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**Gallery Labels and Wall Panels, *30 Americans***

**Reflection panel:**

**Serenity Wise Reflects on the KKK Presence in the Pacific Northwest**

In my childhood, the boogieman in my closet was the fearful image of a white-hooded Ku Klux Klansman. For some kids, the terror of a predator set on harming children and innocents is usually an improbable (if not a totally fictional) work of imagination. For many youth of color like me, it was instead an early lesson in survival. The Klansman that haunted my mind some nights was a prototype conjured from photographs and historical recounts of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), a white supremacist group that formed in the 1860s at the end of the US Civil War.

During a time when black people were making gains in the fight for freedom, the KKK organized with a mission to murder, terrorize, and ultimately eliminate the black population in the United States of America. There have since been multiple waves of KKK activity. Despite its strong associations with the South, the second wave in the 1920s established a Klan presence in the Pacific Northwest that continues to exist today. It is a sobering and relevant admonition that in the Pacific Northwest, a region sometimes regarded as ‘safe’ from the dangers of racism, the KKK continues to commit acts of intimidation and violence against people of color.

Further, there is a perception that Gary Simmons’s *Duck, Duck, Noose* is combining two polarized realities—the early years of life, where a child is innocent of the burden of knowing evil versus the reality of the mortal threats of racism. This is a perception reserved for the privileged. This work is a reminder that even today, black children do not get the comfort of waiting until they are ready to know about the threats of racism on their lives.

Serenity Wise

Director of Community Engagement

Northwest African American Museum

**Intro panel:**

**30 Americans**

*30 Americans* presents compelling art from the past four decades by three generations of American artists. The paintings, sculptures, photographs, video, and installations explore issues important to American society. They reveal the complexity of African American culture as well as a tension inherent to artistic expression across all eras: between the freedom to articulate individual experiences and the powerful social, cultural, and economic forces that shape that freedom. Being American is only one aspect of these artists’s identities, and their understanding of what it means to be American is as varied as the artworks on view.

The exhibition presents a conversation that mirrors the exuberance of American democracy and is sometimes expressed with healthy frankness. Race relations, economic and social inequality, and the legacy of slavery and segregation are prominent topics of American public discourse, especially in this election year. The artists in *30 Americans* address these issues and more. In doing so, they challenge art history in a manner alternately raucous and refined. These artists have also made significant contributions to contemporary American art, and most are now considered among the most accomplished of this period.

These artists ask viewers to reconsider their identity and to contemplate our place in this world. We invite you to consider the artworks in *30 Americans* not only as part of a national conversation, but also as an opportunity to reflect on the issues that shape our community.

*30 Americans* is organized by the Rubell Family Collection, Miami. Support for this exhibition provided by Union Bank and ArtsFund. *30 Americans* is endorsed by the following community groups: Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. (Tacoma Alumnae Chapter); Jack and Jill of America, Inc.; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Tacoma Branch; National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Seattle King County; Northwest African American Museum; Portland (OR) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated; Tacoma (WA) Chapter of The Links, Incorporated; Tacoma Pierce County Black Collective; and Tacoma Urban League (TUL). Program support for *30 Americans* is provided by Stephanie Jordan State Farm Insurance.

**Section panel:**

**Identities, Bodies, and Art**

Over the past few decades, rigid constructions of gender, sexuality, and race have been reexamined and deconstructed. Today, these categories are viewed as fluid and change through societal forces. Many people have felt liberated by this development, more free to articulate their own sense of who they are. Yet, we remain far from a society unaffected by default categories and discrimination. As a result, artists have begun to investigate how society treats individuals based upon their physical characteristics.

A nation is often referred to as a “body politic”—an entity composed of all its citizens considered as a single group. It’s an instructive metaphor, because no matter how these artists choose to address the body, they can’t help but also address politics. This line of inquiry is particularly pointed during a national election.

Art that explicitly addresses the body can act like a decoder ring, revealing to us rules we might otherwise not see. Many artists in *30 Americans* examine the politics of identity by using how we dress, accessorize, and present the body. These perspectives are distinctly American, but they also leave open for consideration other identities, often emphasizing the individual rather than national.

**Community Labels:**

Fran Davis, Member of

30 Americans Community

Advisory Committee

“’But if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering.’ Holy Bible, KJV 1, Corinthians 11:15. I think that ‘Brunette’ is a coded white term to make her dark skin and hair, as well as her hairstyle, acceptable to those who were not black. It definitely speaks to race, identity, sexuality, and pride. I came of age during the era when the Afro became in vogue for black people. It was a time when James Brown instructed African Americans to "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." The expression of female African American hair was jettisoned by the "Afro." Today, African American women display works of art and individualist expression proudly upon their heads. One of the wonderful outcomes of this expression is to see our white, yellow, red, and brown sisters excitedly following suit. Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud.”

