



Above: "Waiting."

THE PETRUCCI FAMILY
FOUNDATION OF AFRICAN
AMERICAN ART

Right: "Garden of Music."

MICHAEL ROSENFELD
GALLERY LLC, NEW YORK, N.Y.
WADSWORTH ATHENEUM
MUSEUM OF ART

On display

130 artworks at the Atheneum tell the truth about the black American experience. Here are 8 of them.

BY SUSAN DUNNE

Afrocosmologies," a new exhibit at Wadsworth Atheneum, features 130 artworks by African Americans who seek to present themselves, their world and their histories in their own way, liberated from interpretations foisted upon them by non-blacks throughout the centuries.

The exhibit, which fills galleries on the second and third floors of the Hartford museum, is a dazzling array of works created from 1885 to the present day. A few reflect the sense of anger and sorrow that one would expect considering African Americans' history of oppression. But most of the works are more celebratory, with artists glorying in their blackness and their freedom to tell the truth as they see it.

The exhibit's curator, Frank Mitchell, wants audiences to embrace the word afrocosmology "as an orientation that embraces the African diaspora as a way of seeing and understanding." Mitchell is director of the Amistad Center for Art & Culture.

Afrocosmology is defined another way by Berrisford Boothe, curator of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art, which loaned the Atheneum 68 artworks in the show.

"We wanted to come up with a word to talk about a particular kind of new modernism," Boothe says. "How do we speak about ourselves when it's only been 100 years or so that we've been allowed to?"

Boothe even hesitates to label the work as African American art.

"You've never seen a box of gay crayons or black crayons or female crayons," he says. "This is American art. All these stories by people who live, were born, were raised, died in America."

Twenty-two of the artworks are a series of 1977 screenprints by Jacob Lawrence titled "The Legend of John Brown." Brown was an abolitionist who

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Hartford Stage show gets real about parenting

'Cry It Out' a comedic drama about 'the fourth trimester'

BY CHRISTOPHER ARNOTT

The parenting comedic drama "Cry It Out," which Hartford Stage has embraced as the second show of its 2019-20 season, has touched a nerve nationwide.

"This is something we have to talk about: how to support working parents in America," said the show's director, Rachel Alderman, when she brought the play to the attention of a triumvirate of artistic decision-makers at the theater.

It wasn't hard to convince them. Hartford Stage artistic director Melia Bensussen, associate artistic director Elizabeth Williamson and outgoing artistic director Darko Tresnjak approved of Molly Smith Metzler's play, which premiered in 2017 at the Actor's Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival.

The play concerns what has become known as "the fourth trimester," the first few months of a baby's life when it is still adjusting to life outside the womb.

Metzler's script has been praised for giving a realistic voice to a fraught period of parenting that is too often relegated to wacky comedies about the chaos of sleepless couples changing diapers while trying to eat or work.

"Cry It Out" touches on the deeper issues of parenting, including the waves of disorienting emotions and unexpected responsibilities that new parents can feel. Its characters — three women and a man — have very different backgrounds but bond over the

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Rachel Spencer Hewitt as Jessie, left, and Evelyn Spahr as Lina, perform in "Cry It Out" at Hartford Stage.

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ARTS

Art

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led a siege on Harpers Ferry and was hanged for his troubles.

Let's wander through "Afrocosmologies" and peer into the mind of the artists.

'Garden of Music'

Bob Thompson's 1960 oil depicts naked people of all skin colors listening to music in a park. The work hangs next to a 1864 Robert Scott Duncanson oil, "Recollections of Italy," to contrast Duncanson's traditional landscape with Thompson's abstract expressionist-influenced style.

"They were both wrestling with the sublime at times in American history that nothing sublime is happening to people of African descent," says Boothe, referencing the backlash during the Civil War and Civil Rights movement. For the artists, landscape was "a point of bonding, and also a point of communion."

'Sunday Promenade'

Hale Woodruff's 1935 linocut shows three ladies in their Sunday best walking away from a church as a young, stylish couple walks toward it.

"The ritual of Sunday church reinforced the community," Mitchell says. "It was also a refuge that allowed for organizing. It also allowed leaders to arise, like Martin Luther King. The sense of community naturally encouraged spiritual leaders to have authority outside the church."

The artwork hangs next to a display of books about King and by Coretta Scott King and Howard Thurman. Another Woodruff linocut, "African Head-dress," also is in the show.

'Band of Angels'

John Biggers' 1992-93 painting shows a group of barefoot African women draped in robes and toting items on their heads.

"Everything here is based on something specific, the turtles, the clothing, the boats, the birds," Boothe says. "There is a myth in Yoruba culture that thoughts are like birds. Birds and thoughts can go anywhere they want. But they have to land. Where the bird lands is where art is made."

The geometric patterns have a purpose, too.

"When you think of Africa, you don't think of geometry. You think it's primitive," he says.

