberately excluded through legal means from homeownership in white neighborhoods. Public agencies such as the FHA joined with the private banking system to deploy practices such as redlining, which rated black neighborhoods as undesirable and risky for investment, depriving those communities of financial capital to construct new buildings and improve old ones. The marketplace of household goods popularized by *Good Design* and exhibitions like it served flourishing white-only suburbs that kept black populations in increasingly marginalized and underserved urban ghettos. “Despite the fact that architects and design critics of the period emphasized avant-garde solutions and even the search for a ‘democratic’ architecture,” writes historian Dianne Harris, “very few postwar building professionals engaged consistently or deeply with issues of social, economic, and political justice.”²⁸ Harris adds that “design professionals tended to imagine the consideration of race and class as falling outside of the purviews of their respective professional realms.”²⁹ Indeed, white architects largely shared Drexler’s stance that architecture alone could not solve poverty and prejudice.

The invisibility of black designers in MoMA’s exhibitions, and most conspicuously in the A&D collection, highlights the paradox of modern architecture and design in terms of its ideal of universality, its goal of service to all, in contrast to those it actually served. MoMA’s experiments with private and public housing reveal the intimacies of spaces designed for individuals, families, and communities. It is precisely in these everyday realms of the home, of work, and of public space that racism walled off white bodies from their racial others. For instance, before Johnson became affiliated with MoMA, he and Barr were neighbors. All educated at Harvard but in different disciplines, Barr, Hitchcock, and Johnson traveled in the same social circles of elite art patrons. In 1930, a year after Barr became the

director of MoMA, he and his wife, Margaret Scolari Barr, moved into a one-bedroom apartment in the Southgate apartment complex in midtown Manhattan.³⁰ Their apartment was directly over the unit Johnson had rented before joining MoMA’s staff in the fall of 1930.³¹ In consultation with Johnson, the Barrs furnished their apartment with the latest tubular-steel furniture, mainly by Donald Deskey. Johnson enlisted Mies, the German architect who at the time was head of the Bauhaus, and his collaborator Lilly Reich to design his apartment.³² Johnson’s daily domestic routines were orchestrated by minimalist modernist furniture in metal, leather, and glass; the walls were adorned with modern artworks recommended by Barr. Modern design choreographed every aspect of home and work—precisely MoMA’s future vision of American life.

The places many Americans called home were regulated by racial boundaries that segregated white residences from black ones. Many white-only domiciles, however, were transgressed daily by black domestics, often the labor force that maintained the impeccable order and polished gleam of the modern interior.³³ A magazine photograph of Johnson’s iconic Connecticut residence the Glass House, built in 1949, for example, shows Johnson sitting at his desk (fig. 7); another photo captures a black butler behind the kitchen counter (fig. 8). Architect and architectural theorist Mario Gooden observes, “Johnson said that he wanted to keep the kitchen very abstract, to make it just a simple bar. It seems that this figure of the black butler standing at the cooking unit signified that this was the service space of the house. And this is important because it signifies the larger ways race has been at the service of modern architecture.”³⁴ Le Corbusier too saw blackness in that service. Visiting Harlem during a trip to the United States in 1935, in part sponsored by MoMA, the Frenchman rhapsodized about “hot jazz” and the dynamic movement of black performers, including trumpeter Louis Armstrong, as akin to machines and black skyscrapers. This raw primitive energy of modernity would give rise to new “white cathedrals,” modern skyscrapers in Le Corbusier’s beloved Europe.³⁵

The primitive reappeared in MoMA’s 1964 exhibition *Architecture Without Architects: An Introduction to Non-Pedigreed Architecture*, a show on indigenous and vernacular buildings around the world. It was organized by the Czech-American architect and social historian Bernard Rudofsky, who believed that “the philosophy and know-how of the anonymous builders presents the largest untapped source of architectural inspiration for industrial man.”³⁶ Whether discovered in the ghetto, the colony, or remote regions, blackness and black building forms, in their vital simplicity, provided white architects with conceptual and formal inspiration to advance their cause of social progress and technological advancement in the metropole.

