

The Time is Always Now Artists Reframe the Black Figure

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The Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) is pleased to announce further details of 'The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure', a major exhibition expanded for its premiere in the U.S. This exhibition features 28 Black and African diasporic contemporary artists who use figurative painting, drawing and sculpture to illuminate and celebrate the nuance and richness of Black contemporary life. Through their work, these artists invite us to consider Blackness as a lived experience rather than as a biological fact.

Curated by British writer and curator Ekow Eshun, The Time is Always Now takes its title from an essay on desegregation by American writer and social rights activist James Baldwin. It highlights a sense of urgency around contemporary artistic expression, while acting as a reminder that Black artists exist within an always-evolving artistic lineage.

Traveling to the PMA from the National Portrait Gallery in London, the artists in this exhibition work in the U.S. and the U.K., including Michael Armitage, Claudette Johnson, Kerry James Marshall, Toyin Ojih Odutola, and Amy Sherald, among others. For the show's Philadelphia presentation, six artists working in the U.S. and U.K. have been added including Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Kudzanai- Violet Hwami, Roberto Lugo, Danielle Mckinney, Deborah Roberts, and Arthur Timothy.

The more than 60 contemporary works featured in this exhibition unfold around three core themes: Double Consciousness, Past and Presence and Our Aliveness. Double Consciousness, a theory first introduced in 1897 by the African American sociologist W.E.B Du Bois, explores concepts of being, belonging and Blackness as a psychological state. Works including Amy Sherald's grayscale portraits, a cast-bronze self-portrait sculpture by Wangechi Mutu, and Nathaniel Mary Quinn's fragmented portraits examine the ways in which artists see themselves, as well as how they are seen and framed by others, navigating real and imagined identities.

Past and Presence explores the absence of Black figures in many mainstream narratives and shows how artists have responded. Barbara Walker, for example, recreates historical portraits with graphite and embossing, reconfiguring Western art history to give primary focus to the Black subject. This section continues with works by Kimathi Donkor, Godfried Donkor and Lubaina Himid, who use the tradition of history painting to restage overlooked narratives and elevate Black protagonists.

Our Aliveness features assertions and celebrations of Black assembly and gathering, including a painting by Hurvin Anderson, unpacking the cultural significance of the barbershop to the Caribbean diasporic community. While many of the exhibited artworks depict scenes of joyful gathering, references are also made to histories of segregation and oppositions to public expressions of Black sociality. The works of Jordan Casteel capture encounters on the streets of Harlem, turning her sitters from anonymous passersby to portraits brimming with personality.

"We're thrilled to work with Ekow Eshun to bring this exhibition to Philadelphia," said Sasha Suda, the George D. Widener Director and CEO of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. "Filled with personal narratives, these richly talented artists are addressing urgent and important topics. We're honored to present this show to our local communities and welcome the important conversations that each of these pieces will inspire."

“Working with Eshun and London’s National Portrait Gallery, we are able to build on this collaboration by adding artists whose work will amplify the experience for our Philadelphia and U.S. audiences,” said Erica Battle, John Alchin and Hal Marryatt Curator of Contemporary Art.

'The Time is Always Now' features works by Njideka Akunyili Crosby (b. 1983, Nigeria), Hurvin Anderson (b. 1965, UK), Michael Armitage (b. 1984, Kenya), Jordan Casteel (b. 1989, USA), Noah Davis (b. 1983; d. 2015, USA), Godfried Donkor (b. 1964, Ghana), Kimathi Donkor (b. 1965, UK), Denzil Forrester (b. 1956, Grenada), Lubaina Himid (b. 1954, Sultanate of Zanzibar), Claudette Johnson (b. 1959, UK), Titus Kaphar (b. 1976, USA), Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955, USA), Wangechi Mutu (b. 1972, Kenya), Chris Ofili (b. 1968, UK), Toyin Ojih Odutola (b. 1985, Nigeria), Jennifer Packer (b. 1984, USA), Thomas J Price (b. 1981, UK), Nathaniel Mary Quinn (b. 1977, USA), Lorna Simpson (b. 1960, USA), Amy Sherald (b. 1973, USA), Henry Taylor (b. 1958, USA), and Barbara Walker (b. 1964, UK).

The exhibition has been extended for the PMA to include works by Jonathan Lyndon Chase (b. 1989, USA), Kudzanai-Violet Hwami (b. 1993, Zimbabwe), Roberto Lugo (b. 1981, USA), Danielle Mckinney (b. 1981, USA), Deborah Roberts (b. 1960, USA) and Arthur Timothy (b. 1957, Ghana).

'The Time is Always Now' is organized by the National Portrait Gallery, London, in collaboration with the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It will be supported by a series of public programs, including student tours, educational guides, and family programming.

The organizing curator is Ekow Eshun, guest curator for the National Portrait Gallery, London, and the supporting curator is Sarah Howgate, Senior Curator of Contemporary Collections at the National Portrait Gallery, London. In Philadelphia, the exhibition is curated by Erica F. Battle, John Alchin and Hal Marryatt Curator of Contemporary Art, with Yocari De Los Santos, Constance E. Clayton Fellow.