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30 Americans: West Coast Debut at TAM in September

JULY 29, 2016 BY [THE SUBURBAN TIMES](#) – [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

The critically acclaimed, nationally traveling exhibition *30 Americans* makes its West Coast debut at [Tacoma Art Museum \(TAM\)](#) this fall. Featuring 45 works drawn from the Rubell Family Collection in Miami – one of the largest private contemporary art collections in the world – *30 Americans* will be on view from September 24, 2016 through January 15, 2017. The exhibition showcases paintings, photographs, installations, and sculptures by prominent African American artists who have emerged since the 1970s as trailblazers in the contemporary art scene. The works explore identity and the African American experience in the United States. The exhibition invites viewers to consider multiple perspectives, and to reflect upon the similarities and differences of their own experiences and identities.



“The impact of this inspiring exhibition comes from the powerful works of art produced by major artists who have significantly advanced contemporary art practices in our country for three generations,” said TAM’s Executive Director Stephanie Stebich. “We’ve been working for four years to bring this exhibition to our community. The stories these works tell are more relevant than ever as we work toward understanding and social change. Art plays a pivotal role in building empathy and resolving conflict.” Stebich added, “TAM is a safe space for difficult conversations through art. We plan to hold open forums and discussions during the run of this exhibition offering ample opportunity for community conversations about the role of art, the history of racism, and the traumatic current events.”

The museum’s exhibition planning team issued an open call in March to convene a Community Advisory Committee. Committee members worked with TAM to identify themes that will resonate with the Tacoma community, offer program ideas, and recommend potential partners to help the museum reach the widest possible audience with this exhibition. Visitors can look forward to engaging workshops, community discussions, activities in the galleries, and more.

“Participating on the Advisory Committee, I’ve had a front row seat to see how TAM listens to the community and designs their exhibitions and programs to connect with a wide range of people. I am proud to be on the Committee and eager to see what Tacomans get out of this exhibition,” said Frances Davis, Arts Facet Co-chair of the Tacoma Chapter of The Links Incorporated and a *30 Americans* Advisory Committee member. “It really shows TAM’s commitment to reaching everyone, not just art experts.”

TAM’s Chief Curator Rock Hushka stated, “The meaning of a work of art evolves depending on what is happening in our culture, where it is presented, and its juxtaposition among other works of art. Every visitor makes his or her own meaning. For some, this exhibition will be comforting and exciting; for others it may be provocative or uncomfortable. We’ll have gallery prompts that invite visitors to examine their own identities and how it affects their reactions.”

What will you see in *30 Americans*? Works by seminal figures such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Carrie Mae Weems alongside younger generations of artists such as Kehinde Wiley, Mickalene Thomas, and Kalup Linzy. The artists weave evocative themes of race and Black identity in America, the struggle for civil rights, popular culture, and media imagery through many of the works. Many works respond to concerns raised in Tacoma and many communities across the country.

Carrie Mae Weems' *Descending the Throne* from her series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* and Leonardo Drew's *Untitled #25* address the legacy of slavery. Robert Colescott's *Pygmalion* includes a dapper self-portrait as the mythical Greek sculpture bringing his art to life. Nick Cave's jubilant *Soundsuit* incorporates a garden of found flowers. Jean-Michel Basquiat's *Bird on Money* riffs on the iconic jazz musician Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, commemorating the Brooklyn neighborhood where the painter was born. Kerry James Marshall's *Souvenir: Composition in Three Parts* recalls the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, on September 1, 1963. The exhibition has Northwest connections too: Both Carrie Mae Weems and Robert Colescott have important ties to Portland, and Noah Davis was born in Seattle.

The exhibition is drawn from one of the world's largest and most celebrated private contemporary art collections, the [Rubell Family Collection](#). Mera and Don Rubell recently celebrated their 51st wedding anniversary and credit a shared passion for art as the key to their relationship. They met in 1962, when he was a medical student and she was a teacher in New York's first Head Start program. In 1964 the couple began collecting art on a budget of \$25 per month. In 1993, they moved the collection from New York to Miami where it is exhibited in a converted 45,000-square-foot repurposed DEA confiscated goods warehouse. A year later, they launched the Contemporary Arts Foundation with their son Jason. Drawing from the collection, the foundation develops annual thematic exhibitions such as *30 Americans* that often travel nationally and internationally.

"We have always collected African American artists as part of our broader mission to collect the most interesting art of our time," shared Don and Mera in discussing how and why they organized this exhibition. The Rubells noted that around 2005, "we found there was a critical mass of emerging African American artists, and began the process of understanding what seemed to be a new movement ... we heard some of the same names over and over: Robert Colescott, Renée Green, David Hammons, Barkley Hendricks, Kerry James Marshall, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, and Carrie Mae Weems. We had been collecting almost all of this older generation for decades. Perfect conditions for a new exhibition."

The Rubells will share about their experience in developing *30 Americans* and the accompanying catalogue as well as their collection in general in Collector Conversation at TAM on Sunday, September 25, at 2 pm. The museum's opening celebration for the exhibition will be Saturday,

September 24, 7-10 pm. Tickets for both events are available at www.tacomaartmuseum.org/events. TAM's website will offer more details about additional related museum and partner programs this fall.

30 Americans has traveled to ten museums in the US, including at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., where President Obama and his family viewed it; the Contemporary Arts Center in New Orleans; Detroit Institute of Arts; and Cincinnati Art Museum. It has set all-time attendance records at many of these venues.

Immerse yourself in some of the most compelling contemporary art in the nation and study these artists' perspectives on vital cultural topics in *30 Americans* at TAM. For more information, see www.TacomaArtMuseum.org/explore/exhibitions.



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