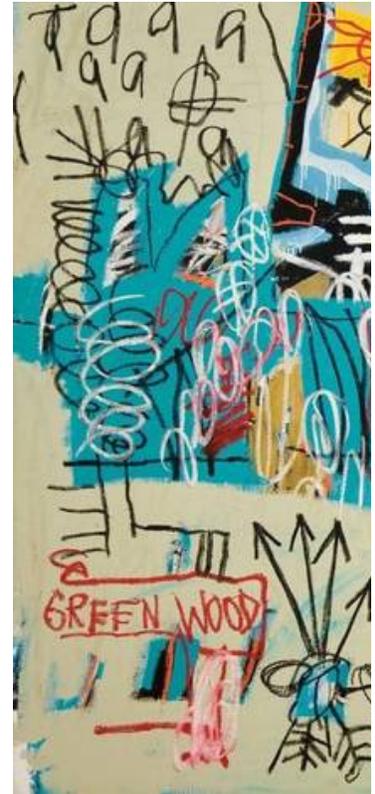


# '30 Americans' confronts issues of race at Tacoma Art Museum



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BY ROSEMARY PONNEKANTI

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In “30 Americans,” opening Saturday at the Tacoma Art Museum in its West Coast debut, the issue isn’t the art. Those 45 works by 31 contemporary African-American artists have stunned audiences across 10 U.S. cities with their size, power and depth since the show began touring in 2008. No, the issue is how the Tacoma Art Museum is going to present it. It’s the museum’s first significant show of African-American art in five years, and the challenge is to curate it for audiences of all races in a way that goes beyond tokenism to understanding.

“These are iconic works — they’re astonishing,” says senior curator Rock Hushka. “It’s so exciting for Tacoma Art Museum to be able to think about really complicated issues, and to open up to conversations in the community.”

Chris Jordan, an African-American Tacoma artist, agrees the works in “30 Americans” are important. “They’re complicated, and really rich with history,” he says. “But my biggest hope is that the venue and the wall texts really address this. As (other critics) have said, African-American art history needs detail, intimacy and care, not just broad strokes.”

## **25-foot nudes and Klan hoods**

Critics from the District of Columbia to Detroit are unanimous: “30 Americans” overflows with amazing art. It assembles America’s most important black artists from the historic (Jean-Michel Basquiat, Barkley Hendricks, Robert Colescott) to cutting-edge (Nick Cave, Xaviera Simmons, Nina Chanel Abney). It ranges from small and intimate (the 10-inch by 10-inch camo-green oils of Noah Davis’ “Basic Training” series) to enormous (Kehinde Wiley’s “Sleep,” a loincloth-draped male nude reclining on his signature floral background. At 11 by 25 feet, it is the biggest painting Hushka has ever mounted).

There’s film (William Pope.L’s heart-stopping video of a black man in a Superman outfit crawling his way abysmally along a city street), there’s mixed media (Rodney McMillian’s raw, stinky “Carpet”), there’s neon (Glenn Ligon’s “America”).

This art doesn’t pull any punches. Hank Willis Thomas photographs a black man’s head, shaved and apparently branded with the Nike logo. Kara Walker renders horrifying images of the antebellum South in fancy silhouettes. Gary Simmons circles a hangman’s noose with classroom chairs wearing Ku Klux Klan hoods. Other works confront slavery, civil rights violence and contemporary racism.

It’s some of modern America’s best art. But until recently you’d be hard-pressed to see it in a museum. Artists of color have fought long and hard to get the kind of institutional attention that white artists have always enjoyed. Even as recently as 2004, Glenn Ligon — whose work is, in fact, in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum and others — told Whitney curator Thelma Golden that “every five or 10 years, (a museum does) some sort of big group exhibition and they put a lot of black folks in it. But there’s not any spin-off or follow-up show from that. ... So the only time you get to be in that major institution’s space is in a group show — the ethnically specific group shows.”

“30 Americans” is an ethnically specific group show. That was intentional by the owners, Mera and Don Rubell, who began collecting art on doctor and teacher salaries in their 20s and have since risen to be two of the most influential art buyers in the United States. They have their own museum, the 45,000-square-foot Rubell Family Collection in Miami, which organized the show.

“We always look at art and visit studios,” says Mera Rubell, now 73. “So many truly dynamic artists now happen to be African American. They were looking into our collection and saying, ‘Those pieces really influenced our work. Those artists are our heroes.’ ”

Realizing they had a rich collection of 30 years of African-American art, the Rubells decided to put on a show. For three years they toured studios and collected art. Even after first mounting “30 Americans” in 2008 at their museum, with more than 200 works and most artists getting a room to themselves, they kept collecting — even adding one artist to the roster.

## **White curators, black art**

As such, most of the 10 museums hosting the show have had to make some curatorial choices — including the Tacoma Art Museum, which picked 45 works. Size comes into it: many pieces are huge, like the two Wileys (“Sleep” takes up the entire south wall of the biggest gallery). Other factors come into play, such as local relevance. Hushka deliberately chose more pieces by Noah Davis, a young Los Angeles artist who died of cancer last year and had his art shown at Seattle’s Frye Museum in April, and by Hank Willis Thomas, who’s commissioned to make art for a future light rail station in South Seattle.

