

Fall 2020

Manual / Issue 14 / Shadows

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Recommended Citation

Ganz Blythe,, Sarah Editor-in-Chief; Pickworth,, Amy Editor; Achi, Andrea; Admassu, Emanuel; Bateman, Anita N.; Best, Makeda; Borromeo, Gina; Brown, Rashayla Marie; Davis, Shuriya; Emezi, Akwaeke; Fincher, Tayana; Harvey, Melanee C.; Irvin, Kate; LaNay, Sade; Molon, Dominic; Onabanjo, Oluremi C.; Quashie, Kevin; Shenoda, Matthew; Mitchell, Kelly Taylor; and Wilson, Leslie, "Manual / Issue 14 / Shadows" (2020). *Journals*. 41.

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THE SOULS OF BLACK FOLK

I

OF OUR SPIRITUAL STRIVINGS

*O water, voice of my heart, crying in the sand,
All night long crying with a mournful cry,
As I lie and listen, and cannot understand
The voice of my heart is in my side or the voice of the sea,
O water, crying for rest, is it I, is it I?
All night long the water is crying to me.*

*Unresting water, there shall never be rest
Till the last moon droop and the last tide fail,
And the fire of the end begin to burn in the west;
And the heart shall be weary and wonder and cry like the sea,
All life long crying without avail,
As the water all night long is crying to me.*

—ARTHUR SYMONS



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Issue—14 / Fall/Winter 2020 / Shadows

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Special thanks to Nicole Amaral, Emily Banas, Denise Bastien, Gina Borromeo, Laurie Brewer, Linda Catano, Julia D'Amico, Christin Fitzgerald, Jamie Gabbarelli, Sionan Guenther, Jan Howard, Anna Rose Keefe, Kiku Langford McDonald, Ingrid Neuman, Maureen C. O'Brien, Jeremy Radtke, Kajette Solomon, Ameer Spondike, Glenn Stinson, Jessica Urick, Elizabeth A. Williams, and Tammie Worthington-Witczak.

The RISD Museum is supported by a grant from the Rhode Island State Council on the Arts, through an appropriation by the Rhode Island General Assembly and a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, and with the generous partnership of the Rhode Island School of Design, its Board of Trustees, and the RISD Museum Board of Governors. Additional generous support for this issue of *Manual* is provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the RISD Museum Associates, and Sotheby's.

Manual: a journal about art and its making (ISSN 2329-9193) is produced twice yearly by the RISD Museum. Contents © 2020 Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design.

Manual can be purchased at the museum's Visitor Services desks and at risdmuseum.org/subscribe, and is a benefit of some levels of membership. To learn more and purchase back issues, visit risdmuseum.org.



(cover)

Zanele Muholi
South African, b. 1972
Kodwa I, Amsterdam, 2017
Gelatin silver print
Image: 100 × 66.7 cm. (39 3/4 × 26 1/4 in.)
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2018.16
© Zanele Muholi. Courtesy of the artist,
Yancey Richardson, New York, and
Stevenson Cape Town / Johannesburg

(previous page)

Excerpt from *The Souls of Black Folk*
by W. E. B. Du Bois, 1903; poem from
The Crying of Water by Arthur Symons,
1903; music from "Nobody Knows the
Trouble I've Seen" (traditional).

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Anita N. Bateman earned a PhD in art history and visual culture and a graduate certificate in African and African American studies from Duke University in 2020. She was the Andrew W. Curatorial Fellow in the Prints, Drawings, and Photographs Department at the RISD Museum from 2017 to 2019.

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Gina Borromeo is the curator of ancient art at the RISD Museum. She is currently co-planning an exhibition focusing on the theme of harmony and discord.

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Akwaeke Emezi is a writer and video artist based in liminal spaces. Their young-adult novel *Pet* was a 2019 National Book Award finalist.

Tayana Fincher, currently the Nancy Prophet Fellow at the RISD Museum, curated the exhibition *It Comes in Many Forms: Islamic Art from the Collection*, on view from May 15 to October 18, 2020.

Melanee C. Harvey is an assistant professor of art history at Howard University. She is currently working on a book about the architectural history of the African Methodist Episcopal denomination, which permanently altered the American landscape.

Kate Irvin is the RISD Museum's head curator of costume and textiles. Her most recent exhibition was *Repair and Design Futures*.

Sade LaNay (fka Murphy) is a poet and artist from Houston, Texas. They are the author of *Härte* (Downstate Legacies, 2018), *self portrait* (Birds of Lace, 2018), *Dream Machine* (co-im-press, 2014), and the forthcoming *I love you and I'm not dead* (Argos Books).

Dominic Molon is the Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art at the RISD Museum. He recently organized projects with Nicole Eisenman and Simone Leigh for the museum's *Raid the Icebox Now* exhibition initiative.

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Matthew Shenoda is the author and editor of several books, including *Bearden's Odyssey: Poets Respond to the Art of Romare Bearden*. He is currently the associate provost for social equity and inclusion and a professor of literary arts and studies at RISD.

Kelly Taylor Mitchell (RISD MFA 2018, Printmaking) centers oral histories of the Africana Diaspora, specifically those related to land tenure, territorial claims, community autonomy, swamp marronage, and inherited identity. She is an assistant professor and the art program director at Spelman College.

Leslie Wilson is the Curatorial Fellow for Diversity in the Arts at the Smart Museum of Art through fall 2020 and an assistant professor of art history at Purchase College, State University of New York.

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From the Files pries open the archive, Double Take looks at one object two different ways, Artist on Art offers a creative response by an invited artist, Object Lesson exposes the stories behind objects, Portfolio presents a series of objects on a theme, How To explores the making of an object

Romancing the Shadow

Anita N. Bateman

The year 2019 was momentous. The 1619 Project, organized by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, marked the 400th anniversary of the first enslaved Africans' arrival to the shores of what is now the United States. Meanwhile, Ghana designated 2019 as the Year of the Return to welcome African people dispersed throughout the diaspora back to the continent. It is also the year that the world lost a literary giant whose writing was so poignant and heart-wrenching that it single-handedly revolutionized the English language. Embodying both "Empress-Supreme" and "Magician," this writer bent words to her will, obligating them to communicate the depth of Black life without pretense or apology.¹

When Toni Morrison writes of ripping the veil in her essay "The Site of Memory," she conveys it as a necessary breach and invitation to Black people to own their own narratives—to transform terrible histories, dangerous even, into power. In the nineteenth century, the veil was present in slave narratives, in memories and events too abominable to recount. In the early twentieth century, ruminating on the failures of post-Reconstruction America, W. E. B. Du Bois created a sociological concept that associated the veil with the line that separated Black life from white terrorism, i.e., the color line first introduced by Frederick Douglass. Articulated as the darker, or melanated, skin of African Americans, as well as framed as an inhibitory blind spot of whiteness, the veil is a "second sight" that stems from the devaluation of African Americans' unique perspectives and self-knowledge. At some point, Black people are or will be made aware that Blackness has connotation; at the same time, Black people see whiteness, or whiteness is made transparent, in a way that it isn't to white people. As a consequence, the veil is forever linked to double consciousness, and it is always relational.

With the veil comes another aspect: the question of crossing over into the discernible, of bringing the shadow into light. In other words, visibility. Thus, the veil has a relationship to the gaze, with the gaze having the added function of looking. One of the most powerful tools in the arsenal of art history and visual culture, the gaze has the sociological and anthropological charge of making the world visually understandable. At the same time, its objective has been to obscure—to hide history (ahistoricize, dehistoricize), to overlook and erase. To veil without permission, and often without recourse.

Over the years, scholars have problematized this concept of visual accountability that the gaze demands for itself and its wielders; some, like Martinican philosopher and poet Édouard Glissant, have universalized the resistance to being known, calling it the “right to opacity,” for what is not visible cannot be trivialized, misunderstood, or exploited. This anti-visibility is not the same as being invisible, rather it is the power to operate against systems of imperial domination, including the gaze. It asks: How do we force the gaze to surrender? What if explanation were off the table? By enabling a *petit marronage* that can be expressed in the visual and symbolic use of shadow, the gaze is challenged.

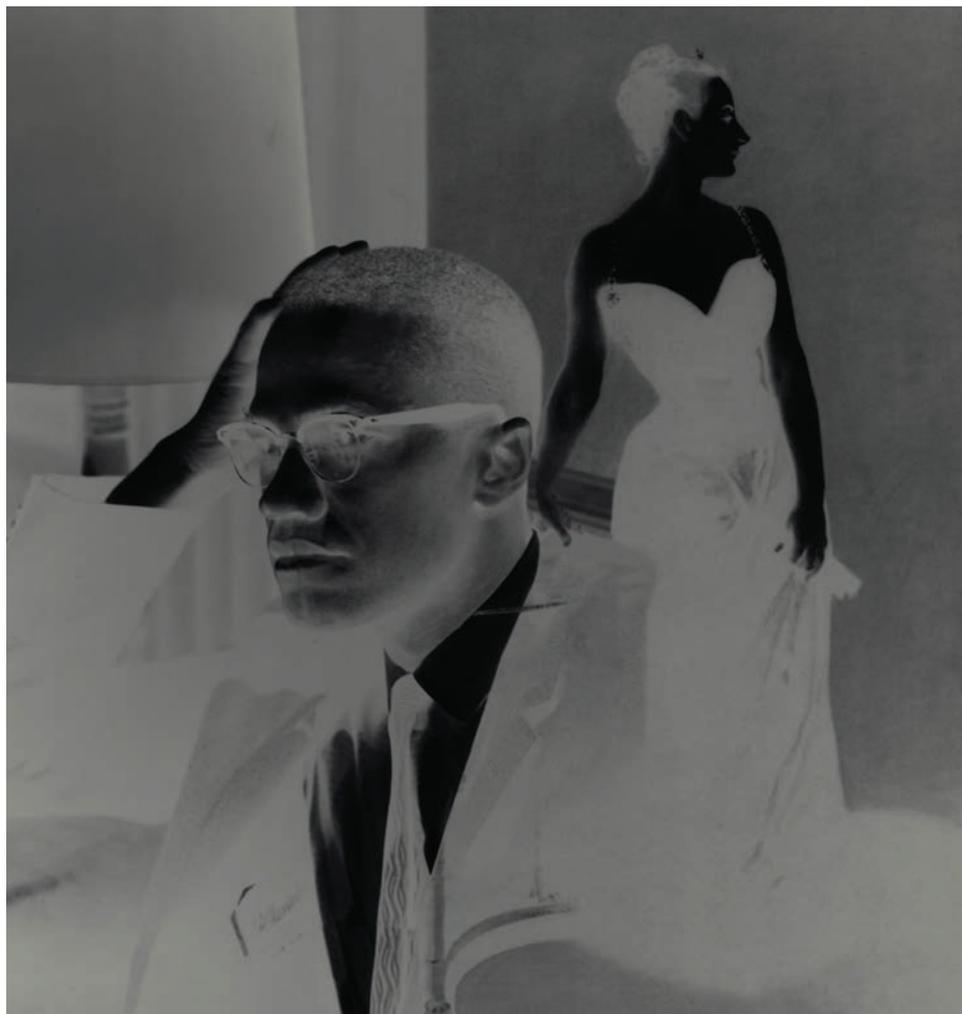
This issue of *Manual* and the accompanying exhibition (on view at the RISD Museum this fall) posit that the right to opacity de-burdens contemporary work by artists who identify as Black and/or queer and/or feminist and/or non-binary and/or OVER IT—whatever sociocultural constriction “it” signifies. Opacity extends to artists who are simply not interested in explaining themselves or offering the emotional labor that is expended for inclusion. This right says, “I have given enough.” It also legitimizes and reclaims the shadow as a place of refuge, instead of being a place from which to escape.

The shadow historically existed on the margins. To be conscripted to the shadow previously meant to be rendered invisible or relegated to non-existence. However, this negative interpretation belies the complex position Black survival and liberation has to agency. Operating in the shadow comes with a legacy of resistance, both in spiritual and ideological forms.

To be clear: freedom doesn’t have to be a constant struggle, nor should it be hidden. It is, however, a constant practice. Black people, say “No.” Rest. Laugh. Dance. Disengage from emotionally draining people and situations. Take up space. Be vocal—or revel in the silence of your thoughts. Wear what you want. Invest in self-care and your mental health. Stop explaining your presence to people who would sooner you disappear. Validate your frustration. Code switch, if that makes you comfortable. Don’t, if it doesn’t. Curate your life. Live on your terms. Succeed. Be accountable to yourself and to the people you love. Practice simple refusal—and self-acceptance—with the mindfulness that you belong to you alone, and that is enough. These small things are radical.

“You are your own best thing.” Toni Morrison taught us that.

You are your own best thing.



Fred Wilson
American, b. 1954
X, 2005
From the Exit Art portfolio *Tantra*
Digital color chromogenic print on Duratrans
Image: 47 × 44.3 cm. (18 ½ × 17 ⅞ in.)
Gift of Exit Art 2012.133.6.6 © Fred Wilson

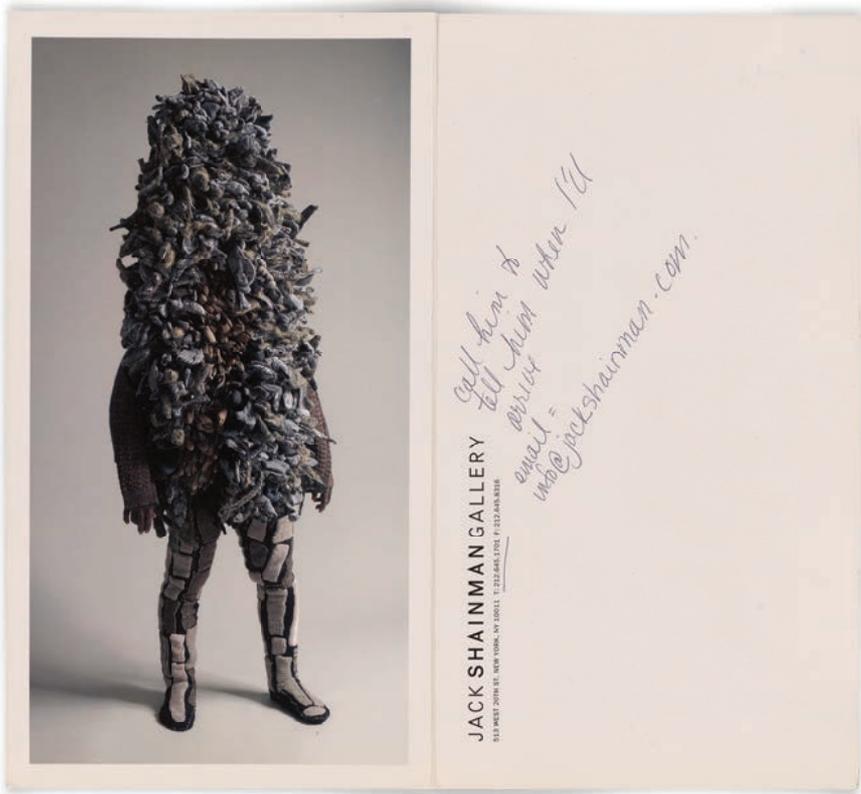
From the Files

When I'll arrive

Dominic Molon

Fall/Winter 2020

Manual



Do works of art wait for museum curators to collect them? Do they sometimes “settle” for private collectors who might someday donate them to a museum or, as is increasingly the fashion nowadays, create their own museum for the work and its brothers and sisters? Do works of art care if the curator is punctual, or are they cool with waiting, content to keep company with the other objects in the backroom or storage or, if they’re on display, to people-watch as viewers walk in and out of the space?

“Call him to tell him when I’ll arrive” is written on a gallery announcement in the object file for Nick Cave’s *Soundsuit*. We assume one or both uses of “him” relates to Jack the gallerist. But couldn’t one or both be the *Soundsuit*? Could Jack or one of his staffers forward the message, delivered by phone or perhaps the email provided? Once the curator’s arrived, what then? What is the psychological-institutional-personal-professional-economical-circumstantial calculus that confirms that this *Soundsuit* is “the one”? Does the curator choose the work, or does the work choose the curator?

It’s an innocuous note, rote in its functionality yet nonetheless cryptic and fraught with anticipation. Unlike so many other works by artists of color until recently, *Soundsuit*—created and presented in 2006 and brought into the RISD Museum in 2007—did not have to wait long to arrive. Named in reference to the noise it makes when worn, this work remains ever-ready, ever-present, set to engage once again with museum visitors and to represent the polyphonous sound of African American lives, experiences, and voices from the past, present, and future.

Origin: American, b. 1959
 Artist: Nick Cave
 Object: *Soundsuit*, 2006
 Materials: Found knit sweaters, socks, driftwood, dryer lint, and paint
 Dimensions: 221 × 76.2 × 53.3 cm.
 (87 × 30 × 21 in.)
 Acquisition: Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund
 2007.11 © Nick Cave







Leslie Wilson /
Emanuel Admassu

Double

Take

Fall/Winter 2020

Manual

Leslie Wilson: A figure in an asymmetrical bright red dress looks to the side, across a divide, seemingly at a mirrored double. Pictures within pictures, the figures appear as portraits contained in arches set against an idealized sky suggestive of Italian Renaissance paintings of the Madonna, as well as of René Magritte's surrealist landscapes. Elements of their dress and symbolic gestures draw from Ethiopian cultures, including their high Gurage head wraps. The two figures share the same formal clothing, delicate body paint dotted on their faces and necks in circular orientations, facial expressions, and gestures set within arched windows lined with red. They turn in three-quarter view toward one another, as if the viewer could fold the square print down the middle and unite their supremely elegant bodies into one. And yet, the expanse of clouds, set in a blue sky of a color more oceanic than celestial, does not align. Instead of mirroring each other as doubles, and despite their seeming proximity, the two figures appear to see one another across time, evocative of a longing that exceeds the present.

This photograph from Aïda Muluneh's series *The World is 9* speaks to a struggle with place and time. If "the world is nine," an expression used by the artist's grandmother to mean that the world is not perfect, then how do individuals find their places within it and the means to imagine their futures? How do individuals think and feel so as to know themselves and the world around them?

