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20/20

*The Studio Museum of Harlem
and the Carnegie Museum of Art*

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Exhibition Review

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About the Author

Rebecca L. Giordano is a graduate student in the History of Art and Architecture Department at the University of Pittsburgh, specializing on race, gender, and transnational exchange in the Americas in the twentieth century. She has written on feminist economics, politics of belonging, and sexual violence in contemporary performance and visual art by women. Giordano is deeply committed to public facing art history and has worked for five years as a museum educator at the Blanton Museum of Art and the Warfield Center for African and African American Studies. She is a co-founder of the anti-racist feminist curatorial collective, INGZ.

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The curators of *20/20*, a collaborative exhibition between the Carnegie Museum of Art (CMoA) and the Studio Museum of Harlem, on view at the CMoA, framed the exhibition as an opportunity “to bring the very different collections into conversation.” The introductory wall text outside the exhibition described the Studio Museum’s catalytic role in the championing of modern and contemporary work of artists of African descent since 1968 and the CMoA’s more than 120 years of showing contemporary art. The adjoining wall featured sparsely collaged

reproductions of works from the exhibition, including the torso of a black female figure flashing a subtle peace sign, by renowned painter Kerry James Marshall, and Michelle Obama’s focused gaze cropped from a photograph by Collier Schorr. Though neither the words “black” nor “race” appeared, the museum’s positioning of the exhibition was clear. Here—finally—at the CMoA, blackness was on view.

Less clear was how this conversation between institutions helped visitors (or the institutions themselves) understand “a tumultuous and deeply divided moment in our nation’s history,” as the wall text suggested, or *how* race has shaped the institutions and their collections differently. Though officially presented as a dialogue about collections, most of the six themes that organized the exhibition— “A More Perfect Union,” “Working Thought,” “American Landscape,” “Documenting Black Life,” “Shrine for the Spirit,” and “Forms of Resistance”—referenced U.S. political history and dimensions of civil society more than collections or art institutions. It was only in the final section, titled “Forms of Resistance,” that exclusion and misrepresentation in the art world were addressed through feminist touchstones like *Free, White, and 21* (1980), Howardena Pindell’s deadpan testimonial video done in whiteface, and documentation of Lorraine O’Grady’s 1981 powerhouse performances as Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire. The suite of photographs shows O’Grady crashing art events bedecked in a dress entirely made of white gloves and carrying a white cat o’ nine tails, a whip associated with slavery, linking the elite art world to antebellum society, finery, and violence. The same section included Meleko Mokgosi’s *Walls of Casbah* (2010–2012), appropriated, densely annotated wall texts screen-printed on linen panels. These offered sharp retorts directly to the persistently patronizing treatment of black art.

One of *20/20*’s strengths was its compelling and beautiful layout. The formal connections between individual works demonstrated thoughtful curatorial vision—in this case, an emphatically collaborative one. Amanda Hunt and Eric Crosby seized the rhythmic powers of the chosen works and offered visitors rich visual paths through the exhibition. Abstract works that rely on repetition, like Mark Bradford’s many rough-edged paper rolls, *Slapping the Daily Prophet* (2016), or Kori Newkirk’s teal and black hair-bead strands, *Solon 6:12* (2000), didn’t sink into their patterns but riffed on each other and on other imaginative uses of everyday materials nearby. Abigail DeVille’s carnivalesque assemblage *Harlem World* (2011), in which the artist repurposed trash collected in Harlem into layered, kaleidoscopic planes, followed and enriched Bradford’s similarly scavenged abstraction, both hovering somewhere between painting and sculpture.



Figure 1

Installation view of *20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art*. Photo: Bryan Conley." Featuring Abigail DeVille *Harlem World* (2011) and Kori Newkirk *Solon 6:12* (2000).