'Spirit of the Cloth'

Ed Johnetta Miller's asymmetrical quilt made in 1993 uses multicolored patches and bits of African cloth to make an abstract



Arcmanoro Niles' 2016 oil on canvas "When We Were Young" is part of "Afrocosmologies: American Reflections."

THE PETRUCCI FAMILY FOUNDATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

pattern. The nation's vibrant tradition of African American female quilters is a reflection of blacks' historical tendency of "making the most with the least. It's a function of how clever we are at doing with what we have," Mitchell says.

Miller, who lives in Hartford, will do a gallery talk on Nov. 21 at noon. On Jan. 20, the last day of the exhibit, she will lead an all-ages quilting activity at the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

'Namesake'

Kenturah Davis' 2015 self-portrait was made using an ink stippling technique. Davis created an image of herself on rice paper by manipulating the text of the 13th amendment, the 1865 addition to the Constitution that ended slavery.

"An actual element of language is being reclaimed by an artist to speak of herself the way the general culture can't," Mitchell says. "She's deconstructing the language and reconstructing it... writing herself into the narrative."

Davis is a 2019 studio fellow at NXTHVN, the artist incubator set up by artist Titus Kaphar in New Haven.



WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

"Baptist."

'Waiting'

Carl Joe Williams' 2016 mixed-media work showing a young man standing and a mother, babe in arms, sitting at a bus stop. Halos circle all three of their heads. A cell phone illuminates the man's face. Williams' painting surface is a mattress.

Williams is deconstructing a widely held belief, Boothe says.

"When you talk about neighborhoods of color, it's all pejorative, old dirty mattresses. On this old dirty mattress, he's basically doing neo-Cubism."

Williams will participate in an artists' panel on Nov. 6 at 6 p.m. with Radcliffe Bailey and Shinique Smith, moderated by Kimberly Drew.

'Baptist'

In Kerry James Marshall's 1992 mixed media, a black man floats in the ocean between maps of Africa and the Americas, evoking the legacy of the Middle Passage, the ocean route during the slave trade by which many kidnapped Africans died. The words "that old time religion is good enough for me" wind



ESTATE OF HALE WOODRUFF/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY. THE AMISTAD CENTER FOR ART & CULTURE

"Sunday Promenade"

around the man's submerged feet.

Marshall "is wrestling with the African diaspora, with water, what that meant for identity," said Mitchell. Old and new gods are referenced by a series of numbered orbs, a Red Cross flag and the artwork itself, which drapes like a flag, symbolic of Haitian religion.

AFROCOSMOLOGIES: AMERICAN REFLECTIONS is at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main St. in Hartford, until Jan. 20. thewadsworth.org

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WORD WATCH

Pity the whistleblower, with a long difficult struggle toward legitimacy

BY ROB KYFF
Special to The Courant

Pity the poor word "whistleblower." Like the intrepid human it denotes, this term has endured a long, difficult struggle toward legitimacy and respectability.

Its parents, "blow" and "whistle," have been sounding the alarm since Shakespeare's time. Lady Macbeth fretted that the "sightless couriers of the air shall blow the horrid deed in every eye," while the clown in "The Winter's Tale" faulted indiscreet maids for choosing to "whistle off these secrets ... tittle-tattling before all our guests."

"Whistle" and "blower" have been used as a phrase for centuries, of course. The

earliest citation I could find of the pairing came in the Janesville (Wisc.) Gazette, which, in 1883, praised a policeman named McGinley for blowing his whistle to disperse a riot: "Ere the town clock had struck the midnight hour, all had returned to their homes. But the crowd of people were all willing to bet that McGinley was the champion whistle blower in America."

In subsequent decades, the term was applied regularly to the law enforcement officers and sports referees who alerted people to felonies and fouls. Perps and players, of course, didn't always appreciate these shrill alarmists - "Damn whistle blowers!" - so the phrase inevitably acquired a negative connotation.

"Whistle blower" spiked in both popu-

larity and reputation during the late 1960s and early 1970s when journalists started using it figuratively to describe brave souls who came forward to expose governmental and corporate malfeasance. Think Daniel Ellsberg, Deep Throat, Ralph Nader and Erin Brockovich, though, as far as we know, none of them actually blew whistles.

By the late 1960s, the two-word phrase was common enough to be joined with a hyphen. In 1969, for instance, the Lawton (Okla.) Constitution wrote of the GI who exposed the My Lai massacre, "This whistleblower has turned out to be a clever member of the anti-war faction." And in 1970, the New York Times described "how well the majority leader handled a whistleblower."

The term had become so popular by the late 1970s that publications and dictionaries began dropping the hyphen and rendering the term as one word. Since then, "whistleblower" has been used to describe anyone who alerts the public or those in authority to wrongdoing.

Whether you love whistleblowers or hate 'em, you're probably asking the same question I am: Whatever happened to McGinley?

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