

Perspective on the Past:

Selections from the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art

Curated by Susanna Gold

January 11 – March 8, 2024

Perspective on the Past brings together over 20 works by 14 internationally recognized artists of African descent that address significant moments and concepts in the American past. Artists engage the past not only as it has appeared in the written historical record, but also as it has been experienced, through both personal and cultural memories that extend back to recent and distant generations. Focusing on figures and events from the national, private, and ancestral pasts, the works in this exhibition re-consider familiar accounts in American history and prioritize lesser-known narratives, expanding the limits of conventional perspectives on the past.

All selections in *Perspective on the Past* are drawn from the Petrucci Family Foundation (PFF) Collection of African American Art, a non-profit educational organization based in New Jersey. This collection consists of over 500 stellar works of art from the late 19th century to the present with an emphasis on contemporary artists. By visually representing a cross-section of themes that speak not only to the African American community but also to the broader American community, the PFF Collection enacts its mission to bring focus to the full range of African American visual creativity and its essential place in the history and discourse of American art.



Jacob Lawrence, *Confrontation at the Bridge*, 1975, screenprint, 19.5" x 26"

Jacob Lawrence (1917-2000)
Confrontation at the Bridge, 1975
screenprint, 19.5" x 26"



In this print created to celebrate the nation's Bicentennial, Jacob Lawrence highlights an important event in the civil rights movement. On a 54-mile march from Selma to Montgomery, AL, in 1965, over 600 unarmed protesters were met with violence by local law enforcement on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, an event which has become known as "Bloody Sunday." The protesters did not give up after this setback but continued to fight for racial equality, and after a series of attempts, finally made it to their destination. The Edmund Pettus Bridge, which Lawrence features so prominently in his composition, has become a powerful symbol of the successes of non-violent protests in the civil rights era.

Allan Edmonds
200 Years, 2008
lithograph, 26" x 18"



This print was made to recognize both the election of Barack Obama as the nation's first Black president, and the 200th anniversary of the act of Congress that prohibited the importation of slaves to the U.S. Martin Luther King Jr. appears in this print to remind us that his civil rights leadership toward the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibited racial discrimination in voting, was an important step toward Obama's election. The names of other heroes, writers, elected leaders, and others who came before Obama represent the efforts of the many people who helped achieve these "Hopes and Dreams."

Sonya Clark
Afro Abe, 2010
\$5 bill and peacock feathers
4" x 6"



This is one of 44 versions of a \$5 bill that Sonya Clark transformed by adding an afro hairstyle to the portrait of Abraham Lincoln as a way to honor Barack Obama, the 44th president of the United States. The afro connects the office of the president, which had always been occupied by a white man, to a new history ushered in by Obama, the first Black president. Using currency as her canvas, Clark reminds us that the wealth of the nation during Lincoln's time in office was directly tied to the forced labor of enslaved people, though they did not receive the benefits of this wealth. The afro is made with peacock feathers in an unfading green – the color of money – reminding us that this economic balance persists in America today.

June Edmonds
Four Years in the White House Flag, 2019-2021
acrylic on linen, 96" x 60"



Each painting in June Edmonds' *Flag* series addresses the story of an under-recognized African American person, event, or chapter in American history. This painting refers to Elizabeth Keckley, a former enslaved woman who purchased her own freedom and became a successful dressmaker and businesswoman. Keckley was also the seamstress and good friend of Mary Todd Lincoln, wife of President Abraham Lincoln. Keckley described her experiences with this political family in her autobiography subtitled, *Thirty years a slave and four years in the White House*. Edmonds draws from Keckley's book to title her painting of an American flag depicted with black and brown skin tones, which more inclusively describes the people it represents.

Kara Walker
No World, 2010
From *An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters*
etching with aquatint
30.25" x 39.5"



This print is from a portfolio of six works in which Kara Walker describes the traumas of the transatlantic slave trade, and the legacy of racial injustices that resulted from it. Playing on the designation of colonial America as the “New World,” Walker plays with this wording in her title, acknowledging the fate of enslaved African people who were brought to this country.

