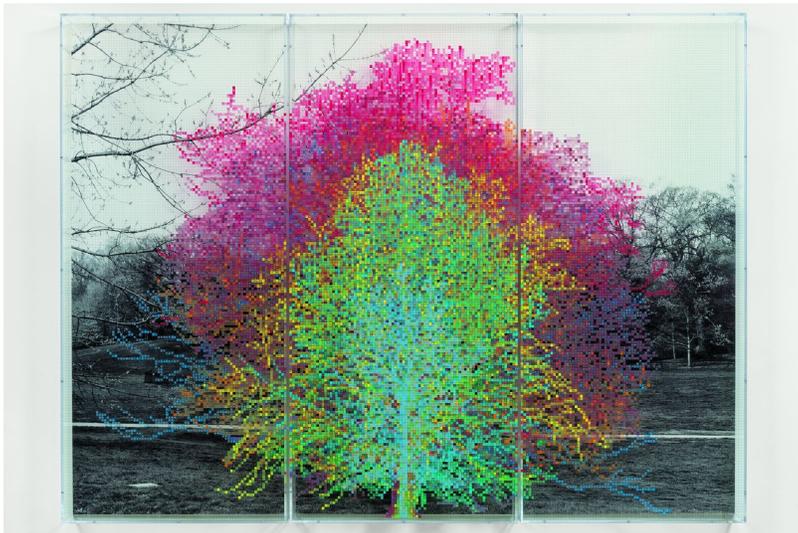


ART REVIEW

# ‘Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art’ and ‘Afrocosmologies: American Reflections’ Reviews: Finding a Legacy or Losing the Thread?

Two shows offer very different approaches to exploring African-Americans’ contributions to modernism.



Charles Gaines’s ‘Numbers and Trees: Central Park Series I: Tree #9, Henry’ (2016) PHOTO: CHARLES GAINES/HAUSER & WIRTH, NEW YORK

*By James Panero*

Dec. 3, 2019 3:27 pm ET

*Baltimore and Hartford, Conn.*

**Look around** and just about every museum suddenly seems interested in artists “on the margins.” When it comes to the rich history of American abstraction by black artists, there is much to be said for these acts of rediscovery. Recent exhibitions of black abstractionists have traced a line of influence that once developed on the periphery of art history. A vein that starts in mid-century modernism with Norman Lewis and Alma Thomas runs through the post-

minimalist constructions of Jack Whitten, Martin Puryear and Howardena Pindell, on through the expansive visions of Julie Mehretu and Mark Bradford today.

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**Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art**

*Baltimore Museum of Art*  
Through Jan. 19, 2020

**Afrocsmologies: American Reflections**

*Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art*  
Through Jan. 20, 2020

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“Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art,” on view at the Baltimore Museum of Art, tells this story through a well paced and at times awe-inspiring exhibition. Mainly drawing on the Joyner/Giuffrida Collection but supplemented by the BMA’s own holdings, the show curated by Christopher Bedford and Katy Siegel presents nearly 80 works by 28 artists from the 1940s to the present. The exhibition begins with a bang, with colossal works—such as Mr. Bradford’s “My Grandmother Felt the Color” (2016), Mr. Whitten’s “9.11.01” (2006)

and Mr. Puryear’s “Lever #2” (1988-89)—covering the walls, hanging from the ceiling, and sprawling across the floor of the opening gallery.

Black abstractionists faced unique obstacles within their own creative community as well as among white audiences who expected them to restrict themselves to chronicling black experience. Could, and should, the language of abstraction, with its emphasis on aesthetic values over reportage, speak for them as well? It turned out that it could, and this tension between cultural expectations and pictorial freedom energized their compositions, with the personal and the political mixing with the purely pictorial. And so we will see such universal forms as circles and triangles coalescing around reminders of time and place.

