

SECTION **accent**



Romare Bearden
‘The Lamp,’ 1984.
Lithograph, 29 1/4 by 21 in.



Bob Thompson
‘Garden of Music,’ 1960
78 1/4 by 143 1/2 in.

WADSWORTH: Sensational show

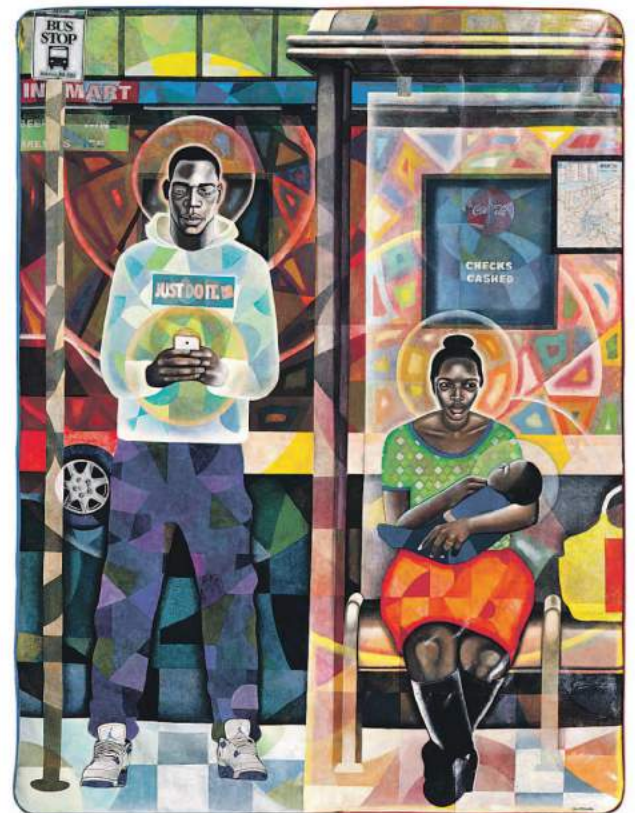
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Pindell’s dazzling work, “Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghost,” is one of more than 100 pieces in the electrifying “Afrocosmologies: American Reflections” at the Wadsworth Atheneum. This exhibit, of 20th- and 21st-century African-American art, is the most sensational show in Connecticut this year.

It combines radiant color with rhythm, irony with fury, jubilation with horror to create works that break new ground in figurative representation. These are works that scream and serenade, swirl and spin with an urgency absent in so much of contemporary art. You feel this exhibit more than view it. And sometimes you feel yourself within it, drifting along the sinuous currents of Barbara Bullock’s radiant “The Whirling Dance,” or scoured by the infinite thread-like gouges that make up Didier William’s staggering “La Croix a Samdi/Two Sons.”

MORE IS ALWAYS MORE in these works, which often take the most ordinary objects — cheap textiles, torn magazine covers, rusted coffee cans, plastic children’s toys — and transmute them into objects of reverence and rejoicing.

That is not to say that “Afrocosmologies” sidesteps or sugarcoats slavery, violence or racism. On the contrary, it’s the steadfast refusal to discount that anguish that makes so many of these pieces thunder with power. A collaboration of the Wadsworth, the Amistad Center for Art & Culture and the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art, these pieces are clear-eyed about violence. It’s a violence that is manifest in Charles E. Williams’ watercolor “Friday Night,” in which a black man is held down by white hands, his arms outstretched in Christ-like passion. It’s in the faces of African-American women, dressed in their Sunday best, as they lean on a wooden “Police Line” barrier in Dawoud Bey’s “Three Women at a Parade” (1973). Bey captures so much in the women’s faces: Fear, wariness, oppression and tenacity.



Carl Joe Williams
‘Waiting,’ 2016.
Mixed media on a mattress
79 1/2 by 59 1/2 by 7 1/2 in.

stamped letters. The letters bleed into one another to create form and shading. Try to read it and you find yourself dissolving back and forth between the image and the words until its refusal to be one or the other makes its own statement.

Seen in the face of the more chilling contemporary work, the early 20th-century pieces like Richard Mayhew’s ethereal landscape “Atascadero,” Henry O. Tanner’s evocative “Nicodemus” or Norman Lewis’ expressive, syncopated “Green Mist” seem that much bolder. The underrepresentation of these works, as with the galloping abstractions of Alma Thomas or Beauford Delaney, are among the scandals museums have lately been trying to redress.

Precisely how to do that — embrace underrepresented cultures without sending the redoubtable favorites to the cellar — has been the Gordian knot of the early 21st century. It’s as true in school curricula as it is in cultural institutions. “Afrocosmologies” doesn’t solve that problem, but it reminds us of what we’ve been missing. If art is — as it should be — the aesthetic incarnation of the human spirit, we have been missing the singular gorgeousness of an African-American aesthetic.

