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See the People: (Re) Framing American Art

You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.

—Angela Davis, 2014

From its origin to its contemporary moment, the United States has been a nation conceived and constructed by various groups of people, while the Americas themselves have always consisted of two continents plus Central America. Why, then, for over two centuries, has the traditional American art-historical narrative remained predominantly Eurocentric and male in essentially every museum dedicated to the subject, as well as in every encyclopedic art museum in the nation? For me the answer is very simple—it’s purposeful.

We know very well that art museums are some of the strongest cultural bastions of western colonization. Through very deliberate exclusionary art-historical, acquisition, deaccession, and exhibition practices, museums have decisively produced the very state of exclusion that publicly engaged art historians and curators are currently working hard to dismantle. As one such curator who specializes in American visual culture, I work diligently to illustrate that this reality has never been coincidental. From the founding of the nation’s first art museums, to the establishment of American art as an academic discipline and the development of curatorial practices around American “fine art,” American art museums and the collections they house have existed as material extensions of systems founded upon genocide and maintained by various practices of marginalization, omission, and erasure.

If we are to eschew this exclusionary culture in American art and its institutions, it is imperative that we change the value system upon which both our art museums and our art history is founded. I recently attended a lecture given by Titus Kaphar, the MacArthur award-winning contemporary artist, who asked, “Why have we amended the US constitution several times to address issues of racism and sexism but never substantially amended the art history?”¹ Think about that. Despite decades of exhibitions that have paid homage to women artists and artists of color, how many museums have moved substantively to create American art galleries that offer a more honest display of the diverse array of American artists working before the end of World War II that we know were not white, male, and living on the east coast?² There is no fundamental way to produce a genuine institutional and disciplinary culture of equity and inclusion in museums until we heal the trauma resulting from decades of building an American art narrative steeped in the values of white patriarchal supremacy. And to do that, we must begin to be honest with ourselves.

In 2017, Latanya Autry and Mike Murawski were brutally honest when they launched "Museums Are Not Neutral," recognizing the ways in which museum concepts of "neutrality," "objectivity," "normality," "professionalism," and "high quality" function as a status quo system that perpetuates oppression, racism, injustice, and colonialism.³ This is the type of honesty that must be the rule, not the exception, if American art is to remain relevant to audiences outside of its discipline and if museums are to become cultural institutions that truly want to be engaged within our communities. Notice I said, "engaged within our communities" as a purposeful linguistic refusal of the traditional idea that success can be measured by the ways in which our communities engage with us, meaning, who is actually visiting the museum. This is not a reliable metric, because we know that certain groups in our communities are not coming. So how can we ever claim success when we know our traditional audiences do not and in some cases have never reflected the demographic of the communities in which we reside? To answer this question, I've spent my career giving lectures and creating programming, reinstallations, and exhibitions to demonstrate that not only are more truthful interpretations of permanent collections necessary to maintain diverse audiences; they are unequivocally essential to the development of equity and inclusion.⁴

The process of inclusion and equity within museums doesn't occur through reinterpretation alone. It actually starts with building genuine relationships between community members and the collection itself. This is why I've always found the confusion that museums exhibit (pun intended) around issues of inclusion to be so perplexing and sometimes infuriating. If the museum's permanent collection represents white people and clearly celebrates European and Euro-American visual culture as "fine," "genius," and "universal"; if both the board of directors and 90% of the professional staff is white; if black and brown presence in the institution is heavily reliant upon school group visits, security staff, facilities staff, and only appears in the galleries as a one-off or an addendum, why exactly are we surprised that our audiences are primarily white? The answer is, we're not surprised. The inquiry itself and the feigned astonishment that often accompanies it are blatantly and purposefully ignorant. So whenever the million-dollar question of how to better engage diverse audiences is posed, I always answer with the following question, "What would it look like if communities of color, the disabled, and LGBTQ+ communities were centered at every level of an institution in the exact same way as the white upper and middle-classes?" It would mean that inclusion would have to be central to the functionality of all museum departments, which inherently means that the institutional value system would have to decenter white patriarchy.

