



ART & EXHIBITS

Why is African American art having a moment? The reasons are as varied as the art itself

Museums and collectors are taking notice. New black curators and scholars are entering the field of art. Prices are astounding. Is this the moment African American art has been waiting for?



Charles Desmarais | June 2, 2019 | Updated: June 6, 2019, 10:37 am





Alma Thomas (1891-1978), "Pink Dogwoods and Azaleas" (1971)
Photo: Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

Hank Willis Thomas answered his mobile phone, but he couldn't talk just then. He was in Brussels, at the opening of his solo exhibition at Maruani Mercier, a

prominent local art gallery. It was but one stop in what might seem a constant world tour these days for Thomas, who, at 43, personifies the successful mid-career artist.

Just last year, his work was featured in one-person exhibitions at the Delaware Art Museum, the art museum at Northwestern University and the Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Fla. It was included in major group shows in cities from Miami to London to Palermo, Italy. He unveiled three public art commissions, was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship, and published his second book, “Hank Willis Thomas: All Things Being Equal.”





Hank Willis Thomas, “Brabo and the Ivory Tower” (2019)
Photo: Maruani Mercier

Such a year would have been virtually impossible for a young African American artist – for a black artist of any age – a decade or two ago. While the art world may not have been knowingly hostile to people of color, it was blind to their

accomplishments.

That has changed dramatically since the turn of the century, as the names of artists like Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Julie Mehretu, Kehinde Wiley and myriad others have taken hold in the public imagination. Meanwhile, the New York Times reports, “older African-American artists are suddenly a hot commodity.”



Indications are everywhere that this is a turning point for black artists. Collectors and museums are taking note, and prices are up. Every week brings news of black scholars being appointed to curatorial and academic positions in art.

Thomas doesn't see it just that way. By the time he returns that call to Belgium, it's after midnight, but the artist is ready to debate the assumption that this is a special moment.

“In the mainstream, sure,” he says. “But there has always been a vibrant market for African American art. That's why there are so many artists who sustained careers in the face of mainstream neglect – there were black collectors and galleries and a whole infrastructure.

“It’s safe to say that work is more expensive, but I don’t know that it’s true those artists were ignored. There were collectors: black collectors. We were always here; we were always making the work.”



| Hale Woodruff (1900-1980), “Untitled (Girl Skipping Rope)” (c. 1959-60)
Photo: Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

Point taken. The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s did not need white explainers, and the explosion of cultural expression around the Black Power movement in

the 1960s had its own intrinsic logic and rewards, only recently documented in a “mainstream” show – decades later and by a London museum – in the Tate’s wildly successful exhibition “Soul of a Nation.” That exhibition continues in Los Angeles at the Broad museum through Sept. 1 before it comes to the de Young Museum, where it will be on view Nov. 9-March 8.

As Thomas points out, “Hip-hop culture was vibrantly alive for 25 years before the mainstream embraced it.” Similarly, Linda Goode Bryant’s gallery Just Above Midtown, which she operated from 1974 to 1986 in Harlem, honored David Hammons, Faith Ringgold, Dawoud Bey and others long before they achieved their current stardom.

“They planted the seed for that ’93 Biennial,” Thomas says, referring to a notoriously influential Whitney Museum of American Art exhibition. That was the show that required visitors to wear an admissions badge, designed by artist Daniel J. Martinez, that read, “I CAN’T IMAGINE EVER WANTING TO BE WHITE.”

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Pamela Joyner frames the question of public attention to the art she loves somewhat differently. “I think this is a special moment,” she said in an interview at her Presidio Terrace home, surrounded by just a small part of the world-renowned collection of works by artists of African descent that she and her husband, Alfred Giuffrida, have assembled over the past two decades.





San Francisco philanthropist and art collector Pamela Joyner at home in San Francisco. At left is a sculpture by Kevin Beasley titled "Aurora" (2018), which incorporates house dresses, kaftans, T-shirts and do-rags embedded in resin. At right is the 1971 painting "Eastern Star" by William T. Williams. Joyner and her husband created the Joyner/Giuffrida Collection of African-American art.
Photo: Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

"This moment has a number of different aspects, but the one that I'm most excited about is that institutions are recognizing the contributions that have been made over long periods of time that were overlooked for the arbitrary reason of race," she said.

