

In Color, on the Land

Matt Wycoff

The exhibition *Young, Gifted, and Black: The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art* is curated from the private collection of art patrons Bernard I. 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. The earliest examples on view date to the mid-1980s, while many from the younger generation were made after 2012 and are among the artists' first professional offerings.

Addressing black identity and history through use of the color black has been a major concern of both generations represented in the exhibition; as if by eschewing mahogany, raw umber, and burnt sienna, they might render (and take ownership of) a depiction of blackness as it exists inside the racist mind—monolithic, impenetrable, and terrifying. Attempts to own the meaning of the color black can be seen as early as 1903 in W. E. B. Du Bois's seminal collection of essays, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and was perhaps most popularly expressed in James Brown's funk anthem "Say It Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud," released in 1968. Masters of this approach in contemporary visual art, such as Kerry

James Marshall and Kara Walker, have likewise been trail-blazers in the radical transformation of the associative link between the color black and the African American experience. 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 symbolisms 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 moody cobalt. Christina Quarles drapes bodies like Dalí's clocks, while denoting skin color in ribbons of orange sherbet, peach, and midnight blue. Arcmanoro Niles renders blackness in rose (think Afros of glittering pink). And Vaughn Spann paints a lurid, Day-Glo, floral tapestry and a shirtless, two-headed man in a teal landscape donning hot-pink trousers and matching Yankees caps, one for each head. There is a jarring contrast in the exhibition between these radically colorful works and those that are primarily black. Their separation into colored and black groupings initially feels crude and oversimplified. Claudia Rankine's raw refrain, "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 surrealist and psychedelic 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 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.³ But what is psychedelia without the drugs?

The surrealist 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 Janae Hamilton's *Untitled (Three Fencing Masks)* (2017) transforms fencing masks into uncanny personal totems, and Jacolby Satterwhite's video animation *Reifying Desire 5* (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—roiling 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, songful, brainy lamentation, Gavin's landscapes demand accounting for these 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 poem "American Sublime" might fit to key the many representations of nature on view in the exhibition. Alexander's "violent sunshine," "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 (Wardell Milan), mixed-media (Ellen Gallagher), 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



Vaughn Spann, *Staring back at you, rooted and unwavering*, 2018. © Vaughn Spann, courtesy Martin Parsekian / Half Gallery

Opposite: Cy Gavin, *Underneath the George Washington Bridge* (detail), 2016. © Cy Gavin, courtesy the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome

what constitutes a portrait continue to expand. It is in this spirit that text-based works, such as Glenn Ligon's *Study for Impediment* (2007), which frames the use of racial slurs as a physical and ethical impairment, and Adrian Piper's *My Calling (Card) #1* (1986) and *My Calling (Card) #2* (1986), which render the artist's personal perspectives on hand-deliverable business cards, are included as examples 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 African American portraiture that ranges from the portraits of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, to the studio photography of James VanDerZee, to the pioneering photo-journalism of Gordon Parks. In Paul Mpagi Sepuya's *Dark Room Mirror Study (0x5A1531)* (2017), for example, the artist questions the relative absence of representations of gay men of color in the photographic record by making visual reference to the early history of studio photography. Mickalene Thomas's bedazzled *Mary J Me* (2002) channels the powerful, feminine gaze of the multiplatinum singer-songwriter Mary J. Blige in an ongoing effort to reshape ideas of beauty and



Paul Mpagi Sepuya, *Dark Room Mirror Study (0x5A1531)*, 2017. © Paul Mpagi Sepuya, courtesy the artist and team (gallery, inc.), New York



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

fame for black women. And Gerald Sheffield's *kbr contractor (Iraq 2007)* (2018) points to potential futures of representation across 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 constitutes a portrait.

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 imagery represented in the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection includes: mannequin as mask (Narcissister), buttons as mask (Lonnie Holley), scribbles as mask (Rashid Johnson), plastic garbage bag as mask (William Pope.L), rock salt as mask (Felandus Thames), Ellsworth 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 unlike an aspect of the Internet in which new terms are created to describe what is essentially very old human behavior, for example: *ally theater*, *sucked into a follow*, *Twar*, *vaguebooking*, *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