IN WORKS LIKE RADCLIFFE BAILEY’S “STORM” or Richard Yarde’s “Ringshout II,” artists gut those issues open like a fish, and rearrange the innards into a shrieking beauty. Take Yarde’s work, in which a background of mosaic blues holds two thick circular bands. One of the bands is filled with hands, mid-clap. The outer band features pairs of blood-red shoes, a reference to the “jumping” or “dancing” that slavers encouraged to “exercise” their chattel on the Middle Passage.

The dancing itself became a form of control, but also of release, a kind of code and

relationship with the land from which they’d been pilfered.

NO EXHIBIT THAT EXPLORES THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE would be complete without pioneers like Jacob Lawrence, whose “Migration of the Negro” series was among the first to employ modernism to explore the African-American experience. His screenprint, “The Legend of John Brown,” the first of a suite of 22, is a brutally beautiful crucifixion image, in which the blood of Jesus rivers down beneath the cross, creating roots of a tree. It’s the simple lines and clear, cool forms that make Lawrence such a giant in 20th century art. “When the subject is strong, simplicity is the only way to treat it,” he once said.

His contemporary Romare Bearden’s work, particularly the statuette “She-Ba” aligns closely to the exhibit’s ethos of the alchemical nature of African-American art. Bearden plunges backward to reference African royalty in his majestic “She-Ba” and gives glittering energy to the power of reading in the bold, yet tender lithograph, “The Lamp.”

“Afrocosmologies” explores the “new philosophical and cosmological systems” that enslaved Africans used “to preserve their innate human dignity.” That cosmology, like the art here, fused African, Caribbean and Christian blender, where color, rhythm and nature puree into colorful and kinetic sap.

Movement is central in these works, in the sheer kinetic brush strokes of Barbara Bullock’s “The Whirling Dance,” or the patterning and colors of Everald Brown, whose “Spiritualism” fuses primary colors with the throbbing ferocity of the natural world. Something animate drives these arrow-plaited rivers and gargantuan, pendulous fruits. They are all a part of African-American “syncretism,” or merging of

different religions, cultures or schools of thought.

Take an arresting work like Adama Delphine Fawundu’s “Blue Black Like in Argentina.” Here is a photographic image of a black woman, in tribal mask, standing in front of a peeling Renaissance-era plaster wall. She wears the lapis blue associated with the Virgin Mary. Her arms are outstretched as if in crucifixion. Her left hand rests on an open-mouthed lion ornament. Two large clots of cotton are stuffed into the mask’s eye sockets. Here it all is — the Euro-centric/Afro-regal bondage. It’s one of the more stunning examples of this syncretism in an exhibit full of them.

Christianity is everywhere evident in these works, whether explicit, as in the dynamic Hale Woodruff woodcut “Sunday Promenade,” or Allan Rohan Crite’s tender linocuts “The Childhood and the Passion of Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” or implicit, as in Armanoro Nile’s futuristic “When We Were Young.”

Carl Joe Williams works within a similar Christian iconography in “Waiting.” Instead of a canvas, he paints a brilliant stained glass window of three figures waiting for a bus, painted on an old mattress. A young man stands in a “Just Do It” hoodie, holding a cell phone as if it is a chalice. His pants are patterns of violet and cobalt triangles and his head is enshrouded in a halo. Next adjacent sits a woman in vivid green shirt and Day-Glo orange skirt, nursing a child swathed in lapis lazuli blue. The female figure too, is enshrouded with a spinning wheel-like halo. This is a modern Flight into Egypt, the figures wary but poised, in full possession of their space. What these black figures are waiting for is, of course, far more than a bus.

With “Afrocosmologies,” their destination has become that much closer.

Museums catch up culturally with art

Wadsworth Atheneum has sensational exhibit of African-American works

BY TRACEY O’SHAUGHNESSY
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

The sea enfolds the woman’s lacerated body. She is drowning or floating, or swimming, or perhaps she is dead already. Long splinters of azure and periwinkle blue lacerate her flesh. Her arms stretch out in surrender or supplication. Whether the sea will swallow or support this ghostly female, her peachy flesh already branded with dozens of disembodied eyes, is part of this work’s eerie magnetism.

What is clear, in Howardena Pindell’s enormous, searing work, is that this is a woman stretched beyond continents and consciousness, steeping in the middle of a gooey blue thatch of ocean. She is of no place and everywhere, her past fading but still within reach, vulnerable and yet stitched together, like the canvas itself, by echoes of a past that grows more distant with each roll of a wave.



Ed Johnetta Miller
‘Spirit of the Cloth,’ 1993.
Cotton, 63 by 74 in.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: “Afrocosmologies: American Reflections”
WHERE: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main St., Hartford
WHEN: through Jan. 20
HOW: thewadsworth.org or 860-278-2670

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