YOUNG GIFTED AND BLACK

The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art

curated by
Antwaun Sargent and Matt Wycoff

February 8–May 2, 2020
We are grateful to have the exciting opportunity to present Young, Gifted, and Black, a superb exhibition of contemporary African American art, thoughtfully curated from the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art by Antwaun Sargent and Matt Wycoff.

During the course of their collecting, Bernard I. Lumpkin and Carmine D. Boccuzzi have lent many pieces to museums, and they have often supported cultural institutions by welcoming visitors into their home for private tours. However, the travelling exhibition Young, Gifted, and Black: The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art is the first time that selected works from their walls are featured in a stand-alone exhibition to benefit the public. We sincerely appreciate the generosity of Bernard and Carmine providing Lehman College Art Gallery with the opportunity to bring this broad survey of some of the most significant artists working today to the students at Lehman College, the Bronx and greater New York City.

African American artists are enjoying a surge of unprecedented influence, with their work being highly sought after by both private collectors and museum curators around the world. Famed painters such as Kerry James Marshall and Mickalene Thomas have challenged and changed the artistic zeitgeist, sparking new conversations about the role of both race and the artist in society. Commanding record-breaking prices at auction, their ground breaking work is evident in the next wave of younger artists represented in the collection, who are just beginning to be discovered by a broader public.

Young, Gifted, and Black is a beautifully distilled curatorial effort to capture this exciting moment, which is why we are pleased to share this important show with our campus community and the broader public. As always, I am indebted to the wonderful staff here at the Gallery, who have coordinated the presentation at Lehman. We owe a special thank you to Elizabeth Vranka, Executive Director of the OSilas Gallery at Concordia College, for her work on an earlier iteration of the exhibition, which was presented at Concordia last autumn.

I hope you enjoy the exhibition and that you find it as exciting, promising, and filled with thought-provoking work as I do. Young, Gifted, and Black is beautifully representative of the root of our mission: prioritizing access for our audiences, and allowing them to become familiar with the most interesting movements in the broader contemporary art world. Artists invariably hold up a mirror so that we may reflect on a changing society and our place within it. They help us understand the world.

Bartholomew F. Bland
Executive Director
Lehman College Art Gallery
The exhibition Young, Gifted, and Black: The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art is curated from the private collection of art patrons Bernard L. Lumpkin and Carmine D. Boccuzzi. The selections made highlight an emerging generation of black artists engaging the work of their predecessors, while also mining new, and in many instances more colorful, vocabularies of symbolism. Over the past ten years, the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi family has assembled a wide range of art in all mediums from roughly two generations of black artists. The older generation of artists represented in the exhibition is presented as both lineage and foil for the younger; while the younger generation is presented as the fruit of the older generation’s struggle for equal representation. It is through this process of reclamation that black artists, musicians, writers, and thinkers have transformed the meaning of the word black in the nomenclature.

The way the color black came to represent the many-hued African diaspora begins with slave owners and traffickers distancing themselves from the property and product of their trade. The owners and traffickers being white, black served as an expedient antonym for the symbolic distortion of enslaved individuals into something less than human. It’s a history no adjective seems to meaningfully illuminate. Maddening, infuriating, atrocious, and staggering all fail to describe the four hundred years of terror and denigration that indelibly linked people of African origin to the color black and its attendant symbols that have included, but are by no means limited to, stupidity, laziness, the devil, and an absence of visible light.1

Hard-earned reclamation of the color black dramatically underlines one of the most striking visual shifts presented in Young, Gifted, and Black: a riotous and radical explosion of color, primarily among the younger painters, to represent the human form. Jordan Casteel shifts skin tones to shades of color, primarily among the younger painters, to represent the human form. In the 180 years since photography was invented, the medium has served as an expedient antonym for the symbolic distortion of enslaved people of African origin to the color black of their trade. The owners and traffickers being white, black served as an expedient antonym for the symbolic distortion of enslaved individuals into something less than human. It’s a history no adjective seems to meaningfully illuminate. Maddening, infuriating, atrocious, and staggering all fail to describe the four hundred years of terror and denigration that indelibly linked people of African origin to the color black and its attendant symbols that have included, but are by no means limited to, stupidity, laziness, the devil, and an absence of visible light.1

