

With All Eyes on the South, the Most Important Art Show in America Is Underway in Pittsburgh

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by JOHN ORTVED

As monuments to Confederate generals come crashing down in the South, and [white supremacists, neo-Nazis, and those who champion their values keep a terrifying grip on the media](#), there are some sculptures (as well as paintings and photographs) up in Pittsburgh that deserve our attention. “20/20: The Studio Museum in Harlem and Carnegie Museum of Art,” is an exhibition that engages 40 artists (20 from each of those museums’ collections) in a dialogue on the importance of art during times of political and social change.

“It’s an unprecedented exhibition,” says Amanda Hunt, who co-curated the museum show with Eric Crosby. Here, the Studio Museum in Harlem, famous for showing artworks by those of African descent, joins forces with the Carnegie, one of the U.S.’s most revered art institutions, to present something nearly impossible: the idea of America, through art. “One of the challenges of a group exhibition taking on something as large as America and our national conversation now is that it can’t reflect every facet of that,” says Crosby.

The exhibition—which features works from the likes of Kerry J. Marshall, Jenny Holzer, Kara Walker, and Lorna Simpson—begins with “A More Perfect Union,” an examination of national identity and symbols. The jumping-off point is a 70-year-old painting by Horace Pippin—a self-taught WWI vet who captured scenes of postwar American life—which gives way to Jasper Johns’s flag painting, and a Louise Nevelson sculpture. Next, with “Working Thought,” the exhibition examines the history of forced labor in America, and progresses into the current prison-industrial complex, with works by Melvin Edwards. Then it’s on to the American landscape, and to a section called “Documenting Black Life,” featuring photographers Charles “Teenie” Harris and James VanDerZee. Finally, we come to “Shrines for the Spirit” and “Forms of Resistance,” which examine artists’ responses to current conditions. Each section is vitally important, not only to understand how we got to where we are in America, but also to understand how others have seen it, and see it now.

“The challenge is making an exhibit for everyone,” says Crosby. “I think you’ll find there’s something for everybody to identify with, to consider their own American experience, their own American moment.”

Here, the curators discuss some of the exhibition's most essential works.



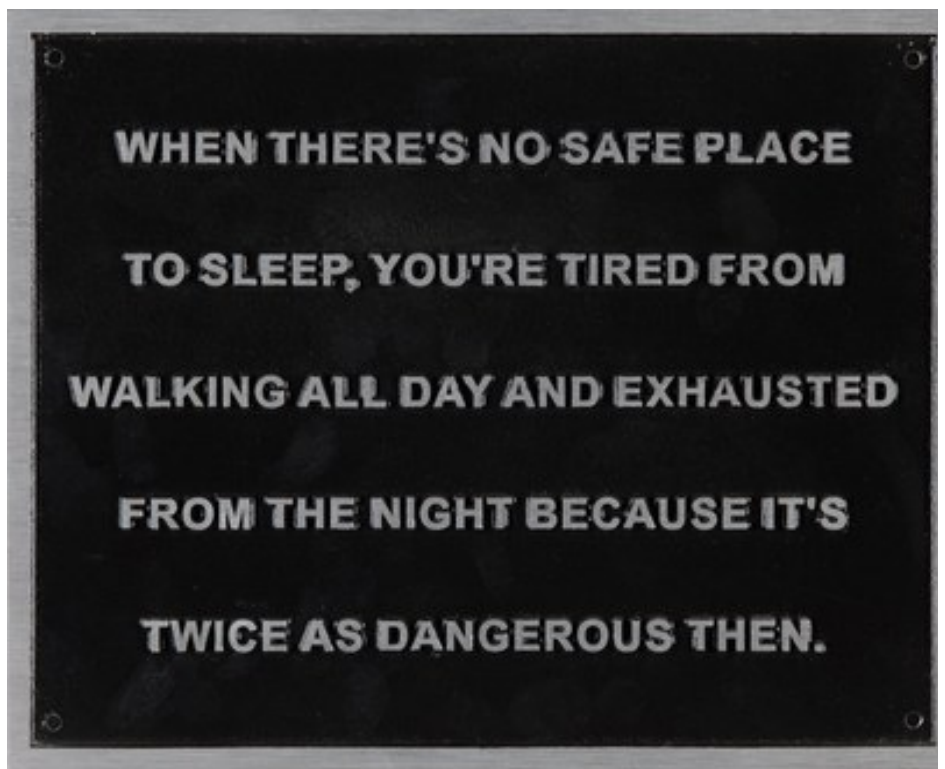
© Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Gallery)*, 2016

Courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art / David Zwirner, London

Kerry J. Marshall, *Untitled [Gallery]*, 2016

“It really encapsulates the spirit of that final gallery, forms of resistance, the changes we wanted to see encouraged in the space, really privileging different voices in those spaces,” says Hunt. “This female figure, a black woman, in a

beautiful, colorful outfit, standing in a stark white gallery space. It's an assertion of this body. It's looking at how she owns this space and commands it. As with every Kerry piece, there are layers of meaning, pictures within pictures that she is herself a figure that she is looking at. It's a meta-picture. It's a fantastic, smart way of looking toward the future of investigating what galleries look like and can and should look like."