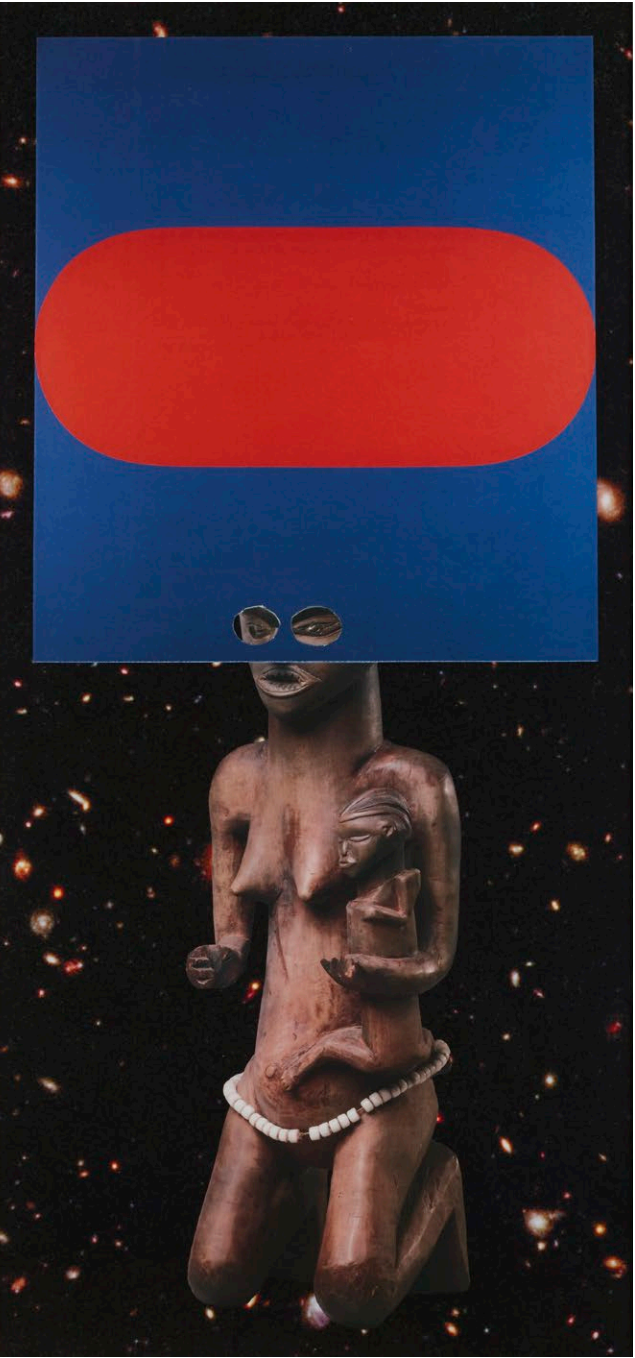
effort, although circumstantial and historical forces are also at work. Two points give important context to the exhibition: the sustained efforts of liberals to be good amid the political right's flirtation with totalitarianism and the golly-gee insanity of an art market fueled by gigantic accumulations 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 a firm belief that art can and does make 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 measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."⁵ Given this perspective, one might say that 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 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 deft 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 the United States 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, "imagining 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*."⁶ 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.

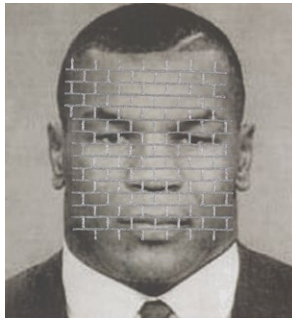
For the past ten years, Matt Wycoff has worked as collection curator for the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection. Wycoff is also an artist, woodworker, and writer living in Brooklyn and Stephentown, New York. His work can be seen at www.mattwycoff.com.

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* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 178.
2 Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2014), 43.
3 See the 1964 speech 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: Dover Publications, Inc., 1994), 2.
6 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 4.



William Villalongo, *Sista Ancesta (E. Kelley/D.R. of Congo, Pende)*, 2012. © Villalongo Studio LLC and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York

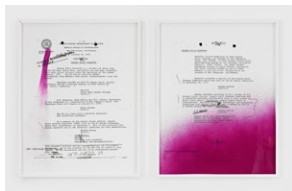
Exhibition Checklist



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



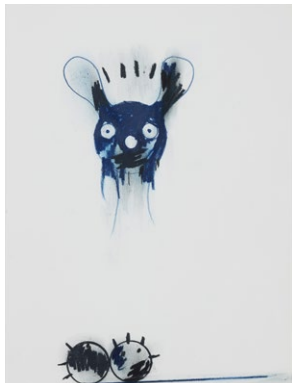
Tunji Adeniyi-Jones
Blue Dancer, 2017
Oil on canvas
68 × 54 in.



Sadie Barnette
Untitled (People's World), 2018
Archival pigment prints on Epson Hot Press Bright paper
Two parts: 27½ × 21¼ in. each



Kevin Beasley
Wrong, 2013
Resin, body pillows, T-shirt, and hooded sweatshirt
30 × 25 × 20 in.



Nayland Blake
4.3.15, 2015
Colored pencil on paper
12 × 9 in.



Jordan Casteel
Kenny, 2014
Oil on canvas
72 × 54 in.



Jonathan Lyndon Chase
peeing in snow footprints, 2018
Acrylic, marker, rhinestones, oil stick, glitter, paper on cotton sheet
60 × 48 in.



