

Los Angeles Times

Inside the California African American Museum's \$5-million, 'momentum'-fueled upgrades

By Deborah Vankin
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Visitors engage with Chloë Bass' sculptural installation "#sky #nofilter: Hindsight for a Future America" at CAAM. The work is an analemmatic sundial. (Photo: Elon Schoenholz; from CAAM)

There's a new public sculpture outside the California African American Museum in Exposition Park. Conceptual artist Chloë Bass' work rests on a patch of gravel near the building's entrance, 16 tinted glass panels set in steel and etched with text. They're based on photographs Bass took of the sky and they form a shimmering arc in gradations of blue, lilac and gray.

Together, the panels make up an analemmatic sundial. As visitors hover over the work, functioning as a vertical gnomon, their shadows fall onto one of the panels, depending on the time of day. Snippets of text — ruminations such as "Do you know how difficult it is to make something appear effortless?" — appear in shadows on the ground. The utilitarian work is ethereal and seemingly simplistic, but it's brimming with meaning.

"There's a lot about what is seen and unseen, what is known and unknown," CAAM Executive Director Cameron Shaw says while standing over the work. Her sundress ripples gently in the breeze, creating dancing shadows on a panel to the right. "And it's about this experience of how things change over time."

Chief among them: the museum itself, which is readying to debut a nearly \$5-million building upgrade.

CAAM hasn't been fully operational for about a year. Its galleries began closing, on a rolling basis, last August to address a deferred maintenance project. The museum commissioned a robust atrium installation, by artists Azikiwe Mohammed and Adee Roberson, that debuted in November as a way to keep visitors engaged over the next six months. Then, in May, the museum closed completely.

On Saturday CAAM reopens its doors, debuting the upgrades and five new exhibitions. The changes at CAAM are quiet, but game-changers: a new HVAC system, refinished floors, a new roof and weatherproofed glass ceiling panels in the atrium.

"They're the things you need to do to have your museum function at the highest level," Shaw says. "It's a better, consistent visitor experience. It's about wanting to offer the community the best possible gathering and learning place."

Still in progress: a refurbished library and conference center as well as an exterior paint job, all planned to be completed by the end of this year.

Shaw, who took her post as executive director in February 2021, says the building upgrade is "a continuation of momentum at the museum."

“CAAM was and is on to something,” she says of the museum’s continued connection with a growing audience. The museum’s annual visitorship, pre-COVID, had climbed to about 100,000, and raucous dance parties at CAAM marking exhibition openings have drawn more than 3,000 people per event. “I think we’re generating a sense of excitement within the communities we serve, which are diverse communities,” Shaw says. “People want to be at CAAM.”

Shaw grew up making trips with her family to CAAM, which was founded in 1977. (Its current home was built in 1984.) She started working at the museum as chief curator and deputy director, succeeding Naima Keith, in 2019. When former executive director George Davis retired in February 2021, Shaw stepped into the role. The maintenance project was already in motion at that point, but Shaw says she helped shape it and expanded its scope.

“To me, it’s really the beginning of what it means to take care of this building under my tenure and develop improved facilities and programs,” she says.

Shaw also rethought the museum’s vision. She found herself helming the museum at a critical juncture. It was a year after the onset of the pandemic, which had upended cultural institutions across the U.S., financially and ideologically. As other institutions grappled with increased calls for diversity, scrutinizing the makeup of their boards as well as artist representation within their collections, CAAM found itself in a unique position. It had been founded to shine a light on Black experiences — so instead, it prioritized “depth and breadth,” Shaw says.

“So many institutions came out of 2020 and the murder of George Floyd thinking ‘how can we center Black voices?’” Shaw says. “Well, CAAM’s been centering Black voices since 1977. That’s the point of what we do. So [the question was]: what are we modeling, next, in terms of cultural practice? For me, that thing was depth.”

As part of her new vision, Shaw created four pillars to guide the development of exhibitions and public programming at CAAM, which has four full-time curators. The pillars — Black abstraction, Black lives/green justice, liberating the Black archive, and spirituality and ancestral technologies — came out of a period of “deep listening,” Shaw says, in which she engaged CAAM staffers, artists, community members and others to get a sense of the issues on peoples’ minds. Specifically, she was interested in how those issues intersect with their everyday lives and what it means to be a Black museum in Los Angeles.

The pillars are meant to prompt conversation. Abstraction, for instance, “includes the legacy of black creativity,” Shaw says, “but also issues around protest, surveillance, legibility, around the black condition of hyper-visibility and invisibility. Artists are working through all these deep things when they take on abstraction.”

In addition to organizing exhibitions, CAAM hopes to become a destination for even more traveling exhibitions. Which was another reason for the upgrades, Shaw says.

“The work we’re producing is increasingly ambitious and complex. But we’re also becoming a very sought-after venue for important traveling exhibitions,” Shaw says, noting the exhibition “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85,” which opened at CAAM in 2017 and was organized by the Brooklyn Museum. “That balance is really critical. And that’s part of what these upgrades ensure — that we can be that attractive venue in the future.”

After such a long closure, CAAM wanted to reopen its doors with a bang, programmatically. The five new exhibitions fill five gallery spaces and the atrium. One group show features contemporary painting, sculpture, multimedia and installation works; two are historical exhibitions; there’s a short film and a solo presentation of large-scale wheat pasted drawings.