Elise Richman, Member of

30 Americans Community Advisory Committee

“Whore in the Church House evokes a scar-like map, a scratched and layered landscape of detritus. Its visceral, aggregate composition represents cartography as a process, and place as a system. Bradford maps the act of incising entangled roads into vital matter and cobbling the stuff of commerce, packaging, labels, products, and signs, into a degraded, whitewashed horizon. This tactile, teeming topography delineates a land composed of stratified layers that can be bought and sold.”



Wayne Williams, Member of

30 Americans Community

Advisory Committee

“I feel Carrie Mae Weems’ prints are very visceral and their expressions span from hopeless to confident, if not defiant. The perception of African Americans has extended from being an undesirable sub-human malignancy to a celebrated, unique, and beautiful creation. And yet, we live in a world that continues to debate which is most palatable. These black women and men are depicted with shoulders straight, posture unbent and head up. Even as they are strong, we continue to fight for a unanimous and positive vote.”

Wayne Williams, Member of

30 Americans Community Advisory Committee

“At every stage of transitioning from ‘Mammie’ to renowned Poet, CEO, Gold Medalist, etc, we’ve been given a taste of the alleged desirable life. But even with such progress, a constant remains in who controls this power.

The enlightenment—African Americans have learned that self-preservation is essential at every stage. And while we realize the collective effort sustains all of us, we are so very tired of waiting for others to get it.”

Larry Norman, Member of

30 Americans Community

Advisory Committee

“The brand name is Nike and Nike says ‘Just Do It!’ This is a definitive statement.

In the head of many African Americans, it is not a statement but a question: ‘Just Do What?’ What do we do with our skills? What do we do with our intelligence? Are African Americans participants in ‘Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness,’ or just commercial commodities to be bought and sold?”

Wanda Thompson, Member of   
30 Americans Community

Advisory Committee

“Kehinde really speaks to me and takes me back to the days I walked through the Louvre for hours on end to make sure I did not miss a detail. His detail and respect for the old world to the urban, contemporary world juxtaposes old and new in such a manner that is vividly powerful and mesmerizing, yet evokes all the emotions of the polar opposites in life. I love this masterpiece!”

**Gallery Panels:**

All works are from the Rubell Family Collection, Miami.

Nina Chanel Abney

Born Chicago, Illinois, 1982

Class of 2007, 2007

Diptych, acrylic on canvas

What would make an artwork about race issues universal? Artist Nina Abney asked herself this question after many classmates told her they couldn’t relate to her work. Abney was the only black student in her class at Parsons The New School for Design, a renowned art school in

New York City.

To create this class portrait, Abney transformed the setting and everyone's race, including her own. In this context, the orange prison uniforms perhaps question stereotypes of black Americans by her peers.

John Bankston

Born Benton Harbor, Michigan, 1963

Man’s Country I, 2004

Oil on linen

John Bankston’s paintings showcase his unique and identifiable style, combining paintings and drawing to create works reminiscent of children’s coloring books. Bankston’s works appear simplistic with heavily outlined and loosely drawn figures, roughly filled in with brightly colored paint that covers some of the voids. The artist challenges the viewer to look past his coloring-book style to uncover a deeper message.

For Bankston, the images act as a vehicle for addressing issues of sexuality, identity, and self-definition. In Man’s Country I, Bankston sets the stage for a display of distinctly masculine behavior, a feat of strength by a wrestler performed for a well-dressed onlooker. The artist deliberately leaves the plot to the viewer’s fantasies, which Bankston understands will activate both nostalgia and desire.

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Born Brooklyn, New York, 1960

Died New York, New York, 1988

One Million Yen, 1982

Oil on canvas with wood and jute

Jean-Michel Basquiat addressed the commercialization of the burgeoning art market and the economic boom of the early 1980s. In One Million Yen, Basquiat represents himself in the painting as a crown that appears in the top left corner.

Basquiat was as obsessed with fame and glory as was his friend Andy Warhol. He incorporates his crown with deadpan irony toward the idea that a black artist could ever achieve art royalty. Basquiat, along with East Village artists such as Keith Haring and Kenny Scharf, gained notoriety by frequenting the most popular New York clubs: Palladium, Paradise Garage, the Mudd Club, and Club 57—so did his brief relationship with a then-little-known singer named Madonna.

Jean-Michel Basquiat

Born Brooklyn, New York, 1960

Died New York, New York, 1988

Bird On Money, 1981

Acrylic and oil on canvas

Jean-Michel Basquiat demonstrated an aptitude for art at a young age. As a high school student, he began spray-painting graffiti in Lower Manhattan. Working under the name SAMO©, Basquiat tagged New York City’s streets with a series of spray-painted symbols critiquing the commercialization of art in the late 1970s. Though his art frequently refers to figures and events associated with African American history, Basquiat was ambivalent about race-based interpretations of his art, insisting, “I am not a black artist. I am an artist.”