Caitlyn Cherry
Ghost Leviathan, 2018
Oil on canvas
57 × 101 in.



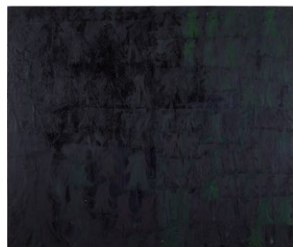
Bethany Collins
Too White To Be Black, 2014
Graphite, charcoal, and latex paint on Arches paper
29 × 41 in.



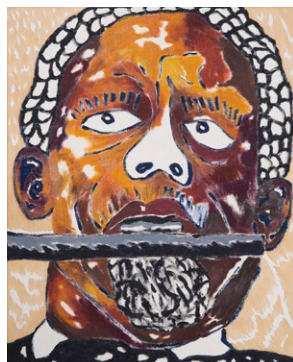
LaToya Ruby Frazier
Momme (Floral Comforter), 2008
Gelatin-silver print
20 × 24 in



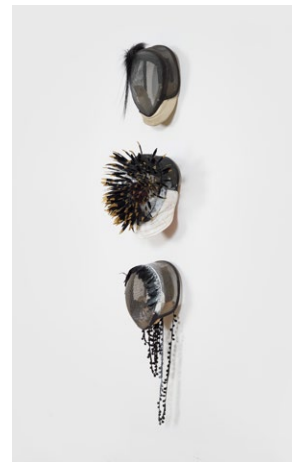
Cy Gavin
Reef, 2018
Acrylic, chalk, and oil on denim
56 × 85 in.



Alteronce Gumby
Gumby Nation, 2014
Plastilina and oil bar on canvas
60 × 70 in.



Chase Hall
Eric Dolphy, 2020
Acrylic and coffee on cotton canvas
20 × 16 in.



Allison Janae Hamilton
Untitled (Three Fencing Masks), 2017
Found vintage fencing masks, painted feathers, horsehair, velvet, cotton trimming, and acrylic paint
64 × 13 × 14 in.



David Hammons
African American Flag, 2011
Printed fabric with painted-wood pole
19½ × 12½ in.



Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle
A Strong Wind, 2014
Collage, india ink, and acrylic paint on transparency
8½ × 11 in.



Lonnie Holley
Still a Family in Business, 2009
Metal wire
14 × 9 × 4¾ in.



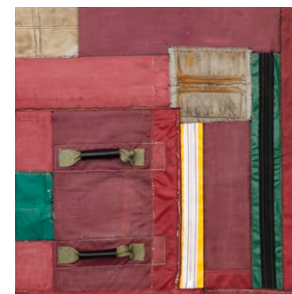
Tomashi Jackson
Magnet School 1, 2014
Acrylic and silk screen on canvas
36 × 25½ in.



Rashid Johnson
The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Kiss), 2011
Gelatin-silver print
10 × 8 in.



Jarett Key
Key Family in the Garden, 2019
Oil on cement (fresco)
9 × 12 in.



Samuel Levi Jones
Agency, 2018
Football tackling pad covers on canvas
30 × 30 × 2 in



Deana Lawson
Three Women, 2013
Pigment print
45 × 35 in.



Glenn Ligon
Study for Impediment, 2007
Oil stick and coal dust on paper
11¼ × 9 in.



Eric N. Mack
Pain After Heat, 2014
Rope, paper, acrylic paint, dye, ink, dried orange peel, wood, plastic, magazine pages, and grommets on quilted moving blanket
93 × 66 × 84 in.



Kerry James Marshall
Den Mother, 1996
Acrylic and charcoal on paper
39 × 37¾ in.



Troy Michie
Dematerialization, 2010
Mixed media
28½ × 21 in.



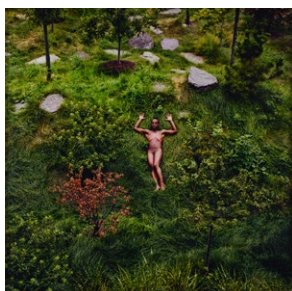
Wardell Milan
Desire and the Black Masseur,
2005
Mixed media on paper
63½ × 40½ in.



Narcissister
Untitled, 2012
C-print
40 × 30 in



Arcmanoro Niles
*The Nights I Don't Remember,
the Nights I Can't Forget*, 2018
Oil, acrylic, and glitter
on canvas
72 × 70 in.



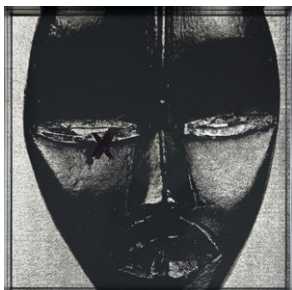
Clifford Owens
Untitled, 2015
C-print
30 × 30 in.



Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2011–13
Oil on canvas
42 × 30 in.



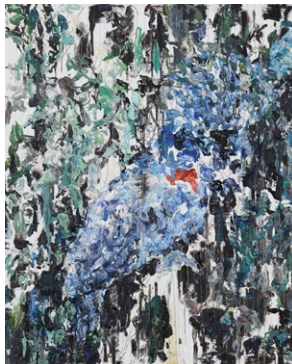
Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas
12 × 11 in.



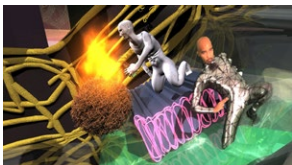
Adam Pendleton
*System of Display, X (EXPRESS/
Poro secret society mask,
Mano, Liberia)*, 2016
Screen-printing ink on Plexiglas
and mirror
9⅞ × 9⅞ × 3⅛ in.



Christina Quarles
Now Top That, 2016
Acrylic on canvas
50 × 40 in



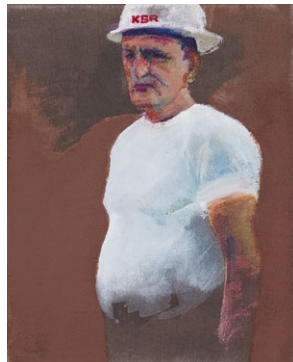
Andy Robert
A song for us, 2016
Oil on canvas
30 × 24 in.



Jacolby Satterwhite
Reifying Desire 5, 2013
HD Digital Video, color 3-D
animation
8:45 minutes



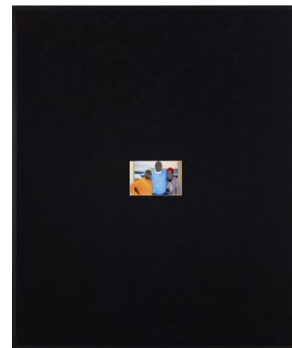
Paul Mpagi Sepuya
*Dark Room Mirror Study
(0x5A1531)*, 2017
Archival pigment print
51 × 34 in.



Gerald Sheffield
kbr contractor (Iraq 2007), 2018
Flashe on canvas
10 × 8 in.



Lorna Simpson
Gold Head #1, 2011
Ink and embossing powder
on paper
11 × 8½ in.



Sable Elyse Smith
8032 Days, 2018
Digital C-print, suede, and
artist's frame
48 × 40 in.



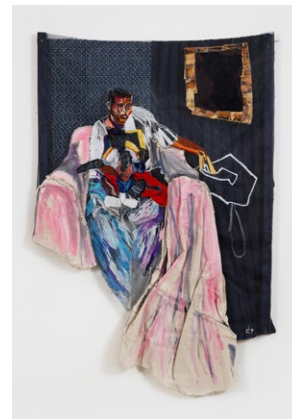
Vaughn Spann
*Radiant Sunshine, The Morning
After (For Lula)*, 2017
Oil and Acrylic on Paper
99% × 76¼ in.



Henry Taylor
Split, 2013
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas
Two parts: 72 × 60 × 2½ in. each



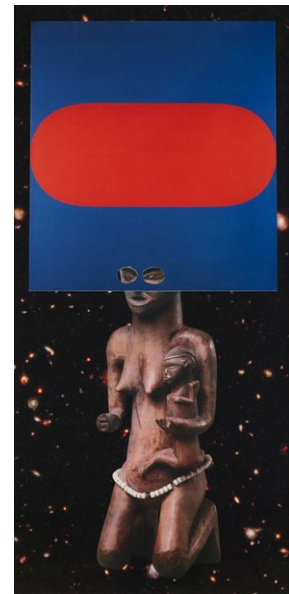
Chiffon Thomas
A New Dad, 2017
Embroidery thread and fabric
11½ × 12 in.



Chiffon Thomas
A mother who had no mother,
2018
Embroidery floss, acrylic paint,
and canvas on window screen
57 × 44½ in.



Mickalene Thomas
Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires,
2011
Mixed Media Collage
23¾ × 31¼ in.



William Villalongo
*Sista Ancesta (E. Kelley/
D.R. of Congo, Pende)*, 2012
Archival pigment print
70 × 35 in.



Kara Walker
Untitled, 1995
Paper collage on paper
52 × 60% in.



Nari Ward
*At any time prior to no later
than*, 2009
Stencil ink and basketball cards
on paper
24½ × 32 in.



D'Angelo Lovell Williams
The Lovers, 2017
Pigment print
20 × 30 in.



Wilmer Wilson IV
Pres, 2017
Staples and pigment print on
wood
96 × 48 × 1½ in.



Lynette Yiadom-Boakye
Non Loin d'Ici, 2010
Oil on canvas
11¼ × 9⅞ in.

Selected Literature

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