This photograph's title invokes the "age of anxiety," a pronouncement, perhaps, about our own time, but also a reference to W. H. Auden's 1947 book-length poem of the same name. In that prologue, we

Aïda Muluneh
Ethiopian, b. 1974
Age of Anxiety, 2016
From the series *The World is 9*
Color inkjet print
80 × 80 cm. (31 ½ × 31 ½ in.)
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2018.19
© Aïda Muluneh. Used with permission

first enter into the mind of Quant, one of the text's four characters, who happens to be meditating on duality and mirrors. Quant begins, "My deuce, my double, my dear image, / Is it lively there, that land of glass." The mirror image becomes a locus for interrogation and projection—a theme that repeats in Auden's poem—a means for scrutinizing the outsides to get at the insides but offering no definitive answers. And so it is that Muluneh claims of her photograph, "We are the stranger looking through the window into the questionable future."¹

In addition to their searching sideways gazes, these strangers in the windows hold their hands over their stomachs, a reference to the Ethiopian expression "keeping your thoughts in your stomach," which Muluneh has revealed is a reference to "holding uncomfortable emotions in."²

The anxiety, then, is contained inside the body, revealed by the symbolic gesture of the clutched stomach. Looking out and looking in are thus inextricably intertwined.

¹ Aïda Muluneh, as quoted in an email message between Anita N. Bateman and David Krut Gallery, November 10, 2017.

² *Ibid.*

Leslie Wilson /
Emanuel Admassu



Emanuel Admassu: *Qene*, or *sem ena worq* (wax and gold), is an Ethiopian linguistic strategy used in poetry, music, and daily language to share a hidden message. A word or phrase can have multiple meanings, depending on varied enunciations of different sections. The *sem* (wax) provides the first layer, while the *worq* (gold) represents the deeper, hidden meaning—often used in pointed critiques of powerful individuals. This goldsmithing analogy refers to the subordinate role of wax in the process of shaping gold jewelry. The phonetic system of the Ge'ez alphabet also permits another level of flexibility, allowing the speaker to loosen or tighten the pronunciation to achieve different meanings.

Images by the Ethiopian artist Aïda Muluneh evoke multiple, layered meanings linked to African history and the aesthetic inventions of the African Diaspora. *Age of Anxiety* could represent a particular moment of uncertainty, anxiety, and trauma in our history of entanglements, as Muluneh recently stated that most of her work is inspired by watching the news.¹ In the past fifty years alone, Ethiopia has gone from an emperor's fall from grace to the Cold War–infused terrorism of a military dictator; from an American-funded and Chinese-influenced authoritarian ethnic division to

a charismatic plea for unity and reform by a Nobel Peace Prize–winning prime minister.

This work also speaks of an Ethiopian refusal to give explicit meaning to things and emotions. Communicating in Amharic often relies on a series of oblique suggestions that are relatively open ended. Muluneh's works are evocative and powerful but almost never explicit. I read this particular image as an homage to Ethiopian women like my mother, my older sister, my aunts, and my grandmothers—women who often make difficult decisions quietly, guiding their respective families through turbulent times.

The two women in the red dresses are standing in an architecture made of clouds. The textures of the enclosure evoke the subtle decay and weathering seen on buildings throughout the city of Addis Ababa, weathering that reflects a recent history of neglect and isolation masked with the measureless pride of successfully resisting European colonization. But this could only be, you know, the “wax” reading of the image. One begins to wonder what the “gold” meaning might be. Is there a subtle statement being made about the burdens of motherhood or the limitless heritage of feminist spatial practices in Ethiopia? How does the global dissemination of images produced by artists like Aïda Muluneh affect the country's appreciation for the women who never left? Maybe the two figures are looking through the opening at a world that can no longer be kept out. A world that aims to extract the wax and the gold, giving close to nothing in return.

¹ Mik Awake, “Ethiopian Enterprise: Artists Build a Future in Addis Ababa and Beyond,” ARTnews, July 10, 2018, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/ethiopian-enterprise-artists-build-future-addis-ababa-beyond-10603/>.

Double

Andrea Achi /
Gina Borromeo

Regardless of modern opinions as to the precise racial identity or proper anthropological classification of Kushites, Nubians, or Ethiopians, the blacks of ancient artists often bear a close similarity to racial types designated in the modern world as “colored,” “black” or “Negro.”

—Dr. Frank M. Snowden Jr.,
Before Color Prejudice

Andrea Achi: Dr. Snowden (1911–2007), a professor of classics at Howard University, was integral to identifying the presence and contributions of Africans in the ancient Mediterranean world. His formative books *Before Color Prejudice* (1983) and *Blacks in Antiquity* (1970) were revolutionary. Analyzing Egyptian, Greek, and Roman artistic and textual sources, he highlighted black and white interactions in classical antiquity. Snowden emphasized that blacks in antiquity were multicultural and multiethnic, a point reflected in the variety of Africans known to the ancient world, including the Aethiops, Blemmyes, Acridophagi, Erebidae, and Nubians. It is within this context that RISD’s bust of an African child was published and celebrated.

Nestled in a vitrine of Greek and Roman vases and figurines, this work represents the diversity and breadth of the classical world. The provenance of comparanda falls within the Roman provinces, including Britain, Portugal, Bulgaria, Germany, Syria, and Egypt. These vessels depicted mythological gods, fantastical creatures, and Africans. A distinctive feature of these vessels was the ways in which they symbolized otherness. Many terms describe the “other” in Greek and Latin. A common word for all non-Greeks was βάρβαρος (*Barbaros*). In Latin, *peregrinus* and *alienigenus* translate to a “foreigner, one from

Take

abroad” or “one of/born in another country.” In any place in the Roman Empire, this child would have been distinguished by his or her African features. In other words, the ethnic identity of the child is integral to understanding this work’s original function as an object that signified an “other.”

The child’s African features prejudiced modern interpretations of the vessel. In RISD’s *Handbook of the Museum of Art* (1985), an entry describes the child as both a “Nubian youth” and “negro captive” who “turns his head angrily, staring up contemptuously at his captor, his lip parted and brow furrowed.” This fictional description hinges on the blackness of the child and memories of a colonial Africa. While derogatory descriptions of such objects abound, representations of blacks in the corpus of classical art symbolize a precolonial history of black peoples, a history not often taught or honored. In *Hands of Ethiopia*, W. E. B. Du Bois (Dr. Snowden’s colleague at Atlanta University) remarked on the displacement of Africa from the history of Western civilization: “there are those who would write world history and leave out of account this most marvelous of continents.” This bust of an African child prompts viewers to integrate Africa into the ancient world and thus situate it within a history before colonialism.

In many ways, this child defiantly forces the viewer to wrestle with ideas of race in Western civilization and history. Yes, in its Roman context, this child likely symbolized an “other,” but this nuanced representation, too, bears a close similarity to racial types designated in the modern world.

Andrea Achi /
Gina Borrromeo

Take

Double

Gina Borrromeo: Working with an object for close to twenty-five years doesn't mean I know most of what there is to know about it. This bronze bust of a child with head turned, eyes looking off to the side and mouth open, has fascinated me from the start, and yet it raises as many questions for me today as it did when I began working in the RISD Museum. Who is depicted? Why was it made of bronze? When and where was it made? What was it used for?

The bust was given to the museum in 1911 by Eliza Radeke, then the president of RISD. A search through the archives did not reveal when or where Radeke acquired it. Museum accession records state that it came from Samandhond, although no such place exists. But there is a place known as Sammanud, a settlement in northern Egypt relatively close to Alexandria, where similar pieces were reportedly found. Many other bronze busts of this type dating to the second and third centuries were found not in Egypt but rather in Western and Central Europe, in domestic and cemetery contexts and others with coin hoards. Most of these busts represent African youths, figures related to the god Bacchus, and idealized males. Other bronzes—far fewer in number—depict divinities such as Hercules, Mercury, Mars; wrestlers; and chubby children.

The bust appears to be a freestanding sculpture, but a closer look reveals that the crown of the child's head is a separately made piece—a lid, in fact. This sculpture is actually a container, which once had a handle whose ends hung from the two loops rising from the child's curls. The handles made the



Roman
Bust of an African Child,
100–300 CE
Bronze
12.7 × 10 × 4.9 cm.
(5 × 3 15/16 × 1 15/16 in.)
Gift of Mrs. Gustav
Radeke 11.035

container easier to carry or suspend. Sometime after the bust entered the RISD Museum collection, the lid and handle were removed, as they were incorrectly believed to be modern additions. The lid is now reattached. Even before the bust was acquired by the museum, its base had been removed, likely to make it appear more like a sculptural work and less of a functional object. Known as balsamaria, vessels such as these are thought to have held scented ointment or incense, as some examples still contain traces of these materials. Unfortunately, the interior surface of this bust has been thoroughly cleaned of any residue identifying what the vessel once contained.

Not knowing exactly where this bust was excavated is a great loss. Its archaeological context would have suggested, if not indicated, its function in antiquity. Was it used in a domestic setting, a religious context, or a burial? Were other objects discovered with it? If so, what were they, and can they be securely dated—because this piece, by itself, cannot? The loss of original context leaves us with only a partial understanding of this bronze bust of an African child.



The bust as it appeared when first acquired by the RISD Museum in 1911, before the handle was removed.

MUSEUM OF ART, RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN

PROVIDENCE, R. I. (TO BE USED AS CREDIT LINE)

ACCESSION NO. 11.035

ARTIST

TITLE *Negro Head Perfume Vase*

MEDIUM *Bronze*

NOT TO BE REPRODUCED WITHOUT PERMISSION

*Early photograph —
"handle" since removed*

814 - R. I. SCHOOL OF DESIGN-PROVIDENCE.

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Issue—14

Double

Matthew Shenoda /
Rashayla Marie Brown

Take

Fall/Winter 2020

Matthew Shenoda: A call. A desire to shape a world that has yet to exist. And it is here, on this particular horizon where that possibility lingers in the air, where the desire for something more is tangible, if only we can get out of our own ways. If only we can go further into our own selves, as Bearden did, as Smith does.

What might it mean to live where we do not create sorrow; where our gathering can be magnified? A formidable perch. A simulacrum of grace. A remembrance.

Striving for a shadow of something otherworldly, a handful of salt eroding stone.

Let us talk then about craft: our skill, our aptitude, our ingenuity, our vessel, Smith's vessel, Bearden's vessel; that thing that none of us possesses with singularity, but rather as part of a collective that we are each entrusted to cultivate; like Smith did Bearden.

You see the great lie is to believe that the artist is somehow distant from the farmer. We are each entrusted to feed the community, to grow a crop according to our labor, to meet one another at the common table and share the bounty of that labor alongside one another. This is the place for such harvest, the place for such labor, the place for the sharpening of one's tools and the understanding of how water, sun, soil, and seed can come together to make a thing of nourishment. This is what happens when artists come together.

What can we say about the apprehension of things, the reasons for a shaft of light in an otherwise dark forest? Romare is that light. Ming is that light.

But when I stand still, watch the bodies move like an upright bass and contemplate the power of the tangible things before them, I am reminded of the need for woven fabrics and moments of rest, gazes that speak of things indiscernible. I am reminded that the problem resides in our own comfort, in the perennial desire to make the world small, known only to ourselves. We do it so easily, so naturally, our not noticing. But Smith puts the self in its multiple places. Smith saw Bearden and made Bearden the floating expanse that he is.

Manual

Ming Smith
American, b. 1947
Romare Bearden, New York, NY, 1977,
1977, printed ca. 1991
Gelatin silver print
Image: 18 × 11.5 cm. (7 1/8 × 4 1/2 in.)
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund
2018.22 © Ming Smith





Matthew Shenoda /
Rashayla Marie Brown

Rashayla Marie Brown:

For us, visibility has been communal edict. Currency.
To guarantee what exactly?

Resistance. Deconstruction. Subversion. No.¹
Uplift. Celebration. Empowerment. No.²
Liberation. Where?³

This image is a portrait of a painter, a collagist, an elder, Romare Bearden, and a woman, maybe his wife, Nanette? Maybe holding a mirror? Maybe she is the mirror. How many male artists needed their woman close by for inspiration? Their success is ours. Eyes closed, she is beheld. His eyes closed, he is held. By her. Twice, in reflection, in mysterious placement, with his head bowed down. Twice. He is held.

From an image-maker who holds historic significance⁴ and remains frustratingly invisible in the archive, whose face graced countless images as a model for others (maybe we'll find these images in the archive, ha). She made her own photograph and adorned it with paint, direct on the surface.⁵ Is that what collage from the photographed subject looks like? Ha.

Maybe this is the magic of the darkroom? Ming Smith was no stranger to techniques. To making a film holder by hand. To blur. To shake. To double. To have a hand in the space. For her hand to be apparent and unseen simultaneously. Perhaps it is more interesting to wonder, instead of guarantee.

To love. She did it for love. Not visibility.
Not legibility. Not romance. No.

The photographer working from the no, as a collagist would, does not necessarily view the world as a blank canvas or a constant negation. But a space. The collagist working from the no-space, as a painter

Take

would, does not align with the binary supposition that to be represented is to equal life and to not be represented means death. Sometimes dark is before life, and death is after light. Sometimes cutting the film gives it life. Inside and out.

The artist working from the no-space does not suppose blackness is a metaphor for liberation. This artist simply works from the liberation that is there, in space. Not from representation, nor from abstraction. From the man or the woman. Both together and apart, one inside and outside. Both portrait and imagination.

But we know that the nature of the medium—the spirit itself—allows us to create from the positive space, to curate and slice down. Thus, this is not representation. It is making. To make what, exactly?

(Oh, to be free from this binary. Oh. Darstellen. Vertreten.⁶ Represent. Represent.)

Black life without signifiers. Black bodies without features. With signifiers. With features. Identification with and without suffering, agenda. Just place, just intimacy, inside us, inside her.

Ming Smith, Ming Smith, Ming Smith. Well. She didn't make these images so we could pay empty tribute to a hidden figure. She did it for love.

Not scarred because of love, a part of a body obscured by the cut and filled with a mirror, another, filled with love of the other. The interior. Black femme interiority? No.

The interiors that contain us we also contain at the same time. The faces that we devote our lives to, we know without seeing. There is no liberation. There is no death. No binary. There is no visibility that truly matters. There is no cut that does not produce life.

There is only space. And love inside it.

1 #blacklivesmatter.

2 #blackgirlmagic.

3 #sayhername.

4 Ming Smith is the first African American female photographer to have work collected by the Museum of Modern Art and the only woman to be a member of the historic Kamoinge photographers collective. We know what William Eggleston means to art history, and we know what Gordon Parks means to art history. I am writing from a space where we all know Ming's work as extensively, and our collective recognition of her photographic contributions precedes any formal analysis of any work, instead of a space

where my writing does a corrective to a violent canonical exercise that has only recently begun to include work by Black artists, that doesn't conform to identity politics or a civil-rights agenda. This is a written collage or poetic relation, inspired by Smith's depiction of other artists such as Romare Bearden, James Baldwin, and Grace Jones.

5 See Ming Smith, *Self-Portrait* (from the *Self-Portrait* series), 1972.

6 See Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).



Aaron Douglas's *Building More Stately Mansions*

Process, Content, and Context

Melanee C. Harvey

In 1944, Aaron Douglas [Fig. 1] accepted a commission from his home institution, Nashville's Fisk University, to paint a mural for the International Student Center.¹ This project came just months after earning his master of arts degree from Teachers College, Columbia University, and almost five years since his arrival at Fisk as full-time art faculty. Alongside the Cravath Library murals he created at Fisk in 1929–1930, this project, entitled *Building More Stately Mansions*, would augment his aesthetic presence on campus as the founding chair of the university's Art Department and extend his reputation as one of the nation's leading muralists.²

FIG. 1

Aaron Douglas restoring a mural, ca. 1960.
The Franklin Library, Fisk University.



2

Claire Davis of the *Cleveland Call and Post* emphasized the significance of Douglas’s body of art at Fisk with these words in 1936: “Fisk University and Aaron Douglas, Aaron Douglas and Fisk University. These two names are synonymous and will remain so always. . . . [The mural cycle of Fisk University Library] establishes Mr. Douglas as one of the country’s greatest mural painters, and stands as a monument to his race.”³

Douglas crafted a sequence of Modernist scenes rooted in African and African American historical narratives and cultural philosophies in his Cravath Library commission [Fig. 2]. But fourteen years later, he designed a mural that would foreground the labor of people of African descent alongside monuments of great civilizations. In his written description of this mural, entitled “Building Thee More Stately Mansions,” Douglas explained, “The central idea in this design is the progression of culture and civilization from the dawn of history to the present.”⁵ Across preliminary paintings to the final mural, Douglas produced a Pan-Africanist, humanistic World War II–era reflection in his designs for *Building More Stately Mansions*.

The version of *Building More Stately Mansions* in the RISD Museum collection [Fig. 3] provides aesthetic and contextual evidence about shifts in the symbolic meanings of architecture and black labor in Douglas’s oeuvre during the early 1940s. The content of this study and the resulting mural expresses Douglas’s exploration of the global function of monumental architecture and its relationship to legacies of labor. Scholars including Amy Kirschke and Susan Earle have investigated and contextualized Douglas’s use of architecture and labor iconography.⁶ According to Earle, in compositions like *Building More Stately Mansions*, “architecture is symbolic of the mind, of expansion and possibilities, of cities and urbanism (so different from Douglas’s hometown of Topeka, flat and low-built), of future growth and ancient civilizations”⁷

This essay will interpret the use of architectural and labor iconography in *Building More Stately Mansions* as distinct in Douglas’s body of art. The preliminary

FIG. 2

Cravath mural at Fisk University.
Photograph by Daniel Meigs.

FIG. 3

Aaron Douglas
American, 1899–1979
Building More Stately Mansions, 1944
Oil on canvas board
50.8 × 40.6 cm. (20 × 16 in.)
Purchased with the Frederick Lippitt Bequest
2008.30
© 2020 Heirs of Aaron Douglas / Licensed by
VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY



painting is evidence of the artist refining design to convey the Western narrative of the cultural progress through juxtaposing architectural forms. Aaron Douglas created a composition that documents a range of meanings. *Building More Stately Mansions* must be understood within the context of the political and economic circumstances of World War II and the sociocultural conditions of American architectural activity during the 1930s and 1940s.