In this period, however, was there a critical “black architecture” not in service to white modernism? In April 1965, *Esquire* magazine published an article by the black architect and writer June Jordan (writing under her married name, June Meyer), “Instant Slum Clearance,” which featured the proposal “Skyrise to Harlem”—the original title of the essay before *Esquire* replaced it with something more provocative, and also attributed the project solely to Jordan’s white collaborator, architect R. Buckminster Fuller (fig. 9).³⁷ Working with Fuller, whose work had been featured in solo shows at MoMA, Jordan envisioned a new architectural landscape for Harlem absent the devastating sweep of slum clearance. Launched as a critique of urban renewal’s ruthless displacement of poor residents, “Skyrise to Harlem” imagined a participatory process in which Harlem’s black residents would incrementally build skyward a new community of a hundred circular decks with residences adorned by hanging gardens fed by recycled water.³⁸ To avoid the displacement typical of urban renewal, the first floor of the new



7 “Johnson House: North End of West Wall,” fig. 13 in Philip Johnson, “House in New Canaan, Connecticut,” *The Architectural Review* 108, no. 645 (September 1950):156. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

8 “Johnson House: Cooking Unit,” fig. 21 in Philip Johnson, “House in New Canaan, Connecticut,” *The Architectural Review* 108, no. 645 (September 1950):159. The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York

Terry Adkins

B 1953 Washington, D.C., USA
D 2014 New York, New York, USA

Last Trumpet 1995

Brass, sousaphone and trombone bells, four parts
Each: 18 ft. x 24 in. x 24 in. (548.6 x 61 x 61 cm)
Gift of David Booth; and gift of Mr. and Mrs. Murray Thompson
(by exchange). 2017

From the late 1970s until his death, in February 2014, artist and musician Terry Adkins developed a multifaceted practice that integrated sculpture, live music, spoken language, and video. Adkins was an ardent proponent of abstraction, as indebted to modernist sculpture as to the vernacular craft and musical traditions of the American South. He said, “My quest has been to find a way to make music as physical as sculpture might be and sculpture as ethereal as music is.”

In 1986, Adkins founded the Lone Wolf Recital Corps, a group with a rotating membership of artists and musicians with whom he would stage multidisciplinary performances he called “recitals.” Incorporating live and recorded music, video, recitation, and costumed, choreographed movement, these events were for Adkins part of “an ongoing quest to reinsert the legacies of unheralded immortal figures to their rightful place within the panorama of history.” The recitals commemorated and celebrated such figures as the nineteenth-century abolitionist John Brown, the blues singer Bessie Smith, and the jazz saxophonist John Coltrane. In their exuberant pageantry and solemn ceremony, they evoked the mystical rites of religious traditions and attained a momentary synthesis of the arts embodied by the notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk.

Last Trumpet, an ensemble of four eighteen-foot-long horns that are both monumental sculptures and functional musical instruments, exemplifies Adkins’s aim to bridge the realms of music and sculpture. He invented these colossal valveless horns, which he dubbed “Akrhaphones,” by attaching the severed bells of used trombones and sousaphones, bearing the eroded engraved logos of their manufacturers, to conical sections of cast brass. Singly authored, the four-part sculpture is collectively activated: the debut musical performance of *Last Trumpet*, in 1996, featured a quartet drawn from the members of the Lone Wolf Recital Corps.

Adkins’s sculptural compositions were guided by a process he called “potential disclosure,” which he described as summoning the innate value within the discarded materials he assembled. “I made [the horns] on the scale at which I thought angels would play them,” Adkins explained, “and so the Akrhaphones actually represented the horns of the first four angels of the Last Judgment.” Originally titled *Silver Sonic*, *Last Trumpet* was first displayed in an exhibition dedicated to the artist’s late father, Robert Hamilton Adkins, an educator and musician whose initials, “RHA,” are embedded in the word “Akrhaphone.” Adkins thus linked his personal tragedy, the loss of his father, to the universal reckoning of the Apocalypse. The Akrhaphones’ viscerally impactful sounds—encompassing a range of styles, from classical sacred music to Negro spirituals to jazz—evoke both the infernal terror and the paradisiacal jubilation of the celestial gatherings described in the biblical book of Revelation and Dante’s *Divine Comedy* (c. 1308–20), Adkins’s stated sources of inspiration for the work.

Adkins kept the Akrhaphones until the end of his life, including them in installations where they were displayed and played by various iterations of the corps, accumulating additional meanings as they circulated.



Last Trumpet 1995

View of the performance of *Last Trumpet* by Terry Adkins, Blanche Bruce, and the Lone Wolf Recital Corps in the Performa 13 Biennial, New York, November 18, 2013

Akili Tommasino



Njideka Akunyili Crosby

B 1983 Enugu, Nigeria

Born and raised in Nigeria, Njideka Akunyili Crosby studied at Swarthmore, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and Yale University, and her subject matter, references, and sentiments are informed by these diverse cultural sources. Her diasporic experience, her continued contact with her homeland and its cultural and social complexities, and her marriage to a white American all shape her subjects and narratives. In her methods, materials, and stylistic influences, Akunyili Crosby shows a deep awareness of contemporary artists from Robert Rauschenberg to Kerry James Marshall, while her visual vocabularies suffuse intimate domestic scenes with the products and riotous patterns of her African homeland. Akunyili Crosby produces large-scale drawings and paintings, frequently of interiors that suggest familiar narratives but retain elements of mystery and ambiguity. These scenes are often directly inspired by the artist's own experiences and memories, and are populated by her family members, friends, and people she has met or recalls from back home.

