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The Art of Remembering: Essays on African American Art and History

By Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw

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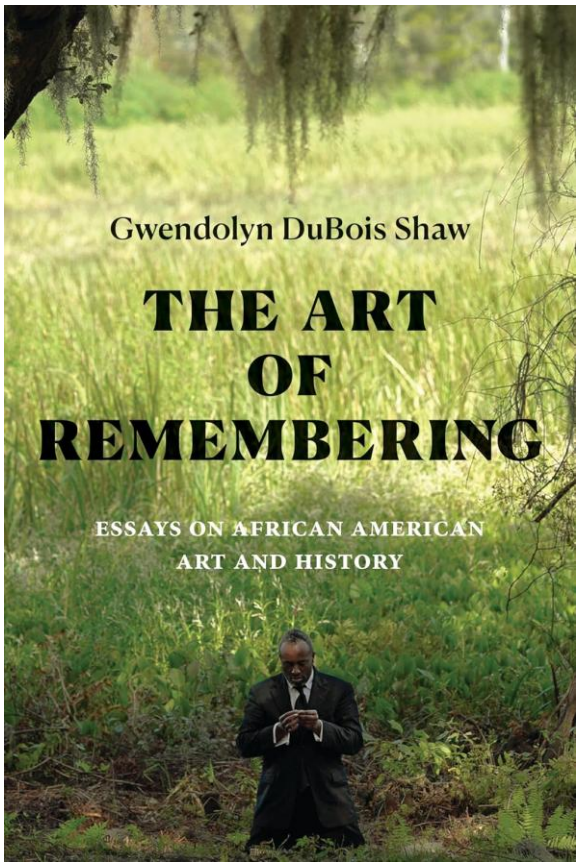

Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw's introduction to *The Art of Remembering: Essays on African American Art and History* concisely lays out critical objectives and methodologies in approaching strategies of remembering and disremembering in African American art, art history, curatorial practice, and exhibition history. Considered within the contexts of critical race art history and visual culture studies, the book draws from the concepts of remembering and disremembering derived from Toni Morrison's 1987 novel *Beloved*, defined as Black navigation through and reaction to the trauma of enslavement and psychological survival born out of the Middle Passage.

A compelling aspect of the volume's introductory chapter is the author's recounting her own biography in relationship to her interest in (African) American art history. Moreover, Shaw's personal approach and subjective engagement with the field serves as a critique of art criticism itself, as she acknowledges the history of disremembering, dismissing, and undervaluing African American art in both the past and present by the subtle and not-so-subtle machinations of white supremacy. For Shaw, the role of today's critic of African American art rests on the historical and moral obligation to "remember" by reviving or proposing "new memories of Black artistic practices" (4).

Many of the chapters in the volume expose Shaw's skepticism of the attempt to attain the elusive notion of "truth" about "objects, images, and the individuals who made them" (5). Hers is a refreshing and eye-opening skepticism that exposes frustration with traditional

approaches to art history that ignore or disavow the idea that works of art can have multiple interpretations (that is, "truths"). Shaw admits, unapologetically, that some of her conclusions may be frustrating in their open-endedness and may not be satisfactory to all. At the same time, she has no qualms about getting into the weeds and giving specific works of art scrutinized formal and historically contextualized readings. The first artist Shaw engages to demonstrate the power of remembering and disremembering, as the binding conceptual trope of her volume, is one about whom she has written eloquently and extensively over the years: Kara Walker. Shaw admits that Walker's work has given her more confidence in being responsively speculative and flexible in her interpretations. Walker's art is, Shaw asserts, all about this task of remembering the disremembered.

The Art of Remembering is divided into three chronological sections consisting of diverse essays, most of which have been previously published but are here greatly expanded and reworked under the conceptual postulation of remembering and disremembering. The essays in Part 1 ("Past As Prelude") confront the volatility of race and representation in African American art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as they register the lived realities of enslavement and their oppressive results in the formation of the conflictual aspects of American culture. The bulk of these writings focus on portraiture and self-portraiture in tackling the question of how a Black American identity could be represented and (re)formed by "African-descended artists" themselves, be it as individual or a community, or through Black patronage (16). These chapters speak to resistance and agency by those who have been othered, made invisible, disremembered; they include Phillis Wheatley, Moses Williams, and the landscape painter Edward Bannister.

Shaw's introduction to Part 2 ("Modern Blackness") takes on the Harlem Renaissance and the artists and works that were inspired by that movement after its heyday. This section acknowledges the author's reliance on and foregrounding of biographical details as vital to illuminating "the lives of the disremembered" (88) and salvaging Black individual experience and creativity from a place of invisibility, as a result of disremembering, to one of visibility, via remembering. This section consists of six essays, all of which begin with a traditional and standard art-historical approach. Shaw examines the biographical and social perspective of each artist to better understand the ways in which their marginalized racial, gendered, and class status helped to influence and yet also limit their subject matter, exhibition history, and sales opportunities. The bulk of these essays exemplifies the impressive breadth and depth of Shaw's archival research in mining significant details of biography and placing them within their respective sociopolitical contexts.