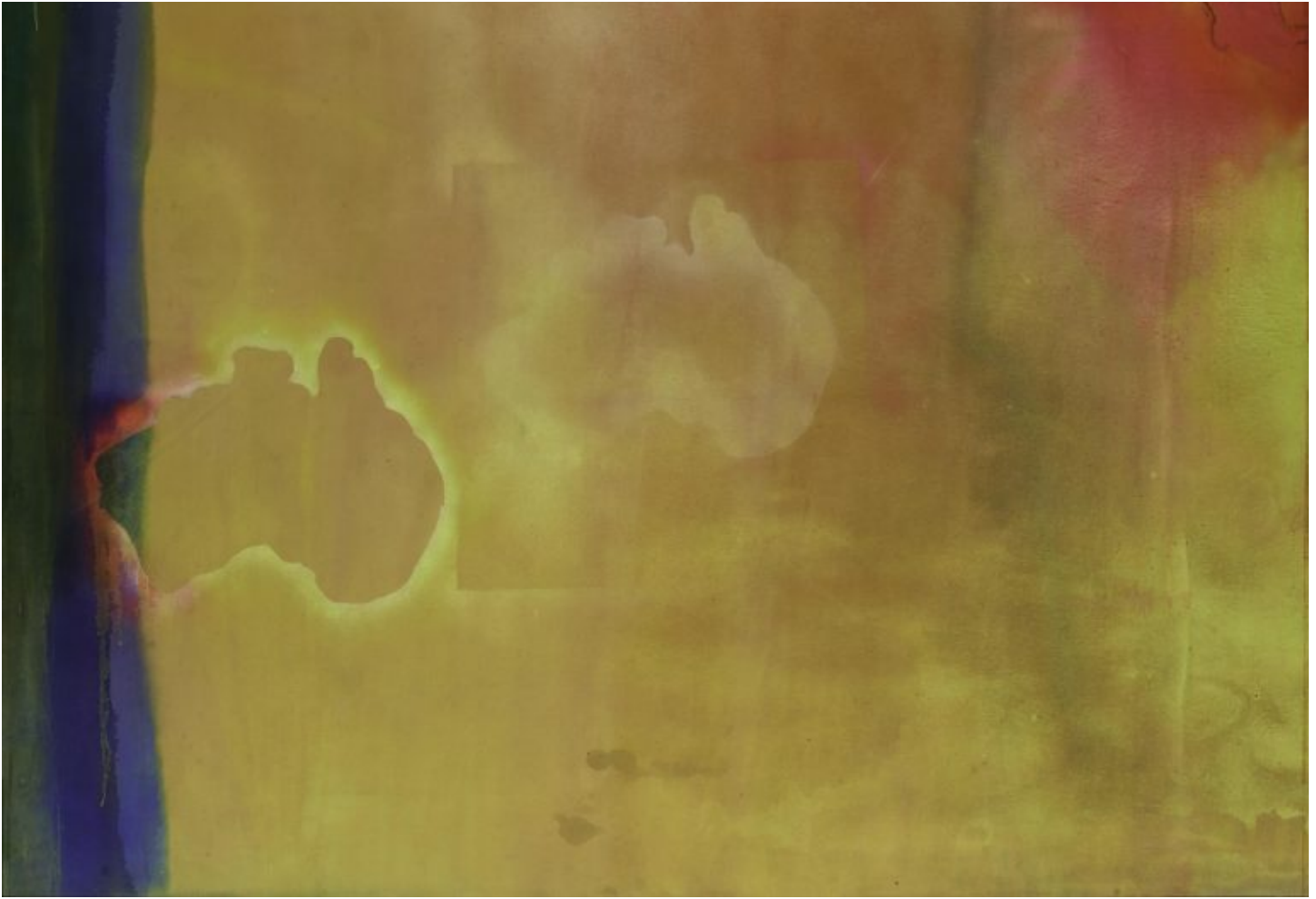


Norman Lewis (1909-1979), Untitled (1949)
Photo: Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

Joyner has encouraged that institutional awareness, both through her advice and as an extraordinarily generous donor of project funds and major works of art to some of the world's great museums. She is a trustee and a member of influential committees at the Art Institute of Chicago, J. Paul Getty Trust, Tate Americas Foundation, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

As she puts it, “my only real role in a boardroom is to ask, ‘Have you considered?’ ” She makes clear her respect for curators’ training and experience. Yet, once they “see the full range of what there is ... that personal history, that narrative within the context of the full arc of art history ... (they) come back to me and say, ‘It’s important, and here’s why it’s important.’ That’s just that part of the ecosystem doing what it is charged with doing, which is to create new knowledge.”