Kara Walker
The Emancipation Approximation
(Scene 18), 1999-2000
screenprint, 44" x 34"



Kara Walker uses the Victorian craft of black paper cutouts with minimal visual language and simplified designs to offer a series of screenprints that tell an alternative story of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, which formally abolished slavery in the U.S. In this scene from Walker’s narrative, the figure of a formerly enslaved Black woman is supporting the figure of an aristocratic white woman, suggesting that although slavery might have officially ended with the Emancipation Proclamation, the imbalance of power between Black and white Americans continues to exist.

Calvin Burnett (1921-2007)
Sojourner Truth: I'll Keep You Scratchin', 1964
lithograph, 29" x 20.5"



With this print, Calvin Burnett celebrates Sojourner Truth, originally named Isabella Baumfree, an important figure in the fight for abolition and women’s rights. Baumfree was born into slavery and was sold away from her family to three different owners when she was a child. Later, as an adult, one of her own children was taken from her and sold off. After New York abolished slavery in 1827 and she became free, Baumfree began touring the country speaking out against slavery, and in 1843, took the name “Sojourner Truth” to reflect her goals. When a white man told her, “Old woman, do you think that your talk about slavery does any good? Why, I don't care any more for your talk than I do for the bite of a flea.” “Perhaps not, but the Lord willing, I'll keep you scratching,” she replied.

Walter Edmonds (1938-2011)
A Prophet Comes, 1974-75
oil on board, 42" x 32"



In the 1970s, Walter Edmonds was commissioned to paint a series of large-scale murals in the Church of the Advocate in North Philadelphia with his partner, Richard Watson. The minister gave each artist several Bible verses, which they were to re-interpret in the cultural context of the African American experience. In this painting, Edmonds portrays an Old Testament prophet as Frederick Douglass, a leader in the abolitionist movement, beckoning forth the enslaved population toward independent American citizenship. Edmonds’ and Watson’s murals remain on view in the Church of the Advocate at 16th and Diamond Streets.

Faith Ringgold
Declaration of Freedom and Independence portfolio, 2009
Series of six screenprints, 15" x 22.5" each

Faith Ringgold's portfolio of prints juxtaposes idealized narratives about the founding and early growth of the United States with parallel applications to significant moments in African American experience. Through this technique of comparison, Ringgold exposes how ideals upheld as "American" often conflicted with the early government's actions:



All Men Are Created Equal points out that the first enslaved people brought from Africa were not considered to be men and were not treated as equals.



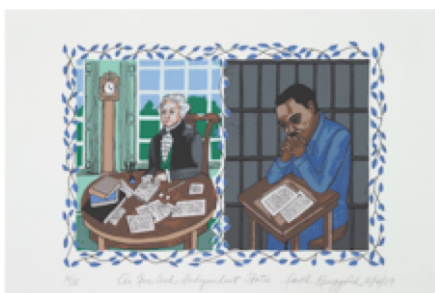
And Women? uses the images and words of Sojourner Truth and Abigail Adams, both strong female leaders left out of the historical conversation of the period, that women, like people of African descent, were not considered equal to men.



Taxes On Us Without Our Consent reminds us that African Americans were subject to American law without freedom to vote without racial discrimination, until the Voting Rights Act of 1965.



We Have Appealed To Their Native Justice and Magnanimity illustrates the failures of political reason in the journey toward independence, both for the colonies and for enslaved people, which would eventually lead to war.



As Free and Independent States parallels Thomas Jefferson's writing of the Declaration of Independence as a protest of British control, to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," an important document in the civil rights movement, defending the right for non-violent protest against racial injustice.

Syd Carpenter
Albert and Elbert Howard, 2014
clay and steel, 49" x 42" x 27"



Syd Carpenter's sculpted *Farm Portraits* delve deeply into family, referencing specific parcels of land owned and worked by Black farmers across the American South. By incorporating highly personalized imagery relevant to individual people and their experiences, these portraits focus on the intimate relationships to the land that these families have developed and maintained for generations. This sculpture is a portrait of Albert and Elbert Howard, twin farmers in Monticello, GA. The wheels represent the labor of the brothers themselves, as well as their farm, which is on a rutted road. Despite the difficulty of sustaining their heritage as farmers, together they are able to move forward on the land.

