

# When We See Us A Century of Black Figuration in Painting

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Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe is part of *When We See Us. A Century of Black Figuration in Painting*, at the Kunstmuseum Basel, Switzerland.

In *When We See Us. A Century of Black Figuration in Painting*, the Kunstmuseum Basel presents a kaleidoscope of Black figurative painting from the past one hundred years. Held at the museum's Gegenwart venue, the exhibition was originally produced by the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, Cape Town, and gathers more than 150 paintings by around 120 artists, most of which have never been seen in Switzerland. Its focus is on the power and political dimension of Black joy.

The exhibition's title is inspired by the Netflix miniseries *When They See Us* (2019), in which the African-American director Ava DuVernay examines how white people indiscriminately perceive and wrongfully prosecute Black teenagers as potential criminals and hence as a threat.

The shift from "They" to "We" indicates a reversal of perspective, making room for the subjects' own perceptions. The artists' views take center stage, revealing how the lives of Black people have time and again been represented by others in flat, false, and distorted ways.

*When We See Us* is the result of extensive research conducted by Koyo Kouoh, executive director and chief curator at Zeitz MOCAA, Cape Town, and her team. The world's largest museum for African contemporary art presented the comprehensive survey from November 2022 until September 2023. It captures a Black self-image and the self-empowerment of Black artists who, after centuries of white dominance over the art canon, are writing their own art history.

At the Kunstmuseum Basel, the exhibition comes on the heels of a series of monographic shows of work by African-American artists: Theaster Gates, Sam Gilliam, Kara Walker, and, most recently, Carrie Mae Weems. Those and many other exhibitions all over the world have addressed Blackness primarily through the lens of trauma and aspects of colonialism. A different approach is emphasized by curators Koyo Kouoh and Tandazani Dhlakama: *When We See Us* turns the spotlight on everyday life and the "power of joy," dismantling stereotypical depictions of racism, violence, or crisis.

The exhibition is designed to offer viewers a fresh perspective that is celebratory, vibrant, and dignified. "We need talk much more about ourselves in ways that uplift our spirits," the curators say.

## Everyday life in six chapters

More than a hundred and fifty works of art are gathered in six chapters titled Triumph and Emancipation, Sensuality, Spirituality, The Everyday, Joy and Revelry and Repose.

The galleries are not arranged in chronological succession, nor are the works grouped by artists' countries of origin or residence.

Organized under these universal themes, the exhibition also demonstrates for the first time that artists working in geographically diverse settings in Africa and the African diaspora engaged with the same subjects.

The resulting iconographic parallels are unmistakable, for instance, in the works of the African-American artist Romare Bearden (1911–1988) and his South African contemporary George Pemba (1912–2001), or in comparing the art of Chéri Samba (Congolese, b. 1956) and Barkley L. Hendricks (African-American, 1945–2017).

When We See Us takes up the entire Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart. As at Zeitz MOCAA, the exhibition design and spatial translation is by Wolff Architects in Cape Town. The composer and sound artist Neo Muyanga has curated the sound stations. A timeline contextualizes the genesis of the works on display, and an audio guide adapted for the Kunstmuseum Basel supplies narrative context for the works.

A dynamic program of events accompanies the exhibition, featuring music, literature, workshops, guided tours, discussion panels, and academic events. A specially designed programming space on the ground floor serves both as a public lounge for visitors and as a gathering and event venue for workshops, seminars, concerts, and other formats.

## Chapters and artists

### *Triumph and Emancipation*

At the heart of this chapter is the pride of people of African descent in their own history and achievements—won in the face of extraordinary adversity and centuries of imperial oppression. On the museum’s ground floor, visitors encounter world-famous icons, as in Chéri Chérin’s painting *Obama Revolution* (2009), who see eye to eye with nameless yet strong figures in portraits like Ibrahim El-Salahi’s *Portrait of a Sudanese Gentleman* (1951). The sitters are guardians of ancestral cultural treasures, politicians committed to their peoples, and individuals who represent success and social recognition.

Artists:

Benny Andrews, Margaret Taylor Burroughs, Chéri Chérin, Kudzanai Chiurai, Aboubacar Diané, Ibrahim El-Salahi, Ben Enwonwu, Gherdai Hassell, Wifredo Lam, Akinola Lasekan, Mustafa Maluka, Eria Nsubuga ‘Sane’, Augustin Okoye, George Pemba, Chéri Samba, Mmapula Mmakgabo Helen Sebidi, Gerard Sekoto, Amy Sherald, Katlego Tlabela, Cyprien Tokoudagba

### *Sensuality*

In *Sensuality*, people appear in depictions radiating an intimacy and confidence that the Western visual canon has rarely, if ever, allowed them. Roméo Mivekannin’s *Le modèle noir, d’après Félix Vallotton* (2019) makes direct reference to that canon, as does Sahara Longe’s *Reclining Nude with Lemon* (2021). The chapter surveys the manifold spectrums of sensuality, love, and intimate affection. What all works have in common is the protagonists’ self-determination.