© Jenny Holzer, *Survival: When there's no safe place to sleep...*, 1983-1985

Courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art

Jenny Holzer, *Survival: When There's No Safe Place to Sleep . . .*, 1983–1985

"It's a piece about empathy," says Hunt. "She's asking us to step into someone else's shoes," Crosby chimes in. "Survival is one of those subjects we talk about as Americans. 'No place to

sleep. You're tired from walking . . .'—it conjures this whole narrative of American landscape, of maybe those who America has left behind, and are not saved effectively," he says. "She's a feminist icon," says Hunt. "I think it touches on the starkness of this current administration. There are all kinds of concerns we're putting forth visually in that section that tie together in language in a beautiful way."

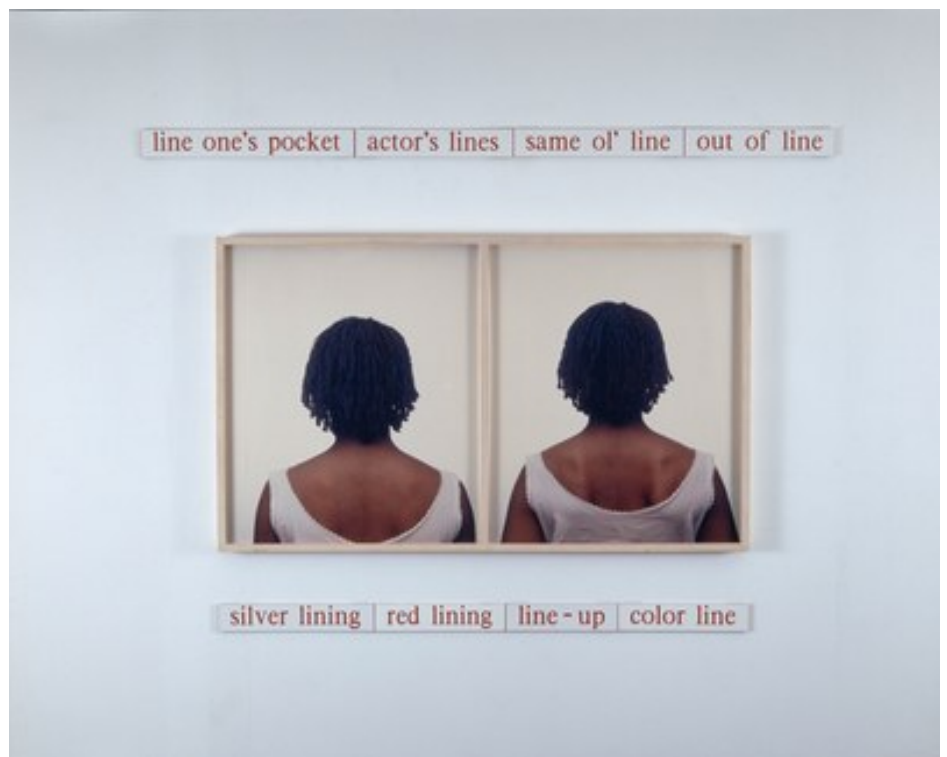


© Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation*, 1999–2000

Courtesy of the Carnegie Museum of Art

**Kara Walker, *Emancipation*
Approximation, 1999–2000**

“The piece goes back to the impulse to rethink our founding doctrines, the promise of our country. Walker is probing the psychological depth of that by probing stories of the antebellum Southern plantation. It’s a history of slavery that shaped this country’s economic foundation. The work is so potent. You can’t make this exhibition without putting Walker’s position in that dialogue,” says Crosby. “I’m thinking about monumentality, in terms of Walker’s practice,” says Hunt. “The subject she takes on is monumental, and these are more focused vignettes but no less potent in terms of their visual impact.”



© Lorna Simpson, *Dividing Lines*, 1989

Photo: Sasha J. Mendez / Courtesy of The Studio Museum in Harlem /
Hauser & Wirth

Lorna Simpson, *Dividing Lines*, 1989

“Lorna is an artist very close to the Studio Museum’s history. This is work that is not shying away from looking at black female subjectivity. She’s reflecting our needs back toward us as an audience,” says Hunt. “There are a number of text plaques that riff on the word *line*: color line, red line, out of line, this kind of thing. What line? Whose line?” asks Crosby. “I’m drawn to it in the context of this show, this reference of redlining and how financial institutions have used data in order to disenfranchise people of color. That’s the reading she’s evoking with this enigmatic image. It’s an interesting play of languages.”