The bird in the center represents saxophonist Charlie “Bird” Parker, an iconic jazz musician. Basquiat adopted Parker’s improvisational and fast-paced style of playing music in his spontaneous use of brushwork, text, and bold, clashing colors. The words para morir (“for death”) reference the Green-Wood cemetery in Brooklyn, near where Basquiat was born and the cemetery in which he would be buried.

Mark Bradford

Born Los Angeles, California, 1968

Whore in the Church House, 2006

Mixed-media collage on canvas

Mark Bradford is deeply interested in the interplay between public signage and the way people encounter words and images in the course of daily life. His collages incorporate bits and pieces of billboards, and clippings from advertisements. He is famous for including materials from his lived experience such as perm foils from his mother’s beauty salon.

Bradford’s painting shows the city as if from a satellite view with a tangled web of lines like a dense street map. Whore in the Church House plays on the slippery distinctions between a work of art and the role everyday materials have in society.

Rozeal

Born Washington, D.C., 1966

Untitled (after Kikugawa Eizan’s “Furyu nana komachi” [The Modern Seven Komashi]), 2007

Acrylic and paper on panel

Rozeal depicts a reclining woman with curls and cornrowed hair, and long painted nails. But the image also recalls the ornately dressed geishas from traditional Japanese woodblock prints. She is particularly fascinated by intersections of Japanese and Korean culture and hip-hop aesthetics, which mirrors Rozeal’s own interest in ukiyo-e prints and kabuki theater.

The woman is a symbolic figure drawn from two distinct cultural aesthetics. Rozeal asks viewers to contemplate what it means to co-opt someone else’s culture.

Nick Cave

Born Jefferson City, Missouri, 1959

Soundsuit, 2008

Fabric, fiberglass, and metal

Nick Cave creates elaborate costumes composed of a wide variety of materials, often found or commonplace objects. The resulting artworks may be both exhibited and worn by a performer or dancer. These Soundsuits provide a multisensory experience: color, texture, and—when performed—sound and movement. Among Cave’s influences are African masquerades, in which an individual identity shares space with the message or entity conveyed by the mask, dress, and movement.

Cave describes the experience of wearing a Soundsuit: "Once I put it on, I have to settle with myself. I don’t move for a while. I’ve got to reach the point where I surrender my identity and it’s no longer present.”

Robert Colescott

Born Oakland, California, 1925  
Died Tucson, Arizona, 2009

Pygmalion, 1987

Acrylic on canvas

The bearded man in the center represents Pygmalion, and appears to be a self-portrait of the artist. According to an ancient Greek poem, Pygmalion carved a statue of a beautiful woman from white ivory. He fell in love with his creation, and it came to life. Here, Pygmalion’s love is a black woman.

Robert Colescott also references two other famous icons of Western art: the armless Venus de Milo is on the left of the two central figures and Mona Lisa is to the right. He depicts them as black women in order to rectify the limited definition of classical beauty. Colescott’s revisions of the ancient legend provide a pointedly satirical commentary on America’s deeply rooted history of racism.

Colescott’s reputation grew rapidly from his first critical successes in Portland, Oregon in the 1960s.

Noah Davis

Born Seattle, Washington, 1983

Died Los Angeles, California, 2015

Basic Training 1, 2008

Oil and acrylic on canvas

Noah Davis

Born Seattle, Washington, 1983

Died Los Angeles, California, 2015

Basic Training 2, 2008

Oil and acrylic on canvas

Noah Davis

Born Seattle, Washington, 1983

Died Los Angeles, California, 2015

Basic Training 3, 2008

Oil and acrylic on canvas

Noah Davis

Born Seattle, Washington, 1983

Died Los Angeles, California, 2015

Basic Training 4, 2008

Oil and acrylic on canvas

Artist Noah Davis knows firsthand what it’s like to have a family member serve in the armed forces. These four paintings were inspired by a series of Polaroids taken by his aunt during her basic training experience. They explore the everyday and solitary aspects of military life. Despite their recognizable subject, areas of each painting dissolve into abstraction.

The images also draw attention to issues of inclusivity in the U.S. Army. While African Americans have fought for the country since the Revolutionary War, it wasn’t until 1948 that black men could serve in combat. Bans on women in combat were lifted in 2013.

