

# The Time is Always Now Artists Reframe the Black Figure

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The National Portrait Gallery opens its spring exhibition, *The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure*, a showcase of work by 22 leading African diasporic artists, working in the UK and USA. Exploring the depiction of the Black form within portraiture, the exhibition will feature contemporary works - made between the year 2000 and today - that consider and celebrate figuration as a means of illuminating the richness and complexity of Black life.

Supported by Bank of America and curated by writer Ekow Eshun, former Director of the Institute of Contemporary Arts, *The Time is Always Now* seeks to question what it means to visualise the Black body. The exhibition's title - taken from an essay on desegregation by the American author, James Baldwin - was chosen by Eshun for its sense of urgency; a reminder that while Black artists are experiencing a moment of flourishing, that their work exists within an always-evolving artistic lineage. Through the mediums of painting, drawing and sculpture, the 55 contemporary works included in the exhibition respond to three core themes - *Double Consciousness*, *Persistence of History* and *Our Aliveness*.

The exhibition will feature the work of leading artists including Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Hurvin Anderson, Michael Armitage, Jordan Casteel, Noah Davis, Godfried Donkor, Kimathi Donkor, Denzil Forrester, Lubaina Himid, Claudette Johnson, Titus Kaphar, Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Chris Ofili, Jennifer Packer, Nathaniel Mary Quinn, Thomas J Price, Amy Sherald, Lorna Simpson, Henry Taylor and Barbara Walker.

*Double Consciousness* - a theory first introduced by the African American sociologist, W.E.B Du Bois, in 1903 - is the initial focus of the exhibition, with works exploring concepts of being, belonging and Blackness as a psychological state. *Double Consciousness* will examine the ways in which artists see themselves, as well as how they are seen and framed by others, navigating real and imagined identities.

The first portraits encountered in the exhibition will be by British artist, **Claudette Johnson**, whose gestural, pastel-on-paper works depict Black bodies on an imposing scale, with figures that resist their confinement within the edges of the paper. Alongside these are a presentation of works by **Amy Sherald**, whose life-size, greyscale portraits of African American subjects shift the focus away from the sitters' skin colour onto their interiority, enabling them to claim the visibility that has long been denied to Black people in art. The figures within Johnson and Sherald's portraits have a direct gaze, one that challenges a viewer to explore the difference between looking and seeing. Indeed, *The Time is Always Now* invites a shift in perspective, encouraging viewers to 'see through' the eyes of Black artists and the figures they depict, rather than simply 'look at' them. The American figurative artist Nathaniel Mary Quinn's fragmented portraits, which include disproportionately large and abstracted facial features, explore how self-perceptions, and those made by others, are physically expressed.

*Double Consciousness* also explores perpetuated stereotypes and the memorialisation of Black lives. A new work by British artist, **Thomas J Price** - created especially for *The Time is Always Now* and displayed for the first time - will be shown alongside works by American artists, **Noah Davis** and **Loma Simpson**. While Price's larger-than-life, fictional female figure, titled *As Sounds Turn to Noise* (2023), will challenge the concept of memorialisation in Britain and the under-representation of Black people within art history, Simpson's *Rope Chain* (2021) reveals, through repetition, the reinforcement of stereotypes in the everyday imagery we consume. Frequently depicting the everyday lives of Black Americans, in scenes that often blend the real and surreal, Noah Davis' *Black Wall Street* (2008) also builds on notions of history and memorialisation. The title refers to Greenwood, Oklahoma - known as 'the Black Wall Street' - prior to the moment in 1921 when it became the site of a two-day-long massacre by a white mob, one of the worst incidents of racial violence in American history. In *Mary Jane* (2008), a young girl wearing the titular shoe stands with her hands clasped in front of a background of abstracted black and green swirls that coalesce into a hedge. Gazing out plaintively at the viewer, her prim appearance suggests a latent narrative, but does not reveal further detail.

In contrast to works that make reference to the tensions of stereotypes and the trauma of history, *Double Consciousness* will also explore the ways in which artists celebrate Black identity. American painter, **Jennifer Packer**, makes the deliberate choice in her work to depict those closest to her. In a desire to celebrate and connect with her subjects, she paints partly from imagination and memory, like **Michael Armitage**, whose dreamlike paintings will be displayed alongside Packer's.

Painted on traditional Lubugo bark cloth, allusions to Western art history permeate Armitage's paintings. In *Conjestina* (2017), the Kenyan-British artist depicts the Kenyan middleweight boxer, Conjestina Achieng, standing in front of a wall decorated with an abstract, Gauguinesque landscape.