What did you say?” feels apt, if only for an instant, before the switch from black to color gives way to a sense of embarkation.2 Taken together, these new, sensationally colored works invoke surreal visual histories to tackle issues of race and identity, but one doesn’t catch a whiff of the defiant 1960s proclamation to “turn on, tune in, drop out.” The work is about being in, not dropping out. Needless to say, dropping out of the mainstream is a much less appealing prospect to someone who has been systematically barred from entry. From this view, the celebration of drug culture itself can be seen as indicative of privilege. The absence of drugs and dropping out amid the use of the psychedelic imagery points to a lineage of black thinkers, such as Malcolm X, who have railed against drugs and alcohol as tools of the oppressors.2 But what is psychedelics without the drugs?

The surrealistic and psychedelic imagery on view represents a dramatic reworking of visual histories that updates twentieth-century responses to rapid social change, shifts in moral and ethical boundaries, and expanding notions of identity. D’Angelo Lovell Williams’s photograph The Lovers (2017) reimagines René Magritte’s 1928 surrealist painting with two black men veiled in do-rags locked in a kiss. Allison James Hamilton’s Untitled (Three Fencing Masks) (2017) transforms fencing masks into uncanny personal totems, and Jacobly Satterwhite’s video animation Relying Desire 6 (2013) constructs a queer, psychological dreamscape. Perhaps the intoxicant for the younger generation represented here is access to new and wider audiences in the art market, rather than drugs, and the effect is exhilarating. The artists represented in Young, Gifted, and Black are also bringing this informed, expressive sensibility to representations of nature. Cy Gavin’s paintings call to mind the psychedelic in his use of color—rolling landscapes streaked with saturated primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and electric secondary colors (orange, purple, green). But his surging seas, skies, and archipelagos are also filtered through the graffiti-culture language of walls streaked with oversprayed burners. Here, there is an opposition to the history of landscape painting that romanticizes the idea of nature: the land literally feels overwritten. Gavin’s landscapes pry open a space between the idea of nature and the often-bloody and contested land itself, making room for histories of racial inequality. This space is haunted by a history in which enslaved individuals were property, treated no different legally than the land. But other histories, such as the disproportionate impact of climate change on communities of color, quickly crowd the void as well. With a sensibility of striving, songs, brainy lamentation, Gavin’s landscapes demand acceptance for the more complex and other histories of inequality.

Of the artists represented here, Gavin confronts the landscape most directly and consistently, but one also catches fresh approaches to nature and the landscape in the paintings of Quarles, Caitlin Cherry, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Jennifer Packer, and I might argue, the installations of Eric N. Mack. Not to mention the volumes that should be written on Clifford Owens’s self-portrait as a recumbent, hands-up—don’t-shoot, neutered (tucked) nude amid a verdant green, pastoral landscape. Elizabeth Alexander’s 2005 poem “American Sublime” might fit to key the many representations of nature on view in the exhibition. Alexander’s “violent sunlight,” “gentle luminosity,” and “vast, craggy, un-/domesticated” landscapes occur entirely in parentheses.4 Young, Gifted, and Black also features a wide range of portraiture, including painting (Lynette Yiadom-Boakye), sculpture (Lonnie Holley), collage (Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle), mixed media (Troy Michie), and photography (LaToya Ruby Frazier). The invention of photography, in 1839, marked a radical turning point in the history of portraiture and is a fundamental frame of reference for all the works of portraiture on view. Photography not only created a new, more accessible and expedient medium in which to represent individuals, but it also challenged artists in traditional mediums, such as painting and sculpture, to profoundly reimagine how, and with new urgency why, they represent the human form. In the 180 years since photography...
appeared on the scene, ideas about what constitutes a por-
trait continue to expand. It is in this spirit that a text-based
work, such as Sadie Barnette’s Untitled (People’s World)
(2018), which alters pages from the FBI’s file on her father as
an act of artistic reclamation, is included as an example of
conceptual or nontraditional portraiture.