Noah Davis

Born Seattle, Washington, 1983

Died Los Angeles, California, 2015

Painting for My Dad, 2011

Oil on canvas

In a remembrance published shortly after Noah Davis’s death in 2015, Henry Taylor, an artist also included in 30 Americans, said of his friend’s art, “[It] was becoming more powerful and essential. Less is more. The backgrounds had become less nebulous, more monochromatic and geometric, but they were not empty feeling. His paintings were spatial. His figures embraced a solemn background… alone in a big world.”

Leonardo Drew

Born Tallahassee, Florida, 1961

Untitled #25, 1992

Cotton and wax

Stacking more than sixty blocks of roughly the same size and shape, sculptor Leonardo Drew creates an abstract geometric sculpture. But his choice of material—cotton, the main product of the American South during slavery—opens up other interpretations.

The stacks of blocks reference the cotton industry of the 1800s and its dependence upon slave labor. With this sobering history, the wall-like sculpture functions as a physical and emotional barrier. Through this work, Drew points to the ongoing separation and psychological pain caused by America’s slave history and its lingering effects on identity in the present day. For the artist, art provides an outlet for coming to terms with this history and memory, and for sharing these concerns with a wider audience.

Renée Green

Born Cleveland, Ohio, 1959

Between and Including, Set B (Un Chien Andalou to Crossdressing), 1998

Black-and-white framed photographs, framed texts, and painted wall

Renée Green

Born Cleveland, Ohio, 1959

Between and Including, Set H (Rock ‘N‘ Roll Highschool to Things to Come), 1998

Black-and-white framed photographs, framed texts and painted wall

Renée Green investigates the past and makes unexpected connections between history, memory, gender, and the politics of race and colonialism.

These arrangements of photographs are made with film stills taken from The Oxford Companion to Film (1976), The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film (1983), and The Women’s Companion to International Film (1990).The overall installation is a complex system of alphabetically arranged cross references and cultural associations, denoted by the title.

Green asks viewers to consider the power dynamics of the process by which filmmakers

and society decides which film, images, memories, and narratives are preserved. She also contemplates the omissions that may never be known.

David Hammons

Born Springfield, Illinois, 1943

The Holy Bible, Old Testament, 2002

1,002-page artist’s book, 225 color plates, leather-bound, soft cover, gilt edged, gold tooling, and slipcase

Edition 117 of 165

At first glance, this appears to be a book about Marcel Duchamp, an artist who shocked the art world by presenting everyday objects as art. For Duchamp, the artist’s concept or idea was more important than the work itself.

Here, artist David Hammons covered the Duchamp book with the Old Testament of the Christian Bible. By giving this text a familiar and sacred cover, Hammons demonstrates his reverence for one of his artistic forefathers.

David Hammons

Born Springfield, Illinois, 1943

Esquire (or John Henry), 1990

Steel, rock, human hair, and tin

The subject of Esquire is the American folk hero John Henry, a nineteenth-century strongman and ex-slave said to have battled a steam powered hammer on the railroad and won. Unfortunately, Henry died soon after of exhaustion. In almost all accounts of the tale, Henry combines working-class ideals with the power of a race historically extorted by slavery.

Using a rusted steel beam, a rock, a can of Esquire black shoe polish, and human hair clippings collected from a Harlem barbershop, Hammons speaks to representations of the black male body within the art historical canon.

Barkley L. Hendricks

Born Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 1945

Noir, 1978

Oil and acrylic on linen canvas

Barkley Hendricks built a national reputation with his hyper-realist paintings of modern-day African American pop culture figures such as hipsters, divas, and basketball players. His subjects, beautifully decked out, capture the era’s fashion sensibilities. By extension, they also reveal the ways people present themselves to the world. Hendricks’s decisions about scale, bold colors, and frontal pose invite our engagement. “It’s a design plan. It’s not accidental, you know,” Hendricks said in a 2009 interview. “You can’t do anything with people if you don’t get their attention.”

Hendricks specifically titled this painting Noirto reference the name of a film genre and the French word for black.

Rashid Johnson

Born Chicago, Illinois, 1977

The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Thurgood), 2008

Lambda print

Edition 2 of 5

Rashid Johnson exposes the contradictions found in the public exploitation and glamorization of African-American stereotypes. Swirls of smoke surround a contemporary young man with a serious expression, echoing the photographs of James Van Der Zee, a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance. His hairstyle and formal attire are intended to remind us of Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery and became an influential abolitionist. Johnson’s title also references Thurgood Marshall, the first African American Supreme Court Justice, who is part of Johnson’s own fictional “hall of fame,” a secret society of African Americans of status and power.

Artist Rashid Johnson said: “I love this idea of the black character being a person who could potentially be rejuvenated and become something new. It’s like, ‘Oh, there’s a new black? How exciting—I want to meet that.’”