Evidence of Process: Concept and Design

For most of his major mural cycles, Aaron Douglas provided a written description to capture his intended meaning of the public artwork. The artist opens the explication with these words: “I take the title for this mural decoration from ‘The Chambered Nautilus’ by Oliver Wendell Holmes. I used this title not so much to reveal or describe the content of the picture as to provide a spring board or starting point around which pertinent symbols might be collected in hope of giving greater illumination to the work.”⁸ The selection of a poetic source reflects Douglas’s childhood interest in canonical authors such as Emerson, Bacon, Hugo, Dumas, Shakespeare, and Dante.⁹

As in his interpretation of the classical themes of drama and philosophy showcased in the Cravath Library murals, Douglas used the metaphorical potency of this popular nineteenth-century American poem to make a larger statement concerning the contribution of people of African descent to the progress of world civilizations across time.¹⁰ “The Chambered Nautilus” evokes cultural themes of personal introspection, the evolution of the domestic realm, and human advancement. According to scholar Peter Gibian, the poem’s concluding stanza, “Building thee more stately mansions, O my soul,” represents “an Emersonian model of human progress.”¹¹ These pre-Civil War sentiments provided a conceptual platform for the mood and concerns of the World War II period. Holmes’s poem continued to circulate and serve as a colloquial reference in the decades surrounding Douglas’s *Building More Stately Mansions*. For instance, on July 18, 1934, the *Chicago Defender* posed this question to its readers in its weekly quiz: “Who wrote ‘The Chambered Nautilus?’”¹² During the 1930s and 1940s, Mount Olivet Baptist Church on Lenox Avenue in Harlem hosted a cultural organization under the name the Chambered Nautilus.¹³ The 1944 mural thematic concept and design reflected Douglas’s ability to construct modern statements from established canonical traditions. Moreover, *Building More Stately Mansions* centers the contribution of black culture and labor, augmenting the interpretive interventions of African American scholars including W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, and Charles S. Johnson. This mural extends signature elements of Douglas’s painting style visible in artworks such as *The Founding of Chicago* (1933–1940) and his popular Harlem mural series *Aspects*



4

of *Negro Life* (1934) [Fig. 4]. With the exception of *Aspects of Negro Life: The Negro in an African Setting*, the composition of all the paintings in *Aspects of Negro Life* are anchored by the relationship to black labor and the built environment. *Building More Stately Mansions* represents a significant advancement of Douglas's exploration of historical narrative and modern aesthetics. Moving beyond visualizing the experience of the African Americans in the United States, *Building More Stately Mansions* challenges viewers to engage the global contributions of people of African descent across the great civilization of the world.

Akin to Douglas's pre-1940s mural cycles, *Building More Stately Mansions* is defined by flat symbolic space punctuated by value, line, and scale. As indicated in the artist's description, the cumulative narrative can be deciphered by reading top to bottom and left to right.¹⁴ Symbols of Egypt—a sphinx and a pyramid—that Douglas popularly employed in his Harlem Renaissance-era illustrations dominate the background of this composition. The artist creates emphasis through the scale of the Egyptian motifs, “magnified to proportions of excess” to communicate the “early and very long years of Egyptian civilization.”¹⁵

A darker tone of gray distinguishes the register of abstract ancient monumental architectural forms in the compositional middle ground, proceeding from the Egyptian obelisk on the far left to the ruins of a Greek temple to the Roman triumphal arch on the right. The spiral structure, which Douglas describes as “pagoda-like,” serves as his symbol for Asian architectural monuments.¹⁶ The thin spire references the European contributions of Gothic cathedrals. These

FIG. 4
Aaron Douglas
American, 1899–1979
*Aspects of Negro Life: From
Slavery to Reconstruction, 1934*
Oil on canvas
Schomburg Center for Research
in Black Culture, Art and Artifacts
Division, New York Public Library
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VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

structures create a soft, curved implied line that echoes the tonal patterns of the concentric circles in the lower-right section of the composition and the expressive lines in the upper register of the painting. The architectural forms establish a progressive projection of monuments into the foreground, mediated by labor, to convey the possibility of new structures for the contemporary era.

The most saturated hues in the foreground are reserved for Douglas's more popular motifs: the symbolic black body in motion and modern architectural forms. The four laboring figures carrying tools and mechanical parts represent a sequence of advancement culminating in an educational scene. The movement of the four figures across a rocky terrain into the foreground is balanced by the radial effects of the concentric tonal progression originating from the globe. This compositional arrangement reflects the charge of Douglas's social message. According to the artist, "[E]ach new generation can and must look back on, face up to, and learn from the greatness, the weakness and failures of our past with the firm assurance that the strength and courage certain to arise from such an honest and dutiful approach to our problems will continue to carry us on to new and higher levels of achievement."¹⁷ In the context of World War II's human loss and structural ruin, Douglas advocates for a pursuit of knowledge to devise better strategies for contemporary issues and the advancement of humanity.

The differences across light and value in the foreground distinguish the two versions of *Building More Stately Mansions*, revealing more about his design process. In the catalogue for Douglas's 1979 memorial exhibition at Fisk University's Carl Van Vechten Gallery, David C. Driskell outlines the muralist's design process, directly addressing the preliminary paintings: "The mural panels were first drawn to scale in cartoon fashion on small cardboard panels. Many of these panels are still in the collection of the artist. They were usually executed in a soft range of whites to blue-gray and black values."¹⁸ The preliminary version reveals Douglas's process of mapping value and form. The final mural [Fig. 5] includes additional elements and objects to emphasize light, with an illuminated implied line between the American log cabin to the reflective surfaces of the metal wheel in tow and rose window of the Gothic monument.

One significant difference between the preliminary painting and the final mural is the treatment of American architectural forms in the foreground. In the former, a flat, craggy skyscraper occupies the lower-left corner of the painting. This irregular form is unlike Douglas's angular Art Deco-inspired symbol for the skyscraper. In terms of design, form facilitates his vacillation on how much compositional space American

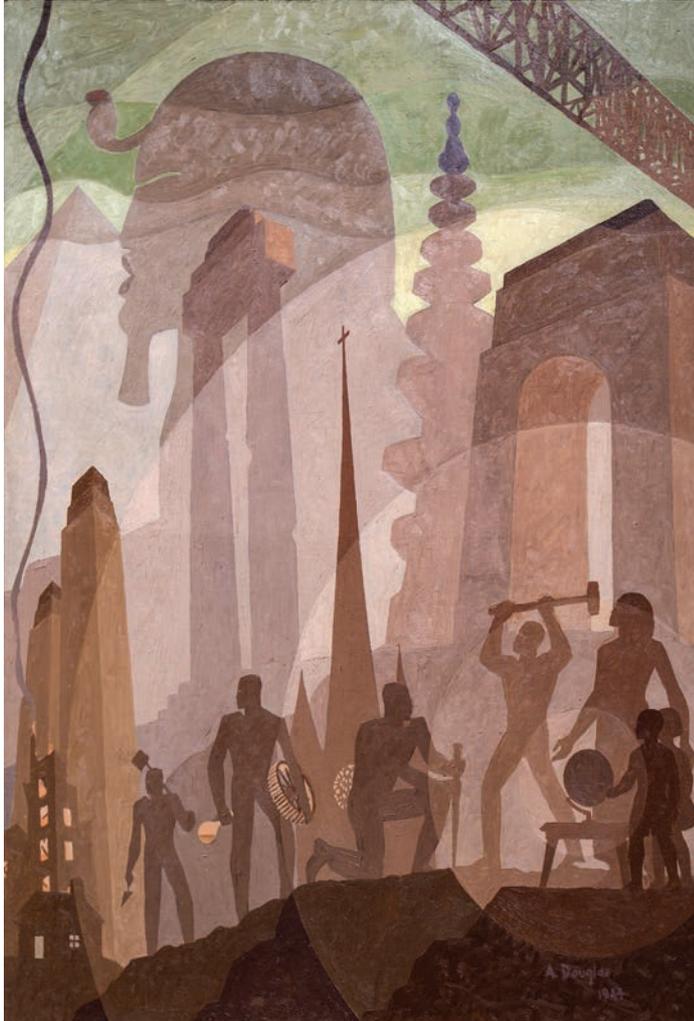


FIG. 5
 Aaron Douglas
 American, 1899–1979
*Building More Stately
 Mansions, 1944*
 Oil on canvas
 Carl Van Vechten Gallery,
 Collection of Fisk University
 © 2020 Heirs of Aaron
 Douglas / Licensed by
 VAGA at Artists Rights
 Society (ARS), NY

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architecture should occupy. The smoke is a symbol for “the two world wars as well as recent Asian confrontation.”¹⁹ Douglas transforms his personal experiences of the impact of World War I and World War II in the United States into a statement highlighting the creative regeneration of humanity and contributions of people of African descent.²⁰

Douglas’s use of line has more symbolic potency and design efficiency in the preliminary painting now in the RISD Museum collection. A thick, expressive gray diagonal emerging from the high-rise building extends over the figurative sequence. The chromatic unity of the smoke and people renders visible how the consequences of war affect humanity. The horizontal green line above the smoke stack is evidence of Douglas

working through tonal gradations for the palette of the final mural, where a similar green hue distinguishes the skyline. As Douglas adapts his New Negro-era African ancestral perspectives for wartime optimism, he fuses his own experiences with his awareness of the evolving cultural landscapes among African American art and design professionals, including African American architects.

Context as Cultural Interpretation

Building More Stately Mansions must be understood within context of Douglas's life in the years surrounding the mural's commission. This period was defined by the escalation of World War II and the increasing visibility of the African American architect. In September 1932, Douglas returned from twelve months in Paris to New York City, which was transforming through new construction. Two months after Douglas's return to Harlem, the community celebrated the completion and opening of a modern twelve-story million-dollar YMCA complex [Fig. 6]. This structure, with its substantial mass, towers, and angular roofline, and other new building projects of the 1930s and 1940s could have inspired his continued musings on modern architecture. The preliminary *Building More Stately Mansions* suggests the artist's desire to include a symbolic reference to the continued development of the urban landscape, as well as the potential for new cultural monuments.

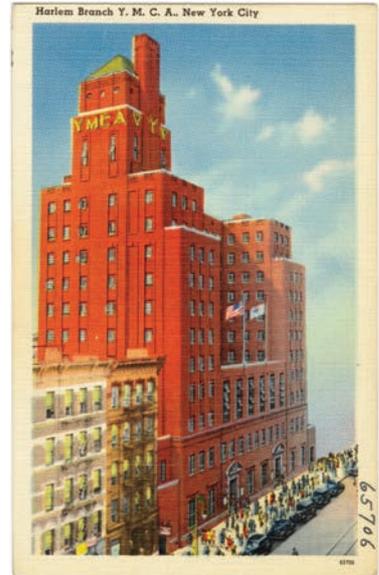
Douglas's international and national travels exposed him to the tradition of monumental architecture as a symbol of advancement. Building on his time in Paris in 1931 and 1932, Douglas spent a little over three months in late 1938 visiting the Virgin Islands, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic.²² In 1939, he traveled to Mexico for five weeks, spending time in several cities offering access to ancient Mexican architecture, including Mexico City and Monterrey.²³ These experiences augmented his journeys across the United States in the 1920s, during which he witnessed the development of Midwestern urban centers.²⁴ In his autobiography, he reflects:

As for travel, I managed to go from Topeka to Kansas City to St. Louis to Cleveland to Detroit to Dunkirk, New York in about two weeks. . . . I saw some of the centers of mid-western America with all of their mad hustle and two-fisted pioneer spirit just as they were during the six months prior to the entrance of American into World War I. . . . This was America; the land of the free which promised a place for all who were willing to chip in and earn their way.²⁵

Travel deeply impacted Douglas's perspective on America, providing him with firsthand experience of diversity across urban cities and labor.

At the same time, historically black colleges and universities provided structural evidence for the legacy and future of African American architects. In May of 1931, Howard University received laudatory press coverage for mounting the first exhibition of African American architects.²⁶ Additionally, Hampton University's annual builders' conferences, which convened from 1922 through the post-World War II era, signaled the increasing visibility and recognition of African American architects and building professionals.²⁷ In 1937, Douglas spent time on the campus of Tuskegee Institute (now Tuskegee University), where he would have been immersed in the historic African American built environment. Tuskegee faculty in the Mechanical Industries Department designed campus building during the leadership of the institution's founder, Booker T. Washington.²⁸ As Douglas navigated the campus, he would have encountered monuments of Negro architectural traditions in Robert Robinson Taylor's Butler Chapel (1894) and William Sidney Pittman's Collis P. Huntington Memorial Building (1902). By the 1940s, Nashville's oldest African American architectural firm, McKissack & McKissack, received recognition by the National Building League for their stature in the field.²⁹ The *Chicago Defender* noted McKissack & McKissack secured more than six million dollars in government contracts over their fifty years of existence.³⁰ *Building More Stately Mansions* allows for the interpretation of the contemporary African American architect as an extension of the ancestral legacy of great African civilizations.³¹

Interest in the built legacies of the African Diaspora as well as those of contemporary African American architects and engineers is documented during the late 1930s and the early 1940s in Carter G. Woodson's monthly *Negro History Bulletin*. Almost one year after Douglas was recognized in the publication's profile on Negro painters, Woodson produced a series of editions exploring facets of African American architectural



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FIG. 6
Postcard for the Harlem Branch YMCA,
New York City, ca. 1930–1945
5½ × 3½ in.
The Tichnor Brothers Collection
Boston Public Library

history.³² The *Negro History Bulletin* examined the following themes from February through May 1940: Negro labor, architecture in Africa and the United States, and engineering [Fig. 7].³³ The following passage from the architecture issue establishes a Pan-African architectural historical narrative that corresponds with Douglas’s *Building More Stately Mansions*: “The progress of architecture toward becoming an art, however, was a long effort. . . . In Egypt and in Greece and Italy, which were civilized from Egypt, building reached a more colossal scale. Egyptians taught the world how to build structures with spacious halls supported by large columns.”³⁴ After highlighting the architectural contributions of each ancient civilization, the writer asserts:

We are so accustomed to think of Africa as having made no progress at all in architecture during these years. Yet we know that Europe was civilized from Egypt with special debt in both art and architecture. . . . Monuments are found in parts which have long been inhabited, but Europeans have not ceased to try to give credit for them to foreigners immigrating into Africa.³⁵

Douglas echoes histories advanced in Woodson’s monthly journal. The coverage of architectural activities in African American communities in the press and the circulation of new bodies of knowledge on African American architectural legacies layer additional significance to the motifs and content of *Building More Stately Mansions*.

Douglas’s mural design also reflects the impact of World War II and wartime mobilization that occurred on college campuses across the nation. According to news coverage from 1942 through 1944, students at historically black colleges and universities including Fisk University were learning skills to aid recovery from World War II.³⁶ Fisk University aspired to become “the center of post-war colonial education” by emphasizing the study of African cultures across the social sciences.³⁷ Douglas crafts an appeal for new monuments and symbols of cultural advancement necessary in the postwar period, and his starting point for such an endeavor was critically examining the past. *Building More Stately Mansions* provides a graphic language for the spirit of an era driven by wartime industrial demands and postwar humanitarian relief.

The theme at the core of *Building More Stately Mansions*—recognizing the contribution of people of African descent to the progress of human civilization and American nationhood—seems to frame Aaron Douglas’s perspective during the 1940s. In 1948 he delivered a speech entitled “The Negro, Too, in American Art” at LeMoyne (today LeMoyne-Owen), Memphis’s historically black college. He opened this



FIG. 7
 "Architecture with Respect to Africa,"
Negro History Bulletin 3, no. 7
 (April 1940). Association for the Study of
 African American Life and History.
 Used with the permission of the
 Association for the Study of African
 American Life & History, www.asalnh.org

lecture by inquiring, "Have we, the Negroid people, participated in the art of the world? Did we or the group from which we are derived make a significant contribution prior to the American experience?"³⁸ His extensive presentation answered in the affirmative and provided the audience with an overview of African American artistic production as an extension of African aesthetic legacies. Informing the audience of incremental advancements of the contemporary field of Negro architects, Douglas notes, "The opportunities for creating new and individual forms in architecture are much

less than in other art forms. Despite this limitation, some Negro architects of distinction have appeared. Chief among these are Paul Williams and Hillyard Robinson, Vertner Tandy and the McKissack Brothers.”³⁹ For Douglas, African American architects were promoting a design frontier with the potential to produce new monuments. Across his public art and public performance as an artist, Douglas marshaled his knowledge of the advancements made by Africans and African Americans as an inspirational charge to future generations.

When the preliminary painting *Building More Stately Mansions* was listed for auction by Swann Galleries in 2008, the provenance of this object offered another instructive note about the circulation of African American art. It had originally been purchased from Douglas by a colleague at Fisk University during the same year the mural was completed.⁴⁰ Its immediate purchase serves as one indication of the positive reception of the commission among faculty at Fisk University. Several scholars, including Michael Harris and Richard Powell, have recognized the impact of twentieth-century mural programs on historically African American campuses.⁴¹ But few have considered how institutional commissions reinforced the role of these educational sites as art-market spaces that facilitated art purchases and collection practices among faculty and the broader art and educational communities. This painting documents that tradition and expands twentieth-century African American collection narratives.

Building More Stately Mansions provides historical insight into advocacy around the contribution of people of African descent to the progress of human civilization. The motif also represents and seeks to augment African American architectural traditions during the 1930s and 1940s. The design for Fisk University’s International Students Center presents a view of the advancement of humanity with Egypt as its foundation. It also poses a challenge to subsequent generations to approach “higher levels of achievement.”⁴² The preliminary painting serves as an important example of alternative ways this theme circulated beyond the final mural, beyond the walls of Fisk University.

