

In 'Grief and Grievance,' Black artists explore aspects of loss in contemporary life

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Even amid the pandemic, some art exhibitions are opening to the public. "Grief and Grievance" at New York's "New Museum," a timely examination of race and racism, is one of them. Black artists explore the aspects of loss in the contemporary Black experience and their own roles in telling that story. Jeffrey Brown reports for Race Matters, and CANVAS, our ongoing arts and culture coverage.

Jeffrey Brown:

A large painting titled *Souvenir II*, by Kerry James Marshall, a living room, a woman with angel's wings, images of those who are gone. Photographs by LaToya Ruby Frazier, a personal history of a family and a neighborhood. In a new exhibition, *Grief and Grievance* at New York's New Museum, 37 leading Black artists explore, in different ways, aspects of loss in the contemporary Black experience, and their own roles in capturing that story.

Glenn Ligon:

As a Black American, I draw on my experience living in this country as a source to make the work. That's the subject matter that a lot of artists in the show are contending with. But they're also contending with issues of grief, of mourning, of digging into the subtleties of living in this society.

Jeffrey Brown:

Glenn Ligon is himself a well-known artist. His neon text on the museum's exterior represents the words of a young man beaten while in police custody. But for this exhibition he had another role, helping to finish the work of the man who conceived and inspired it.

Okwui Enwezor:

(INAUDIBLE) is really one of the most significant modern South Africa artists of the 20th century.

Jeffrey Brown:

Nigerian-born Okwui Enwezor was a hugely influential art world figure, first as a champion of contemporary African art and artists.

I spoke with him for his seminal 2002 exhibition *the Short Century*.

Okwui Enwezor:

Coming to the United States a little more than 20 years ago, I was really confronted with the complete absence of what I consider to be a history that I belonged to.

Jeffrey Brown:

Over the years, Enwezor would help expand that space, before dying of cancer in 2019 at age 55. Grief and Grievance was his last project, turning his attention to the African-American experience. Glenn Ligon points to the range of work to show the subtle, yet powerful approaches of artists, including the oldest works here. Jack Whitten's Birmingham, an abstract painting that looks ripped open, hidden inside, a news photograph of a man being attacked by a policeman with a dog. And Daniel LaRue Johnson's Freedom Now, Number 1, with a button and other items embedded in the surface.

Glenn Ligon:

Artists are thinking abstractly and figurative, trying to blur the lines between them. They're thinking that art also has relevance socially, that it's commentary, that the line between social justice and art is blurred. And that was at the beginning of Okwui's thought about the show and my thinking as an artist. I like to say that I'm an artist and a citizen. Maybe I'm more of a citizen than an artist. And the citizen has a kind of responsibility.

Jeffrey Brown:

Melvin Edwards has created his welded-steel sculptures called Lynch Fragments, over several decades. Howardena Pindell made this mixed-media collage in 1988. It's titled Autobiography: Water/Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts. And Adam Pendleton has a brand-new room-sized installation, commissioned for this exhibition, evoking graffiti and protest signs. Dawoud Bey's 2012 Birmingham project presents a view of violence and death through ongoing life, young children the age of those killed in 1963 paired with people the age they would be now had they lived. Naomi Beckwith is another of the exhibition's organizers.

Naomi Beckwith:

So, he began to reflect on those lost lives and those lost histories through these portraits that appeared together for Dawoud's work, again, not an image of the bombing or the church or any of its effects, but really looking at human life and what was missing in between.

Jeffrey Brown:

Beckwith, a curator in Chicago, was recently named deputy director of New York's Guggenheim Museum.

Naomi Beckwith:

What you can do in the context of a museum and especially an art exhibition is not confront people with those difficult terms right away, but give people something to ponder. Make them feel a little bit closer to the issue because they can access it through their emotions and through their sense of curiosity.

Jeffrey Brown:

And even amid the grief, there is music everywhere, on the walls and in the air. Another theme apparent in several videos, the mix of the personal, as in Garrett Bradley's "Alone" about a women's relationship with a man in prison and the public. Arthur Jafa's "Love Is the Message, The Message Is Death" is just seven and-a-half minutes, but epic in scope.

Naomi Beckwith:

The thing I hope people walk away with is an understanding of the riches of contemporary art by Black artists across America right now. We often think about the violence that surrounds protests. We often think about the rights that people really agitate for, and as they should, but we don't often talk about the psychological effects on people.

Jeffrey Brown:

That, the organizers show, is what art can do, particularly now.

Glenn Ligon:

Society as a whole has realized how deeply, deeply embedded white supremacy is into the fabric of this nation and that very hard conversations have to happen to change that. And I think this exhibition, Grief and Grievance, is one of those conversations.

Jeffrey Brown:

The exhibition at New York's New Museum is now open for timed entry with distanced viewing. On its Web site, the museum also offers an interactive virtual tour, plus interviews with many of the artists involved. For the "PBS NewsHour," I'm Jeffrey Brown.