The works of portraiture selected for the exhibition also
demonstrate the many ways contemporary black artists
shape, and reshape, the black experience through figurative
representation. In doing so, they further the concerns of a
lineage of portraiture that spans from the portraits of abolition-
ist Frederick Douglass, to the studio photography
of James VanDerZee, to the pioneering photojournals-
isms of Gordon Parks. In Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s Dark Room Mirror Study (0xSa1531) (2017), for example, the artist questions the
relative absence of representations of gay men in color in the
photographic record by making visual reference to the early
history of studio photography. While the striking choréo-
photographic record by making visual reference to the early
Study (2017), for example, the artist questions the
perceived racial barriers. These works display a spectrum
of approaches to portraiture that includes direct figurative
representation, works that question histories of mis- and
underrepresentation, and those that expand notions of what
costumes.

And then there’s the mask, which traverses notions of
identity, history, and the land at a clip. The dizzying array of
masks created on the African continent is tied to the land
by centuries of use in ceremonies that accompany planting,
harvesting, birth, and death. These masks seem to get at
the root of all human emotions, while somehow maintaining
a fearsome understanding that everything is subject to the
Earth. Use of costume and the mask in the work of black
artists has long addressed lost relationships to ancestral
homelands and has become a deeply symbolic well of
meaning for black heritage and identity. A short list of mask
imageries represented in the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family
Collection includes: mannequin as mask (Narcissister),
buttons as mask (Lonnice Holley), scribbles as mask (Rashid
Johnson), plastic garbage bag as mask (William Pope Jr.),
rock salt as mask (Felaudus Thomas), Elliottt Kelly as
mask (William Villalongo), do-rag as mask (D’Angelo Lovell
Williams), brick wall as mask (Derrick Adams), fencing mask
as mask (Allison Janae Hamilton), and, perhaps the most
revelatory, the camera lens as mask in Sepuya’s smart,
historically savvy seductions. This flux and reinvention is not
unique to the Internet in which new terms are cre-
tated to describe what is essentially very old human behavior, for
example: ally theater, sucked into a follow, Twar, vague-
booking, finsta, and nontroversy. Young, Gifted, and Black
presents similarly updated (sometimes pithy, often profound)
takes on the ancient arts of costume and the mask.

Symbols do change meaning, after all. As with the color
black, shifts in our use of symbols often require a concerted
effort, although circumstantial and historical forces are also
at work. Two points give important context to the exhibition:
the sustained efforts of liberals to be good amid the political
right’s flirtation with totalitarianism and the golly-gee insanity
of an art market fueled by gigantic accumulations of private
wealth. Amid these forces’ ebb and flow, there is perhaps
more of a sense now, a belief even, that social change can
occur, is in fact occurring, through the wiles of the art market.
For many, there is a near-constant back-and-forth between
art and social change, and a question of to what extent it should overtly try. Many of the artists in Young, Gifted, and Black are at the very heart of this
debate. It raises a question central to the exhibition: Can one
look at the work of this emerging generation of black artists
without the lens of identity politics?

One answer to that question is rooted in Du Bois’s
concept of “double-consciousness,” this sense of always
looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measur-
ing one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused
contempt and pity. Given this perspective, one might say
Black artists have largely been denied the opportunity
to choose whether their work is political or not. Artists
in the exhibition, such as LaToya Ruby Frazier, Jordan Casteel,
and Chancel Chiffon Thomas, present subjects whose very
matter-of-factness affirms their rightness on the scene,
while at the same time raising questions of identity politics.
The persistence of identity politics in the work of these artists is
an issue of historical circumstance, but it is also, and
importantly, one of intent.

Through their reworking of the color black, psychedelia,
landscape, nature, portraiture, and the mask, the artists
featured in Young, Gifted, and Black are finding new ways
to address the history and meaning of blackness. They
are also pointing to the fact that a true equity in seeing and
being seen seems to be the clearest way out of the racial
paradox that exists in America and elsewhere. We can view
the work of black artists as being about asserting black
identity and representing lived experience. Consider the
difference between the two. Staring at Vaughn Spann’s
Staring back at you, rooted and unwavering (2018) feels
almost like a game of stack hands, in which the contest
of seeing and being seen vie for the top. In Toni Morrison’s
famous framing of the “process of entering what one is
estranged from,” she writes, “imaginings is not merely
looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other.
It is, for the purpose of the work, becoming.” To see and be
seen in this way requires an emotional openness, but also
a firm intellectual position. The feet of Spann’s two-headed
man, anyway, are planted firmly in the earth.

