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At the Wadsworth Atheneum, art by African-Americans rejoices in the sacred

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent,Updated December 4, 2019, 3:46 p.m

John Biggers's "Band of Angels: Weaving the Seventh Word" from 1992-93.COURTESY JOHN T. BIGGERS ESTATE/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NY

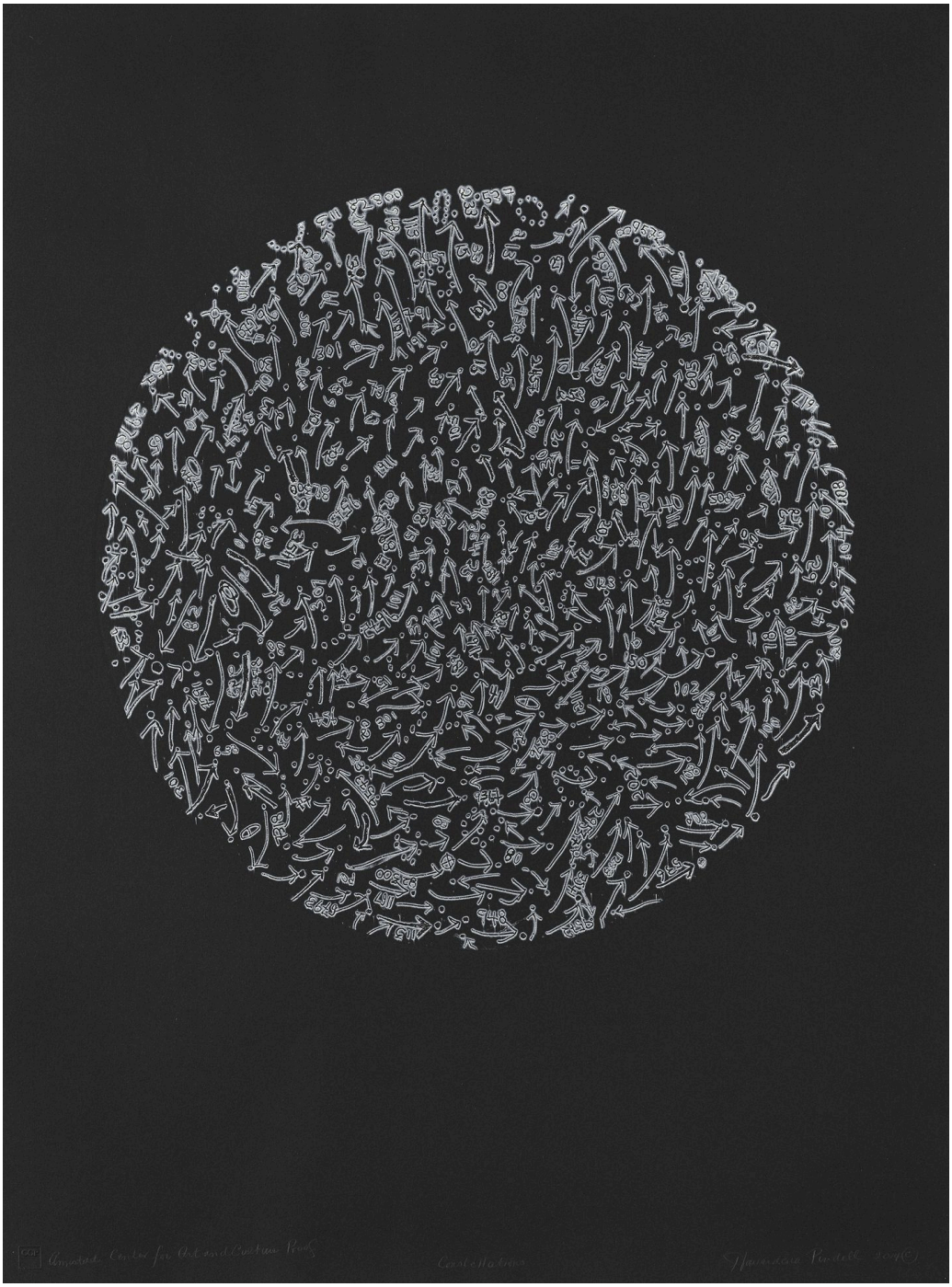
HARTFORD — “Afrocosmologies: American Reflections" sits like a beating heart at the juncture of several major historical arteries: religion, art, and American history. The sweeping exhibition on three floors of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art revolves around African-American spirituality.

It's a giant theme. Cosmologies make sense of the world, and African-American belief systems contend with the kidnapping and enslavement of Africans brought to America as chattel, followed by generations of oppression. Making some sense of that senselessness requires grief, community, and a muscular faith.