Artists:

Nina Chanel Abney, Olusegun Adejumo, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Maxwell Alexandre, Tiffany Alfonseca, Dominic Chambers, Somaya Critchlow, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Elladj Lincy Deloumeaux, Aboubacar Diané, Ibrahima Kébé, Yoyo Lander, Sahara Longe, Danielle McKinney, Roméo Mivekannin, Moké, Geoffrey Mukasa, Chris Ofili, Kambui Olujimi, Tschabalala Self, Monsengo Shula, Mickalene Thomas, Bob Thompson, Kehinde

### *Spirituality*

Black everyday life, the curators argue, is almost unthinkable without spirituality. This chapter unfolds the “triple heritage” the Kenyan-American writer Ali Mazrui (1933–2014) portrayed in his book *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*: showing Black life in its capacity to incorporate Indigenous, Islamic, and Christian traditions and rituals. The works on display visualize lived spirituality; among them are Jacob Lawrence’s *Genesis Creation* (1989) and Michael Armitage’s *The Dumb Oracle* (2019).

Artists:

Michael Armitage, Gerard Bhengu, Wilson Bigaud, Edouard Duval-Carrié, Aaron Douglas, Scherezade García, Jacob Lawrence, Cassi Namoda, Malangatana Ngwenya, Kambui Olujimi, Emma Pap', Naudline Pierre, Prosper Pierre-Louis, María Magdalena Campos Pons, Cinga Samson, Gerard Sekoto, Devan Shimoyama, Alex Shyngle, Sthembiso Sibisi, Olivier Souffrant, Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Nirit Takele

### *The Everyday*

Paintings like Aaron Douglas's *Boy with a Toy Plane* (1938), William H. Johnson's *The Reader* (1939), Joy Labinjo's *Gisting in the Kitchen* (2018), or Johnny Arts's advertising poster for *Ozor International Barber also Specialist in Hair Dying and Shampooing* (1962) illustrate the beauty of everyday life.

The chapter presents public and private scenes that capture instants of joy or contemplation: among family, in the community, at play, in school, carrying water, or braiding hair.

Artists:

Johnny Arts, Malang Badji, Romare Bearden, Aaron Douglas, Gervais Emmanuel Ducasse, Ben Enwonwu, Ablade Glover, Gavin Janties, William H. Johnson, Kangudia, Ibrahima Kébé, Joy Labinjo, Petson Lombe, Marvelous Mangena, Luis Meque, Moké, Meleko Mokgosi, Richard Mudariki, Theresa Mungure, Lavar Munroe, Chemu Ng'ok, Nicholous Njau, Boris Nzebo, Antoine Obin, Télémaque Obin, Bruce Onobrakpeya, George Pemba, Horace Pippin, Kingsley Sambo, Gerard Sekoto, Ament Soi, Moustapha Souley, Edward Saidi Tingatinga, Zandile Tshabalala, Sane Wadu, Richard Witikani

### *Joy and Revelry*

Festive moments and leisure pursuits come into focus in the chapter *Joy and Revelry*: as the curators note, there is always time for a song or a dance. Esiri Erheriene-Essi's characters in *The Birthday Party* (2021) sing for anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, while Philomé Obin's in *Un mardi de Carnaval* (1960) walk in a parade and Romare Bearden's in *Jazz Rhapsody* (1982) listen to the rhythms.

Artists:

Romare Bearden, Esiri Erheriene-Essi, Barkley L. Hendricks, Clementine Hunter, Jacob Lawrence, Arjan Martins, Moké, Cinthia Sifa Mulanga, Eric Ndlovu, Nicholous Njau, Nestor Vuza Ntoko, Philomé Obin, George Pemba, Chéri Samba, Matundu Tanda, Katlego Tlabela, Charles White

### *Repose*

Scenes of rest, no less vital than moments of revelry, are set out on the third gallery floor at the Kunstmuseum Basel | Gegenwart. Figures loll on the sofa, as in Wangari Mathenge's *Sundials and Sonnets* (2019), stroll through the countryside, as in Toyin Ojih Odutola's *Surveying the Family Seat* (2017), or simply sit down to enjoy the quiet, as in Kudzanai-Violet Hwami's *An evening in Mazowe* (2019)—relaxed people everywhere, by themselves or in conversation with family or friends.

Artists:

Cornelius Annor, Gideon Appah, Firelei Báez, Amoako Boafo, Beauford Delaney, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami, Wangari Mathenge, Neo Matloga, Sungi Mlengyea, Ian Mwesiga, Thenjiwe Niki Nkosi, Toyin Ojih Odutola, Eniwaye Oluwaseyi, Marc Padeu, Zéh Palito, Otis Kwame Kye Quaicoe, Henry Taylor, Zandile Tshabalala, Kehinde Wiley, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye

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