Rashid Johnson

Born Chicago, Illinois, 1977

The Shuttle, 2011

Mirrored tile, black soap, wax, books, shea butter, plant, and CB radio

Rashid Johnson combines history, science fiction, magical realism and non-Western theories of the origins of the universe. The Shuttledemonstrates these wide-ranging interests and how he uses them to highlight his personal history and the role of black cultural figures in the construction of black American identities.

Johnson explains, "It has [seventeen] copies of a book by comedian Dick Gregory called, Write Me In, where he tries to convince the American public to write him in as a candidate for president to run against Nixon...It also includes a CB radio, which is what my dad did for a living…He went on to run a CB radio business, so I use that radio quite often in my work. This shape, which is space shuttle-like, is actually the blueprint of the first comedy [club] that comedian Dick Gregory ever performed in."

Glenn Ligon

Born Bronx, New York, 1960

America, 2008

Neon sign and paint

Edition of 1

Glenn Ligon made America, the first of his neon sculptures, during a time of both enthusiastic political optimism and widespread economic and social crisis. A charismatic and inspiring African American man, Barack Obama, was the Democratic nominee for president of the United States. Yet the nation was also in the middle of turmoil: an economic meltdown, protracted warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq, and festering class, political, and racial discord.

Ligon painted the front of the sign’s letters black, creating a “black light.” However, the artist has allowed the sign’s light to gleam upon the surface directly behind it. Perhaps Ligon presents us with a question about America finding sources of hope from within, or how this idea fits within the promise of America as a light in times of darkness. The artist challenges the typical usage of sign, lighting, and language to suggest that the idea of America can never be fully illuminated.

Kalup Linzy

Born Stuckey, Florida, 1977

Conversations wit de Churen V: As da Art World Might Turn, 2006

Digital video, color, sound

Edition 2 of 5

Run time 11 minutes, 16 seconds

Kalup Linzy often releases films directly onto YouTube, bypassing the art gallery or museum. In his film Conversations wit de Churen V: As da Art World Might Turn, Linzy examines the politics of the art world, particularly its competitiveness and petty melodramas. In this way Linzy raises larger points: What is the role of the museum and gallery? What is considered art/performance in the age of the Internet?

For Further Consideration

What do you think is the difference between video art on YouTube and in a museum exhibition?

Kerry James Marshall

Born Birmingham, Alabama, 1955

Souvenir: Composition in Three Parts,

1998–2000

Plastic, glass, paper, wood, steel, and framed video still

This work explores the racially motivated 1963 bombing by the Ku Klux Klan of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama. The floral arrangement replicates an original one from a memorial to the four young girls killed in the attack: Addie Mae Collins (age 14), Carol Denise McNair (age 11), Carole Robertson (age 14), and Cynthia Wesley (age 14).

The card that reads “As seen on TV” points to how the predominance of mass media coverage of the bombing played a pivotal role in generating national awareness and support for the Civil Rights Movement. The work raises questions about the power of the media—then and now—to shape public opinion around issues of race in America.

For Further Consideration

How does today’s social media change our conversations on race and violence?

Rodney McMillian

Born Columbia, South Carolina, 1969

Untitled, 2005

Carpet

Over the past decade, Los Angeles-based artist Rodney McMillian has exhibited several “carpet paintings.” The seemingly simple gesture of relocating a stained, worn-down carpet to a pristine gallery tests our threshold for what counts as art. But it also encourages reflection upon the life or lives spent in the room the carpet once lined.

Composed of a discarded swath of dirty carpet that the artist reclaimed from a roadside, Untitledlacks other evidence or explanation of how it was aged, marred, or stained. The stains, dirt, and deterioration of the carpet hint about the carpet owner’s life and history. The artist compels us to consider the cultural implications of the politics, economics, and deeply personal experiences that created such a filthy carpet.

Wangechi Mutu

Born Nairobi, Kenya, 1972

Non je ne regrette rien (No, I Regret Nothing), 2007

Ink, acrylic, glitter, cloth, paper collage, plastic, plant material, and mixed media on Mylar

Non je ne regrette rien translates to “No, I regret nothing.” It is the title of a song recorded by Edith Piaf during the French-Algerian War (1956–1962) and dedicated to the French Foreign Legion in 1961. Mutu’s appropriation of this title brings together historical references and contemporary dialogue. She ties France’s colonizing past with the black female experience today.

In this painting, Mutu presents the female body as a site for cultural change and explorations of identity. She investigates the consequences of war, colonization, and violence—and their effects on women. She explained, “Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body.” Mutu’s protagonist may be awkward and twisted, but she is alive, all of which connects ironically with the spirit of Piaf’s song.