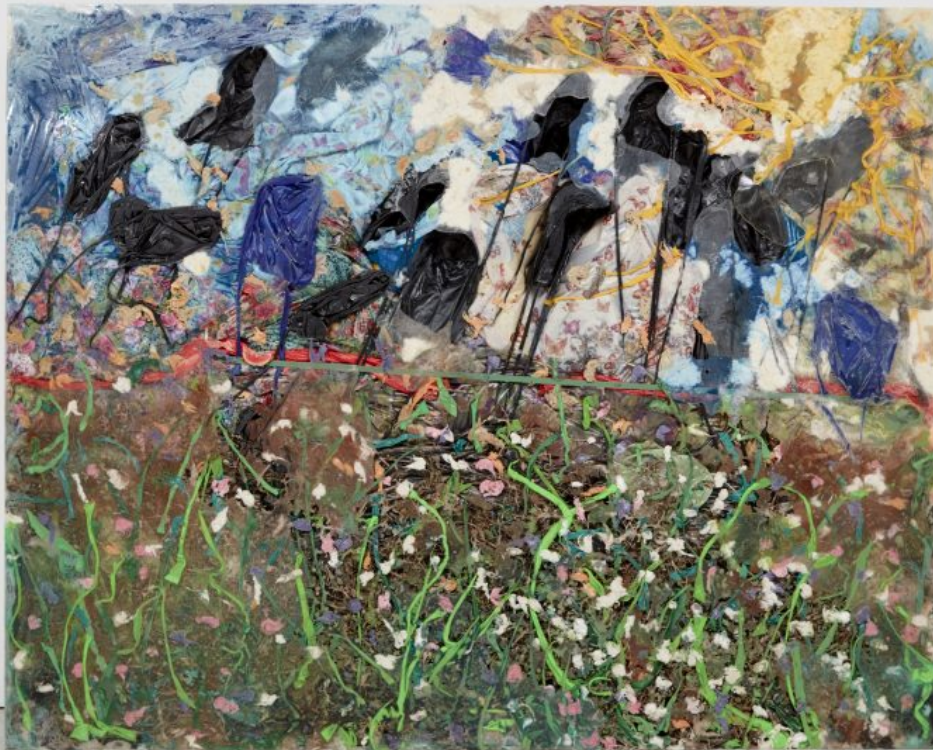
Frank Bowling (b. 1936), "Traveling with Robert Hughes" (1969-70)
Photo: Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

"People are open to doing what they have been trained to do but to tell a comprehensive story," she said. "That's what's changed."

Karen Jenkins-Johnson, an art dealer who is African American, talked about that new attitude in an interview at her eponymous gallery near Union Square in San Francisco. "When I first started (in 1996), I had maybe two artists of color," she said. "I have to say that people in the mainstream would not collect artists of color. And if I wanted to have a business, I had to have artwork that I could sell. I was not a nonprofit."

She dates the change in perspective to a specific year: 2008. “There was a huge sea change in the art world in general, which was, of course, stimulated by the election of Barack Obama,” she said. “I think the mainstream art world realized that they were exposed. They did not have artists that looked like the president in their institutions. A lot of periodicals didn’t have writers who knew how to have dialogues with people of color.

“When you have a first lady who is black, from the South Side of Chicago, when she says that she wants to have artists of color in the White House, and people don’t know how to source it, or who the artists are – that’s an eye-opener, don’t you think?”



| Los Angeles artist Kevin Beasley’s “The Reunion” (2018) in the Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

incorporates “raw Virginia cotton, Virginia soil, Virginia twigs ... housedresses, kaftans, t-shirts, durags” and other materials. The photograph shows only one side of the freestanding work.

