

NORTHWESTERN NOW

'A Site of Struggle: American Art against Anti-Black Violence' debuts at the Block Museum of Art Jan. 26

Five years in the making, the exhibition stakes a claim on the power of the visual to make change

December 06, 2021 | Lindsay Bosch



Darryl Cowherd "Stop White Police from Killing Us – St. Louis, MO," c. 1966-67; courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Photography.

A new exhibition will explore the various ways American artists have grappled with anti-Black violence over the past 100 years.

"A Site of Struggle: American Art against Anti-Black Violence," organized and presented by The Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art at Northwestern University, will premiere Jan. 26, 2022, and continue through July 10, 2022. Admission is free and open to the public.

A new, historical approach to looking at the intersection of race, violence and art, "A Site of Struggle," will deeply consider how art has been used to protest, process, mourn and memorialize anti-Black violence in America for more than a century.

The exhibition features approximately 65 works in a wide range of media from collections around the U.S. “A Site of Struggle” will examine works by artists spanning more than 100 years from the anti-lynching campaigns of the 1890s to the founding of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2013. Conceived in 2016, the project continues to be informed by the current national reckoning on racial violence.

Among the artists included in the exhibition are Laylah Ali (b.1968), George Bellows (1882-1925), Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012), Darryl Cowherd (b. 1940), Ernest Crichlow (1914-2005), Melvin Edwards (b. 1937), Theaster Gates (b. 1973), Ken Gonzales-Day (b. 1964), Norman Lewis (1909-1979), Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955), Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988), Howardena Pindell (b. 1943), Carl and Karen Pope (b. 1961), Paul Rucker (b. 1968), Alison Saar (b. 1956), Lorna Simpson (b. 1960), Dox Thrash (1893-1965), Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953), Pat Ward Williams (b. 1948) and Hale Woodruff (1900-1980).

After its debut at The Block, the exhibition will travel to the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts in Montgomery, Alabama (Aug. 12 to Nov. 6, 2022), a city with a deep civil rights history and which currently acts as a national and international forum on racial injustice through the National Memorial for Peace and Justice and the Legacy Museum, among other institutions.

“A Site of Struggle” is curated by Janet Dees, the Steven and Lisa Munster Tananbaum Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Block, with the assistance of Alisa Swindell, associate curator of photography at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. Swindell was a curatorial research associate at the Block.

“‘A Site of Struggle’ employs art history to help inform our understanding of the deep roots of racial violence,” said Dees. “From realism to abstraction, from direct to more subtle approaches, American artists have developed a century of tools and creative strategies to stand against enduring images of African American suffering and death. Contemporary artists taking on this subject are doing so within a long and rich history of American art and visual culture that has sought to contend with the realities of anti-Black violence.”

The Block Museum of Art is recognized for developing exhibitions and projects that embody a collaborative methodology and that have brought about transformation within the institution and across the field. Reflecting the vision and values of The Block to connect visitors with essential but understudied art histories and voices, these projects have partnership at their core. “A Site of Struggle” builds on this legacy and the Block’s record of generating new scholarship in the field of American art.

“The Block Museum of Art is committed to developing bold, meaningful and challenging projects that ask audiences to reconsider accepted narratives and search for new modes of understanding and active reflection,” said Lisa Corrin, the Block Museum Ellen Philips Katz director. “In its breadth of scholarly and community collaborations and support of the museum’s ongoing social justice initiatives, “A Site of Struggle” is one of the most important exhibitions the institution has ever undertaken.”

In the creation of “A Site of Struggle,” Dees convened a national group of established and emerging scholars and museum professionals, including Northwestern faculty, staff and students to consult on the themes, content and format of the exhibition. Critical discussions about the gallery installation of the exhibition centered around how to responsibly present this challenging material and offer a structure of care for audiences. These best practices include limiting the number of works in the space to provide visual and psychological rest; controlling the sight lines to the most graphic works; and offering numerous opportunities for respite and quiet reflection. A room devoted to additional resources will provide information on campus and community support and access to social justice organizations.

A key component of “A Site of Struggle” is the establishment of an active community advisory group in Evanston, Illinois, the home of Northwestern University and the first city in the U.S. to establish paid reparations. This cohort of intergenerational leaders working in social justice, education and the arts in Evanston was formed last year and convenes regularly to develop exhibition-related programming and discussion guides, and to provide counsel, context and feedback on the exhibition and the role of The Block Museum in the community more broadly.

“A Site of Struggle: American Art against Anti-Black Violence” will be accompanied by a fully illustrated companion publication of the same title with major contributions by established and emerging scholars from the fields of African American studies, art history, communications and history. Co-published by The Block Museum of Art and Princeton University Press, the book features a foreword by Huey Copeland, and original essays by Sampada Aranke, Courtney R. Baker, Janet Dees, Leslie M. Harris and LaCharles Ward.

Opening Program

Saturday, Jan. 29, 2022

1 to 1:45 p.m. Opening Performance

2 to 3:30 p.m. Opening Conversation

The exhibition’s opening program will take place Saturday, Jan. 29 from 1 to 3:30 p.m. and will include remarks by Robin Means Coleman, professor and vice president and associate provost for Diversity and Inclusion at Northwestern and Natasha Trethewey, professor and two-time former United States Poet Laureate. The program will include a discussion between curator Janet Dees and Courtney R. Baker, author of “Humane Insight: Looking at Images of African-American Suffering and Death”; Dino Robinson, founder of Shorefront Legacy Center in Evanston; and Carl and Karen Pope, exhibition artists. A sound performance by artists Mendi + Keith Obadike sonifies data from Ida B. Wells’ 1895 publication, “The Red Record: Tabulated Statistics and Alleged Causes of Lynching in the United States.”

Lead support for the exhibition is generously provided by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Major support is provided by The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts. The project is also supported in part by an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Bernstein Family Contemporary Art Fund, the Myers Foundations, the Block DEAI Fund and the Block Board of Advisors. Generous support is contributed by William Spiegel and Lisa Kadin, the Alumnae of Northwestern University, the David C. and Sarajeon Ruttenberg Arts Foundation, the Elizabeth F. Cheney Foundation, the Illinois Arts Council Agency and by Lynne Jacobs. The related publication is supported by Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund and the Sandra L. Riggs Publication Fund.

About the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art

The Block Museum of Art believes deeply in the capacity of art encounters to catalyze thinking about what is at stake for us in our lives today. The museum dynamically serves its Northwestern University, Evanston and regional Chicagoland audiences through exhibitions and programs that bridge perspectives, examine assumptions and serve as a springboard for urgent dialogue. With 6,000 artworks in its growing collection – primarily works on paper and global modern and contemporary art in all media – The Block fosters innovative interdisciplinary teaching and learning experiences. The museum is home to one of the region’s most innovative cinemas and reaches national and international audiences through its traveling exhibitions, scholarly publications and digital projects. The Block has achieved national acclaim for exhibitions that focus on overlooked, understudied or suppressed narratives and histories.