William Pope.L

Born Newark, New Jersey, 1955

The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years,

1 Street, 2001–02

Digital video

Edition 1 of 5

Run time 5 minutes

William Pope.L performs his “crawl pieces” by dragging himself on his hands and knees for long distances. The Great White Way refers to Broadway in New York City. Satirically dressed

in a Superman costume, Pope.L performed this 22-mile crawl.

Pope.L began performing these crawls in the late 1970s as a response to the steady increase in homelessness in New York City, a condition that was frequently overlooked by the upwardly mobile, or “vertical” citizens. The artist has said that “horizontal” people (the homeless and the handicapped) have a greater struggle simply to survive—and yet this brave challenge is often ignored.

William Pope.L

Born Newark, New Jersey, 1955

Foraging (asphyxia version), 2008

Digital C-print

Edition 1 of 5

Foraging (asphyxia version) is a self-portrait with the artist seemingly asphyxiating himself with a plastic bag. It’s a pointed and specific image, yet one that can be brought into a wide range of conversations. For example, Artforummagazine placed the work on its cover in February 2015 as part of an article on the death of Eric Garner in Staten Island. The gesture took the artist by surprise: “I—I—this sort of thing always seems to happen outside of me,” he said in an interview. “It’s as if someone is performing my blackness for me. All us Eric.”

For Further Consideration

What do you think it feels like to see your art used for a political statement?



Artforum cover, February 2015

Gary Simmons

Born New York City, New York, 1964

Duck, Duck, Noose, 1992

Wood, cloth, metal, and hemp

Duck, Duck, Nooseis a powerful installation that recalls “duck, duck, goose,” a chase-and-catch game played by young children. The artist arranged a circle of white Ku Klux Klan hoods perched atop stools like dunce caps. At the center of the circle hangs a rope tied into a noose. The work is a somber and jarring reminder of the random and targeted acts of violence inflicted upon African Americans by members of the Ku Klux Klan from post-Civil War Reconstruction well into the Civil Rights era and today. Simmons likens these terrifying activities to the casual fun of childhood play. His work also points to racism as a learned cultural trait, beginning in early childhood.

According to the Tuskegee Institute, nearly 3,500 African Americans were lynched between 1882 and 1968, most between 1882 and 1920 when the Ku Klux Klan was at its height.

For Further Consideration

How can a work of art help us better understand and talk about the effects of racial violence?

Xaviera Simmons

Born New York City, New York, 1974

One Day and Back Then (Seated), 2007

Color photograph

Edition 3 of 7

Xaviera Simmons

Born New York City, New York, 1974

One Day and Back Then (Standing), 2007

Color photograph

Edition 2 of 5

Xaviera Simmons explores complexities within the representation and experience of black women in American culture and history. Simmons transforms her body with red lipstick and dark pigment as a reference to blackface, a form of make-up associated with minstrel shows. In these theatrical performances, popular during the 1800s and first decades of the 1900s, white performers in blackface perpetuated some of the worst stereotypes about African Americans.

In one of the photographs, Simmons is seated naked in a wicker chair evoking a famous portrait of Huey P. Newton, who co-founded the Black Panther Party in 1966. In its early years, the party, which sought militant self-defense of minority communities, insisted that black women take a subordinate role to black men to support the overall cause. Simmons reestablishes her power as a black woman.



Huey Newton by Unidentified Artist,

circa 1968

National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution / Art Resource, NY

Lorna Simpson

Born Brooklyn, New York, 1960

Wigs (Portfolio), 1994

21 lithographs on felt and 17 lithographed felt

text panels

Lorna Simpson explores the role of hair as a signifier of race and gender. She focuses attention on the ways people, especially black women, are identified, classified, and judged based on their physical attributes and personal styles. The artist presents black-and-white images of hairpieces, hairstyles, and facial hair of varying hues and textures: dreadlocks and silky curls, a thin mustache and a triangular goatee, ranging from black to blond. Her text panels offer witty, observational commentaries and highlight how we negotiate ever-shifting identities.

In her images of varying hairstyles or hairpieces, Simpson subtly implies stories or personalities and leads the viewer to create opinions and ideas based on this single physical characteristic.

Shinique Smith

Born Baltimore, Maryland, 1971

a bull, a rose, a tempest, 2007

Fabric and found objects

Shinique Smith was inspired by a newspaper article detailing the shipment of massive bales of discarded clothing from America to impoverished countries in Africa. Many of the elements found in this work were abandoned objects that Smith found in coin laundries and garbage cans.

Her clothing and fabric bundles point to her interest in the material excess that plagues wealthy societies today. Smith does not exempt herself from this commentary on consumerism and waste. In many of her works, she includes pieces of her own wardrobe, cast away not for the sake of charity, but for the sake of art.