In composing her works, Akunyili Crosby combines sources from different worlds, mixing family photographs from Nigeria with an interior of her own apartment. Each element is broken down into constituent parts (figures, furniture, background, surrounding spaces), transferred onto transparent films, and projected and retraced onto the final support. During this process she considers and finalizes crucial decisions about the details of the scene. She also makes deliberate and complex use of transfer prints, using a mineral-based solvent to transfer photocopied images from newspapers and product catalogues, magazines and books, onto the support. (Rauschenberg used this technique to great effect in his work starting in the late 1950s.) Akunyili Crosby layers these transfers, creating dense patterns that may move from a figure to parts of a piece of furniture, a background wall, a carpet, or an architectural element, creating an atmosphere of tension and instability. The transferred images are drawn from a wide variety of sources, ranging from colonial-era portraiture through recent popular culture to the intricately detailed Dutch wax-print fabrics produced by the Dutch manufacturer Vlisco for the African market, and they often directly reference Nigerian and African-diaspora culture.

In *And We Begin to Let Go*, a young black woman, seen in profile, sits in an ornate armchair while a male figure standing behind her bends over to whisper into or kiss her hidden left ear. While her face, neck, and arms are bare and dark-skinned, his torso is rendered more ambiguously: his short-sleeved T-shirt is a flat monochrome on the shoulders and back, while the front is adorned with densely patterned fragments of transferred images, which also cover his bare elbow and lower arms. Only part of his right arm is rendered in a color approximating white skin, suggesting that this male figure is white.

The chairs and floor are also covered in densely patterned images. The man's address appears tender, but just as well could be understood to be more ambiguous, whispering a warning or instruction in the woman's ear. Her downcast eyes and heavy lids could equally be seen as sensual and dreamy or sullen, stoic, even resentful. The work contains all the hallmarks of Akunyili Crosby's breakout body of work, which she started making in 2010 and was first shown in 2013, and which presented her as a developed, formally inventive storyteller. Her particular strength is in conveying a mood that hovers between intimacy and longing, discovery and loss.

Christian Rattemeyer

And We Begin to Let Go 2013

Acrylic, pastel, charcoal, collage, Xerox transfers, and marble dust on paper
6 ft. 11 ½ in. × 8 ft. 8 ¾ in. (212.1 × 266.1 cm)
Promised gift of Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine Farley. 2013



Álvaro Barrios

B 1945 Barranquilla, Colombia

A young black Colombian poses as Marcel Duchamp in that artist's female pose as Rose Sélavy. The Colombian's mustache—a real feature of his persona c. 1980—adds a layer to the image: *L.H.O.O.Q.*, Duchamp's mustached version of Leonardo's Mona Lisa. Ultimately, then, with *L.H.O.O.Q.* as the last term in the work's four-name title, Álvaro Barrios appears as a mustached Mona Lisa, *après* Duchamp. And Mona Lisa, by showing a masculine attribute in Barrios's version, reveals or "lays bare," Barrios tells me, "the man behind Rose Sélavy by Duchamp."

Barrios has set references to Duchamp at the core of his production. He has also set Eros there, an eroticism full of gayness, in the sense of both homoeroticism and arbitrary humor. Barrios, who in his Duchampian obsession has dreamed the creation of an imaginary Museo Duchamp del arte malo (Duchamp museum of bad art) in the city of Barranquilla, in northern Colombia, has often combined signature conceptual strategies—such as the mass-media distribution of his "*grabados populares*" (popular prints)—with pop, kitsch, and camp elements, framing a repeated and often comic Duchampian *ritornello*. His humble image of himself as Duchamp/Rose Sélavy/L.H.O.O.Q. is arguably central to his practice, revealing its multilayered syncretic structure: campy, kitschy, and Duchampian.

It was in 1979 that Barrios, about to present his first Duchamp-based works at the Garcés Velázquez gallery in Bogotá, conceived his landmark appropriation of Rose Sélavy, which ultimately became a print, conceived to be endlessly reproduced and distributed through unconventional, outside-the-art-world ways, notably in the press. Much of Barrios's work takes the form of "*grabados populares*" featuring comic book-like images, intentionally flamboyant and referring systematically to the work of Duchamp: Dick Tracy meets Duchamp meets Superman, if not—almost—Tom of Finland. Esoterism, in Barrios's thinking, is closely related to his interest in Surrealism and in Duchamp. In an additional layer of complexity and Caribbean hybridity, he claims to be a gifted spiritual medium, in which capacity he claims to have made a connection with Duchamp in the late 1970s (Duchamp died in 1968), establishing a dialogue that has lasted his entire career since: "Once I accepted Duchamp as a friend coming from an unknown dimension, I had the feeling of having initiated a journey full of risks, phantoms, and storms as powerful and unpredictable as those Ulysses went through."