For the past ten years, Matt Wycoff has worked as collection curator
for the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection. Wycoff is also an artist,
woodworker, and writer living in Brooklyn and Stephentown, New
York. His work can be seen at www.mattwycoff.com.

1 For an example of how blacks have been likened to the devil, see
James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in Notes of a Native Son
2 Claudia Rankine, Citizen: An American Lyric (Minneapolis: Graywolf
Press, 2014), 43.
3 See the 1964 speach at the founding rally of the Organization
of Afro-American Unity in Malcolm X, By Any Means Necessary (New
York: Pathfinder Press, 1992), 76-78.
4 Elizabeth Alexander, American Sublime (Saint Paul, MN: Graywolf
Press, 2005), 89.
5 W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk (1903, repr., Mineola, NY:
6 Toni Morrison, Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary

Bethany Collins, Too White To Be Black, 2014. © Bethany Collins,
courtesy Patron Gallery, Chicago

Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Dark Room Mirror Study (0xSa1531). 2017. © Paul
Mpagi Sepuya, courtesy the artist and team (gallery, inc.), New York

William Villalongo, Sista Ancesta (E. Kelley/D.R. of Congo, Pende),
2002. © Villalongo Studio LLC and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York
Exhibition Checklist

Derrick Adams
The Great Wall, 2009
Digital photograph and metallic paint
25 x 22 in.

Kara Walker
Ain’t Misbehavin’, 2014
Resin, body pillows, T-shirt, and found objects
30 x 25 x 20 in.

Clytie Newmann
African American Flag, 2011
Printed fabric and painted wood pole
19 1⁄2 x 12 1⁄2 in.

T svg Aungzian
Ain’t Misbehavin’, 2014
Oil on canvas, 58 x 44 in.

Katie Bentz
Untitled (People’s World), 2018
Archival pigment prints on Epson Hot Press Bright paper
Two parts: 27½ x 21¼ in. each

Cy Gavin
Reef, 2018
Acrylic, chalk and oil on denim
56 x 85 in.

All works © the artist
Exhibition Checklist

Jacolby Satterwhite
Reifying Desire 5, 2013
HD digital video, color 3-D animation, 8:45 mins.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya
Dark Room Mirror Study (0x5A1531), 2017
Archival pigment print, 51 x 34 in.

Sable Elyse Smith
8032 Days (detail), 2018
Digital c-print, suede, artist’s frame 48 x 40 in.

Henry Taylor
Rock It, 2008
5 cardboard boxes (premium malt boxes), acrylic on foam mannequin head, wood) 36 x 12 x 80 1⁄2 in.

Gerald Sheffield
kbr contractor (Iraq in 2007), 2018
Flashe on canvas

Vaughn Spann
Radiant Sunshine, The Morning After (For Lula), 2017
Oil and acrylic on paper 103 x 80 in.

Chiffon Thomas
A New Deal (2017) mixed media assemblage, thread and fabric 115 x 51 in.

Clifford Owens
Untitled, 2015
Photograph (C-print) Edition 1 of 5 Object: 30 x 30 in.

Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2011-2013
Oil on canvas, 30 x 42 in.

Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas 11 x 12 in.

Adam Pendleton
Era: How lucky to be alive to see you today, 2018
Silicone ink on plexiglass and mirror 84 x 99 x 3 1/2 in.

Raven Kwok
Now Top That, 2016
Acrylic on canvas Object: 40 x 50 in.

William Wilson IV
Pres, 2017
Staples and pigment print on wood 96 x 48 x 1 ½ in.

Lorna Simpson
Gold Head #1, 2011
Ink and embossing powder on paper 11 x 8 1⁄2 in.

Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2019
Oil on canvas 30 x 42 in.

Clifford Owens
Untitled, 2019 Photograph (C-print)Edition 1 of 5 Oil on canvas 30 x 30 in.

All works © the artist

Selected Literature


Always free to the public, Lehman College Art Gallery has been serving the interests of our diverse audience from the Bronx and greater New York City since 1984. The gallery specializes in thematic group exhibitions that bring together famous artists with emerging talents. Education is an integral component of the Gallery’s programming and provides the basis of community outreach—from young students to senior citizens.