- 1** "Fisk Gets \$10,000 for Student Center," *Chicago Defender, National Edition*, May 13 1944, 1; Stephanie Fox Knapp, "Chronology," *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, ed. Susan Earle (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 218. The *Chicago Defender* reported "Presentation of a \$10,000 International Student Center to Fisk University was made by Miss Margaret Shaw Campbell . . ." Although the mural was originally intended for this space, it now is exhibited in the Carl Van Vechten Gallery as a part of the Fisk University Art Collection.
- 2** Aaron Douglas, "Mural Decoration—*Build Thee More Stately Mansions*," Aaron Douglas Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 4520, n.p.; Swann Gallery, "Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) *Building More Stately Mansions*, African American Fine Art," Sale 2136, Lot 38, [https://catalogues.swannalleries.com/auction-lot/AARON-DOUGLAS-\(1899---1979\)-Building-More-Stately-Mansions.-2136+++++38+++596553](https://catalogues.swannalleries.com/auction-lot/AARON-DOUGLAS-(1899---1979)-Building-More-Stately-Mansions.-2136+++++38+++596553). *Building More Stately Mansions* is recorded under the title *Build Thee More Stately Mansions* in the artist's mural description. The Swann Gallery description of the preliminary drawing stated the artwork was additionally documented as *Building More Stately Pavilions*. Following David C. Driskell's 1976 landmark exhibition, *Two Centuries of Black Art*, this mural and its affiliated artworks were referred to as *Building More Stately Mansions*.
- 3** Claire Davis, "The Arts: Nashville Notes," *Cleveland Call and Post*, July 1936: 8, Proquest Databases, Historic Newspapers.
- 4** Aaron Douglas, "A Sketch of the Murals, Fisk University Library," Aaron Douglas Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 4520, n.p.
- 5** Douglas, "Mural Decoration," Archives of American Art.
- 6** Amy Helene Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995); Susan Earle, *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist* (New Haven: Spencer Museum of Art, 2008).
- 7** Susan Earle, "Harlem Modernism and Beyond: Aaron Douglas and his Role in Art/History," *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, 37.
- 8** Douglas, "Mural Decoration," Archives of American Art; Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr., "The Chambered Nautilus," 1858, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44379/the-chambered-nautilus>. Douglas takes his title from the last two stanzas of Oliver Wendell Holmes's "The Chambered Nautilus." The concluding stanzas read as follows:
- Thanks for the heavenly message brought by thee,
Child of the wandering sea,
Cast from her lap, forlorn!
From thy dead lips a clearer note is born
Than ever Triton blew from wreathèd horn!
While on mine ear it rings,
Through the deep caves of thought I hear a voice that sings:—
- Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life's unresting sea!
- 9** Aaron Douglas, "Autobiography," Aaron Douglas Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 4520, page 1.
- 10** Michael A. Weinstein, *The Imaginative Prose of Oliver Wendell Holmes* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006), 33.
- 11** Peter Gibian, "Holmes' House Divided: House-Keeping and House-Breaking," *Oliver Wendell Holmes and the Culture of Conversation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 277.
- 12** "How Many Can You Answer Today?" *Chicago Defender*, July 18, 1931, Proquest Databases, Historic Newspapers.
- 13** A. A. Graham, "N.Y. Churches," *Afro-American*, December 22, 1934, 16; "Churches," *Afro-American*, April 4, 1936: 18; "Club Chats," *New York Amsterdam News*, September 22, 1934, 4; "Church News: Religion of Negro" *New York Amsterdam News*, December 22, 1934, 14. Mount Olivet Baptist Church's Chambered Nautilus Club hosted concerts, theatrical performances, lectures, and debates on issues pertaining the condition of African American communities.
- 14** Douglas, "Mural Decoration," Archives of American Art.
- 15** *Ibid.*

- 16** Ibid.
- 17** Ibid.
- 18** David C. Driskell, foreword, *Retrospective Exhibition: Paintings by Aaron Douglas*, n.p. (Nashville: Fisk University Art Gallery, 1971), Collection of Lois Mailou Jones, Box 215-25, Folder 11, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.
- 19** Douglas, "Mural Decoration," Archives of American Art.
- 20** Douglas, "Autobiography," Archives of American Art, Reel 4520, page 8; Fox Knappe, "Chronology," *Aaron Douglas: African American Modernist*, 207. Douglas enlisted in the Students' Army Training Corps at University of Minnesota just a few months before the end of the First World War.
- 21** "The Beautiful New Harlem Y.M.C.A. Is Monument to Genius of Modern Builders" *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 31, 1932: A8. This news article included a photograph of the new Y.M.C.A., emphasizing the African American press's promotion of aesthetic practice including the iconography of Modern architecture.
- 22** Fox Knappe, "Chronology," 217.
- 23** Ibid.
- 24** Douglas, "Autobiography," Archives of American Art, Reel 4520, page 8; Fox Knappe, "Chronology," 207. In the summer of 1924, Douglas worked as a dining-car waiter for the Union Pacific's Oregon Short Line.
- 25** Douglas, "Autobiography," Archives of American Art, Reel 4520, pages 2–3.
- 26** "Work of Architects Shown at Howard," *Baltimore Afro-American*, May 16, 1931, 17, Proquest Databases, Historic Newspapers.
- 27** "Builders, Contractors at 15th Hampton Conference," *New Journal and Guide*, February 22, 1941, Proquest Databases, Historic Newspapers.; Harold Ruggles, "Many Tips to Builders Are Supplied at Recent Conference at Hampton," *New Journal and Guide*, February 27, 1932, Proquest Databases, Historic Newspapers.
- 28** Wesley Howard Henderson, "Tuskegee Normal & Industrial Institute, Mechanical Industries Department (1892), *African American Architects: A Biographical Dictionary, 1965–1945*, Dreck Spurlock Wilson, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 410–13.
- 29** "From a Mite to a Million": Story of the McKissacks," *Chicago Defender*, November 7, 1942: 6, Proquest Databases, Historic Newspapers.
- 30** Ibid.
- 31** Kirschke, *Aaron Douglas: Art, Race, and the Harlem Renaissance*, 111.
- 32** "Distinguished Painters Inspire Those of African Blood," *Negro History Bulletin*, March 1939, 62.
- 33** "Negro History Week Features Labor" *Negro History Bulletin*, February 1940; "Architecture with Respect to Africa," *Negro History Bulletin*, April 1940; "Early Engineering and Its Development," *Negro History Bulletin*, May 1940.
- 34** "Architecture with Respect to Africa," *Negro History Bulletin*, February 1940: 2.
- 35** Ibid.
- 36** "Howard Speeds Turning Out of Engineers for War Effort," *Atlanta Daily World*, September 27, 1942, 5, Proquest Databases, Historic Newspapers.
- 37** "Fisk University Professors to Teach African Culture," May 4, 1944: 5, Proquest Databases, Historic Newspapers.
- 38** Douglas, "The Negro, Too, in American Art," Aaron Douglas Papers, Archives of American Art, Reel 4520, 2–3.
- 39** Ibid, 21.
- 40** Swann Gallery, "Aaron Douglas (1899–1979) *Building More Stately Mansions*, African American Fine Art."
- 41** Michael Harris, "Urban totems: the communal spirit of Black Murals: 1967–1975: art for the people," James Prigoff and Robin J Dunitz, eds, *Walls of Heritage, Walls of Pride: African American Murals* (San Francisco: Pomegranate, 2000); Richard J. Powell, ed., *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art, 1999).
- 42** Douglas, "Mural Decoration," Archives of American Art.

Untitled

Akwaeke
Emezi



Renée Stout
American, b. 1958
Red Room at Five (E), 1999
Chromogenic color print
Image: 11.5 × 15.3 cm. (4 ½ × 6 in.)
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2000.98E
© Renée Stout

If you are born to die, then you are a dead thing even while you live.

Ada has died so many times; a life has become almost nothing to her by now. The humans consider it precious, which Ada knows it is, but a life is also so small, so brief. A beautiful thing that ends quickly. Since she became embodied, this world has pressed against her with its reminders that things like her shouldn't be alive, especially as something Black, something nonhuman. The reminders come in rustling waves, a concerted susurrus, and Ada hears the message stitched inside the whispers. You are meant to live inside a collar of fear, folding yourself into a shadow, reduced to a cowering shade. If you are obedient enough, will they spare you? If you wear the masks they give you, flattening your faces into docile shapes, will you call it freedom? Will you still think any of this can save you?

There are much better questions to ask, Ada thinks. The first is, Have you considered dying first? To die before death can be a distinct liberation; Ada has been resurrected enough times to understand this. She sees that if the end exists, then it exists across time—now as well as in the future.

Ada has heard stories about fighting shadows with light, wrapping everything in brilliance to cast out the darkness, but she also knows that you can also remove the shadow by removing the light. Isn't that a form of defiance, too, eschewing the blaze of promises meant for things that aren't you? Darkness doesn't have to be dangerous. When Ada feels for it, her hands come back dripping in velvet. It is not a shadow; a shadow is a piece while this is an entirety, this is utter and whole and encompassing. Darkness envelops all obstructions and just like that, the shadow is gone.

Ada isn't afraid. She eats the sun and waits, almost eagerly. There is so much life to live, you see, if you are already dead.

b. 1797

I'll keep you scratchin'

SOJOURN TRUTH

Calvin Bennett

N/S



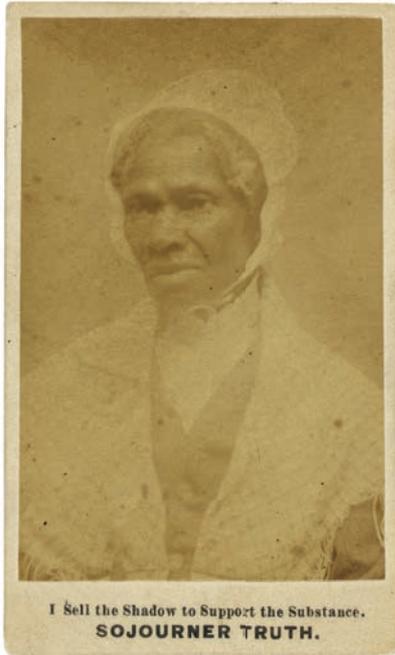
Burnett's Truth, On Paper

Makeda Best

In Calvin Burnett's 1964 portrait *Sojourna Truth* [Fig. 1], the body of the abolitionist and orator fills most of the thirty-by-twenty-two-inch print. Inscribed in the space around Truth's body are her birth year and a phrase attributed to her: "I'll keep you scratchin'." A golden-colored space hovers over and frames the portrait's upper portion, the loosely rounded top corners of this area pulling the compositional attention downward toward Truth, and to her form, constructed of rough black and white lines. The details in this sculpturally rendered form add a sense of realism. Truth—known for the religious conversion that led her to shed her "slave name," Isabella Van Wagner, to become Sojourner the itinerant minister—nearly floats in the space.

FIG. 1

Calvin Burnett
American, 1921–2007
Sojourna Truth, 1964
Lithograph and woodcut
Sheet: 76.2 × 55.9 cm. (30 × 22 in.)
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2001.22.4
© 2020 Estate of Calvin Burnett /
Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights
Society (ARS), NY



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FIG. 2
 Sojourner Truth, ca. 1864
 Albumen print
 10 × 6 cm.
 Carte de visite photograph from
 the Gladstone collection
 Library of Congress, Prints and
 Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.

In the two parts of the image, Burnett creates a juxtaposition between the dense colored area and the large expanse of bare white paper along Truth’s shoulders that indicates the presence of her shawl. These areas are illustrative of the pictorial qualities of the two mediums Burnett uses: lithograph and woodcut. His fluid yet precise drawing hand is visible in the lithographic portion, while a different kind of graphic deliberateness is palpable in the section made by woodcut. It is in this contrast that he evokes a spatial tension: foreground and background compete for attention, enlivening the pictorial space and the body depicted therein. Disrupting the viewer’s perception of the pictorial space was a maneuver that fascinated Burnett, who created this work during an artistic period in which he felt a desire “to make pictures that weren’t based on Renaissance perspective.”¹

To this end, Burnett turned to print mediums whose pictorial language is derived from the maker’s utilization of negative and positive space. And yet a third medium and its binary language are also important here. The suggestion of patina evoked through the color choice of the background and Burnett’s realistic style of portrayal recall and reveal the nineteenth-century photographic portraits

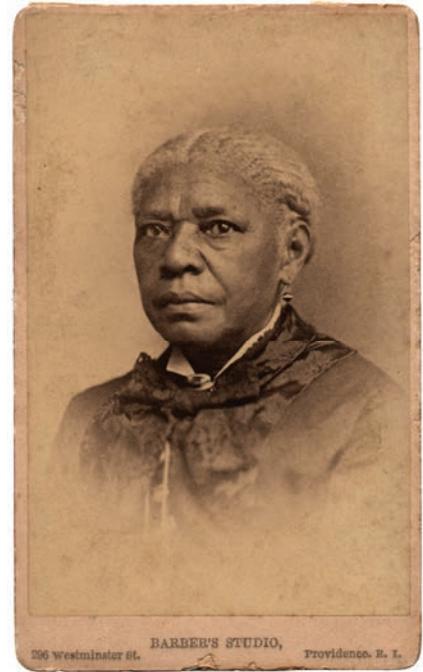
upon which the image is based [Fig. 2]. Examining Truth’s face, and the abrupt line between her face and bonnet, it is almost as if Burnett has cut and pasted a photograph into the image space. The photographic lexicon is further evidenced in the strange way in which Truth fills the image, her central placement and the cropping of the body just below the folded hands in her lap.

More specifically, Burnett’s inspiration is a paper-based photographic portrait Truth herself commissioned and styled in the mid-nineteenth century—one of many. Building on Kathleen Collins’s writing on nineteenth-century photography and race and the work of historian and Truth biographer Nell Irvin Painter, recent scholarship by art historian Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby reveals that possibly as early as 1850 and nearly

until her death in 1883, Truth sat for twenty-eight known portraits. These were made during perhaps fourteen sessions with at least six different photographers, including the famed portraitist Mathew Brady, and printed in two formats: the carte de visite (about four by two inches) and the cabinet card (about six and a half by four and a half inches).

The initiation of Truth's productive period of image production coincided with dramatic innovations in photographic technology and portraiture. The wet collodion process was invented by Frederick Scott Archer in 1848. A direct ancestor of modern analog photography, Archer's technique made it possible to create glass negatives that could be printed on sensitized paper to produce cheap, unlimited reproductions in various sizes. By the mid-1850s, a French inventor named André Adolphe-Eugène Disdéri had created a camera with four, six, eight, or twelve lenses, capable of creating multiple images from the same portrait sitting. Once the negatives were developed, the images were then printed, mounted onto cardstock, and cut apart. The resulting carte de visite—essentially a visual calling card—was widely accessible to a broad audience because it was cheap and easy to produce, and it soon became the most popular form of portraiture in the United States [Fig. 3].

Beginning in the 1860s, people of all classes avidly made, distributed, and collected cartes de visite. The daguerreotype—the format's mirror-like, metal-based predecessor—had been expensive, fragile, cumbersome, and, importantly, did not support collective viewing. Paper-based cartes de visite, however, could be easily inserted into albums and books and mailed. In fact, the photographic album as we know it appeared in American life at this time, specifically in response to the invention of the carte de visite. Cultural historian Elizabeth Siegel explains how photographic albums became an increasingly important object in the construction of personal and national identities.² Cartes de visite entered



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FIG. 3

Cartes de visite were a popular form for several decades, as illustrated by this example of an unknown sitter.

Alonzo S. Barber
[Unidentified Woman], 1878–1885
International Center of Photography,
Gift of Daniel Cowin, 1990 (58.1990).

the public sphere during the Civil War—a period when American audiences were particularly drawn to images that connected them personally to the people and the politics of the nation. During the war, Americans fashioned their own stories by gathering portraits of statesmen, literary figures, cultural celebrities, and family members in albums, creating assemblages of “an unlimited range and in every possible variety— family collections, collections of portraits of friends, and of celebrities of every rank and order.”³

It was not unusual for a sitter to participate in many photographic portrait sessions, as these were seen as occasions not only to document, but to fashion and experiment with identities and affiliations. Some studios utilized painted backdrops, while others relied on furniture and props to assist in setting the scene. Studios served customers in urban markets, while itinerant photographers catered to rural areas. The *carte de visite*'s use of the standing pose, a posture assumed in paintings commissioned by the wealthy for centuries, further expanded and accelerated the photographic portrait market. Public figures seized on the possibilities presented by images that could be sold as souvenirs and used as tools for publicity and fundraising, and the genre of celebrity portraiture was born.

Like fellow abolitionist and author Frederick Douglass, Sojourner Truth chose photography as a medium, and her production of photographic imagery was strategic. Douglass, who argued that through photography anyone could make their “subjective nature objective,”⁴ famously foresaw the potential of the weaponization of the photographic image in the cause for African American equality. Truth sold copies of her photographs and her self-published *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850) by mail. During her travels speaking and lecturing, she offered the images for sale to her audiences. Truth inscribed these *cartes de visite* with her name and the words “I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance” [Fig. 4]. She sold her photographic portraits to support her work and travels on behalf of the abolitionist cause. Truth wrote in a letter to the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* in 1864 that the photographs would fund her work: “I have had three photographs taken of me here in as many different positions, and which are considered much better likenesses than the old ones. I sell the whole for \$1.00. . . . I hope to sell my way to see the Freedmen, and thus bear the expenses of the journey.”⁵ The implications of Truth's declaration are significant, and her adaption of the common nineteenth-century reference for photography as a “shadow” of oneself has different meanings here. Grigsby

FIG. 4

Sojourner Truth, Detroit, 1864
Albumen print
Library of Congress, Prints and
Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.



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writes of Truth's statement as mediation "by a former slave on value and authorship": "[Truth's] use of the first-person pretense 'I sell' also declares her ownership of her image: to sell it, she must own it. But what is it that she sells? A shadow, she tells us, a shadow can be sold."⁶ Truth makes a distinction here between what she is willing to sell: the shadow, or photographic remnant, versus the substance, or the body which is her own as a free woman.

Truth stands in some of her portraits and sits in others. She appears both composed and relaxed at the same time. Even seated, the viewer can recognize her six-foot standing height. Though sometimes Truth poses with column or a small table, the portrait setting is generally simple, because the small format did not allow for many other pictorial elements. The cut of her clothing is precise, and her skirts are pressed. Truth's shawl was a common accessory, and her hair typically is wrapped in a white cloth. Sometimes she poses with her knitting [Fig. 5], books and flowers on the table beside her, while other times she faces the camera. In some, she wears eyeglasses. Through such accessories, Truth

presents herself as a respectable middle-class woman. As scholars have noted, this styling refuted the characterizations of her in the popular press that presented her as defiant and unruly.⁷ Cultural historian Mandy Reid expands this argument when she observes: "We can see Truth's cartes as responding to several different constructions of black identity: racial scientific theories of black inferiority, questions about her own gender identity, Harriet Beecher Stowe's characteri-

zation of her as an exotic racial other, and the scantily clad black bodies displayed at slave auctions."⁸

Truth's commissioning, self-styling, and distribution of her self-portraits, her added text, and her efforts to assert control over her images are radical declarations of her resistance to and evasion of "ownership" by anyone other than herself. This is especially significant considering that since her first appearance in public life in the 1850s, authors, activists, politicians, and artists had used her in service of their own various narratives.

