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Detroit Exhibition Showcases 30 Years of Black Contemporary Art

By Antwaun Sargent — Nov 2 2015



Kehinde Wiley's Sleep, 2008, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami

It isn't often that the stars of black contemporary art—Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Mickalene Thomas, Barkley L. Hendricks, Nick Cave, Lorna Simpson, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Carrie Mae Weems, Rashid Johnson, Mark Bradford, Wangechi Mutu, Hank Willis, Glenn Ligon, and Kehinde Wiley—have the works hung in the same show. But in

30 Americans (<http://www.dia.org/calendar/exhibition.aspx?id=4998&iid=>) at the Detroit Institute of Arts (<http://www.dia.org/>), three decades of painting, sculpture, installation, photography, and video, making up over 50 works by these artists, explore the full range of events and inspirations that have shaped both their individual practices and art history itself since the 1980s.



Jean-Michel Basquiat's Bird On Money, 1981, acrylic and oil on canvas. Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami



Rashid Johnson's I Who Have Nothing, 2008, wax, soap, shea butter and mixed media on fiberboard.

Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami

“The show first opened at the Rubell Family Collection, because all the work comes from that collection, and it has changed as the show has toured,” exhibition curator Valerie Mercer tells The Creators Project. “We organized this show around seven themes that we saw in the works—which have to do with the various artists approaches, ideas, and issues they are interest in” she adds. These themes include: “defying Western art traditions; portraying black subjects as real people as opposed to types; sampling multiple sources of

inspiration, from historical material to found objects; freestyling by adopting improvisational and expressionistic styles to demonstrate creative and technical virtuosity; signifying through the use of symbols, materials and images that imply or trigger associations about gender, race, religion, class and sexuality; transforming the body's appearance to examine the relationship between societal assumptions and identity; and confronting American history regarding race, racism and power in the United States.”



Glenn Ligon, Untitled (I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance) 2005, neon sign and paint, Ed. 3/3.

Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami



*William Pope.L's The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street, 2001-2002, digital video, Ed. 1/5;
Duration: 5 minutes. Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami*





Barkley L. Hendricks' Noir, 1978, oil and acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami

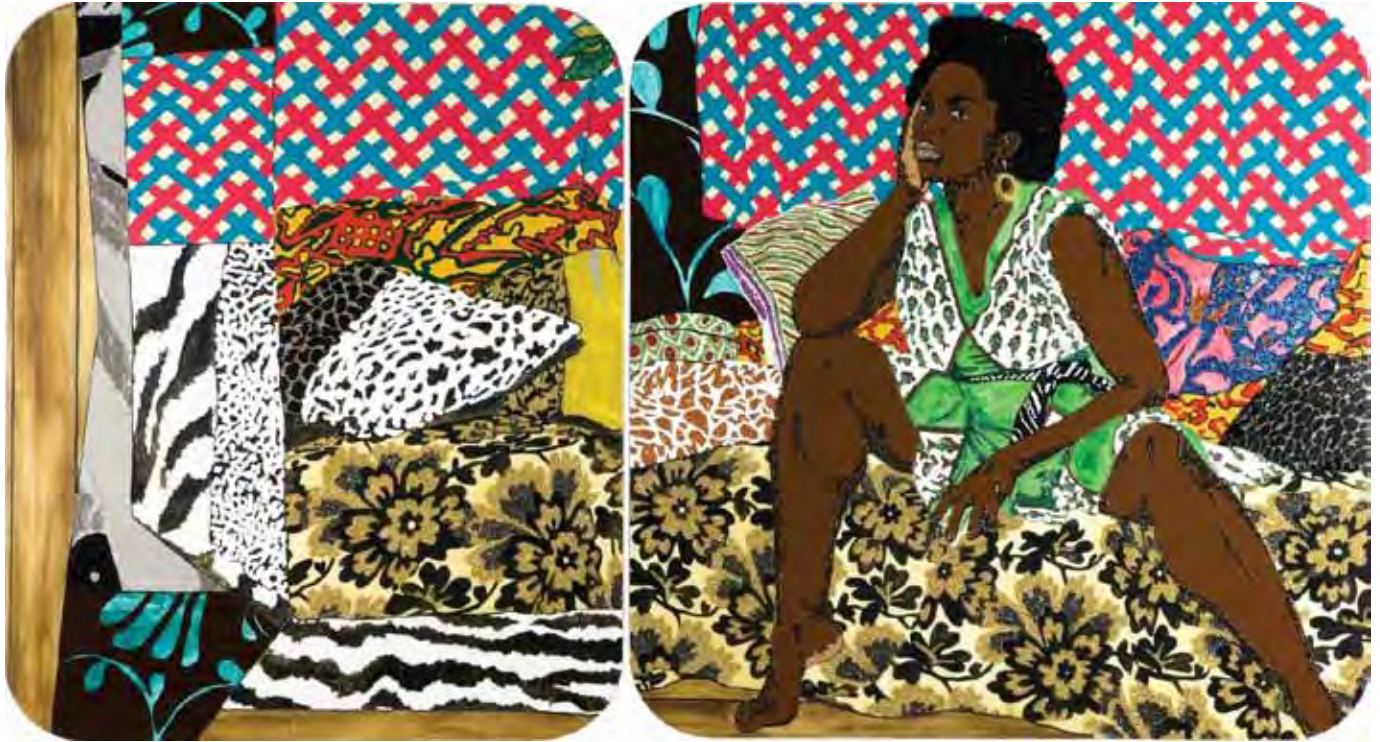
Using the themes to contextualize the work, *30 Americans* at DIA collectively charts a history of how representational art has dramatically changed. The once ignored, artistic impulses of non-white artists in the Western canon have been given increasing credit for their contributions in shaping high and popular culture. On view is the monumental *Sleep* by Kehinde Wiley, whose work has appeared on the TV show *Empire* (<http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/everything-we-know-about-the-art-in-empire>). Kerry James

