

# Searing images in a sweeping show about race and democracy

By Cate McQuaid Globe Correspondent, December 5, 2018

The operatic opening notes in “Nine Moments for Now,” a sweeping exhibition about democracy, race, and society at Harvard’s Ethelbert Cooper Gallery of African and African American Art, are grounded in violence and grief.

In Steve Locke’s spare, abstract “Auction Block” paintings, the modernist grid and color theory contend with slavery’s bitter history. Alexandria Smith’s antic collage installation “When the Bough Breaks” infuses Dick-and-Jane innocence with peril.

A piercing installation of black-and-white photographs follows. Carrie Mae Weems conflates three tragedies in a staged pieta in “The Assassination of Medgar, Martin, and Malcolm,” for her “Constructing History” series.

Across the way, curator Dell Marie Hamilton searingly mirrors Weems’s mythic imagery with photos of the real thing: Myrlie Evers, Coretta Scott King, and Betty Shabazz at their husbands’ funerals; funerals of Emmet Till, Sandra Bland, Freddie Gray, and Michael Brown. There is no looking away. We still build this imperfect society on blood and tears.

The rest of “Nine Moments for Now” sometimes tries to cover too much ground. The Cooper Gallery’s tricky layout of hallways and side rooms doesn’t help. The show dips into history, protest, social action, the African diaspora, and more. Each could be an exhibition in itself.

Still, there is some terrific and surprising art. Portraits by L’Merchie Frazier and Ekua Holmes honor ancestors and family. Ayana V. Jackson reclaims history in her “Aina, Dear Sarah Series” photos, reimagining the tale of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, a Yoruba woman presented to Queen Victoria as a gift. There’s a commanding wall of posters by Corita Kent and Shepherd Fairey. Then, in a video of her conversation with a robot, Stephanie Dinkins cleverly deconstructs ideas of race and looks to the future.

Today, Hamilton suggests in an essay, “the democratic apparatus is still in place while its applications become progressively less effective,” staking her show’s territory with doubt. But the exhibition itself testifies that our democracy has always been profoundly flawed, and that its ideals still offer hope.