Scholars have demonstrated Truth symbolically served white authors such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and white sculptors such as Adelaide Johnson, but Calvin Burnett's work introduces how African Americans creatively interpreted and used Truth's image. During the 1960s, as African American activists and civil rights workers looked to their canon and galvanized supporters of the cause with historical imagery, Truth

FIG. 5
Sojourner Truth (ca. 1797–1883), 1864
Albumen silver print on card
9 × 5.3 cm. (3 5/8 × 2 1/8 in.)
Harvard Art Museum/Fogg Museum,
Transfer from Special Collections,
Fine Arts Library, Harvard College Library,
Bequest of Evert Jansen Wendell
© President and Fellows of Harvard College

understandably appealed to contemporary audiences as a transhistorical figure of self-transformation and strength. Prints and photographic reproductions played a key role here. Works based on photographs of well-known figures like Angela Davis were enormously popular, as were images of anonymous African Americans in the work of artists like Emory Douglas, the minister of culture for the Black Panther party. When the Cambridge, Massachusetts-born Calvin Burnett made this image of Truth in 1964, he had recently earned his MFA at Boston University. By then, he was already involved in political and social-justice activities such as Stage for Action, a radical theater group, and the NAACP. He described his cohort as being “interested in that aspect of making a statement rather than just art for art’s sake.”⁹

The phrase Burnett inscribed on *Sojourna* was supposedly Truth’s response to a male audience member who derided her following her infamous speech popularly known as “Ain’t I a Woman,” given in 1851 in Akron, Ohio. When the man claimed not to care for Truth’s words, she reportedly replied, “Maybe not, but I’ll keep you scratchin’.” Truth’s story is one of self-creation—of her transformation from enslaved person to a free woman and orator—and Burnett’s choice of quotes underscores her as a complex figure. He accentuates her bourgeois clothing through his rendering of her shawl, the sharp line of her collar, and the cut of her sleeve and shirt. She is self-assured and respectable, and demanding of respect. Truth maintains control here, as she says: she will continue to make people uncomfortable, and not the other way around. Such a message—and Truth as the messenger—must have felt especially resonant to Burnett. Ironically, he began his career as an artist in the US Army as a sign maker, and in this work he interprets Truth as a kind of sign. Burnett adopts Truth’s statement of radical self-definition, of resistance and persistence, during a period of intense racial tension in his home region: 1963 had seen a historic march through Roxbury against the segregation of Boston’s schools, and by 1965 Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. would join the cause. The ways in which Burnett manipulates Truth’s photographic image are like what an African American viewer during Truth’s time might have done. He writes on and “cuts” the image to focus more on Truth, removing much of the surrounding area. The smudges and dissolution of ink along the bottom look as if the work has been handled with fingertips and worn away.

Nineteenth-century Americans collected cartes de visites as personal mementos and as materials in constructing personal and collective histories. This practice continued into the twentieth century through family albums and scrapbooks, and for African Americans, photographic

portraits always had a special function. In her essay “In Our Glory,” cultural critic bell hooks describes the affirmational function of photography in African American life: the collecting and possession of photographs, she argues, functions as a process confirmation of being and knowing.¹⁰ Display, she continues, is as central to African Americans as is the making.¹¹ The process of display is part of the inward-facing function hooks identifies for images of African American life. “Many of those images,” she writes, “demanded that we look at ourselves with new eyes, that we create oppositional standards of evaluation.”¹² Burnett’s print too, is made for sharing—for looking closely and for use as evidence, for remembering to resist meaning, to keep those who doubt scratching.

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1 Oral-history interview with Calvin Burnett, June 12, 1980, and January 6, 1981, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/interviews/oral-history-interview-calvin-burnett-11452>.

2 Elizabeth Siegel, *Galleries of Friendship and Fame: A History of Nineteenth-Century American Photograph Albums* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

3 “Carte de Visite,” *Humphrey’s Journal* 8, no. 21 (March 1, 1862): 327.

4 Frederick Douglass, “Age of Pictures,” as cited in John Stauffer and Zoe Trodd, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century’s Most Photographed African American* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), 144.

5 “Sojourner Truth,” *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, April 16, 1864.

6 Darcy Grimaldo Grigsby, “Negative-Positive Truths,” *Representations* 113 (2011): 19.

7 Roseann M. Mandziuk, “Commemorating Sojourner Truth: Negotiating the Politics of Race and Gender in the Spaces of Public Memory,” *Western Journal of Communication* 67, no. 3 (2003): 276–77.

8 Mandy Reid, “Selling Shadows and Substance,” *Early Popular Visual Culture* 4, no. 3 (2006): 297.

9 Oral-history interview with Calvin Burnett.

10 Bell Hooks, “In Our Glory,” in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: New Press; distributed by W. W. Norton, 1995), 56.

11 *Ibid.*, 59.

12 *Ibid.*, 61.

How To

Haunt History

by Oluremi C. Onabanjo

Fall/Winter 2020

“According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures survey[ed] have an origin which cannot [be] contemplate[d] without horror. . . . There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.”

—Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”

A crowd of tourists dashes up the steps of the British Museum. They ascend intently, eager to enter. Their mission: brief encounters and/or sustained exposure to the myriad masterpieces and cultural treasures within. Forming a meandering procession, they move toward the institution’s imposing portal, a gaping maw partially occluded by rigid teeth—a slew of Ionic columns. Between these pillars is a more contemplative lot: readers. They take advantage of the shade provided by the expansive frontispiece, their heads bowed towards the texts they inspect.

Surveying the scene is a Black woman, dressed in black. She stands apart from the others, isolated in the picture plane. Her hair is pinned back, arms fixed closely to her body. Her stance is strong, yet her sleeves and skirt suggest gentle movement. As this spectral presence, Carrie Mae Weems asserts quiet but insistent withdrawal—a clear act of refusal through detachment. Here, as in the other images from her *Museums* series, she inserts herself as the narrator of history, inscribing herself in the

FIG. 1

Carrie Mae Weems
American, b. 1953

When and Where I Enter,
The British Museum, 2007

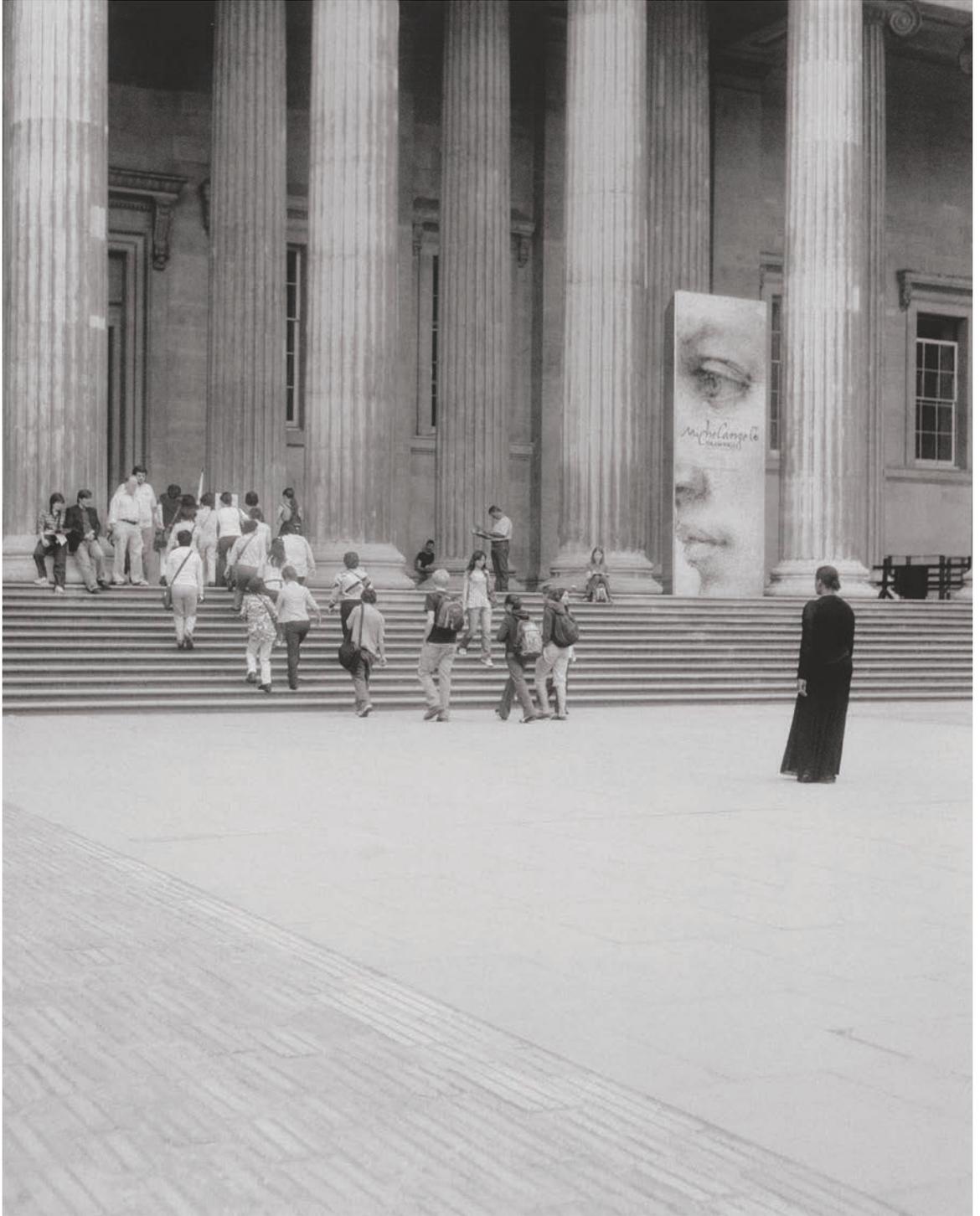
Inkjet print

Images: 47.6 × 38.1 cm. (18 ¾ × 15 in.)

Walter H. Kimball Fund 2014.35.6

© Carrie Mae Weems. Courtesy
of the artist and Jack Shainman
Gallery, New York

Manual



space of sociocultural import, in the process exposing the ideologies of exclusion that buttress its prestige.¹ As art historian Nancy Princenthal has stated, in this practice “Weems positions herself as history’s ghost.”

Since her iconic 1990 *Kitchen Table Series*, Weems has often physically inserted herself into the images she makes. The results are compositions of radical transparency, where she becomes “both subject and photographer, performer and director, blurring the distinction between participant and observer.”² Through the act of performance, Weems argues that “with our own bodies, we are allowed to experience and connect the historical past to the present—to the now, to the moment. By inhabiting that moment, we live the experience; we stand in the shadows of others and come to know firsthand what is often only imagined, lost, forgotten.”³

A formal expansion on *Roaming* (2006)—a visual investigation of sprawling Roman sights and scenes—Weems’s *Museums* series incorporates an interrogation of architecture into her ongoing conceptual conversation with history and landscape. Her act of “brush[ing] history against the grain” is therefore amplified by her embodied confrontation with monuments to Western civilization.⁴ In so doing, she offers an affective model of institutional critique, contingent on a granular consideration of the structural violence embedded in the marking of civilizational achievement. Positioning herself within the frame, she resists closure, highlighting the fraught foundations upon which the master narratives of history so surely seem to rest.

¹ Kathryn E. Delmez, *Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 9.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 257.

Portfolio

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Dear Friend,

I am not here to pick anyone up, or to be picked up. I am here alone because I want to be here, ALONE.

This card is not intended as part of an extended flirtation.

Thank you for respecting my privacy.

Dear Friend,

I am black.

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when they believe there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me.



9am-1pm
2am-6pm
11pm-4am
8pm-10pm
9am-11am

310 years
ago



1575
bricks



25 twists

70 braids

50 locks

DEATH OF A NEIGHBORHOOD

SCATTERED THROUGH THE GRAVEYARD OF WASTED CITY BLOCKS
ARE THE SNAGGLED TOOTH, HOLLOW EYED SHELLS
OF ABANDONED BUILDINGS,
STANDING LIKE OLD WOUNDED ANIMALS WAITING TO DIE.

'WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED HERE ?' YOU SAY TO A PASSERBY
WHO LOOKS YOU DEAD IN THE EYES, AND REPLIES:

'THEY RAPED AND MURDERED ANOTHER NEIGHBORHOOD.
FIRST THEY WITHDREW SUPPORT. BANKS, SCHOOLS,
HOSPITALS, STORES ALL CLOSED DOWN
AND RELOCATED ACROSS TOWN.

LANDLORDS - STRANGLERED THEIR BUILDINGS TO DEATH
BY CUTTING OFF GAS, ELECTRIC, HEAT.
TURNING THE ONCE HAPPY TENANTS INTO HOMELESS REFUGEES
LEFT TO WANDER THE GRAVEYARD STREETS

FEAR, HUNGER AND HATE TAKE HOLD: CRIME BECOMES KING.
ANOTHER POOR NEIGHBORHOOD SHOT THROUGH THE HEAD
AND LEFT FOR THE DEAD.

REBIRTH!

THEN UP FROM THE WOUNDED STREETS COMES THE CRY:
THIS NEIGHBORHOOD AIN'T READY TO DIE,
'CAUSE WE'VE GOT SONGS THAT ARE YET TO BE SUNG.
BALLED UP FISTS WITH BLOWS TO BE FLUNG
HOMES TO BE BUILT FOR HOUSING OUR ELDERS
AND RAISING OUR YOUNG

SO SING YOUR DEATH SONG IN SOME OTHER TONGUE
AND DO YOUR DEATH DANCE ON SOMEBODY ELSE'S STAGE

NO, THIS NEIGHBORHOOD AIN'T READY TO GIVE UP THE GHOST
WE'RE PLANNING ON LIVING OUR LIVES TO THE VERY UTMOST.
TO LIVE, NOT DIE - TO LIVE!

W.S.

BULLET





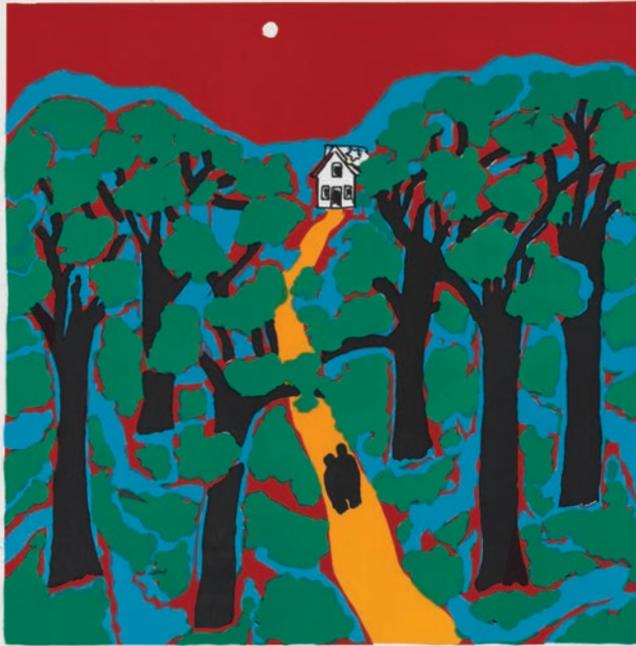








and turn up in the same way. One day they two just up an walk to freedom Ain nobody see em go. Then Aunt Emmy voice numbr'n thru the fields. say: Time to walk to freedom. Aunt Emmy could be in two places at the same time, and Uncle Tate could vanish in a flash. Look for a white farm house with a star quilt on the roof. God be your guide you as good as free.



75/90

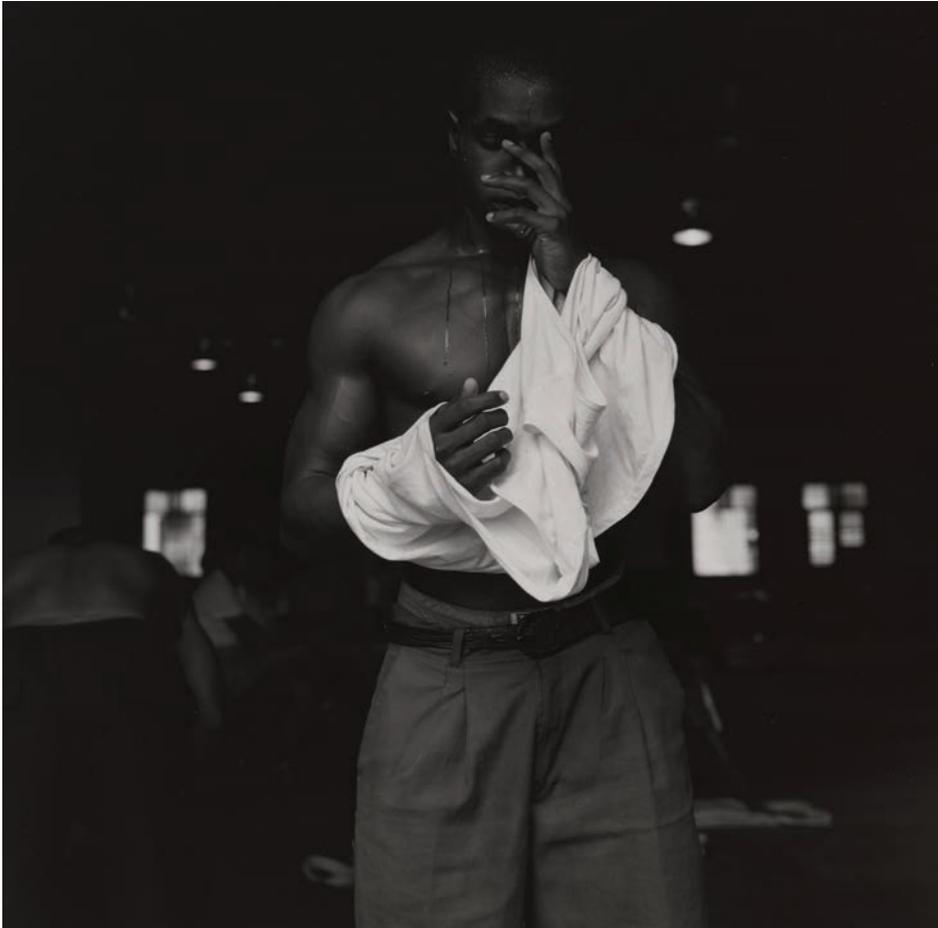
Under a Blood Red Sky # 7

Faith Ringgold 2007











FIGS. 1, 2, and 4
Nubian
Shoe, late 1800s
Leather
Length: 27.9 cm. (11 in.)
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph K. Ott 79.077.16

Recontextualizing Histories

Categorizing the Black & Brown

Tayana Fincher

One Nubian sandal [Fig. 1] sits among several dozens of pairs of shoes in RISD Museum storage, all varying by material, color, composition, culture, and time period. One of the bottom shelves houses twentieth-century *ojotas*, Bolivian sandals made of rubber reclaimed from tires. Three rows up you'll see wedge sandals with studded brass along the straps, created by Tunisian fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa in the early 2000s. On another bottom shelf, bright-green velvety boot tights by American fashion label Anne Klein patiently wait to be displayed on a mannequin. Looking back up, you'll find nineteenth-century wooden stilts called *kabkabs*, intended to be worn in Turkish public bathhouses but now inhabiting a neat, static place among other shoes with so many different pre-determined uses. And yet this single sandal seems to hold more weight than complete pairs, its presence suggesting a tumultuous history and path to the museum collection.