Álvaro Barrios as Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy as L.H.O.O.Q. blossoms with Barrios's signature irony, and just for that reason is a very serious work. Without claiming any thesis, the powerful and comic image of Duchamp/Sélavy as a black Colombian transvestite offers a radical creolization of an icon of the white European avant-garde, an artist whose legacy has relentlessly emerged, if as an object of subversion, in the production of this key conceptual artist of Colombia.

Luis Pérez-Oramas

Álvaro Barrios as Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy as L.H.O.O.Q. 1979

Postcard
5 1⁄16 × 4 1⁄16 in. (14.1 × 11.6 cm)
The Museum of Modern Art Library,
New York



Barbara Chase-Riboud

B 1939 Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA

The Albino 1972
(reinstalled in 1994 by the artist as
All That Rises Must Converge/Black)

Black-patinaed bronze, wool, and various fibers
15 ft. × 10 ft. 6 in. × 30 in. (457.2 × 320 × 76.2 cm)
Committee on Painting and Sculpture Funds,
and gift of Mrs. Elie Nadelman (by exchange). 2017

The Albino hunkers down atop a tightly coiled base, weighty bronze anchoring two energetic extensions that soar upward: possibly limbs or pathways, but undeniably outgrowths from the same seed. The organic curves of the oxidized bronze both defy and exaggerate the metal’s solidity, conjuring the searing heat and strenuous labor required to mold the unyielding material into what could be draped cloth, artful origami, an exotic shell, or perhaps some kind of wreckage. From this base rises an elegant parabola of wool and other fibers, hanging like royal decoration. Studded with tassels, swaggered garlands wind, braid, and knot to weave a complex, texturally polyphonous cord with many associations: nautical ropes, impossibly glamorous experimental knitwear, hair weaves, even bondage restraints. In the end, though, all are abstractions.

Barbara Chase-Riboud’s sculptures move across not just mediums but time. Her textiles and patined surfaces seem both to rustle like strands of hair and to settle and compress like bones, sitting at a productive juncture between the living and the dead, between contemporaneity and antiquity. *The Albino* has a particularly insouciant relationship to time; it was once shown in an entirely different configuration, with the two textile branches joining in one skyward thrust, under the title *All That Rises Must Converge/Black*.

Chase-Riboud made her first bronze casts as a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, in 1956–57, using the ancient lost-wax method to arrive at sculptural forms otherwise impossible in metal. In 1957 she also took a formative trip to Egypt, where she was influenced by non-Western forms of art. A return to living in Europe in 1960 removed her from developments in the United States such as the Black Arts Movement, but in 1970 she nevertheless became one of the first black women, alongside Betye Saar, to show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1965 she explored Buddhist caves in China and hit on her approach to figuration: “These draped Buddhist figures were headless . . . because the British and Americans had stolen all the heads. It was uncomfortable to see these massive figures beheaded; these exquisite carvings were mutilated, and yet their presence was enormous and overwhelming. So I tried to get rid of the figure in my work. My sculptures are personages, it’s true, but there’s no figure there anymore.”

Chase-Riboud’s poems and best-selling novels offer further entry into her visual work. Her breakout 1979 novel *Sally Hemings* chronicled the relationship between Hemings and Thomas Jefferson, centering on the enslaved woman’s perspective; other books have recovered lost narratives of other women of African descent. Chase-Riboud’s practices as writer and visual artist are inextricable, and *The Albino* exemplifies this convergence in that she wrote a poem to accompany it. She has said of her writing, “Each book is a kind of monument to an invisible figure,” and this invisibility finds form in a repeated phrase of the poem: “White African/Walking negative.” A photographic film negative, of course, inverts the image’s black and white values, so that black skin would be stark white; the term “negative” also functions as a secret truth or obverse to what is collectively accepted. Chase-Riboud is interrogating not just blackness, not just whiteness, but truth itself. Undermining color as a determinant or identifier, as well as the dualities referenced by the bipartite sculpture, she asserts, “I am as male as I am female/I am as white as I am black.” These lines are not just a key to this particular sculpture but a personal manifesto. *The Albino* is yet another “invisible figure” dealing with the trauma of difference and hypervisibility; as she writes in the poem, “An ancestor called back/To prove the soul survives.”