Photo: Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

Joyner, who served on the President’s Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, appointed by Obama, agrees. “I would point to that as a touchstone, absolutely. But it was one of many things that were happening.” She points to the work of women who are working to advance appreciation for Latin American art, like Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and Estrellita Brodsky, as “the real role models for a lot of what I do.”

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Last year, the National Portrait Gallery reported record attendance, as 2.3 million people streamed through the Smithsonian museum – a million more than in 2017. The primary difference between the two years? Paintings by Kehinde Wiley of Barack Obama and by Amy Sberald of first lady Michelle Obama went on view in February 2018.

At the opening of the Venice Biennale in Italy in May, widely considered the world’s most influential contemporary art exhibition, the United States was represented by the great African American sculptor Martin Puryear. It was much the same story at the last Biennale, two years ago, when the U.S. selection was Los Angeles painter Mark Bradford, who is also of African heritage.

At the same time, the value of art by black artists has risen conspicuously, not to say astoundingly. They may not always predict history’s judgment, but the prices for works of art at auction are at least, by definition, a precise measure of the interest of collectors.







| Jack Whitten (1939-2018), “Black Monolith X, Birth of Muhammad Ali” (2016)
Photo: Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

Andrew Massad, deputy chairman in the postwar and contemporary art department at the international auction house Christie’s, cited the work of the late Jack Whitten, which had never sold at auction before 2011. In March, a 1974 painting projected to sell for \$300,000 to \$500,000 went for more than five times its high estimate.

He also recounted the price history of the artist Kerry James Marshall’s paintings. “In 2006-2007 we began selling them at auction. It was a very narrow audience, but very loyal, and prices were in the \$50,000 to \$100,000 range.”

In November 2007, a large work sold for \$541,000. “That opened the eyes of people who hadn’t been looking,” said Massad. Then, the same piece came back on the auction block in 2014, selling for over \$1 million. By 2017, a painting only two years old went for more than \$5 million, well over its high estimate of \$1.5 million.



“Past Times” by Kerry James Marshall at Sotheby’s Evening Sale of Impressionist and Modern Art, which set the auction record for a work by a living African American artist on May 4, 2018.

Photo: Hector Retamal, AFP / Getty Images

Last year a painting by Marshall, then age 62, set a record, at \$21.1 million, for a work by a living African American artist.

That breathtaking price pales in comparison to the most expensive work ever sold at auction by any American, regardless of background – but which, not so incidentally, happened to be by a black artist. It was a 1982 Jean-Michel Basquiat, and in 2017 it went for \$110,487,500.

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Ascend a grand stairway into the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art today and you will be flanked by a pair of enormous canvases, painted by Julie Mehretu. They were commissioned by the museum at an undisclosed price in the millions, and installed in 2017.

Nothing could be a more potent symbol of the changed attitude to the work of black artists at the Bay Area's most important museum of modern and contemporary art. Nothing except, of course, SFMOMA's commitment to use a substantial part of the \$50 million generated by the sale of a Mark Rothko painting last month to broaden representation in the collection of artists of color.



John Bankston, "Bronze Cowboy" (2003); oil on linen; 72 x 60 in.; collection SFMOMA