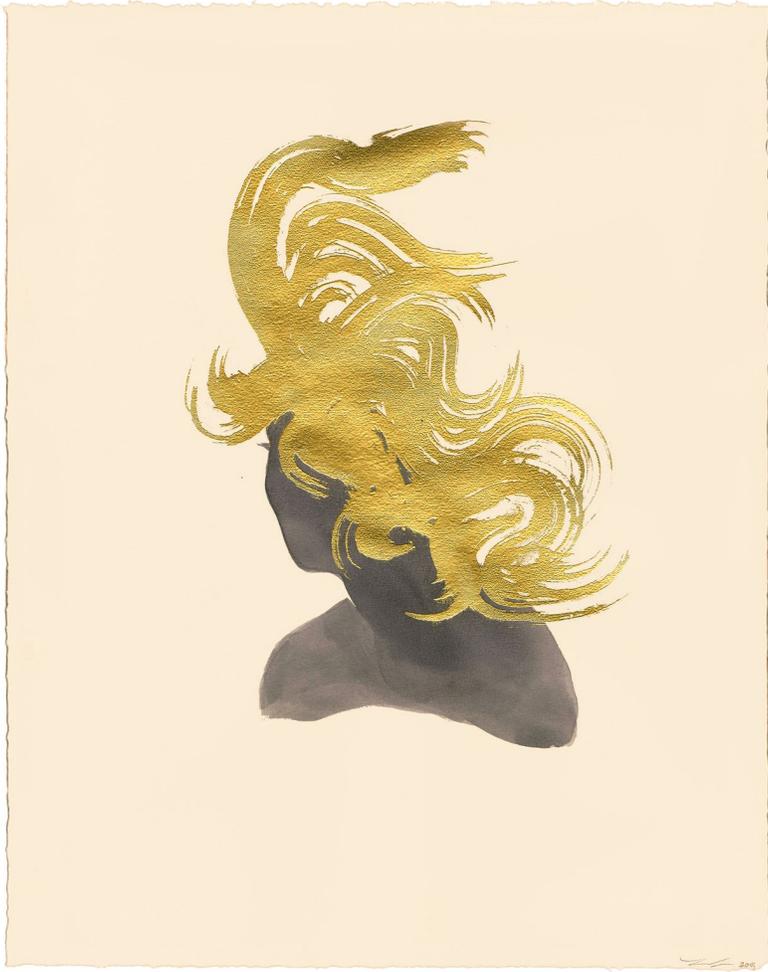
“Generations” presents this journey through parallel gallery bays that feel like rungs on a ladder. The arrangement reveals a selection of artists in depth and in cross-conversation. In such works as “Autumn Flight” (1956) and “Afternoon” (1969), Lewis conceals as he reveals. In “Evening Glow” (1972), Thomas similarly clouds over shapes of red and yellow with a camouflage of blue squares. These screens then lead on to the conceptual systems of Glenn Ligon, Jennie C. Jones and Charles Gaines —who superimposes a grid of leaves onto winter trees. Melvin Edwards and Leonardo Drew complete the section with powerful works that do not easily settle into categories of painting, sculpture, or relief. Mr. Drew’s “Number 52S” (2015), a black-and-white tour-de-force of painted wood that seems to grow out of the wall, recalls the Whitten from the start in its stark abstract complexities.

While “abstract art” appears in the title of this exhibition, the term here is too loosely applied. Yet the wide perspective also elevates the more abstract elements of representational artists such as Lorna Simpson and Gary Simmons —and the “abstract” materials that we find in Mr. Ligon’s illegible coal-dust letters in “Stranger #68” (2012).



Romare Bearden's 'The Lamp' (1984) PHOTO: ROMARE BEARDEN FOUNDATION/LICENSED BY VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY/ THE AMISTAD CENTER FOR ART & CULTURE, HARTFORD, CT.

A final room brings the remaining artists together and makes the case for shared affinities. The swirling circles of William T. Williams's "Eastern Star" (1971) connect the dots of Ms. Pindell's "Autobiography: Japan (Tombo No Hane)" (1982-83). The hanging forms of Sam Gilliam's "Stand" (1973) and Al Loving's "Brownie, Sunny, Dave, and Al" (1972, later revised) reach out to the levitating strips of Barbara Chase-Riboud's "Well of the Concubine Pearl" (1967). The language of abstraction speaks in a uniquely liberating voice across the generations.



Lorna Simpson's 'Gold Head K1' (2011) PHOTO: LORNA SIMPSON/HAUSER & WIRTH, NEW YORK

The expansion of the canon may be welcome news, but just because art has gone unseen does not mean it deserves to be shown. The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn., has been collecting significant work by black artists longer than most institutions. Messrs. Gilliam, Williams and Edwards all showed there in the 1970s. Ms. Pindell, Ms. Simpson, Mr. Ligon and Mr. Bradford were brought into the collection while still mid-career.

Yet the Wadsworth's exhibition "Afrocosmologies: American Reflections" now mostly makes a muddle of their achievements through an overhung and underdetermined selection of work. Connected, as the museum put it in a press release, by "African philosophical, ritual, and cultural systems that migrated here in memory," an amorphous thesis that seems crafted after the fact, "Afrocosmologies" presents over a hundred works by nearly as many artists packed across two museum floors. The one-of-each approach offers a wide selection of black artists but only a superficial treatment of black work.

The Wadsworth's own collection here includes important Puryear, Whitten, Pindell, Thomas and Edwards pieces along with those by Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, Beauford Delaney, Kerry James Marshall and Bob Thompson. Yet with a majority of objects on loan from the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art, minor works and middling



Carl Joe Williams's 'Waiting' (2016) PHOTO: CARL JOE WILLIAMS/THE PETRUCCI FAMILY FOUNDATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART, ASBURY, NJ.

artists come to dominate, with far too many small prints and drawings to navigate.

“Afrocosmologies” does suggest some interesting redirections: the meaning of the circle in works by Mr. Puryear, Ms. Pindell and Berrisford Boothe ; the connections of black figurative sculpture from Richmond Barthé, William Artis, Elizabeth Catlett and Artis Lane on through Vanessa German and Nick Cave. But, packed as it now is, you could almost miss the powerful Lawrence cycle on “The Legend of John Brown” (1977) at the very end.

“Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you?” asks Ralph Ellison in “Invisible Man.” The great achievement of black American art is work that speaks to a fuller range of the human experience. The challenge is to tell these stories coherently, and for all to see.

—Mr. Panero is the executive editor of the *New Criterion*.