Jeff Sonhouse

Born New York City, New York, 1968

Exhibit A: Cardinal Francis Arinze, 2005

Oil and mixed media on wooden panel

Cardinal Arinze from Nigeria is one of the highest-ranking black leaders in the Catholic Church, an advisor to Pope John Paul II, and a former candidate for pope in 2005. Like numerous artists featured in 30 Americans, Sonhouse draws on art historical precedents—here representations of Innocent X by Francis Bacon from 1953 and Diego Velazquez in the 1650s.

He includes satirical elements, like the harlequin-patterned face mask that evokes the role of a jester. He seems to suggest that the cardinal was the Church's token black candidate for the role of the pope.

[](https://www.google.com/url?sa=i&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=images&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=0ahUKEwi-jOzc68jOAhVB5mMKHX5QBnIQjRwIBw&url=https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Study_after_Vel%C3%A1zquez's_Portrait_of_Pope_Innocent_X&psig=AFQjCNGz4JSvLU9WMsKloBkYkPGtMTyKIA&ust=1471536751491367)

Francis Bacon (Irish-British, 1909–1992)

Study after Velazquez’s Portrait of Pope

Innocent X, 1953

Collection of the Des Moines Art Center,

Des Moines, Iowa



Diego Velazquez (Spanish, 1599–1660)

*Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, circa 1650

Collection of Galleria Doria Pamphilj, Rome

Henry Taylor

Born Oxnard, California, 1958

The Long Jump by Carl Lewis, 2010

Acrylic on canvas

Henry Taylor situates the legendary track-and-field hero Carl Lewis in the tenuous balance between success and failure. The Olympic gold-medalist jumps toward viewers and away from the looming presence of prison guard towers and a high wall. Lewis propels himself through the realm of white picket fences and hopscotch boards and into history. Taylor juxtaposes the outcomes of poverty and crime with physical prowess and athleticism.

Hank Willis Thomas

Born Plainfield, New Jersey, 1976

Branded Head, 2003

Digital C-print

Edition artist’s proof

In his series B®ANDED, Hank Willis Thomas critiques consumer culture and the frequent exploitation of athletes to sell material goods, particularly African American men. Thomas has said about B®ANDED, “I believe that … advertising’s success rests on its ability to reinforce generalizations about race, gender, and ethnicity, which can be sometimes true, and sometimes horrifying, but which at a core level are a reflection of the way a culture views itself or its aspirations.”

In Branded Head a cropped image is manipulated to give the appearance of a shorn, branded man’s head. Combined with Thomas’s removal of the advertisement’s text, the resulting image creates an unexpected connection. By excluding distinguishing features, the head becomes an object and the embroidered Nike “swoosh” takes form as a scar from a branding iron. The logo no longer represents athleticism and achievement, but instead recalls the practice of physically branding slaves. In this work, Thomas demonstrates how marketing content is affected by context. The celebratory tone of a typical Nike advertisement is placed in tenuous and murky territory.

For Further Consideration

How are stereotypes used to sell products?

Hank Willis Thomas

Born Plainfield, New Jersey, 1976

Who Can Say No to a Gorgeous Brunette? from the Unbranded series, 1970/2007

Digital C-print

Edition 1 of 5

Hank Willis Thomas

Born Plainfield, New Jersey, 1976

Power is Nothing Without Control from the Unbranded series, 1994/2008

Digital C-print

Edition 1 of 5

Mickalene Thomas

Born Camden, New Jersey, 1971

Baby I Am Ready Now, 2007

Acrylic, rhinestone, and enamel on wooden panel

Inspired by the social awareness and feminist liberation of the 1970s, Mickalene Thomas creates images of women who are empowered, emotive, and resolved. They seem to know what they want and are unafraid to acknowledge it.

Thomas emphasizes this self-assuredness through sparkles, bold colors and patterns. As Thomas noted, “I’ve always been interested in dressing up and beautifying and what that meant to black women.” In her portraits, she positions sensuality and seductiveness as positive attributes: tools of strength and power.

Kara Walker

Born Stockton, California, 1969

Camptown Ladies, 1998

Paper

Kara Walker explores ideas of race and the ongoing psychological trauma of slavery. Through paper-cutting inspired by traditional nineteenth-century Victorian silhouettes, Walker reimagines scenes from the American South, infusing fact with nightmarish fictions.

The title Camptown Ladies refers to the 1850 song written by Stephen Foster and popularized by blackface minstrels who played on stereotypes for comedic effect. Silhouetted forms reduce characters to emblematic profiles the same way stereotypes profile a person through degrading and racist assumptions. The seeming simplicity of Walker’s imagery often forces viewers to confront the painful history of slavery. Her narrative also indicates ongoing racial tensions in America—a point driven home by the ironic “The End” at the installation’s conclusion.