African-American cosmologies are, of course, wide, syncretic, and varied. Here we find them rooted in the religions of West Africa, brought over in the holds of slaving ships. Captives had nothing more to cling to than their companions and their faith. African beliefs then funneled through Christianity, which promised enslaved people eventual salvation. Faith practices were vital avenues of personal and artistic expression. Often coded or carried out in secret, they were lifelines to dignity and selfhood.

"Afrocosmologies" takes its uneasy, of-the-moment place championing the subjective experience of African-Americans in an art historical lineage built on power structures that glorified privileged white men and erased people of color or turned them into things of exotic beauty and symbols to fear.

Curator Frank Mitchell, executive director of the Amistad Center for Art & Culture, an independent nonprofit housed at the Wadsworth, has corralled the visions of dozens of artists in more than 100 works from three worthy collections: the Wadsworth's, the Amistad Center's, and that of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art. The exhibition's stellar roster of artists includes Henry O. Tanner, Jacob Lawrence, Melvin Edwards, Howardena Pindell, Kara Walker, and Kerry James Marshall. The



Howardena Pindell's "Constellations."COURTESY HOWARDENA PINDELL AND GARTH GREENAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

earliest work in the show is a serene Italian landscape painted in 1864 by Robert Scott Duncanson. Its shimmering lake beneath a luminous sky place it in the Hudson River School tradition. Duncanson was a free man based in

Ohio, and an exquisite painter. Occasionally bankrolled by abolitionists, he found his success a blessing and a curse. Given all that context, the dreamy "Recollections of Italy" feels removed from the fray, although, in a section of the exhibition devoted to nature, it rejoices in the power of land and light.

Most of the work in "Afrocosmologies" was made when African-Americans had readier access to studying and making art, starting in the early-to-mid 20th century. Jacob Lawrence, the fearless 20th-century chronicler of black life and history, is given his own room for a knife's-edge-sharp series of screenprints relating abolitionist John Brown's life and death following the raid at Harper's Ferry, in bold, flat colors and spiky lines, as a cautionary passion play.

Many 20th-century black American artists visited Africa and drew from the lush cultural legacies there. John Biggers traveled to Ghana, Nigeria, Benin, and Togo, and infused his paintings with African patterns and designs and vibrant scenes of life, like the regal women bearing textiles in "Band of Angels: Weaving the Seventh Word."

Biggers elevated African community and social practices. "Band of Angels," made in the early 1990s, has kinship with Bob Thompson's 1960 painting "Garden of Music," a utopian scene depicting musicians at play.

Bob Thompson's "Garden of Music."COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY LLC

Formally, Thompson's painting, with its bold, largely naked figures in a grove, echoes Paul Gauguin's existential mural at the Museum of Fine Arts, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" But Gauguin idealized and objectified native Tahitians, and Thompson paints his jazz musician friends, including Ornette Coleman and John Coltrane. Gauguin depicted a timeline from infancy to senescence, and Thompson stops time, making a moment of community precious.

Circles recur through "Afrocosmologies": "Kiruna," a painted pine circle by Martin Puryear, Pindell's "Constellations" etching filled with figurative hieroglyphs and mathematical marks in tribute to her mathematician father. We can call these cosmograms or devotional objects; they bring us to the sacred space of the center, bounded by community. Richard Yarde's

“Ringshout II” watercolor, with shoes ringing hands, refers to a circle dance practiced by enslaved people.

These nod to artistic legacies older than Europe’s. But Europe’s has irrevocably shaped ours, and many artists wrestle mightily with that history. Kehinde Wiley’s stunning “Portrait of Toks Adewetan (The King of Glory)” gives the full, heroic royal portrait treatment to Adewetan, a black model with dreadlocks.

Carl Joe Williams's "Waiting."COURTESY PETRUCCI FAMILY FOUNDATION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

Carl Joe Williams’s stained-glass-like painting on a mattress, “Waiting,” holds to the values of Renaissance-era religious paintings. He depicts three haloed figures at a bus stop: A young black man in a hoodie eyeing his phone; a young woman, and her baby.

The hoodie is a charged symbol. Trayvon Martin was wearing one when George Zimmerman shot him dead. Williams undercuts that bias by making this man a saint with an inward, reflective gaze. (Although, it must be said, the deity in “Waiting” appears to be corporate America, with nods to Nike and Apple). The woman is a black Madonna; she, too, seems lost in thought. Is it just a bus they’re waiting for? Or the recognition that they are as complicated and holy as, say, Joseph and Mary?

When we use other people for our own ends, we make them invisible. African-American artists have made it a mandate to be seen, and to tell the untold stories of their communities. Framing such stories in the intimate context of spirituality, “Afrocosmologies” zeroes in on the subjective, and like a full-throated gospel choir, it’s glorious.

AFROCOSMOLOGIES: AMERICAN REFLECTIONS AT THE WADSWORTH

At Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main St., Hartford, through Jan. 20. 860-278-2670, www.thewadsworth.org