There’s only one requirement from the Rubells: Include every artist. Other than that, museums can take their pick.

“What’s cool when I arrive (at each venue) is that it’s like seeing a new show,” says Mera Rubell.

Another big freedom curators have is how to arrange the work, and how to explain it via wall texts and educational materials. This is where other museums have attracted criticism.

In Washington’s Corcoran Gallery in 2011, the show was slammed by Washington City Paper as being a “random agglomeration of work” that conveyed no “sense of history: “...how the works function in the art world at large; or why, aside from the color of their skin, any of these artists belong in a room together.”



### **AFRICAN-AMERICAN ART HISTORY NEEDS DETAIL, INTIMACY AND CARE, NOT JUST BROAD STROKES.**

Chris Jordan, Tacoma artist

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In 2015, the Detroit Institute of Arts decided to lump several works into the category of “sampling” — a hip-hop reference that has little to do with visual art appropriation and which, the Detroit Free Press pointed out, is not used with white artists.

Then there's the simple, vexing issue of white collectors and curators making a show about black artists.

“There was an awkwardness,” Mera Rubell says of the show's genesis. “People told us we shouldn't do it. ... White collectors doing an all African-American show — we wanted to make sure it was in the right spirit.”

The Rubells, Mera says, resolved that issue by talking in depth to all the artists involved.

At the Tacoma Art Museum, it was Hushka — who is white — who chose the works and reviewed the texts, getting feedback from Serenity Wise, a black director of community engagement at the Northwest African American Museum. Hushka's not specific on how he's tying the works together in a narrative, other than focusing on artist intent and the connection between art history and American history. He hopes event programming will also spur dialogue and thinking. Juan Roselione-Valadez, the Rubell director who came to Tacoma to help install the biggest works, points out how each work in the show is naturally in dialogue with the rest.

For Jordan, it's not enough. After protests last year about the lack of African Americans in “Art AIDS America,” Jordan spoke with museum staff and board about improving diversity, something director Stephanie Stebich agreed needed doing. One of the requests was that “30 Americans” — which had been in the pipeline since 2012 — have a paid guest curator with a deep knowledge of the subject area. That didn't happen.

“The response we got was that the show was already boxed up, and they had no choice in the artworks,” says Jordan.

The museum did work with a community advisory committee, which included people of color, on Tacoma programming and to write eight of the exhibition labels. Hushka says three Tacoma African-American organizations have endorsed the show, including the Urban League, Black Collective and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

For Jordan, that doesn't replace a paid person “creating a strong experience.”

“I feel it's a missed opportunity for our community,” Jordan says.

## **Better than nothing?**

The fact remains, though, that “30 Americans” is a show that gives African-American art an enormous spotlight. The last group show featuring black artists at Tacoma Art Museum was the Gee's Bend quilt show of 2011; the last solo show for a black artist was Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson in 2006-7. Roselione-Valadez says, thanks to “30 Americans,” many of these newer

artists now have more museum representation. Even the title still has impact: Mera Rubell remembers how Thomas, when he heard the name, told her he felt like he'd just been given citizenship.

Yet, it's not the art that's questioned, it's the presentation.

“We'll have to see what ends up on the wall to really know how it will impact (Tacoma),” Jordan says. “Part of the problem of this show is ... when curators are unable to create context that speaks to where the art comes from ... then the work becomes about brokering black experience to white people. There's a violence in that, and black audiences are left behind.”

*Rosemary Ponnekanti: 253-597-8568, @rose\_ponnekanti*

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## “30 AMERICANS”

**When:** Opens Saturday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Then 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesday-Sundays through Jan. 15.

**Where:** Tacoma Art Museum, 1701 Pacific Ave., Tacoma.

**Events:** Members opening, 7-10 p.m. Saturday (\$20; \$10 students; members free) includes live music, spoken word, refreshments. Collector conversation with the Rubells at 2 p.m. Sunday (\$10 general; \$5 members, students). Lunch and Learn, noon-1 p.m. first Wednesdays with museum staff (free). Fusion Fest, noon-4 p.m. Oct. 9 (free). Panel discussion on racism, 6:30-8 p.m. Oct. 20 (free). Artist talk with Barkley Hendricks, 2 p.m. Oct. 30 (\$10 general; \$5 members, students). Poetry slam, 6:30-8 p.m. Nov. 17 (free). Teen Night, 7-10 p.m. Nov. 19 (free). Film screening of “Colored Frames,” 6 p.m. Dec. 15 (free). Community festival, Jan. 8 (free).

**Admission:** \$15 adults; \$13 senior, student and military; free for 4 and younger, MUSE students, Art Access library pass holders, Bank of America cardholders on first weekends, from 5-8 p.m. the third Thursday of the month, and community festivals on Oct. 9, Nov. 6 and Jan. 8.

**Information:** 253-272-4258, [tacomaartmuseum.org](http://tacomaartmuseum.org).



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