Crosby and Hunt's selection of works also highlighted the ability of minimalism, conceptualism, and abstraction to respond to political, cerebral, and spiritual themes. Quentin Morris's enormous monochromatic circular painting, *Untitled [January–February 1994]* (1994), was given space to be sublime. Somehow it both absorbed light and shimmered, like a black sun reflecting on water. Edgar Arceneaux's slideshow, *Blocking Out the Sun* (2004), in which he repeats the youthful gesture of trying to blot out the sun by pinching one's fingers, humorously nods to catastrophic climate change and to the ordinary metaphysics of seeing. Who doesn't wish for the power to sway the universe, even minorly, in times like these?

20/20 was not a show about, or of, black art. One might describe it as an exhibition of largely postwar art by black artists that acknowledged—but did not coalesce into—a history of blackness in the United States. Artists' races were not uniformly identified in the wall labels and several white artists were included. The title *20/20* referred to the number of artists chosen from each institution; given that they were only forty, why include white artists at all?

Perhaps the idea was modeling integration while centering blackness. The exhibition emphasized formal and thematic connections between artworks across time and race rather than historicized artistic production or exchange. But what does Zoe Strauss's *Half House* (2008) offer that isn't imaged more urgently for Pittsburghers by LaToya Ruby Frazier's photograph of a destroyed medical facility twelve miles from the CMoA (*Doctor's Office*, 2011)? Does a show in Pittsburgh that features mostly black artists *need* an Andy Warhol/Jean-Michel Basquiat collaboration? Could that space have been used to acquaint visitors with a lesser-known black artist with local ties?



Figure 2

"Installation view of *20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art*. Photo: Bryan Conley." Featuring Quentin Morris, *Untitled [January–February 1994]* (1994).

With the exception of three, the artists in *20/20* were U.S.-born. Jamaican-born Nari Ward's contribution—a sculpture of a baseball bat painted white, sugar-soaked, and covered in cotton—did the heavy work of reminding viewers that the horrors and aftermath of slavery in the United States comprise but one node in the transatlantic slave trade's pervasive, violent grip on the Atlantic. The piece demonstrated the necessity of including immigrant voices and positioning U.S. history—and art—within global flows.

Which begs another question: Why are the forty artists *only* black and white? In the *20/20 Gallery Guide*, Hunt writes "I think our show was prompted by a shared urgency to describe what our country looks like to us today, and what it is shaping up to be in the not-so-distant future." If so, where are Native, Latinx, Asian, and Arab artists (including the African-descended artists who share these identities)? This is not to say that blackness should not be central but to press the relation between the exhibition's framing and roster of artists on view.

20/20 began with *Abe Lincoln's First Book* (1944)—a phenomenal nocturne of young Lincoln reaching for a book in a dark cabin lit by a single candle, painted by the influential modern painter Horace Pippin. The U.S. flag is featured prominently in other works in the room, and the wall text argues that they "reflect the very foundation of our American democracy."



Figure 3

Horace Pippin, "Abe Lincoln's First Book," 1944, oil on canvas, Collection of the Carnegie Museum of Art, Gift of Sara M. Winokur and James L. Winokur.

Leading with a painting of a white president (albeit by a black artist) and extolling U.S. patriotism contradicts the commonsense understanding that part of the "shared urgency" surrounding *20/20* was ushered in by widespread black-led opposition to state violence in the form of police brutality. Black Lives Matter has wrought an overdue awareness of the histories of quotidian and juridical antiblackness in the United States, including in museums. Borrowing a phrase from the U.S. Constitution to title the opening section, "A More Perfect Union," risked papering over the state's role and vested interest in perpetuating racism and our fractured civil society.

The histories of large public museums are inscribed in a consistent neglect of black artists and the once-legal exclusion of and routine disinterest in the black communities, which they are, in fact, charged to serve. No exhibition that showcases black art could avoid being freighted with expectations of righting this history. But if an exhibition's (unstated) objective is to remedy or at least avoid contributing to a more than hundred-year history of institutional racism, it must do justice to the complexity and contradictions within the myriad themes, affects, and formal approaches in artwork by black people. In many of these ways *20/20* succeeded. However, such efforts towards cultural reparations would have been bolstered by direct acknowledgment of racism in the institutional history in and beyond the collections. After all, reconciliation begins not with celebration but with public discussions of difficult truths.

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