Jocelyn Miller



Julie Dash

B 1952 New York, New York, USA

Daughters of the Dust 1991

35mm film (color, sound)
112 min.
Gift of Kino International. 1998

We need recognize the multiple achievements of Julie Dash’s *Daughters of the Dust* as a stellar matrix of singularities—first theatrical feature by a Black American woman in the history of cinema; first full-length by a woman member of the “L.A. Rebellion” (per scholar Clyde Taylor’s coinage) collective of ’70s Black filmmakers, which also gave us the heraldic works of Charles Burnett, Haile Gerima, Larry Clark, Barbara McCullough, Billy Woodberry, and Alile Sharon Larkin; first period drama about the distinct culture of the Gullah folk of South Carolina’s Sea Islands—but for many viewers, none is more palpable and visceral than Dash’s decision to have a community of Black women, predominantly darker complexioned, occupy the narrative center of a filmic history for the production’s hour-and-fifty-two-minute running time.

How those women psychologically and linguistically occupy the film’s core is as uncompromising to cinematic convention as it is physiognomically and phenotypically. The Gullah voice and vernacular are as distinct to the extra-ethnic Anglophone ear as those of Jamaican patois, and are likewise a language whose intelligibility to such ears depends on not just translating the unique pronunciation of phonemes but knowing the meaning of the colloquialisms in the islanders’ rich, idiosyncratic repertoire of metaphoric folk wisdom.

Daughters is also a film that literally and figuratively privileges the narrative voice of its Black women’s wombs—those wombs’ spiritual resonances and echoes, their reproductive necessity for the sustenance of a culture, their violation by generations of European rapists. In another contravention, there are no European characters in the film, just reminders of the wounds inflicted on the bodies and psyches of Black men and women by sexual assault.

The film has also drawn much commendation since it was released for the cinematography of first-time Director of Photography Arthur Jafa—particularly in terms of its remarkable, breakthrough capture of its protagonists’ range of luminous and lustrous skin tones. When Jafa was once asked by a stunned Black woman viewer, “How were you able to make the women look so gorgeous?,” his reply was simply, “I just shot what was there.”

Greg Tate



Samuel Fosso

B 1962 Kumba, Cameroon

Untitled from the series African Spirits 2008

Gelatin silver print
64 1⁄8 × 48 1⁄8 in. (162.8 × 122 cm)
The Family of Man Fund. 2016

Samuel Fosso makes photographs that catalyze the performative nature of identity. An Igbo who spent much of his childhood in Nigeria, Fosso was displaced by the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–70 and settled in Bangui, in the Central African Republic, where he launched his own portrait-photograph studio at the age of thirteen. After hours, he took advantage of leftover exposures on rolls of film used for commissions to playfully pose for the camera himself, often donning fashionable clothes and reveling in self-transformation. Fosso broke onto the stage of global contemporary art in 1994, at the first Rencontres de Bamako, a biennial of African photography. His subsequent work took aim at an expanded field of social types and recognizable figures, increasingly undertaking analysis of cultural mythologies.

The African Spirits series is a group of large-scale black and white photographs in which Fosso assumes the personas of iconic heroes of the African independence and the American Civil Rights movements. Ranging from Léopold Sédar Senghor and Nelson Mandela to Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, Fosso animates public figures whose images—alongside their actions—were objects of collective desire and vehicles of political will. This portrayal of the activist, scholar, and onetime kidnapping and murder suspect Angela Davis amalgamates features of several famous pictures—an F.B.I. wanted-poster photo, the covers of *Life* magazine and of her autobiography, and media deployed in the “Free Angela Davis” campaign—all of which contributed to her iconicity and fame.

Untitled, the series’ photographs draw their charge through visual recognition rather than nomination. The viewer identifies Davis by the attributes Fosso assumes. At the time of her greatest prominence, her Afro seemed to condense an era’s racial and gender politics, serving on the one hand as an object of identification and adulation, on the other as proof of alterity and criminality. For Fosso in African Spirits, the politics of the mass image are characterized by a Janus-faced mix of fame and notoriety. Davis herself has reflected on the susceptibility of such iconic representations to co-optation; their decontextualization or appropriation, she writes, “reduces a politics of liberation to a politics of fashion.” Fosso’s working of the pop archive participates in Davis’s own exhortation to “develop strategies for engaging photographic images” in ways that contribute to social and political memory rather than occluding them. He is forthright about his desire to convey the significance of these historical figures to audiences who may be ignorant of their contributions, telling one interviewer, “This series is in homage to the leaders who have tried to liberate us, to give us back our dignity as Africans and as blacks.”