Although I am an Americanist, I am a Black woman from Detroit, trained as a critical race scholar in African American Studies. This is my worldview, so my curatorial philosophy is rooted in a working-class, womanist value system that does not uphold white patriarchy as a standard of universality or excellence. Yet, as a woman of color, I am cognizant of the fact that within greater society white-maleness has always been and is still considered to be "right." With that, at the heart of my curatorial approach is an understanding of the traditional American art-historical narrative and its maintenance within museum collections as more insidious than instructive. Hence, I am in the very beginning stages of planning *See the People: (Re) Framing the Americas*, my upcoming reinterpretation of the Nicholas H. and Marguerite Lilly Noyes Suite of American Art at the Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields. The project integrates ancient Peruvian vessels by Moche peoples, Mayan vases, American and European painting, Chinese export porcelain, British decorative art, and works of Contemporary art to visualize not only that ancient America was a

flourishing region before the development of the colonial United States, but that it was the very systematizing of European colonization that forever altered the Americas as a region.

See the People employs a genealogical methodology that de-centers the United States and its European heritage as the foundations of American art history. Instead, the project begins in northern Peru, with stunning portrait ceramics created by the Moche, and in ancient Mesoamerica, with beautifully embellished Mayan vases. In considering Moche ceramic portraits and Mayan hieroglyphs as some of the earliest forms of American art, the project asks viewers to recognize nations and art practices indigenous to the Americas as central to the region’s art history.⁵

A key aspect of the Moche and Mayan galleries that both I and the interpretation team are hoping to realize is the inclusion of works by contemporary artist Kukuli Velarde and audio interpretation from local individuals with ancestral connections to South and Central America. Beyond affirming the fact that these nations, their descendants, and their artistic traditions continue to thrive throughout the United States, inclusion of these elements will allow visitors to experience the Moche and Mayan objects not simply through the institution’s eye, but through the voices of descendants from both regions.⁶ In this manner, visitors learn about the objects from people who actually have experience and deep connection with the cultural traditions that originally produced the objects.

Secondly, *See the People* positions Tim Hawkinson’s *Möbius Ship* (2006) as the interpretive fulcrum upon which the subsequent galleries turn. Hawkinson’s piece signifies the American literary classic *Moby Dick*, the processes of bottle ship building, and, most importantly, the mathematical phenomena of the Möbius Strip—a continuous loop. To deconstruct the term “vessel” as theme and object, *Möbius Ship* will be installed with maritime works by Thomas Whitcomb, [Gilbert Stuart’s portrait of Vice-Admiral Edward Hughes](#), [Charles Willson Peale and Charles Peale Polk’s portrait of George Washington at Princeton](#), and Paul de Lamerie’s stunning silver cup (just to name a few) to show that over time the United States developed through both the forced and voluntary movement of various nautical, household, decorative, and human vessels traded between various nations. I’m hoping to secure the loan of works by Titus Kaphar, Joshua Johnson, and the West Indian silversmith Peter Bentzon to demonstrate the multifaceted lives lived by African Americans who were both enslaved and free during the colonial and antebellum periods. The gallery will also address issues of sexism and post-colonialism through object groupings that include contemporary works by Anila Quayyum Agha and Holly Brigham.

More pointedly, this gallery will present beautifully rendered portraits of British Admirals, American Presidents, and Euro-American families to contextualize the ways in which they oversaw, maintained, and benefited both directly and indirectly from the erasure of First Peoples and the enslavement of countless Africans as a means to establish early American economies, including its art market. The gallery will also illuminate how these economies simultaneously established white Americans as the “universal” representations of physical beauty, their institutions as the “universal” representations of excellence, and their value systems as the “universal” representation of “normality.” When a culture normalizes genocide and enslavement as a means to capital and a justification for magnificence, what would it not do for profit and claims of beauty?⁷ This is just one of many questions my work poses to American art as a discipline and to art museums as cultural institutions. Thus, *See the People* aims to not simply complicate the story of American art; its very goal is to

articulate and dismantle the fictive and oppressive loops traditional American art history and museum practices have upheld for so long.