Marshall's *Vignette #10*, Barkely L. Hendricks' *Noir*, and Jeff Sonhouse's *Exhibit A: Cardinal Francis Arinze* represent a class of painting that redefines who deserves to be painted. Hank Willis Thomas' *Branded Head* photograph of a black male head embossed with the Nike swoosh logo, Nick Cave's flowery *Soundsuit* sculpture, and Mickalene Thomas' *Baby I Am Ready*, of a black woman powerfully sitting with a hand on her cheek staring undaunted into the distance, have widened the definitions of what portraiture can be.



Jeff Sonhouse. Exhibit A: Cardinal Francis Arinze 2005. oil and mixed media on wooden panel. Courtesy of

Rubell Family Collection, Miami



Mickalene Thomas' Baby I Am Ready Now, 2007, acrylic, rhinestone and enamel on wooden panel. Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami



Lorna Simpson's Wigs (Profolio), 1994, 21 lithographs on felt with 17 lithographed felt text panels. Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami

30 Americans also showcases the evolution of abstraction in American art. Jean-Michel Basquiat's wordy *One Million Yen and Bird Money*, both painted in the early 1980s, denote an earlier play on abstraction in the show, while Mark Bradford's 2005 *Whore in the Church House* and Wangechi Mutu's *Non je ne regretted rien* from 2007 show the sublime current heights black abstraction has reached. Glenn Ligon's neon sign *Untitled (I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance)* and William Pope.L's video *The Great White Way, 22 miles, 9 years, 1 street*, also highlight how the exhibition is also a brilliant visual history of the politics of race.



Mark Bradford's Whore in the Church House, 2006, mixed media collage on canvas. Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami

"I want people to see this history and not forget it because we are always talking about having some kind of conversation—none of which I believe has happened yet," says Mercer of what she would like the exhibition to achieve in Detroit. "The non-African-American audience has to learn that this is American history and you can't just segregate it as being just African-American history," she continues. "Everyone should know it."



Kerry James Marshall's Vignette #10, 2007, acrylic on fiberglass. Courtesy of Rubell Family Collection, Miami

30 Americans continues through January 18, at the Detroit Institute of Arts. For more information, click here (<http://www.dia.org/calendar/exhibition.aspx?id=4998&iid=>).

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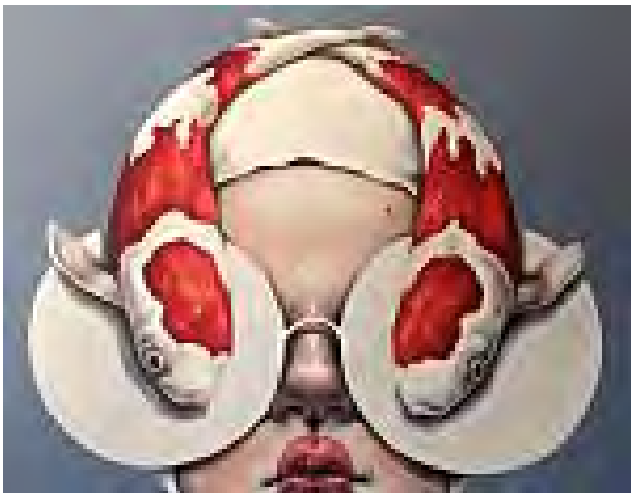
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