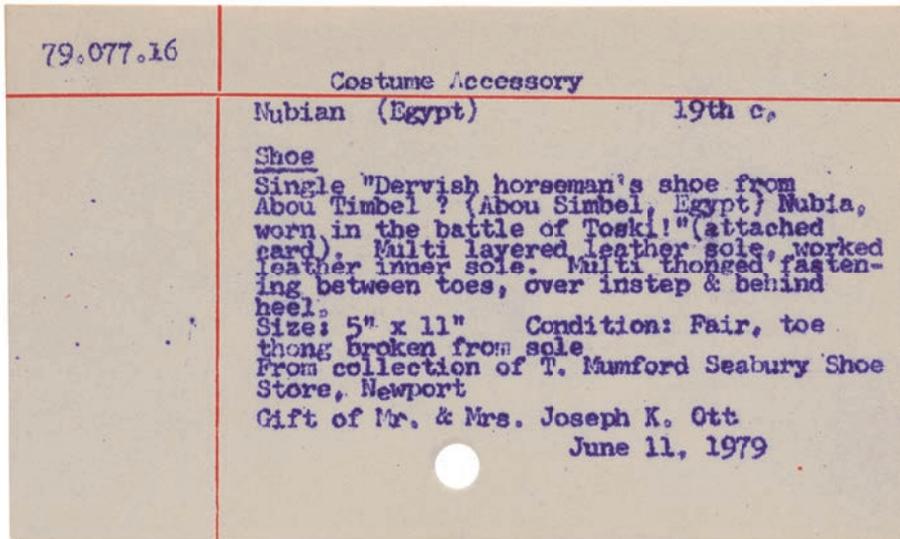
One of my duties here as the Nancy Prophet Fellow is to help reconcile issues in our database regarding works from the African and Islamic art collections. The continents and regions represented by these categories are vast, but at the moment there is no specialized curator for either. This means that African and Islamic objects, despite sometimes being in the collection for many decades, often receive inadequate research analysis, attention, and conservation.

When I first began my position in the museum's Costume and Textiles Department, I was drawn to this lone shoe, but am still unable to articulate exactly why. The sandal is made up of fifteen stacked leather panels, with a punched pattern extending along the length of the top layer. The shoe is about 11 inches in length—about a 7 in US men's sizes or a 9 in women's. Its dark brown hue makes the shallow carvings seem muted and subtle, inviting a closer look at its worn appearance. A striped border rounds the edges of the footbed, and starting under the ball of the foot, an interior pattern branches upwards into five directions, leading to each toe [Fig. 2]. Symmetry forms around the middle shoot, with more stripes and concentric circles lining up to create an abstracted decoration not seen when the shoe is worn. Knotted wrapped-leather cords comprise the sandal's strap, which would hold securely behind the wearer's heel and run over the top of their foot. The cords converge as they approach the toes, then break out into two parts with tripartite fringes. One tiny nail sticks out where the strap should meet the footbed, but the strap is no longer attached [Fig. 4].

Why did this shoe enter the collection broken and without its mate? Based on the shoe size, were people in the nineteenth century smaller in stature than people today, or was the wearer young, and thus still growing? What stories does the shoe tell? How can we recontextualize the shoe to better understand both its earlier life and its new purpose in a museum? As is the case with many museum objects acquired prior to the mid- to late-twentieth century, when registration departments began developing more standardized methods of maintaining collection records, this shoe



2



3

has almost no information in its object files. Its only worthwhile record is an archival notecard [Fig. 3]. There is a lot to unpack here, between names, terminology, and choice of punctuation. As you can guess, there is no attached card, leading us to wonder what other information was lost since the shoe's acquisition in 1979.

Dating back at least 130 years, this sandal originates in Nubia, a region mainly bounded by the first and sixth cataracts of the Nile River between modern-day Egypt and Sudan. Much of what is currently taught about African history tends to erase the significance of black bodies, their creations, and histories¹; this is evident when museum collections remove Egypt from the African continent, instead considering it a separate entity or part of the Middle East. About five or six thousand years ago, Nubia's earliest civilizations settled along the banks of the Nile River, initially consisting of groups from throughout the Sahara Desert. Nubian diasporas still exist in and outside of northeastern Africa today, but as is the case with Abu Simbel's rock temples, which were built in the thirteenth century BCE to broadcast ancient Egypt's colossal power over surrounding enemies, many historic sites and homelands have been uprooted for twentieth-century dam construction and recent "modernization" efforts. With its close proximity to resources and bodies of water [Fig. 5], Nubia became a hub for global trade well before

FIG. 3
Accession card for Nubian shoe, late 1800s.
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph K. Ott.





European imperialists forcibly achieved such in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Ancient Nubian kingdoms lived alongside their Egyptian neighbors, sometimes as reigning Kushite and descendant kings and queens, and at other times as Egyptian subjects trading with populations around the Mediterranean Sea to the north and the Red Sea and Indian Ocean to the east.²

Expanding beyond the local purview, Nubians also traversed the Sahara Desert into wealthy West and Central African empires.³ Through trans-Saharan trade especially between the seventh and sixteenth centuries, a breadth of valuable goods

was exchanged between the African coasts, including precious metals, ivory, salt, leather, beads, cowrie shells, and enslaved people. Nubians also competed in Arab, Indian, and Chinese markets since at least the first century CE, trading these commodities for things such as textiles and spices.⁴ Through maritime commercial trade with populations across Indian Ocean networks in the medieval period, Arab and Asian ideologies also crossed Africa's eastern coastline. Muslim missionaries—especially those from the Fatimid Empire just north in Egypt—joined merchants on caravan and maritime expeditions, and between the tenth and sixteenth centuries they steadily gained converts among previously Coptic Christian Nubians. Successfully placed along the fertile Nile River, Nubia continued serving as a cosmopolitan region, selectively adapting both local and foreign influences.

Our shoe is labeled “Nubian,” but by the time of the shoe’s 1979 acquisition into the museum collection, the region had been known by several names by non-African forces. Since the birth of Islam on the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, Muslim merchants and



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FIG. 5
Map of Nubia, ca. 1889

scholars had journeyed across what is now Egypt, Eritrea, and Ethiopia to empires in North and West Africa, as well as to the Iberian Peninsula. The etymology of “Sudan” actually stems from the medieval period, when early Arab travelers called the vast land area beneath the Sahara Desert *Bilad al-Sudan*, meaning “land of the blacks.” Sudan was under variations of Christian and Muslim rule for five centuries before the Ottomans finally conquered the region in 1821, coming down from the Khedivate of Egypt.⁵ A notable empire preventing a quick Muslim conversion of all of Nubia was that of the Funj, a strictly African power that maintained control in southern Sudan before the Ottoman takeover.⁶ When the Battle of Toski (also Tushki, Tushkah) took place near what is now the northern border of Sudan in August of 1889, Egypt had been under Ottoman Turkish rule for more than three hundred years. In fact, Ottoman control of the area did not end until World War I, precipitated by the growing European colonial presences.

Seaports along the east coast of Africa attracted many foreigners, and these external powers quickly reshaped the environmental and political structures in Egypt and Sudan. The French invaded Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth century, seeking to control access to and through the Red Sea and to disrupt other European powers’ access to their territories in South and Southeast Asia over the next several decades.⁷ British occupation of Northeast Africa officially began in the early 1880s, and Sudan similarly experienced subsequent invasions and occupation. Unfortunately, to make way for technological advances by new external forces, such as the building of the Suez Canal in the mid-nineteenth century and the Aswan Dams in the mid-twentieth century, some indigenous and long-standing populations were permanently displaced.⁸ This includes great numbers of Nubians, some of whom have still not been able to return to their homelands.⁹

I’m drawn to the emphasis in the notecard’s first sentence, where the inclusion of the exclamation point seems to imply that this shoe is an exciting piece of rare war memorabilia. The Battle of Toski was a decisive loss for Sudanese soldiers fighting against the Anglo-Egyptian army. In 1881, a Nubian religious scholar named Muhammad Ahmad ibn ‘Abd Allah proclaimed himself to be the *Mahdi*, or restorer of peace and justice especially according to Shi’a Islam. Angry with the growing British, Egyptian, and Ottoman presences in government and largely with self-interested fiscal policies and actions enacted at the expense of Sudanese and Nubian lives, Muhammad Ahmad and his followers (*Anṣār*, Mahdists) led a Sudanese revolution against Anglo-Egyptian forces.¹⁰ The Sudanese revolted were called “dervishes,” a term used derogatorily by

the British to describe Muslims during this time period. This word was also employed on our archival notecard.

Between 1881 and 1899, the Mahdist War raged between the Anṣār and the Anglo-Egyptian forces, which also included a number of Sudanese men. During the first few years of the war, Mahdists successfully regained control over lost territories, including Khartoum, the capital of what it is today the country of Sudan, but Toski was just one of many battles the Nubians and Sudanese would lose.¹¹ Newspapers from London to, less understandably, Los Angeles reveled in British victories with an air of superiority, as we see here after the Battle of Omdurman:

The Delta has beaten the Desert. Instead of marching in triumph to Cairo, Wad-el-N'Jumi has found a grave among the sandhills of the Nile Valley, his army of valiant fanatics has been destroyed, and the invasion of Egypt has speedily and effectually been thwarted by the Egyptian Army. The General and officers were English, but, except the 20th Hussars, the soldiers were natives, tawny or black, — we believe chiefly black. Even the horse artillery which came so opportunely into action, is qualified as Egyptian; so that the troops of the Khedive have at last satisfactorily shown what they can do in the open field, when well led, against a brave and obstinate foe animated by Moslem fanaticism.¹²

By combining new firepower and successful infantry structures at the Battle of Toski, the British effectively ended the advancing Mahdist revolution against the Anglo-Egyptians, all while the region remained under nominal Ottoman control until World War I. In the thirteen years after Mahdi's death in 1885, his successors were unable to codify strong alliances with Sudanese neighbors or Christian Ethiopians against European imperialism, ensuring that only a few hundred Mahdists were able to escape.¹³

The RISD Museum's shoe is certainly not the only piece from an African battleground now in the collection of an art or anthropology museum. The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, England, holds a *jibbah* (also *jubbah* or *djubbah*; a long, heavy overcoat worn by men in some Muslim countries) that was likely taken off a dead Sudanese soldier [Fig. 6]. Although these coats are thick in their quilted construction, they proved useless against Britain's newly developed machine guns, as evident in the bullet hole in the coat's center.¹⁴ Memorabilia is by definition meant to celebrate historic moments, but how can museum audiences celebrate objects with such blatantly one-sided, violent histories? How can cultural institutions rectify the acquisition of racist or imperialist gifts into their collections?



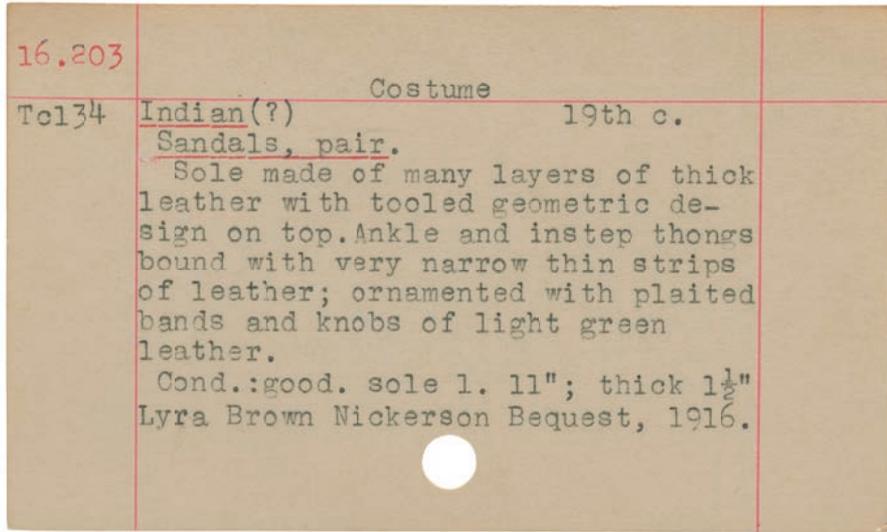
6

Diving back into the Costume and Textiles Department object files, we know that the Nubian shoe came to the RISD Museum in 1979 from Thomas Mumford Seabury (1821–1907), the owner of a shoe store in Newport, Rhode Island. Seabury was also a well-traveled deacon, often taking trips to areas around the Holy Land.¹⁵ In 1898 he embarked on a three-month trip to Egypt, Palestine, Syria, and Europe with other members of the American Baptist Publication Society.¹⁶ Might this be when he came into contact with the holder of this Nubian shoe, perhaps a British soldier eager to show his spoils to American tourists? Or maybe the

shoe was in the hands of an Egyptian or Sudanese “native” entertaining Seabury at a *souk* in Cairo? Was it a shoe so uniquely Nubian that Seabury felt he had to buy it for his Newport audiences back home? The lack of written evidence in the archives leads to many speculations, but for now it seems plausible that the shoe was picked up on one of Seabury’s numerous international voyages. Despite our

FIG. 6
 Jibbah from Sudan, Africa
 Collected by Harry Hamilton Jackson
 Given to the Museum in 1919
 Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford
 © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford





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uncertainty as to how the shoe found a new life in Rhode Island, its path to the RISD Museum may be a fortuitous one after all, in terms of helping us recontextualize its history.

A pair of Indian leather sandals [Fig. 7] almost identical to the Nubian shoe was bequeathed to the museum in 1916 [Fig. 8]. The Indian pair has a brighter brown color and green bundles of leather along its straps, but aside from miniscule differences in the punched designs along the footbed, the shapes and structures are strikingly similar. The benefactor of these sandals, Lyra Brown Nickerson, was thirty-one when she died of typhoid fever in 1916, but she, like our Mr. Seabury, was well traveled.¹⁷ She toured with her father throughout Europe, and these trips were perhaps where she also came into contact with objects now in our collection. Her bequeathed gifts include artworks and objects from a range of countries, including Bolivia, Algeria, South Africa, Sweden, Italy, Egypt, and Japan. With such a substantial collection, however, is there a possibility that Nickerson jumbled these shoes with another pair, incorrectly attributing them to an Indian maker? Or do the similarities between the Indian and Nubian sandals subvert colonial-era thought, literally and visually providing proof

FIG. 7
Indian
Sandal (one from a pair), 1800s
Leather
Length: 27.9 cm. (11 in.)
Bequest of Lyra Brown Nickerson 16.203

FIG. 8
Accession card for Indian sandals, 1800s.
Bequest of Lyra Brown Nickerson.

of artistic exchange between Africa and South Asia? Without consultation, conversation, and more focused research on the Indian and Nubian examples and on leather-working practices in these parts of the world, it will be hard to accurately convey the histories of these shoes. But making their incomplete backgrounds transparent in museum galleries and online can be a good first step to rectification, sparking fruitful dialogue among scholars, students, and museum visitors.

When I first encountered the Nubian shoe in storage and tried to describe its shape, daggers came to mind. I was reminded of research I had done a few years ago into the symbolism of these personal weapons and their intricate differences in Mughal and Rajput manuscript paintings. *Khanjar* and *shibriya* daggers (which first originated in Oman and Jordan, respectively) sometimes have handles that roughly follow the shape of the footbeds of these Nubian and Indian shoes. Do these weapons just further complicate this conversation, or can we speculate that objects such as these circulated Nubian markets, connecting the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean worlds and influencing artisanal and artistic visual languages?

We are left with more questions than answers, but we can be sure that by embracing new paradigms for curatorial work and making the uncertain histories of objects known, we counter imperialist modes of erasure sometimes imposed on museum collections and departments. The Nubian sandal may have been purchased by Thomas Seabury to enthusiastically commemorate a white European victory against black “Moslem [fanatics],” or perhaps it simply was an opportunity to present an African shoe in his store’s collection, regardless of the credibility of information he received upon purchasing. Maybe the Nubian and Indian shoes were acquired by the RISD Museum to categorize both African and Asian creations into compact, museological microcosms, or maybe museum workers just thought they would provide art and design students with more international examples for artistic inspiration. Either way, the shoes’ presence in the museum’s collection serves as a subversive reminder that black and brown people led the way in globalizing the world, and that history is multiple.

- 1 Amy Maxmen, et al., "In Sudan, Rediscovering Ancient Nubia Before It's Too Late," *Undark Magazine*, September 30, 2019, undark.org/2018/02/19/nubia-sudan-amara-west-archaeology/.
- 2 "The history of the populations on the Nile south of the first cataract can thus be described as being rooted in multiple cultural, social, political, and religious legacies, fusing pharaonic and post-pharaonic Egyptian, Roman, Greek, Arab, Ethiopian, and Iranian influences, as well as Islam and Christianity with ancient Nilotic and Sudanese traditions from the south." Roman Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013), 172.
- 3 For further reading and a couple of examples, look into Michael A. Gomez's new book, *African Dominion: A New History of Empire in Early and Medieval West Africa* (Princeton University Press, 2019). See also Herbert M. Cole and Doran H. Ross, *The Arts of Ghana* (Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History / University of California, 1977).
- 4 Omar H. Ali, *Islam in the Indian Ocean World: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston and New York: Bedford / St. Martin's, 2016), 14.
- 5 A. Adu Boahen, *General History of Africa: Africa under Colonial Domination 1880–1935*, vol. VII (Paris: UNESCO 1985), 73.
- 6 Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa*, 140.
- 7 Colonial powers sought to control the Suez Canal to maintain efficient maritime access to their dominions, such as the East India Companies, rather than traveling by land through hostile Ottoman territory or all the way around the southernmost tip of Africa.
- 8 Idris El Hareir and El Hadji Ravane M'Baye, *The Different Aspects of Islamic Culture: The Spread of Islam throughout the World*, vol. 3 (Paris: UNESCO, 2011), 302. See also a list of ancient Nubian buildings and sites that had to be extracted and moved for the building of hydroelectric power in Egypt: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, "The Rescue of Nubian Monuments and Sites," *World Heritage Centre*, whc.unesco.org/en/activities/173/.
- 9 R. M. "Who Are the Nubians?" *Economist*, September 19, 2016, www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2016/09/19/who-are-the-nubians.
- 10 Mervyn Hiskett, *The Course of Islam in Africa* (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 72.
- 11 "The Battle of Toski," *Spectator*, August 10, 1889, archive.spectator.co.uk/article/10th-august-1889/5/the-battle-of-toski-t-he-delta-has-beaten-the-dese.
- 12 "A Death Blow to Mahdism," *Los Angeles Herald*, September 5, 1898, [cdnc?a=d&d=LAH18980905.2.15&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-----1](http://cdnc.ucr.edu/cgi-bin/cdnc?a=d&d=LAH18980905.2.15&e=-----en--20--1--txt-txIN-----1).
- 13 Boahen, *General History of Africa*, 77.
- 14 Jibbah (1919.29.7), *Arms and Armour: Selected Objects from the Upper Gallery*, web.prm.ox.ac.uk/weapons/index.php/tour-by-region/africa/africa/arms-and-armour-africa-20/index.html.
- 15 J. H. Beers & Co., *Representative Men and Old Families of Rhode Island: Genealogical Records and Historical Sketches of Prominent and Representative Citizens and of Many of the Old Families*, vol. 1 (Chicago: J. H. Beers, 1908), https://books.google.com/books?id=sNo4AQAAMAAJ&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.
- 16 "Gaze's Oriental Tours, Season 1898," *Gaze's Tourists Gazette* X, no. 3 (January 1898), books.google.com/books?id=ZsYBAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA5-PA11&lpg=RA5-PA11&dq=thomas%20mumford%20seabury%20egypt&source=bl&sots=G5sZAAymyu&sig=ACfU3U3m2GxJMrl3lYPQu00K2GxPq8l-A&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwi_2sOQ8KDIhXtkOAKHX3wBxcQ6AEwDnoECAkQAQ#v=onepage&q=thomas%20mumford%20seabury%20egypt&f=false.
- 17 Kelly Sullivan, "A Life of Tragedy for Wealthy Shannock Man," *Chariho Times* (RI), March 5, 2018, www.ricentral.com/chariho-times/a-life-of-tragedy-for-wealthy-shannock-man/article_38d33e8a-1d88-11e8-b202-03d97c31e728.html.