The mutability of historical images is mirrored by the pliability of identity. “I wear the lives of others,” Fosso says, “it is not disguise.” Artist and scholar Olu Oguibe has noted the series’ resonance with Igbo ritual practices of masquerade, and Fosso’s activation and inhabitation of his archival icons is indeed mediumistic as much as mimetic. He explains, “I put on his clothes, and I enter his soul. I leave myself, and I become him. Then I take the picture. And when it’s over, I come back to myself.” Phenomenologically, these larger-than-life images produce a kind of flicker effect, in which one’s recognition of the source collides with one’s awareness of Fosso’s performance. Although he has often worked in color, these particular prints are rendered in a pellucid gray scale that, while signifying pastness, also proffers an illusion of immediacy, as though fostering a connection across the breach of time. Rarely have photographic portraits so exceeded the scale of their real-world referents. Physical enlargement engenders affective charge. In bridging disparate historical moments, the work is commemorative, but also serves as a means of iconic amplification.

Phil Taylor





DeLuxe 2004-5

Portfolio of sixty photogravure, etching, aquatint, and drypoints with lithography, screenprint, embossing, tattoo-machine engraving, laser cutting, and chine collé, some with additions of modeling clay, paper collage, enamel, varnish, gouache, pencil, oil, polymer medium, watercolor, pomade, velvet, glitter, crystals, foil paper, gold leaf, toy eyeballs, and imitation ice cubes

Each: 13 × 10 ½ in. (33 × 26.7 cm); overall: 7 ft. × 13 ft. 11 in. (213.4 × 424.2 cm)
 Publisher and printer: Two Palms Press, New York. Edition: 20
 Acquired through the generosity of The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art and The Speyer Family Foundation, Inc., with additional support from the General Print Fund. 2004

William H. Johnson

B 1901 Florence, South Carolina, USA
D 1970 Central Islip, New York, USA

William Henry Johnson, one of the great painter/poets of American experience, left South Carolina, the state of his birth, in 1917, when he was only seventeen, and found a place in the Harlem home of an uncle who made a good living as a porter on the trains that ran north and south. Johnson’s journey was part of the Great Migration, the mass exodus of black Americans from the South that had begun in earnest that year and that in the years to come would thoroughly transform American society and culture. The double “North/South” consciousness of black migrants to American cities would become Johnson’s core subject.

Soon after arriving in New York, Johnson was already able to imagine himself as a professional artist, even with few black figures as precedents and little formal education of his own. By working as a stevedore, cook, and porter, he saved the money to attend the National Academy of Design, where he excelled to the degree that his teachers raised funds to allow him to study in Europe. There he schooled himself in the lessons of European modernism, using bright colors and loaded brushstrokes to create expressionist landscapes that found small but steady sales. After marrying Holcha Krake, a Danish artist, designer, weaver, and ceramist, in 1930, he spent time in Scandinavia and developed a deep interest in folk art and culture that he carried into his later work.

In the fall of 1938, with Europe on the brink of war, Johnson and Krake returned to New York, settling in Greenwich Village. Their repatriation was prompted by their alarm at the rise of fascism—the previous year, Johnson’s brother-in-law, the Expressionist artist Christoph Voll, had lost his teaching position in Germany and had had his work denigrated in the Nazis’ *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate art) exhibition in Munich. Johnson also spoke of a desire to come home to “paint his own people.” In these lean Depression years he found employment, in spring 1939, through the Work Projects Administration (WPA), as an artist/instructor at the Harlem Community Art Center (HCAC), the largest WPA-funded center in the country. There Johnson found himself at the heart of a vibrant community of artists, including Charles Alston, Henry Bannarn, Selma Burke, Gwendolyn Knight, Jacob Lawrence, and others.

Johnson’s work changed dramatically in New York. He learned screenprinting at the HCAC, where a workshop dedicated to the technique had been set up, and before and after teaching classes at the center he spent time creating hundreds of prints. Screenprinting was generally used for commercial art, but the fine artists at the HCAC were imaginatively repurposing it. The method helped Johnson to define a new visual language of simplified forms and flat planes of bright color laid down in inexpensive opaque inks. It also seems to have served as a prompt for him, allowing him to let go of the painterly expressionist idiom he had honed in Europe in order to embrace something that seemed newer and bolder, that mixed high and low, that could speak plainly of a new kind of urban experience with folk origins. Johnson made prints and paintings in parallel in these years, often tackling a subject virtually simultaneously in both mediums, and the spare forms and vibrant colors that he used in his prints carried over into his painted work too.

