

5 Museum Curators Share The Artwork They've Missed The Most

July 15, 2020

By Cathryn Haight

For museum curators, life truly does imitate art. These masterpiece maestros are a wellspring of knowledge and tastemakers in the truest sense of the word — illuminating the talents of artists past and present, and sharing their works with the public through carefully crafted collections. With Boston-area museums shuttered since mid-March due to COVID-19, curators are eager to once again immerse themselves in what they love most. As their institutions prepare to reopen in accordance with the third phase of Gov. Charlie Baker's plan, five art aficionados from local museums share what masterpieces they're most looking forward to seeing again.

Akili Tommasino

Associate Curator, Modern and Contemporary Art | Museum of Fine Arts

“Suncrush” by Frank Bowling (1976)

Akili Tommasino can pinpoint the exact moment he felt called to become a curator. The Brooklyn, New York native grew up in an apartment adorned with his own father's paintings and situated a stone's throw away from cultural institutions like the Brooklyn Museum, but it wasn't until a summer spent in Italy as a student that he truly confirmed his vocation. On a visit to Florence's famous Uffizi Gallery, a then 15-year-old Tommasino successfully led his host mother to a Bronzino painting she was eager to show him after

she became lost in the museum. “I insisted that we had passed it and she disagreed, but after a few entreaties she let me lead us back to the painting,” says Tommasino, who has been with the MFA since October 2018. “Triumphant, I boasted that I would one day be a museum professional. Little did I know how closely I would adhere to that declaration.”

Just as he so vividly remembers that moment in Florence, Tommasino also recalls the first time he encountered Frank Bowling’s “Suncrush” in the MFA’s offsite storage facility. The abstract painting was acquired in the 1970s during the heyday of color field painting, but not displayed in the museum until October 2019 as part of “Contemporary Art: Five Propositions” — a collection-based exhibition highlighting work from integral, yet underrepresented artists from 1899 to the present. Tommasino’s office is situated on the opposite end of the museum, and he makes frequent trips to the painting to “bask in its radiance”



Akili Tommasino (Courtesy Brigitte Lacombe)



Frank Bowling, "Suncrush," 1976. (Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

and ponder the powerful legacy of its painter.

Born in British Guiana (present-day Guyana) and a fixture in the 1960s NYC art scene, Frank Bowling challenged his contemporaries, embracing the technicolor hues and gestural nature of abstract painting when pop art and minimalism ruled the scene. Much of Bowling's work hearkens to his transatlantic identity — "Suncrush" in particular evokes warmth, vibrancy and the tropical climate of the artist's homeland — and the large-scale, acrylic-on-canvas work resonates with Tommasino through the parallels he finds between Bowling's life and his own. "As the son of immigrants from St. Vincent and the Grenadines, raised in Brooklyn, and trained in both Europe and the U.S., I admire Frank Bowling's intentionally itinerant education, ambitious cultivation of a global perspective and defiance of limitations imposed on Black identities," he says. "'Suncrush' is a vibrant reminder of the tremendous yet often overlooked contributions of people of African descent from South America and the Caribbean to the culture of the United States."