Double

Kevin Quashie /
Sade LaNay

Take

Fall/Winter 2020

Manual

Kevin Quashie: The lyric poem, as a form, is the domain of being, a schema where the speaker can render themselves as object for the sake of beholding experience and feeling. In this way, the lyric is a world of experience, a delicious privacy that unfurls in public—a privacy that might even generate from publicness. We might say, then, that the lyric exemplifies the subjective consciousness of a human free to sing intimacy intimately.

What else is this drawing but a visual lyric of black privacy, impossible though blackness might seem both to the lyric (its idiom of objectification, authority, intimacy) and to privacy? Here, in Toyin Ojih Odutola's *Last Portrait of the 18th Marquess*, the subject is swallowed and swaddled and secured by plant life. Do they grow there, and what might be said of the nature of their growing? Ojih Odutola's graphic strokes establish the plants as clouds circling around the figure like a lyric atmosphere. Indeed, we might notice how the artist marries the greens of the plants with the blacks and grays of the figure's hair, extending the sense of atmosphere. This marquess is materially immaterial.

I love the intimation, the declaration, of privacy here. I love that this is the last painting of a noble ruler of a border area, one who protects thresholds. It reminds me of the character Denver in Toni Morrison's majestic novel *Beloved*, particularly of Denver's bower, that port of trees that coheres as her room in the

woods: "between the field and the stream, hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty inches of murmuring leaves. Bent low, Denver could crawl into this room, and once there she could stand all the way up in emerald light." This bower is Denver's refuge, where her "imagination produced its own hunger and its own food."¹

This image—Morrison's, Ojih Odutola's—is an imagining of what privacy might be: everything one is cannot be shown; something is reserved though the reservoir is not of one's control and therefore it stipples the heart. I am suggesting privacy as a will to follow the pulse of one's own breathing, as an engine where one can feel "vague and intense at the same time."² In Ojih Odutola's lyricism, the figure's shielded, urgent presence betrays ecstasy—ecstasy which, in the Greek, means standing outside oneself.³

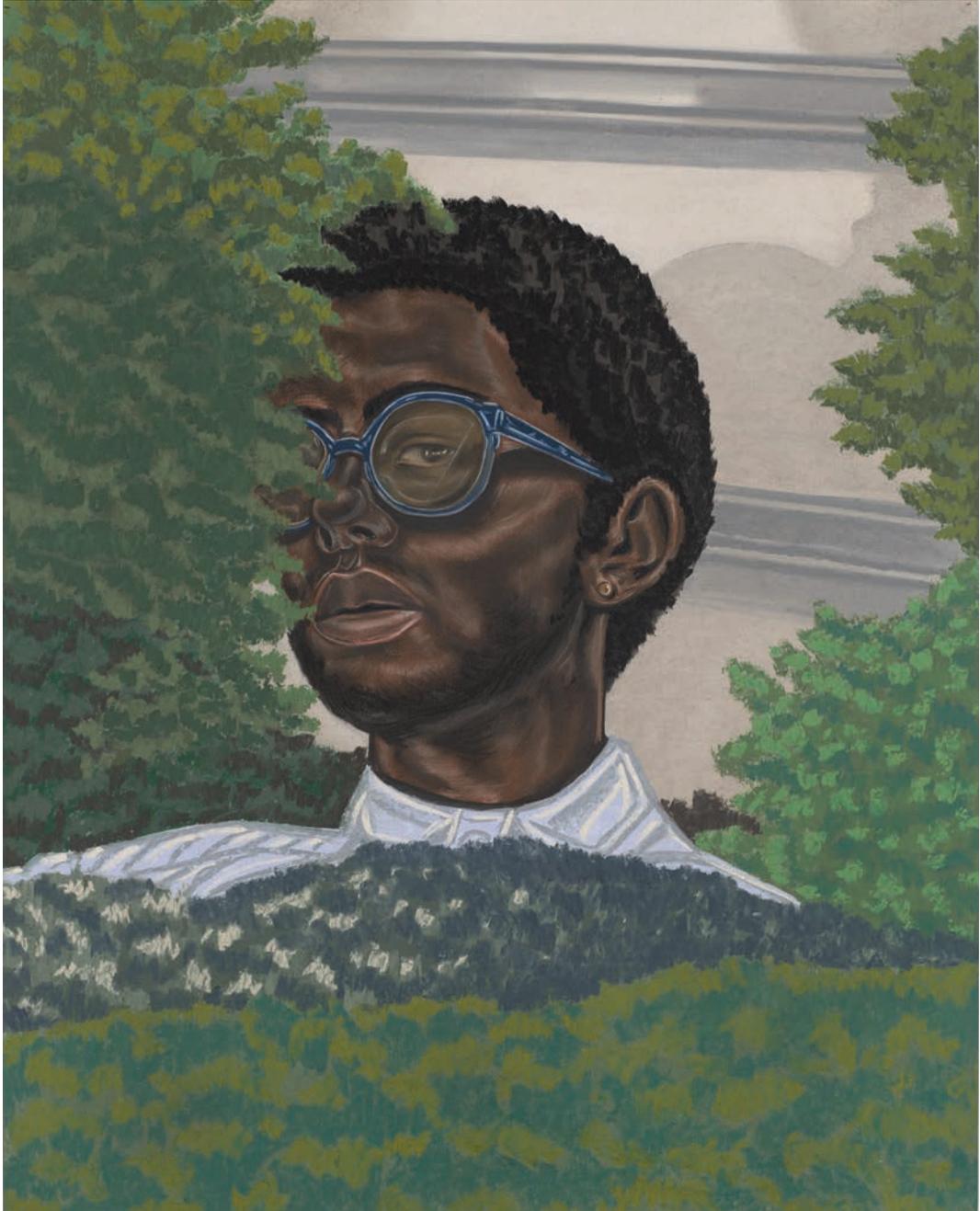
In *Last Portrait of the 18th Marquess*, we can appreciate privacy as a scene from and in which a one arrives, the small ordinary rightness of being for this one with dark skin composed as a sea of browns and blacks and taupes. One is one is many: this unfurling lyric privacy, this figure becoming right before our eyes in a manner not privy to full view, the wonder possessing but not possessed by the one.

Perhaps a marquess has never looked like this marquess, who appears and disappears in plain sight.

¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Knopf, 1987; New York: Plume, 1998), 28. Citations refer to the Plume edition.

² Morrison, *Beloved*, 118.

³ See the title essay of Carl Phillips's *Coin of the Realm: Essays on the Life and Art of Poetry* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2004) for more on the lyric and ecstasy, especially page 239.



Toyin Ojih Odutola
Nigerian, b. 1985
Last Portrait of the 18th Marquess, 2018
Charcoal, pastel, and pencil on paper
Image/sheet: 60 × 47.6 cm. (23 5/8 × 18 3/4 in.)
Paula and Leonard Granoff Fund 2018.92
© Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist
and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York



Take

Double

Kevin Quashie /
Sade LaNay

Sade LaNay: The frame in which the portrait resides. Wood, gray, faintly grained liberty. The shirt, buttoned up to the collar, frames the body. Stripes of white, gray, and periwinkle. The glasses, their thick lenses, frame the eyes. Slivers of sunlight gleam off ultramarine.

Duck down with me here. I want to show you something. Swallowed up in the lush strokes of Van Gogh camouflage. Let us be consumed by the chaos of green layered on gray. What harm is there in a kiss between an earl and a duke? What is natural anyway?

I want to press my self into a body that does not give. I am tired of the frame woman. Everything it holds does not feel like it belongs to me. I want to break the membrane. My female body is a receptacle. A net for psychic refuse. A vacuum of projections. Dutifully dispensing hollow ova and frequent sighs.

Do men enjoy being men? Do their bodies bring them any joy?

I covet every hint of softness in a man. The tip of his nose. His earlobe. His full bottom lip after a gasp. His shadow. The shadow that his body casts upon itself. The pitch of his shadow self. How he keeps a warm curious tongue in his mouth like a secret at dusk. His moans. The hollow behind his knee. Globes of wet brown light.

Even so, I can only enjoy a man if I am a man too.

A man adorning his easy smile in lipstick. A man zipping up a chiffon skirt. A man highlighting his nose and cupid's bow in the makeup mirror. A man evincing

his scars. A man commanding his emotions. A man relishing the laughter of women. A man manifesting space for vulnerable bodies. A man spending the day in bed watching yaoi. A man openly crying.

If I believe there is more than one way to be a man, then why can't I—?

Bring our hips together like a pair of cymbals. Groan against the frenetic restlessness peeling through our brimming bodies. Neither of us knowing how to receive the other. Unraveling around the clenched fist in the pit of my stomach. I am hungry and I want to be greedy. I want to press myself into a body that will not give.

What does it mean to make an unwavering statement of gender a declaration of independence? What does it mean to be afraid to say it? What does it mean to apprehend a loss as much as a release?

The skin frames the identity. Dips and mounds of browns, black smudged across cheekbones and brows. Glints of pink, taut at the edges. A supple, reflective surface, absorbing and masking what is already opaque and resistant to definition.

*Butterfly Hymnals
That Won't
Disturb the Pleasant
Complacency, And Other Lullabies*

Shuriya Davis

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WATER

B-989

Uniform spandex binds my hips
like a tight curtain sash,
wind looking much freer than how it usually look
cold and naked in the daylight

As always
ms. keith follows in her same tradition,
grabbing cheeks and
gibbering like some baby

From where i sit i can see ma's judging eye
tearing me down from her choir pew,
says that last service mrs.lou caught me
flirtin my eyes with some boy

After revival
i head to the reception table,
tempting that german chocolate cake
against ma's custard white dress



Out of the corner
of coolness
petals lay open faced, juiced
starches flowing
baked on the pavement
loose like tethered skin

Snipping snapping
adhesive footprints
violet smudges, dehydrated
and faint of pulp
in a quiet space of headache
baby buds peel

crawling sticky
vanilla
like sweat



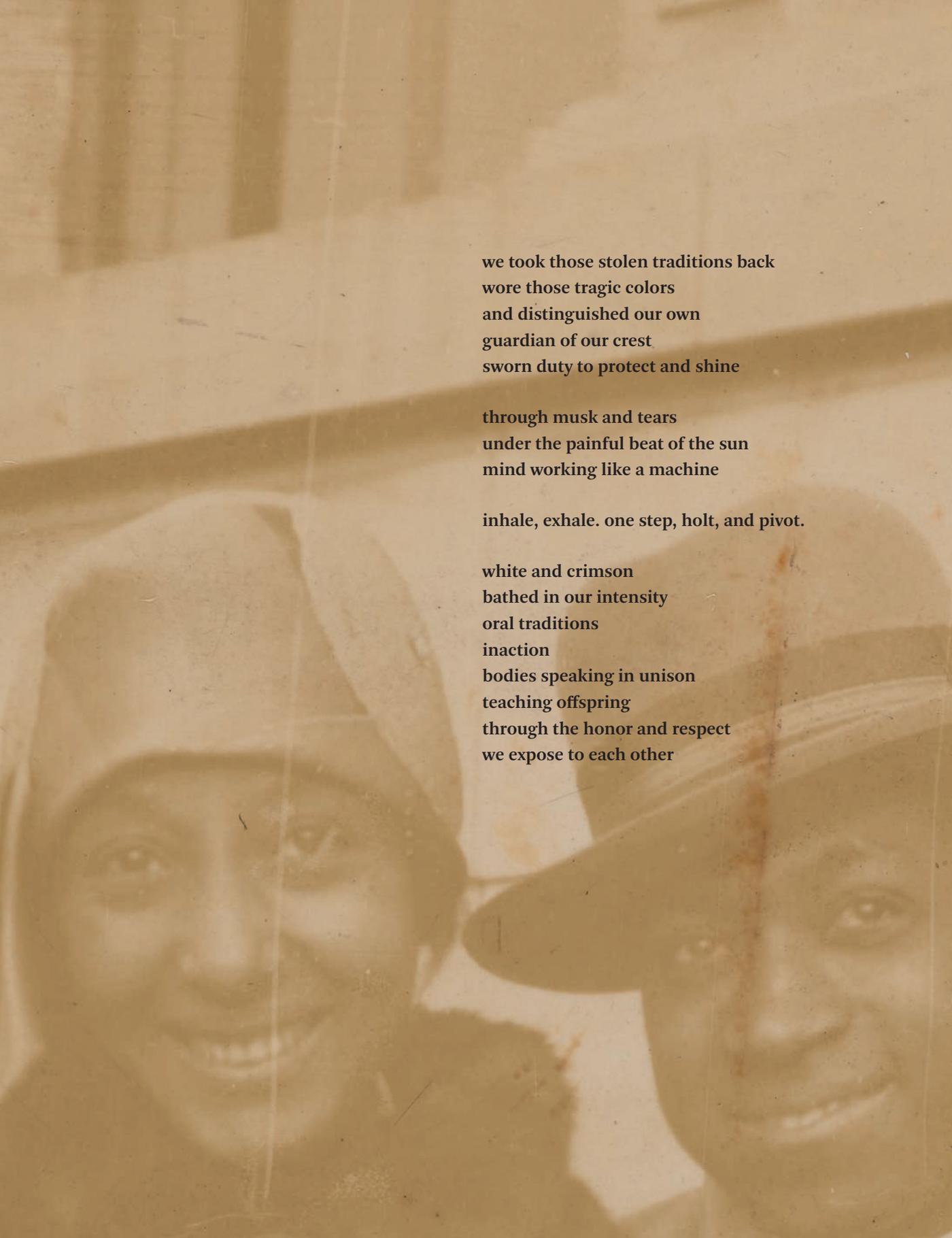
Sundried tomato,
bitter back tongue sweet
I get a twisty head, a frying stomach
sultry eyed and scared

walk far away and pretending not to walk back
clutching those tired frustrated pockets

furthest from them black boys,
them ghetto black boys,
they beautiful black boys,

they carrying on like flies do,
everywhere on each other but neva touching

crisp ice chilling up the noon
eyes pierced frigid,
suffocating me and my white tee
home from where those black boys be



we took those stolen traditions back
wore those tragic colors
and distinguished our own
guardian of our crest
sworn duty to protect and shine

through musk and tears
under the painful beat of the sun
mind working like a machine

inhale, exhale. one step, holt, and pivot.

white and crimson
bathed in our intensity
oral traditions
inaction
bodies speaking in unison
teaching offspring
through the honor and respect
we expose to each other



we lay our tenderized heads stacked in the freezer
searching for whatever treats left over from last service

in the dead of midday heat
we hear not one cicada kiss

our pavement sizzles and
speaking to us from the pane

a tub of dish armor
suds up to our arms, and
wets our bellies
heads dizzy of pine and bleach



tall day flattens at evening
radio voices play behind cleaning
repetitive games of sticker boy
with loud screams of laughter

mommas permission
we run as fast as we can
before she changes her mind
gums flapping flour dust into creme sky

it works like muscle memory
what oral history
can do to nervous system

adjusting to a world
north and south
shocks

the same bodily trauma
travels
borders
and generations

and that hatred
that is pre-colonial
still stings
skin still punctured, peeling

gentle with my skin
tender with your hugging
in step you flow

back and forth
breathing warmly behind my ear
i always hear that start to your grin
the parting to your lips

i am always concerned
always with my guard up
cautioning whatever is left open for judgement

i shake from being this open
this abandoned
i chill
you welcome me in

Handwritten text in a dark, possibly black, ink on a light-colored surface. The text is written in a cursive or stylized script, appearing to be a name or a signature. The characters are somewhat indistinct but seem to include a large initial letter followed by several smaller characters.