Debra Priestly
mattoon 4, 2001
mixed media, 19.75" x 25.25"



Debra Priestly explores personal history and memories of the past in her work. *mattoon 4* serves as a "memory map" for Priestly, with old photos from her family archives juxtaposed with aqua blue canning jars prized by her grandmother, arranged in rows reminiscent of her neat, colorful, and well-stocked pantry. For Priestly, the canning jar was an important origin for family stories: "What's in the jar?", "Do you have the recipe?", "Who made it?", "Where do they live?", "How does one travel from here to there?", or "How is that person related to me"? When Priestly's grandmother opened a canning jar for a family supper, she opened a portal, setting up an incredible journey into her family's history. Priestly hopes her work will inspire viewers to consider their own "memory maps."

Richard J. Watson
Grandfather's Watch, 2004
mixed media collage and acrylic,
36" x 24"



The poem in this work was written by Richard Watson, and describes his grandfather's watch, which never seemed to have the correct time, nor did it shine as an authentic gold timepiece. But it serves as a record-keeper of sorts for both of his grandparents' memories and feelings about unpleasant experiences that they had to endure in their past. The assembling of texts, images, and found objects that relate to these memories might not be easily interpreted, but remain private and personal, like memories often are.

Delita Martin
Say Our Names, 2020
limited edition print, 36" x 24"



Delita Martin created this limited edition print in the aftermath of the tragic killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others at the hands of white police officers in the summer of 2020, which were critical events in the acceleration of the Black Lives Matter movement. This print incorporates gelatin and woodblock printing, drawing, painting, and hand-stitched elements. Stitching is a signature component of Martin's work originating from childhood visits with her grandmother, who was a quilt maker. Her grandmother taught her "tacking," a light loop stitch, while she talked about her own life story. It was a powerful experience for Martin and one she describes as "stitching together my history."

Martina Johnson-Allen
Sacred Space V, VIII, X, XIV,
2005-12
mixed media, 9" x 8" x 3" each



Martina Johnson-Allen has always had an interest in the art of Africa, as well as other visual traditions. Connections to African cultural history abound in her work, though they are not always intentional, but rather, intuitive or spiritual. Her curved forms, for example, articulate movement, particularly the positive directions of the heart, mind and soul. But they also suggest feathers, a symbol of status and wealth in African culture. By finding ancestral connections to African culture and visual traditions, Johnson-Allen creates abstract work that combines elements of the traditional with her own improvisations and interpretations.

Tawny Chatmon
Deeply Embedded / Thoroughly Rooted, 2016
photographic montage, 20" x 16"



Tawny Chatmon's *Deeply Embedded* series is a response to the harmful policies in schools and workplaces that deem Black hairstyles unkempt and unprofessional. Recognizing that Black hair has a history that is rooted in Africa and spans centuries, Chatmon superimposes historic photographs of African women onto the hairstyles of her own contemporary portrait subject. Drawing from the UK's National Archives project titled "Africa Through A Lens" for imagery of past African ancestors, Chatmon celebrates the beauty and deeply embedded connection between African and African American hairstyles and culture.

Curator Statement:

Susanna Gold has been active as an independent curator, scholar, and educator in the Philadelphia area for over 20 years. She served on the Art History faculty at Temple University's Tyler School of Art for nearly a decade and has also taught at the University of Pennsylvania, where she earned her Ph.D. She has curated academic and community-based exhibitions for institutions such as Woodmere Art Museum, InLiquid, Drexel University's Leonard Pearlstein Gallery, and Temple University's Tyler School of Art, and has curated several contemporary exhibitions at Unique Photo, Main Line Art Center, NoBA Artspace, and Massey Klein Gallery in New York. She has published widely and has presented papers and delivered lectures at professional conferences and museums internationally, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Barnes Foundation, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