That mix of art, history and culture — in adjacent galleries — is what makes CAAM unique, Shaw says,

“We have these five galleries for exhibitions, and we’re increasingly activating our atrium space as well as thinking about the outdoors,” she says. “Each of those spaces can be a portal to a moment or perspective in Black history. That can be transformative for the viewer.”

“A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration” showcases contemporary commissions by 12 artists, including L.A.-based Mark Bradford, Theaster Gates Jr. and Carrie Mae Weems. It was organized by the Mississippi Museum of Art and the Baltimore Museum of Art and is traveling to L.A. from the Brooklyn Museum.

Bradford’s piece, a large-scale painting, takes on the history of Blackdom, a Black homesteader colony in Chaves County, N.M., in the early 20th century. His work, painted on oxidized paper, repeats the text of a 1913 advertisement stating, in part: “Wanted: 500 Negro families (farmers preferred) to settle on FREE Government Lands in Chaves County, New Mexico.” The repeated panels appear freshly burnt, as if on charred paper that might imminently crumble into charcoal dust.

“With each of the artists making independent commissions,” Shaw says, “you really do see different artistic interpretations of the legacy of the great migration, both personal and cultural.”

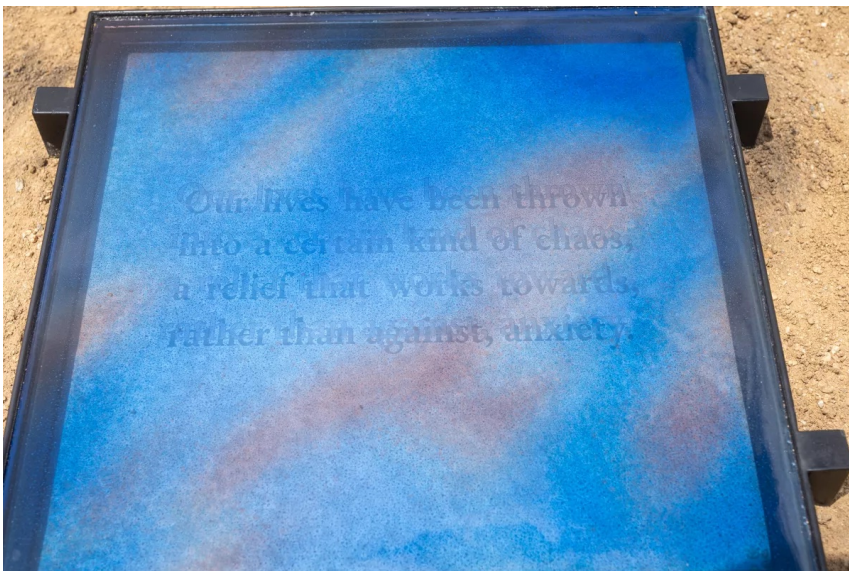
The two history shows on view — “Black California Dreamin’: Claiming Space at America’s Leisure Frontier” and “We Are Not Strangers Here: African American Histories in Rural California” — are in “beautiful conversation” with the show about migration, Shaw says. “Because of the focus on what the great migration meant in terms of pursuing an American dream or a new life in California.”

Collective rhythm is the focus of South Los Angeles artist Darol Olu Kae’s short film on view, “Keeping Time.” The piece centers on the South Central L.A. avant-garde jazz group the Pan Afrikan Peoples Arkestra (the Ark), which emerged there in 1961.

“It touches on Black abstraction and in many ways, migration,” Shaw says of the film. “It also speaks to this concept of spirituality and ancestral technologies. You’re thinking about ritual and relationship, what does it mean to perform together as a collective, to keep time together, how do bands think about the formation of rhythm and fellowship?”

Tatyana Fazlalizadeh’s project, “Speaking to Falling Seeds,” fills the museum’s atrium. The artist wheat-pasted towering portraits of Black women in nature onto the atrium walls. The images are based on vintage photographs and her own graphite drawings of real women she met in L.A. this spring — strangers she found on social media, introductions from friends — all of whom she spoke with about where they feel safe. The women are ensconced in lush natural landscaping, their faces steely and emanating a sense of agency.

Bass’ outdoor sculpture, “#sky #nofilter: Hindsight for a Future America,” a commission by CAAM, was installed in June. The piece is the culmination of a series Bass started working on as a way to process her anxiety leading up to the 2016 presidential election. The project incorporates photography — she featured pictures of the sky on different days on her Instagram account and translated those images onto glass panels — as well as text, performance and sculpture.



Detail of Chloë Bass’ sculpture, “#sky #nofilter: Hindsight for a Future America.” (Photo: Elon Schoenholz; from CAAM)

What is Shaw most looking forward to about the reopening? “For it to be done!” she jokes, before adding: “No, it’s about welcoming back the public.”

To that end, CAAM will host a free party open to the public, on Friday night. The event is part of its KCRW Summer Nights @ CAAM series and includes food trucks, a beer garden and multiple DJ sets. The galleries will be open as well. During such large openings, when the exhibitions are streaming with visitors and the dance floor is hopping, Shaw says she often likes to stand in a corner and observe from afar. “I just look around,” she says. “I kind of marvel at the thing we created. This space we created for other people to be themselves. Their joy, that’s an incredibly beautiful thing.”

California African American Museum

Where: 600 State Drive, Los Angeles

When: Regular hours: Wednesdays-Saturdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sundays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

Reopening celebration: Friday 7–11 p.m.

Cost: Free

Info: caamuseum.org