In both, Johnson began focusing on images of black life in the urban North and rural South. Many of his images of this period depict the Harlem community and touch on the forces that made it what it was. The screenprint *Blind Singer* (c. 1940), for example, pays homage to two street performers. They wear city clothes—suit and tie, hats and heels—but the guitar speaks of the blues, with that music’s deep roots in the South, where it evolved from the songs of black sharecroppers, and of those earlier enslaved, before making its way to urban areas with the Great Migration. The



Blind Singer c. 1940

Screenprint with tempera additions
Composition and sheet: 17 ½ × 11 ½ in.
(44.5 × 29.2 cm)
Publisher: unpublished
Printer: the artist, New York
Edition: unknown
Riva Castleman Endowment Fund and
The Friends of Education of The Museum
of Modern Art. 2001

Children 1941

Oil and pencil on wood panel
17 ½ × 12 ½ in. (44.5 × 31.8 cm)
Gift of Abby Aldrich Rockefeller
(by exchange), Agnes Gund,
Marlene Hess and James D. Zirin,
and the Hudgins Family. 2016



Aïda Muluneh

B 1974 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Resolutely singular, *Strength in Honor* stops its viewer in her tracks. It arrests, if only for a moment, her exploration of the dreamlike space evoked by *The World is 9*, Aïda Muluneh's serial—and surreal—deployment of painted bodies, glowing colors, and digital abstraction. In title and composition, *Strength in Honor* points to representational conventions associated with depictions of accomplished or otherwise esteemed individuals. Cloaked in a language of dignity, the profiled woman sits for her portrait, staring ahead. She is sitting but not passive. A band of electric-blue face paint lends dynamism to the hint of tension in her jaw; this sitter is actively orchestrating, collaborating with the artist to bring the motions of her body into a harmony that produces the profile's elegant lines. Nevertheless, the voluptuous intensities of her impossibly red costume ask the viewer to attend to it rather than to her. The image uses color to hold out the possibility that there is more at stake than a particular sitter's performance of idealized personhood. After all, her costume is strangely flat, devoid of the reality effects of photographic texture. It is an abstraction that frees the imagination to explore multiple interpretive possibilities. Botticelli's late-fifteenth-century Dante, in all his red-robed glory, might flicker across the rose-colored glass of the mind's eye, perhaps accompanied by the brightly hued and emphatically contoured icons of the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church.

Strength in Honor might then begin to look more like the self-portrait of a celebrated Ethiopian photographer. Despite his exile from the city of his birth, Dante has come to represent Florentine cultural achievement. Similarly, despite having spent much of her life abroad, Muluneh has become an important figure on the Ethiopian art scene, thanks not only to her work behind the lens but also to her efforts to build institutions that support African artists. As others have noted, Muluneh's interest in the visual language of Ethiopian Orthodox icons, and in practices of bodily ornamentation from all over the world, indexes a desire for a mode of image-making that does not reproduce the objectifying looks of the colonial relation. As *Strength in Honor* reveals, though, this desire has not generated a practice that renounces European culture. Rather, it recasts that tradition as one imbricated with others—as anything but universal. *Strength in Honor's* glance toward Botticelli's portrait of Dante speaks to the particularity of Muluneh's artistic career—she made a series inspired by Dante's *Inferno* in 2014—as well as to the particular history of her home country. The piece's idiosyncratic entanglement of African and European visual traditions conjures up the afterimages of conflicts, such as the Italian Fascist invasion in the 1930s, that not only proved central to the development of contemporary Ethiopian culture but also made their effects felt all over the globe. There is therefore no honor here in choosing to see either portrait or self-portrait, “East” or “West”—to take a side would mean losing both. The challenge of the image is precisely to dwell with the relational movement between self and other that makes and unmakes individual and collective identities of all kinds.

Carmen Merport Quiñones

Strength in Honor from the series *The World Is 9* 2016

Pigmented inkjet print
31 ½ × 31 ½ in. (80 × 80 cm)
Fund for the Twenty-First Century, 2018



Melvin Van Peebles

B 1932 Chicago, Illinois, USA

Asked in 2016 about *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*, Melvin Van Peebles, then eighty-five, replied, "I was doing what I was doing, writing what I was writing, and that was it." Turning down a filmmaking offer from Columbia Pictures, Van Peebles instead invested personal funds to produce *Sweet Sweetback* unencumbered by outside influence, and the result is one of the most transformative American films of the early '70s. *Sweet Sweetback* made a vital contribution to the blaxploitation genre, a cinematic phenomenon developed specifically for black audiences, cast mainly with African Americans, and featuring funk, R&B, soul, and gospel on the films' soundtracks. Blaxploitation was controversial: on the one hand its characters could often be seen as racial stereotypes, on the other it privileged artists, actors, and urban stories rarely featured in the cinema of the time. And as Van Peebles's friend Richard Milner later observed, "What shocked the [film] industry more than *Sweetback's* sex and violence were the credits at the end. Turns out Melvin not only starred in the movie but did everything else too. . . . All this at a time when blacks behind the camera were even rarer than dark leading men."