Carrie Mae Weems

Born Portland, Oregon, 1953

You Became a Scientific Profile/

An Anthropological Debate/A Negroid Type/ & A Photographic Subjectfrom the series From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried,

1995–96

Four monochromatic C-prints prints with

sand-blasted text on glass in artist-made frames

Each from an edition 2 of 10

Carrie Mae Weems uses portraits of enslaved black people taken by Joseph T. Zealy, a white photographer working in the 1850s, into her work. The people depicted have been stripped of their clothing and identities. Dehumanizing images like these were used for scientific arguments supporting racial hierarchies.

Weems explores racial stereotypes and oppression by overlaying her own text and giving voice to the individuals portrayed. In doing so she reveals the reality of the images, which were used to create and justify oppression based on pseudo-scientific beliefs about race and black bodies.

Carrie Mae Weems

Born Portland, Oregon, 1953

You Became Mammie, Mama, Mother, & Then, Yes, Confident-Ha/Descending the Throne from the series From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried, 1995–96

Two monochromatic C-prints with sandblasted text on glass

Each from an edition 6 of 10

As with her other work in 30 Americans, Carrie Mae Weems transforms historic photographs to explore the history and legacy of slavery. In this work, Weems focuses on the various roles assigned to African American women in American society.

Kehinde Wiley

Born Los Angeles, California, 1977

Equestrian Portrait of the Count Duke Olivares, 2005

Oil on canvas

Kehinde Wiley references Western European portraiture in what he calls “urban-meets-classical” style. He places subjects from the streets of Harlem, Brooklyn, and other urban locales into historical poses or settings typically associated with portrayals of wealthy, powerful, aristocratic white men. Equestrian Portrait of the Count Duke Olivares owes its composition and title to a painting of the same name by Diego Velázquez (1599–1660). The lush details, such as the Rococo-style wallpaper, emphasize the relationship between past and present. By presenting his contemporary subjects in these formats, Wiley purposefully lays claim to a style of portraiture that was historically reserved

for elites.



Diego Velázquez (Spanish, 1599–1660)

Equestrian Portrait of the Count-Duke of Olivares, 1634

Collection of Museo del Prado, Madrid

Kehinde Wiley

Born Los Angeles, California, 1977

Sleep, 2008

Oil on canvas

Kehinde Wiley questions the representation of black males in art. He frequently replaces the heroes, commanders, and kings depicted in historical European paintings with images of young black men. He reinterprets Sleep (circa 1771) by Jean Bernard Restout.

Wiley enlarges the original to monumental scale. He replaces the rock, posies, and garland upon which Restout’s winded protagonist rests with a bed or perhaps an altar. The subject of Wiley’s Sleep is elevated to Christ-like status by the draping of the cloth across his torso.



Jean Bernard Restout (French, 1732–1797)

Sleep, circa 1771

Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art

Purvis Young

Born Miami, Florida, 1943

Died Miami, Florida, 2010

Untitled, 1985–99

Paint on wooden panel

Purvis Young looked to his life experiences in Overtown, a historically African American and underprivileged community on the fringes of Miami for his primary subject matter. During the 1960s, construction of an interstate highway over Overtown drove out residents and businesses. Young, however, stayed and chose the largely vacant Goodbread Alley as his home. After nearly forty years of artistic experimentation, Young developed a provocative, blunt painting style.

He expressed his feelings of disappointment and rage about the social inequities in Overtown, “I paint what I sees … I paint the problems of my world.” Compelled by experience and emotions, he translated the complicated world around him into the broad strokes of his paintings, perhaps as a method for coping with the challenges and realities of injustice.

I address race in my work ‘cause day-to-day in our country it addresses me.

—William Pope.L

Critics would say, “your work is about identity,” and that would seemingly be enough to say. I was always uncomfortable with that kind of easy digesting of the work, as if artists of color are simply expressing who they are, as if one had unfettered access to who one is, and one could just say it…

—Glenn Ligon

I am concerned with what the viewer sees and discovers when they engage with my work. My work should operate as a mirror. The viewer should be able to realize some aspect of themselves in front of my work.

—Leonardo Drew

My art has a great deal to do with the breadth of the humanity of African Americans, who are usually stereotyped, narrowly defined, and often viewed as a social problem. It’s an attempt to reposition and reimagine the possibility of women and the possibility of people of color, and to that extent it has to do with what I always call unrequited love.

—Carrie Mae Weems

The Conversations

A film by Jennifer Rubell

Run time 114 minutes, continuous loop

For Further Consideration

When Nick Cave wears his sound suits, he willingly surrenders his identity. Why is consent so important when it comes to our identity?

For Further Consideration

Have you ever co-opted someone else’s culture? How and why?

For Further Consideration

How do the stereotypes within your community affect your day-to-day life? How do they affect others in your community?