In the probing essay in this section on the life and works of May Howard Jackson, Shaw focuses on the attributes of race, gender, and class to wrestle with the notion of the sculptor's intersectionality as an African American woman of a privileged class, impacted by racism and sexism inside and outside the Black community. Shaw surmises that despite Jackson's economic privilege and light-skinned complexion, these social factors "served to undercut her artistic ambitions" and "widespread recognition." She was "forever at the mercy of racist society's perception of her as a racialized and gendered body" (110). Although not explicitly stated, Jackson was clearly in the clutches of the polarizing forces of remembering and disremembering. In reading this essay I came to understand the frustration that could result from Shaw's often tentative approach to her subjects. Shaw's tendency to remain inconclusive becomes progressively pronounced in subsequent essays, in which the terms "remembering," "disremembering," and their variants do not

appear even once. This leaves the text frustratingly open despite Shaw's impressively meticulous research into biographical backgrounds and deftness at historical contextualization.

The refusal to make any conclusive critical connections based on the book's premise is acutely evidenced in Chapter 9, "Malcolm X Rising: Barbara Chase-Riboud's Phenomenological Art." Here, Shaw provides a detailed formal analysis, with an emphasis on materiality, of Chase-Riboud's sculpture *Malcolm X, No. 3* (1969). At the same time, the author highlights the complementary aspects of visual art and literature that attend most of Chase-Riboud's practice by underlining the sculptor's intellectual and aesthetic communing with writers such as Alexander Pushkin and Alexandre Dumas. By concluding that Chase-Riboud entices the viewer "to engage with a uniquely transcendent, transglobal, and transhistorical discursive field where monumentalization is an ongoing aesthetic process" (152), Shaw exhibits her preference for embracing the implicit over the explicit, thereby forcing the reader to complete the critical work of resolving the open-endedness of Chase-Riboud's phenomenological sculptural pieces and practice. As a reader, I left this chapter wondering how Shaw's claim that Chase-Riboud's sculptures operate "within a space . . . of dualities and multiplicities, of potential and opportunity" was in critical dialogue with the book's remembering/ disremembering dynamic (159). In the end, I came to no conclusion, and I am left still ruminating on it.

Part 3 ("Beginning Again") consists of essays that focus on the contemporary art world of the twenty-first century, examining works by artists of color, specifically, by Black diasporic creatives currently undergoing a surge in presence, visibility, and value in the art world (187). With this series of writings, Shaw is determined to repair rather than exploit the disremembered. She mentions the reactionary pushback against critical race theory beginning in 2020, in which there was "a radical disremembering" and "willful impulse" by some on the political and intellectual right "to purposefully disremember the past and disavow its presence" (188). Such resistance was fostered not only by individuals but also by art and media institutions.

The first chapter in this section, Chapter 11, "Remembering the Remnants: Contemporary Art and Hurricane Katrina," considers art produced and affected by Hurricane Katrina and how that catastrophic event of the recent past is remembered by contemporary artists such as Walker. Chapter 12 considers Carrie Mae Weems's 2003 multimedia installation, "The Louisiana Project" as engagement with the past and present racial histories of Louisiana as a way to conjure "disremembered image worlds for contemporary revision" (189). Chapter 13, "Ten Years of 30 Americans," discusses an ongoing national exhibition of contemporary African American art, *30 Americans*, which debuted in 2008 and had been touring the United States for ten years when Shaw served as the guest curator for its stop at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia in 2019. This exhibition was particularly important, Shaw notes, because it had a strong impact on her thinking about "the power of exhibitions to change the trajectory of art history" (189) and helped spark a noteworthy exponential increase in the market visibility and value of contemporary African American art produced over the past two decades. Considering this as a transformative exhibition and curatorial reflection for herself, Shaw observes how our major arts institutions continue to fall behind in "expansively and aggressively" collecting the works of African American artists to "ensure their continued relevance in coming decades" (189–90). Chapter 14, "'No Man Is An Island': The Diasporic Performances of Wanda Raimundi Ortiz

and Sheldon Scott," tackles the idea of resistance to "colonization and efforts at disempowerment through restorative performances" in the work of these two performance artists, both of whom create meditations on "African-descended island-based communities in the South Carolina Sea Islands and in the US territory of Puerto Rico" (189).

Shaw considers her final essay in the volume, Chapter 15, "What Deana Lawson Wants," as her most "generative" piece to date (190). Previously published for *Hyperallergic*, it was "conceived as a combination of review, self-reflection, and a manifesto for contemporary art criticism" (190). Of all the essays in *The Art of Remembering*, this one is among the most critically probing and deeply felt by the author. It is a personal and intense reaction to Lawson's representation of Black bodies, specifically Black female bodies, in the 2021 exhibition *Centropy* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Shaw considers her assessment of Lawson's work and motivations empowering, a call for herself and others to approach African American artists and their works in a boldly critical yet open-ended manner that resists obligatory knee-jerk racial affirmations, tidy critical resolutions, or intellectual closures. Throughout the essay, Shaw takes to task what she believes to be the artist's nonconsensual "violent appropriation" strategies, problematic intentions, and dubious motivations and processes for depicting Black women in ways Shaw describes as "resoundingly commercial," exploitative, and prurient (241). With this concluding essay, as with the bulk of the writings collected in the book, Shaw challenges the tendency in art history and visual culture to place race in a positive humanistic light.

The artists and works the author has selected as illustrative of remembering and disremembering exemplify the tensions and challenges that remain for art history, art criticism, and Black cultural production, particularly when considered within the contexts of contemporary commercial capitalism, consumerism, and continued attempts to promote Black artists as victims of white supremacy and commercial gain. Indeed, what *The Art of Remembering* makes clear is that the burden of representation in and of the past and the present by African-descended creatives remains exigent for not only the artist but also for the art historian, the art critic, the museum curator, and, perhaps more importantly, for the reader of this volume.

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Editors' Note: Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw is a guest editor of this issue's In the Round, "Blackness, the Ashcan School, and Modern American Art."