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Notes

Editors’ Note: In the fall of 2019, we solicited responses to our Bully Pulpit, “Isn’t It Time for Art History to Go Public?” guest-edited by Laura M. Holzman. To see all four responses, please visit <http://editions.lib.umn.edu/panorama/article/talk-back-issue-6-1>. To see the original Bully Pulpit, please visit <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2271>.

Dr. Morgan was one of the first to respond to our call for feedback on “Isn’t It Time for Art History to Go Public?”—before we set a suggested word limit and other parameters. Her response is included here in full.

- ¹ Titus Kaphar, “Making Space for Black History: Amending the Landscape of American Art,” Lecture presented as part of the Sutphin Lecture Series at the University of Indianapolis, Indianapolis, IN., November 7, 2019.
- ² The Brooklyn Museum of Art is well known for the various ways it has reinstalled its American collection to address these issues; see Jessica Murphy, “Before and After: ASKing about American Art” (blog post), Brooklyn Museum, April 21, 2017, <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/2017/04/21/before-and-after-asking-about-american-art>; and Holland Cotter, “Placement Is Politics in Brooklyn Museum Reinstallation,” *New York Times*, May 19, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/20/arts/design/placement-is-politics-in-brooklyn-museum-reinstallation.html>. Other institutions like the Worcester Art Museum purposely changed gallery labels to address slavery and its legacies; see Sarah E. Bond, “Can Art Museums Help Illuminate Early American Connections To Slavery?” *Hyperallergic*, April 25, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/439716/can-art-museums-help-illuminate-early-american-connections-to-slavery/>; and Sarah Cascone, “A Massachusetts Museum Is Taking a New Approach to Wall Text: Revealing Early American Portrait Sitters With Ties to Slavery,” *artnet news*, June 19, 2018, <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/worcester-art-museum-slavery-wall-text-1305407>.
- ³ La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski. “Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together,” *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, no. 2 (Fall 2019), <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2277>.
- ⁴ For more about my curatorial work, see Dan Grossman, “Dr. Kelli Morgan Brings Diversity to Newfields,” *NUVO*, July 4, 2019, https://www.nuvo.net/arts/dr-kelli-morgan-brings-diversity-to-newfields/article_c5f88892-9dd4-11e9-b17b-53b058625072.html; Mason King, “Q&A with Kelli Morgan, IMA’s associate curator of American art,” *Indianapolis Business Journal*, July 19, 2019, <https://www.ibj.com/articles/shaking-up-the-ima>; and Dab Grossman, “A Moment of Change and Reckoning at Newfields,” *NUVO*, March 17, 2019, https://www.nuvo.net/arts/a-moment-of-change-and-reckoning-at-newfields/article_815424e8-48fd-11e9-9fao-2f01f9d33edo.html.
- ⁵ Moche people were one of the first nations to perfect and produce realist portraiture in large numbers. See Christopher B. Donnan, *Moche Portraits from Ancient Peru* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003).
- ⁶ Based in Philadelphia, Kukuli Velarde is of Peruvian descent and creates work in the traditions of Moche portrait ceramics and Nazca cultural traditions. Her *Plunder Me Baby* series offers a group objects who have come to life after centuries of rest, only to realize that they are no longer in the hands of their original creators or in the cultural spaces of their origin. See “Plunder Me, Baby” on Velarde’s website: http://www.kukulivelarde.com/site/Ceramic_Work/Pages/PLUNDER_ME_BABY.html.

⁷ This question was taken from a version of a similar question posed by Nikole Hannah-Jones, lead journalist for the 1619 Project for the *New York Times Magazine*, during a recent lecture where she asked, "When you can torture people into profit, what would you not do for profit?" Nikole Hannah-Jones, 24th Annual Public Conversation Featuring Nikole Hannah-Jones, from the Spirit and Place Festival: Revolution, Indianapolis, IN, November 10, 2019.