The film opens with an orphan working in a Los Angeles whorehouse, where his gentle nature and, eventually, his sexual prowess make him a favorite of the prostitutes. One night, police officers come to the brothel: an African American has been murdered, the community is militating to find the perpetrator, and the police fabricate a plan to pin the murder on Sweetback. On the way to the station, they also arrest Mu-Mu, a member of the Black Panthers, and handcuff him to Sweetback in the police car. When Mu-Mu curses them, they pull the car over, force the two men out, and begin a savage beating. Reacting wildly, Sweetback pounds the policemen unconscious with the handcuffs on his wrist. Thus begins his perilous flight from South Central Los Angeles to Mexico.

Sweet Sweetback now becomes a road movie in which the fugitive Sweetback encounters all manner of disenfranchised, strung-out, poverty-stricken individuals. The law views him as an archetypally hypersexualized African American on the run; his random encounters with the marginalized reinforce his determination to foment social change. Earlier bitter experiences have brought home to him the realities of injustice and inequality. Where previously he has silently accepted prejudice, his unwarranted arrest now obliges him to fight in order to live. A title card at the film's start sums up his radical philosophy: "This film is dedicated to all of the Brothers and Sisters who have had enough of the Man."

Sweet Sweetback, Van Peebles felt, "simply couldn't be a didactic discourse which would end up playing to an empty theater except for ten or twenty aware brothers who would pat me on the back and say it tells it like it is. . . . to attract the mass we have to produce work that not only instructs but entertains." The didactic nature of *Sweet Sweetback* was certainly clear, but the film was also entertaining, with its clever screenplay and its soundtrack by Earth, Wind & Fire. Radical in more than its militant content, *Sweet Sweetback* includes experiments with visual form, incorporating split screens, strobos, negative images, jarring camera angles, stop-motion, and embellishments of highly saturated color. Editing the film himself, Van Peebles also supplied incongruous jump cuts and temporally disorienting montage segments.

Forty-five years after the original release of the film, Van Peebles was asked whether he had intended it to influence the political and social perspective of the audience back in 1971. He responded, "I didn't think about that." Was his reply a little disingenuous, or perhaps roguishly sly? Hard to know, but the impact of *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* not only on cinema but on social consciousness, culture, and political discourse remains indisputable.

Anne Morra

Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song 1971

35mm film (color, sound)
98 min.
Purchase from Direct Cinema Limited. 1993.
Restored from original materials on loan from the artist, with funding from The Film Foundation and The Hollywood Foreign Press Association



Carrie Mae Weems

B 1953 Portland, Oregon, USA

She'd been pickin em up and layin em down, moving to the next town for a while, needing a rest, some moss under her feet, plus a solid man who enjoyed a good fight with a brave woman. She needed a man who didn't mind her bodacious manner, varied talents, hard laughter, multiple opinions, and her hopes were getting slender.

He had great big eyes like diamonds and his teeth shined just like gold, some reason a lot of women didn't want him, but he satisfied their souls. He needed a woman who didn't mind stepping down from the shade of the veranda, a woman capable of taking up the shaft of a plough and throwing down with him side by side.

They met in the glistening twinkling crystal light of August/September sky. They were both educated, corn-fed-healthy-Mississippi-stock folk. Both loved fried fish, greens, blues, jazz and Carmen Jones. He was an unhardened man of the world. She'd been around the block more than once herself, wasn't a tough cookie, but full grown woman for sure.

Looking her up, down, sideways he said, "So tell me baby, what do you know about this great big world of ours?" Smiling she said, "Not a damn thang sugar. I don't mind telling you my life's not been sheltered from the cold and I've not always seen the forest or smelled the coffee, played momma to more men than I care to remember. Consequently I've made several wrong turns, but with convictions I can tell you I'm nobody's fool. So a better question might be: what can you teach me?"

He wasn't sure, confessing he didn't have a handle on this thing called life either. But he was definitely in a mood for love. Together they were falling for that ole black magic. In that moment it seemed a match made in heaven. They walked, not hand in hand, but rather side by side in the twinkle of August/September sky, looking sidelong at one another, thanking their lucky stars with fingers crossed.

Untitled (Man smoking) from The Kitchen Table Series 1990

Gelatin silver print and text panel
Image: 27 ³/₁₆ × 27 ¹/₁₆ in. (69 × 68.8 cm),
text panel: 13 × 10 ¹/₁₆ in. (33 × 25.5 cm)
The Family of Man Fund. 1991