fluorescent against white walls, kanekalon braids, single file practicing hand games, protected by wired fence

warm

lint

hot
gravel

crush

in grown

antlers,

threatened by tweed,

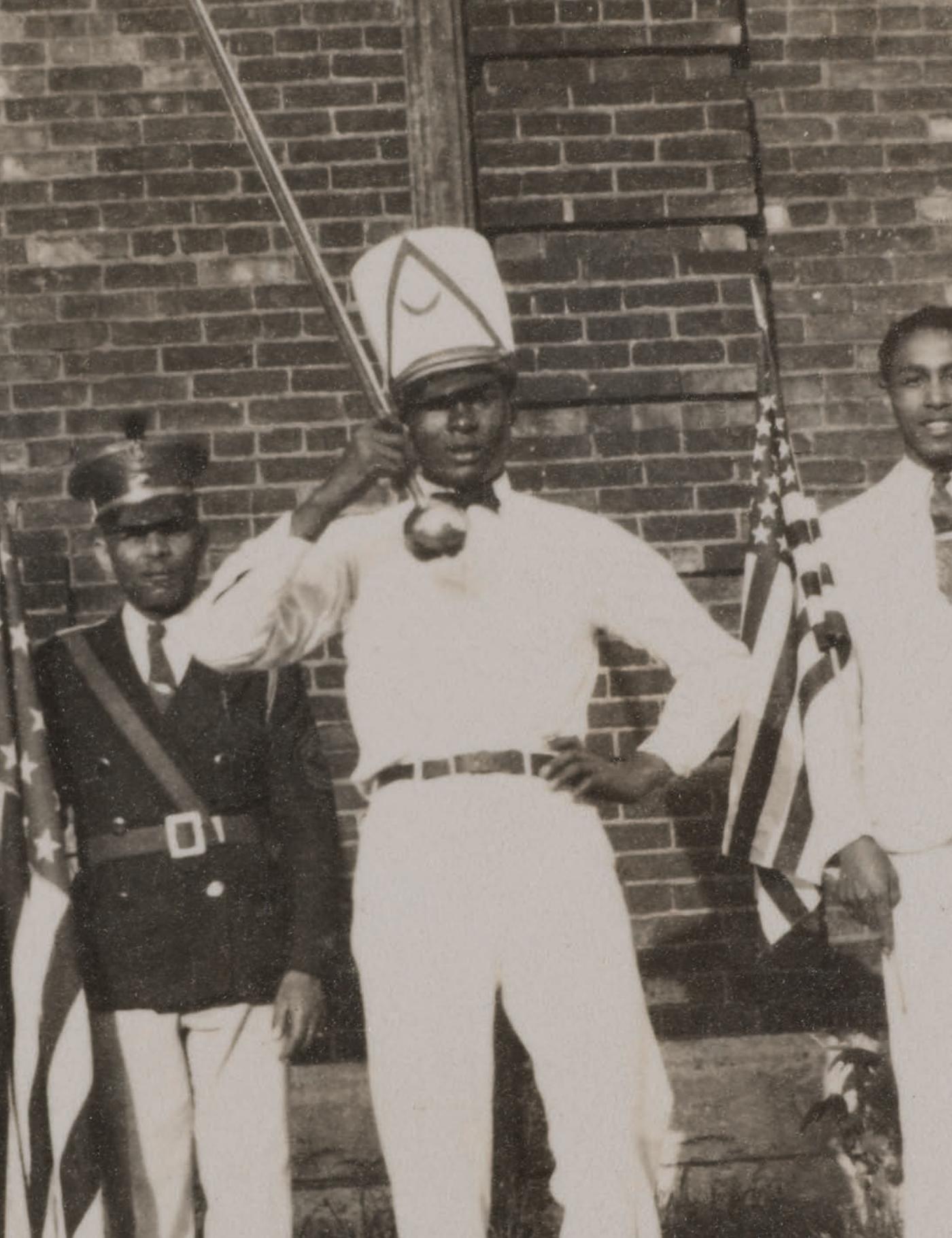
and bush,

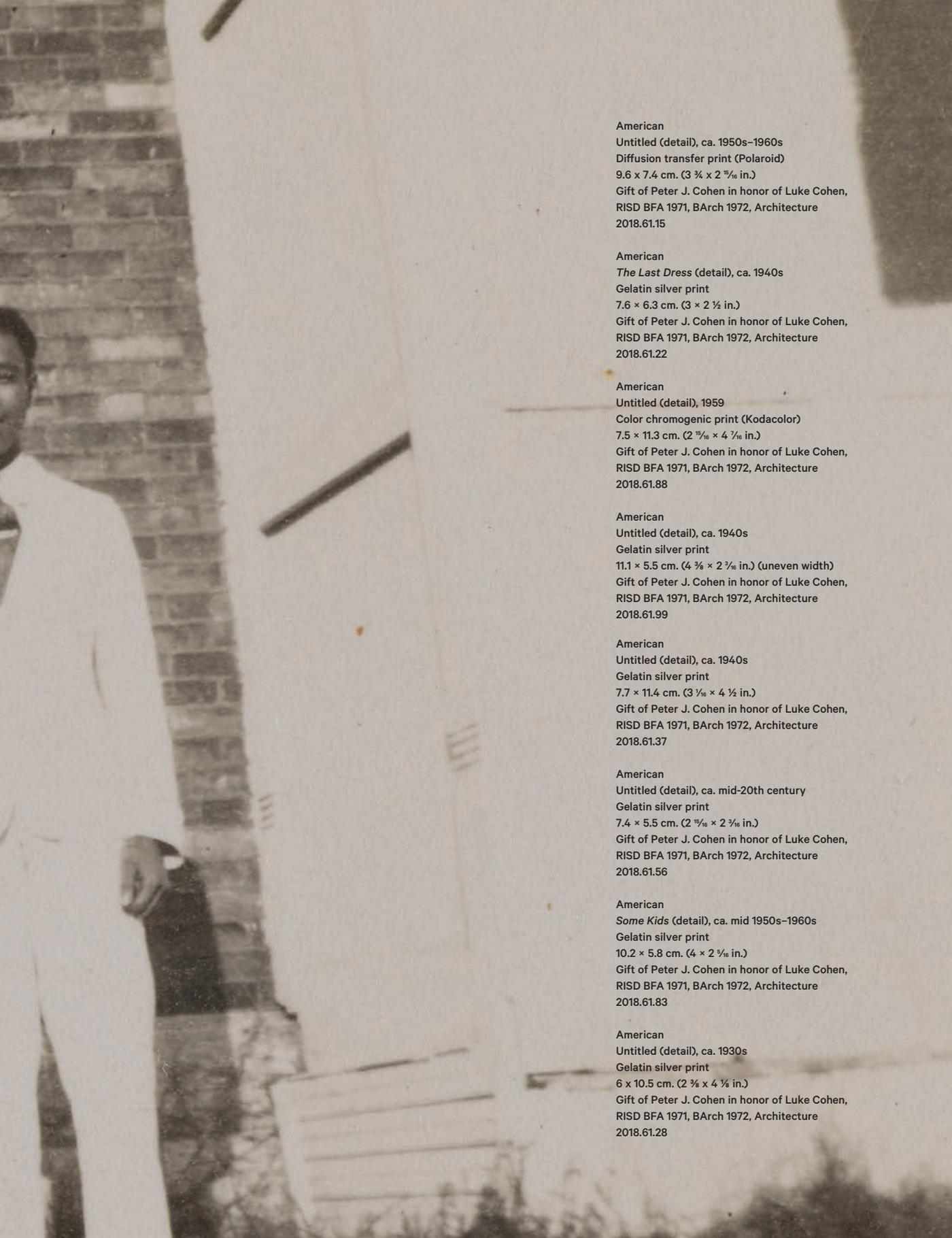
like the angry larva,

growling in my tummy

butterflies hatch,

murmuring hymns





American
Untitled (detail), ca. 1950s–1960s
Diffusion transfer print (Polaroid)
9.6 × 7.4 cm. (3 ¾ × 2 ⅞ in.)
Gift of Peter J. Cohen in honor of Luke Cohen,
RISD BFA 1971, BArch 1972, Architecture
2018.61.15

American
The Last Dress (detail), ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
7.6 × 6.3 cm. (3 × 2 ½ in.)
Gift of Peter J. Cohen in honor of Luke Cohen,
RISD BFA 1971, BArch 1972, Architecture
2018.61.22

American
Untitled (detail), 1959
Color chromogenic print (Kodacolor)
7.5 × 11.3 cm. (2 ⅞ × 4 ⅞ in.)
Gift of Peter J. Cohen in honor of Luke Cohen,
RISD BFA 1971, BArch 1972, Architecture
2018.61.88

American
Untitled (detail), ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
11.1 × 5.5 cm. (4 ¾ × 2 ⅞ in.) (uneven width)
Gift of Peter J. Cohen in honor of Luke Cohen,
RISD BFA 1971, BArch 1972, Architecture
2018.61.99

American
Untitled (detail), ca. 1940s
Gelatin silver print
7.7 × 11.4 cm. (3 ⅞ × 4 ½ in.)
Gift of Peter J. Cohen in honor of Luke Cohen,
RISD BFA 1971, BArch 1972, Architecture
2018.61.37

American
Untitled (detail), ca. mid-20th century
Gelatin silver print
7.4 × 5.5 cm. (2 ⅞ × 2 ⅞ in.)
Gift of Peter J. Cohen in honor of Luke Cohen,
RISD BFA 1971, BArch 1972, Architecture
2018.61.56

American
Some Kids (detail), ca. mid 1950s–1960s
Gelatin silver print
10.2 × 5.8 cm. (4 × 2 ⅞ in.)
Gift of Peter J. Cohen in honor of Luke Cohen,
RISD BFA 1971, BArch 1972, Architecture
2018.61.83

American
Untitled (detail), ca. 1930s
Gelatin silver print
6 × 10.5 cm. (2 ¾ × 4 ⅞ in.)
Gift of Peter J. Cohen in honor of Luke Cohen,
RISD BFA 1971, BArch 1972, Architecture
2018.61.28



How To

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Design the Black Imaginary to Counter Hegemony (B.I.T.C.H.)

by Kate Irvin

Issue — 14

Fe Noel, design label
American, 2011–present
Felisha “Fe” Noel, designer
Grenadian American, b. 1987
Harmonia Rosales, painter
Afro-Cuban American, b. 1984
Oshun Slip Dress, 2019
Digitally printed silk plain weave
with polyester plain-weave trim
Center back length: 119 cm. (46 7/8 in.)
Edgar J. Lownes Fund 2019.30



1

In 2017, the Afro-Cuban Chicago-based artist Harmonia Rosales filled the gallery walls of Simard Bilodeau Contemporary in downtown Los Angeles with seven paintings that explored the theme of the exhibit's title, *Black Imaginary to Counter Hegemony (B.I.T.C.H.)*. Among the works in the show was an oil-on-canvas painting that generated much controversy and conversation when Rosales introduced it via social media months before: *The Creation of God* [Fig. 1], a reinterpretation of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco *The Creation of Adam* (ca. 1511) in which Rosales painted the creator of humankind as an elderly Black woman birthing a Black female Adamah (or feminized Adam) figure from a heavenly womb. Rosales

FIG. 1
Harmonia Rosales
Afro-Cuban American, b. 1984
The Creation of God, 2017
Oil on linen
121.9 × 152.4 cm. (48 × 60 in.)
© Harmonia Rosales.
Courtesy of the artist

FIG. 2
Harmonia Rosales
Afro-Cuban American, b. 1984
Birth of Oshun, 2017
Oil on linen
139.7 × 170.2 cm. (55 × 67 in.)
© Harmonia Rosales.
Courtesy of the artist



2

explained: “I wanted to take a significant painting, a widely recognized painting that subconsciously or consciously conditions us to see white male figures as powerful and authoritative and flip the script, establish a counter narrative.”¹

Equally challenging and empowering is another canvas featured in that show, *Birth of Oshun* [Fig. 2], which immediately captivated the mind and heart of Brooklyn-based fashion designer Felisha (“Fe”) Noel. Having grown up in a community of strong West Indian women, Noel was drawn to Rosales’s explicit challenges to Eurocentric narratives of white male power and prestige: “I wanted to find work that celebrated the strength and regal nature of black women, and Rosales’s paintings blew me away.”²

In reproducing *Birth of Oshun* on the gauzy silk of this dress [Fig. 3], Rosales references Sandro Botticelli’s *Birth of Venus* (ca. 1485), reimagining Venus, the classical Roman goddess of love and fertility, as Oshun, an orisha or



goddess of Yoruba origins who represents the divine feminine, fertility, beauty, and love in the Santería religious pantheon. “Traditionally, we see Venus as this beautiful woman with flowy hair,” Rosales explains. “My hair never flowed, so I’m wondering why this is supposed to be a painting of the most beautiful woman in the world? So I changed her up. . . . In Santería, when you pray to an Orisha, you give them an offering. And her offering happens to be gold so that’s why I made her vitiligo gold.”³

As it is worn and gazed upon by others, *Oshun Slip Dress* becomes both “fanciful and disruptive,” in the words of entrepreneur and artist Desirée Venn Frederic.⁴ Rosales’s and Noel’s collaboration shifts Eurocentric narratives of beauty by combining the embodied power of fashion with master paintings used as an idiom for thinking about the black female body. As Noel asserts, “I think clothes have the power to transform people. Power is in all women. My hope is that when women wear my clothes, they can lean into that power.”⁵

FIG 3
Fe Noel, design label
 American, 2011–present
Felisha “Fe” Noel, designer
 Grenadian American, b. 1987
Harmonia Rosales, painter
 Afro-Cuban American, b. 1984
Oshun Slip Dress, 2019
 Digitally printed silk plain weave
 with polyester plain-weave trim
 Center back length:
 119 cm. (46 7/8 in.)
 Edgar J. Lownes Fund 2019.30

¹ Simard Bilodeau Contemporary press release for *Black Imaginary to Counter Hegemony (B.I.T.C.H.)*, <https://www.artsy.net/show/simard-bilodeau-contemporary-black-imaginary-to-counter-hegemony-bitch>.

² Fe Noel quoted in Brooke Bobb, “This Brooklyn Designer Is Shifting the Eurocentric Narrative Around the Renaissance Art Trend,” *Vogue* online, January 11, 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/article/fe-noel-designer>.

³ Harmonia Rosales, quoted by Sonaiya Kelley in “Words and Pictures: Viral Artist Harmonia Rosales’ First Collection of Paintings Reimagines Classic Works with Black Femininity,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-cm-harmonia-rosales-the-creation-of-god-reimagined-20170919-story.html>.

⁴ Audrey Hoffer, “Collecting to Explore ‘Origin, Culture, Form, Function and Race,’” *New York Times*, July 31, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/31/arts/design/venn-frederic-gyepi-gabraah-art-collection.html>.

⁵ Fe Noel, quoted in Brooke Bobb, “This Brooklyn Designer Is Shifting the Eurocentric Narrative Around the Renaissance Art Trend,” *Vogue* online, January 11, 2019, <https://www.vogue.com/article/fe-noel-designer>.

Portfolio

(1)

Adrian Piper
 American, b. 1948
 Angry Art, publisher
My Calling (Card) #2 (Reactive Guerilla Performance for Bars and Discos), 1986–present
 Offset lithograph on paper
 5.1 × 8.9 cm. (2 × 3 ½ in.)
 Gift of Alison W. Chang 2015.54
 © Adrian Piper Research Archive
 Foundation Berlin

Adrian Piper
 American, b. 1948
 Angry Art, publisher
My Calling (Card) #1 (Reactive Guerilla Performance for Bars and Discos), 1986–present
 Offset lithograph on paper
 Sheet: 5.2 × 8.9 cm. (2 ¼ × 3 ½ in.)
 Gift of Jan Howard 2017.16
 © Adrian Piper Research Archive
 Foundation Berlin

(2)

Lorna Simpson
 American, b. 1960
Counting, 1991
 Photogravure and screenprint
 172.7 × 90.8 cm. (68 × 35 ¾ in.)
 Walter H. Kimball Fund 1993.001
 © Lorna Simpson

(3)

Will Sales
 American, b. 1928
Death of a Neighborhood, 1989
 From the portfolio *Your House Is Mine*
 Screenprint on Mohawk vellum paper
 Image: 58.6 × 48.4 cm. (23 ¼ × 19 ⅞ in.)
 Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 2013.91.3.29
 © Will Sales

(4)

Vincent Smith
 American, 1929–2003
Shadows in Harlem, 1965
 From the portfolio *Eight Etchings, 1965–1966*, 1994
 Etching on Arches wove paper
 Image: 20.3 × 22.2 cm. (8 × 8 ¾ in.)
 Gift of Dr. and Mrs. George A. Violin 2016.126.2
 © Vincent Smith

(5)

Clarence John Laughlin
 American, 1905–1985
"MOTHER" Brown, 1945
 Gelatin silver print with varnish
 Image/Sheet: 34.3 × 25.4 cm. (13 ½ × 10 in.)
 Edgar J. Lownes Fund 77.051
 The Clarence John Laughlin Archive at
 The Historic New Orleans Collection

(6)

James Van Der Zee
 American, 1886–1983
Nude, Harlem, 1923
 From the portfolio *Eighteen Photographs*
 Gelatin silver print
 Image/Sheet: 23.8 × 18.7 cm. (9 ¼ × 7 ⅜ in.)
 Museum purchase with the aid of
 funds from the National Endowment
 for the Arts 80.232.6

(7)

Claudette Johnson
 British, b. 1959
Untitled, 2015
 Pastel on paper
 Sheet: 84.1 × 59.4 cm. (33 ¼ × 23 ⅜ in.)
 Richard Brown Baker Fund for
 Contemporary British Art 2019.16
 Courtesy the artist and Hollybush
 Gardens, London

(8)

Asante (Ghana)
 Woman's Prestige Mantle (*Nsaduaso*), 1800s
 Silk; plain weave, supplementary
 weft patterning
 177.2 × 262.3 cm. (69 ⅞ × 103 ⅜ in.)
 Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2010.27.2

(9)

Joyce J. Scott
 American, b. 1948
Family, 2009
 Woven glass beads
 33 × 22.9 cm. (13 × 9 in.)
 Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 2019.37
 © Joyce J. Scott

(10)

Faith Ringgold
 American, b. 1930
Under the Blood Red Sky, 2007
 Color offset lithograph on paper
 Sheet: 75.2 × 55.9 cm. (29 ¾ × 22 in.)
 Gift of the Brandywine Workshop and
 Archives, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 2014.66.31
 © 2020 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society
 (ARS), New York, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

(11)

Kara Walker (RISD MFA 1994, Printmaking)
 American, b. 1969
Wait, 1993
 Photo-etching on paper
 Sheet: 16.8 × 11.4 cm. (6 ⅝ × 4 ½ in.)
 Phil Siebert Alumni Acquisition Fund 2006.47.1
 © Kara Walker

(12)

David McGee
 American, b. 1962
Shawn, 2001
 Oil on wood
 34.6 × 27.6 cm. (13 ⅝ × 10 ⅞ in.)
 Mary B. Jackson Fund 2002.21
 Courtesy of the artist and Texas Gallery

(13)

Sofie Lachaert & Luc d'Hanis, designer
 Dutch, b. 1969
Sad Hanky (purple), 2010
 Silkscreen print on cotton plain weave
 27.3 × 27.5 cm. (10 ¾ × 10 ⅞ in.)
 Gift of John W. Smith 2015.10.1
 © Sofie Lachaert & Luc d'Hanis

(14)

Paul Meleschnig (RISD BFA 1988,
 Photography)
 American, b. 1966
Untitled, 2000, printed 2012
 From the series *SPAR/CUBA*
 Gelatin silver print
 37.9 × 37.9 cm. (14 ⅞ × 14 ⅞ in.)
 Gift of the artist 2014.98.2
 © Paul Meleschnig

Manual