

The New York Times

GUEST ESSAY

Piecing Together a Black Identity, and a Whole Black World

Dec. 11, 2023



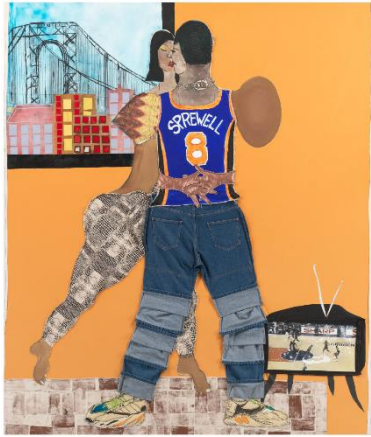
Yashua Klos's "Uncle Scott," 2022, is included at the Frist Art Museum's "Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage" in Nashville through Dec. 31. Sikkema Jenkins & Co.

By Margaret Renkl

Ms. Renkl is a contributing Opinion writer in Nashville who covers flora, fauna, politics and culture in the American South.

One of the greatest astonishments of "Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary Collage," on display through Dec. 31 at the Frist Art Museum in Nashville, is that no major institution has ever before mounted a comprehensive showcase of work by Black collage artists. One of the most original things about the exhibition, in other words, is the fact of its existence.

It is difficult to capture in language even a hint of the scope and the ambition of the more than 80 works in this show. They range from jewel-like to vast, from the deceptively simple to the mind-bogglingly complex. These works make use of every imaginable two-dimensional item that might be combined into a collage, and some three-dimensional ones as well. The Harlem-born artist Tschabalala Self, for example, includes an entire pair of jeans in her work titled "Sprewell."



Tschabalala Self's 'Sprewell,' 2020. Pilar Corrias and Galerie Eva Presenhuber; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum

The New York-based artist Rashid Johnson incorporates mirrored tiles, oak flooring and black soap, among other unconventional elements, in “Untitled Escape Collage.” The Jamaican-born Paul Anthony Smith includes found flags in “CARICOM.” These artists, and many others, are working far beyond the tradition of a form that began as *papiers collés*, or glued papers.

The Cubist artists Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso are generally credited — although this is a debatable point — with having invented collage as a fine-art genre. Bringing together disparate elements from a variety of sources, the form itself echoes the modernist insistence on fragmentation, its celebration of rebellion, its repudiation of predictability and conformity. Often constructed from found materials, collage can also be a very democratic medium, accessible to the most impoverished of starving artists.

It’s in part this insistence on democracy, this full claiming of democracy, that may make collage a particularly valuable medium in the context of Black artists. It is ideally suited for capturing — and considering and confronting — the wide array of experiences within the African diaspora. The need to construct an identity as an artist within multiple cultural and historical contexts, some of them deeply at odds with one another, is a challenge that collage addresses through its very nature.

“The notion of collage is very rooted in the African American experience,” the Memphis-born artist Derek Fordjour told the Nashville Scene’s Laura Hutson Hunter. “It’s a way of putting old and new things together, or finding new life for old objects or old materials.” As in “Airborne Double,” which features two drum majors captured mid-leap, Mr. Fordjour’s work often comments on “the Black figure, the Black entertainer, the Black athlete” in a country where working at the pinnacle of mastery always comes with the risk of backlash for Black creators and competitors.



Derek Fordjour's 'Airborne Double,' 2022. David Kordansky Gallery and Petzel Gallery; Daniel Greer

One thing a collective exhibition like this makes clear is that hybrid works — even those that aren’t constructed principally of collage materials — nevertheless work entirely within the spirit of the medium.



Kerry James Marshall's collage 'Century Twenty One,' at the Frist Art Museum's 'Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage' in Nashville through 31 December. John Schweikert/Frist Art Museum

“Century Twenty One,” by the Birmingham, Ala.-born, Chicago-based artist Kerry James Marshall, is primarily a painting made against a background grid constructed of sheets of paper glued to an upstretched canvas. In this work, the central image is a haloed Black man who is running through a burning forest partly surrounded by a white picket fence. Signs on extended pickets frame the piece. One reads “Open.” The other reads “House.” A smaller sign in the foreground, nearly blacked out, reads, “For Sale by Owner.”

In a single work, Mr. Marshall manages to address a huge sweep of racist history in America — from the slaveholder’s claim to human ownership, to the traditional intimidation tools of white supremacists, to redlining Black neighborhoods as a way of devaluing Black homeownership and limiting generational wealth. The fragmentation so characteristic of collage as an art form works primarily as the background of the painting, but it adds powerfully to the truth of this work.

Collage is different from almost any other visual medium. Unlike paint or pencil or crayon or ink, for example, its components bring with them the life they experienced — the role they played, the meaning they conveyed — before a human consciousness combined them to create a unique, inimitable work of art. Each collage exists in conversation with its own past and with the conversations it participated in before it even existed. Each collage carries within it the literal world from which it was made.



Deborah Roberts. ‘Let Them Be Children,’ 2018. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts; Sydney Collins

In her depictions of Black children, for example, the Austin-based artist Deborah Roberts has made use of not just magazine and internet images of Black children but also the eyes of James Baldwin and the fist of Muhammad Ali. In such works, Ms. Roberts is commenting on more than

just the “otherness” she discusses in an artist’s statement on her website. She is commenting on more, even, than the failure of the white world to recognize Black beauty and the damage that this failure does to children.

She is also celebrating the moral clarity of James Baldwin’s gaze and the unapologetic strength of Muhammad Ali. And she is doing all that while recognizing what this country did to both James Baldwin, who died a resident of France, where he fled to escape the persecution of Black Americans during the 1940s, and Muhammad Ali — who after taking countless punches to the head for the enjoyment of audiences — suffered for decades from the debilitating effects of Parkinson’s syndrome.

Ms. Roberts’s recent work returns to her origins as a painter, with fewer collage features than it contained earlier in her career. But she credits collage with providing the mechanism for transmitting her central preoccupation as an artist: “Collage offered me the opportunity to break up this monolithic idea of Blackness,” she told Scheherazade Tillet in an online conversation for The Brooklyn Rail.

To the immense credit of the Frist’s senior curator Kathryn E. Delmez and her team, “Multiplicity,” like so many of the artworks it features, spills out from the tight frame of the museum itself. Portions of the exhibition are on display at Fisk University and Tennessee State University, two of Nashville’s historically Black colleges, and William Edmondson Park, named for a self-taught sculptor who was the first Black artist to have a solo show at New York’s Museum of Modern Art. When it leaves Nashville, “Multiplicity” will travel to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and after that to the Phillips Collection in Washington.

For those who won’t have a chance to see the original works — or for those who see them and fall in love with them — a lavish catalog published by Yale University Press is a worthy companion to the exhibition. It provides not just beautiful reproductions of the artworks but also commentary on the way these artists, and others, have used collage to address the full range of Black experience.

“One can tell a great deal about a country by what it chooses to remember: by what graces the walls of its museums, by what monuments are venerated, and by what parts of its history are embraced,” writes Lonnie G. Bunch III in an essay for The Atlantic. “One can tell even more by what a nation chooses to forget: what memories are erased and what aspects of its past are feared.” With “Multiplicity,” an exhibition brilliantly and lovingly displayed by a museum nestled right in the heart of a red state controlled by elected officials determined to erase as much of the truth of Black history as they can possibly get away with, the Frist has taken a major step toward correcting a shameful void.