*This second Dreamer* (2017), a self-portrait sculpture by **Wangechi Mutu**, portrays the head of an African woman, reclined on a large wooden block as if in sleep. Mutu's sculpture lies in front of Armitage's painting *Conjestina*. The cast-bronze's eyes shut, are reminiscent of other earlier works by Wangechi including *Sleeping Heads* (2007), *Mwotaji the dreamer* (2015), and *Fallen Heads* (2010), all of which point to her original inspiration from classical African masks, Native American totems and Oceanic tiki figures, also inspirations for Constantin Brancusi's *Sleeping Muse* (1910). Through this reference, Wangechi makes a 21st century, Afrofuturist-feminist reactivation of an iconic work.

Completing *Double Consciousness* are four works by **Kerry James Marshall**, which invoke a dialogue with Western art historical movements. Addressing the invisibility ascribed to Black bodies in the Western pictorial tradition, the artist reinserts Black figures, moving his subjects from the periphery to the centre.

Artists' responses to art and history, as well as the exploration of presence - and absence - in historical narratives, continue in the second core theme of the exhibition, *Persistence of History*, which begins with a display of five drawings by **Barbara Walker**. In *Vanishing Point 24 (Mignard)* (2021), the British artist recreates a historical portrait of *Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth with an unknown female attendant* (1682) by Pierre Mignard, which is part of the National Portrait Gallery's own Collection. Walker's drawing reduces the named Duchess of Portsmouth to an embossed outline and, instead, shines a light on the 'unknown female attendant,' rendering the young servant girl in exquisite detail. Similarly, the multidisciplinary American artist **Titus Kaphar** confronts history by deconstructing how it is conveyed through the visual language of Western painting. Like Walker, Kaphar draws attention to what has been removed or forgotten, reconfiguring Western art history to include the African American subject. In *Seeing Through Time 2* (2018), the artist combines two paintings - one to conceal and one to reveal - again, removing the presence of Louise de Kéroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, and replacing her silhouette with a contemporary Black female figure.

Building on this, **Kimathi Donkor** also uses the tradition of history painting to restage important events from history and tell the often forgotten or overlooked narratives of people who fought for freedom. In *Nanny of the Maroons' Fifth Act of Mercy* (2012), the artists bring to life the story of Queen Nanny, who led the Maroon guerrillas that fought the British in Jamaica during the 1700s, using a composition borrowed from Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Portrait of Jane Fleming* (c.1778) - a sitter whose family were involved with enslaving people in Jamaica. Paintings by the British-Ghanaian artist, **Godfried Donkor**, will be displayed on the opposing wall, exploring the triumphs of Black protagonists. *St Bill Richmond, the black terror* (2019) depicts African American heavyweight boxer Bill Richmond, both of whom were born into slavery and fought their way to freedom. Using gold leaf, the artist adds haloes to the figures, elevating them to the status of saintly icons, martyred not for their religious beliefs but in the fight for racial equality. Further hidden histories are uncovered in the work of **Lubaina Himid**. *Le Rodeur: The Exchange* (2016) is a painting that responds to a case of blindness that struck the French slave ship, *Le Rôdeur*, in 1819. Without their sight, the captives were deemed worthless and were thrown overboard to drown. Refusing direct representation in her work, Himid instead encourages viewers to imagine the victims' fear and disorientation by removing any sense of cohesion.

The third theme of *The Time is Always Now is Our Aliveness*, featuring works that respond to assertions of Black assembly and gathering. While many of the exhibited artworks depict scenes of joyful gathering, references are also made to histories of segregation and oppositions to public expressions of Black sociality. This dual theme of hostility and welcome is explored by British-Jamaican artist, **Hurvin Anderson**. His series of paintings, which unpack the cultural significance of the barbershop to the Caribbean diasporic community, will be shown alongside *Itchin & Scratchin* (2019) by **Denzil Forrester**, a painting that combines the Grenada-born British artist's childhood memories of Caribbean carnivals with the intoxicating atmosphere of the London dub clubs he frequented in the early 1980s; and **Chris Ofili**, whose dancing figures reference the mythical *douens* of Trinidadian folklore and the work of Malian photographer Malick Sidibé.

Works depicting the domestic will be displayed alongside works that capture experiences of life in public space. Charcoal, pastel and pencil drawings by **Toyin Ojih Odutola**, depicting wealthy Black figures in fictional homes, consider the social construct of class in relation to race, sexuality and gender, while *Still You Bloom in This Land of No Gardens* (2021) by **Njideka Akunyili Crosby** portrays the Nigerian-born, Los Angeles-based artist in her garden - surrounded by plants found in both Nigeria and America. **Jordan Casteel's** figurative paintings capture intimate moments with people she encounters on the streets of Harlem or on the New York Subway. Her portraits give visibility to those who are often overlooked in public spaces, while **Henry Taylor's** drive to capture life extends to the communities closest to him, revealing the social and political forces that come to bear on American life.

In this final section of the exhibition, visitors will themselves be invited to gather together, interacting with each other and the artworks around them by sitting within a specially constructed structure at the centre of the space.