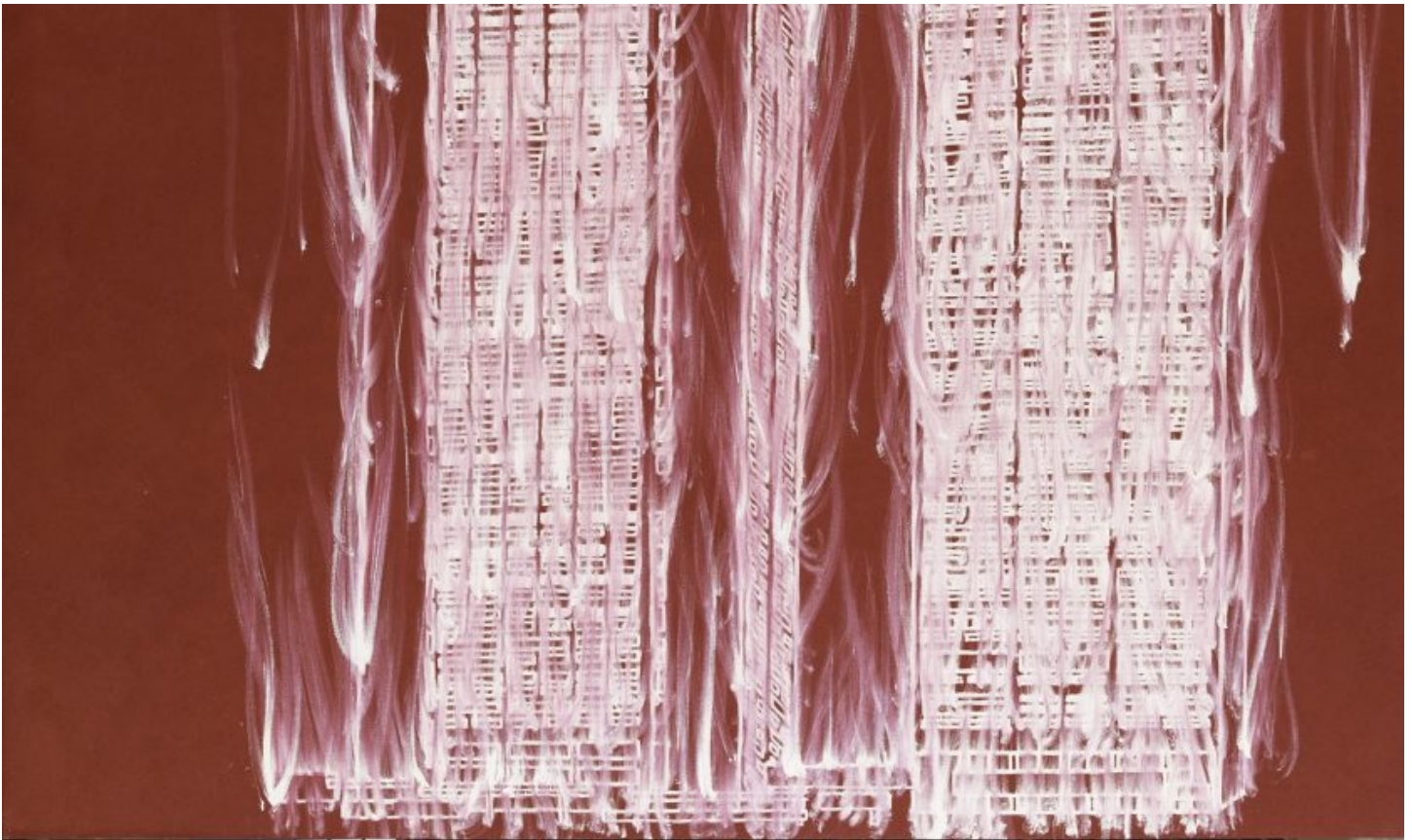
Photo: Courtesy SFMOMA, © John Bankston

The museum appears all along to have done a better job than many in acquiring art by people of color, including African Americans, for its collection, and it has a robust schedule of pending exhibitions of such work. The board of the museum has also become more diverse, and its administration seems to want to do the right thing.

Yet SFMOMA will not say whether it has any African American curators on staff.

In fact, a Chronicle survey of collecting museums in the Bay Area turned up not a single full-time curator of African descent. (The Museum of the African Diaspora, which does not collect, has a grant-funded "exhibitions associate" and there are some excellent curators working independently or at smaller organizations.)





Gary Simmons, (b. 1964), “Double Cylinder” (2007)
Photo: Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

But if the Bay Area has a long way to go in achieving equity in the curatorial ranks, change is certainly afoot nationally. It is an essential shift, because it speaks to the central question that underlies the excitement many feel about the rise of African American art and artists: Is the art world’s embrace of these artists and their work a permanent change, or a passing fad?

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Clearly, a curator does not need to be black to have a wide perspective and a commitment to diversity. Just as obvious, however, is the likelihood that the inclusion of African American voices of authority in decision-making lead to greater inclusion.

The venerated artist and San Francisco Art Institute professor Dewey Crumpler thinks the day may have finally come when those voices are being heard. “Finally, the pressures of globalization and demographic change have created a context that forces museums and art markets to change historic collecting habits,” he wrote in an email. “I have seen this emphasis on black artists several times in my 50-odd years in the art profession, and every time it has resulted from pressure applied from external forces. Maybe this iteration will have some lasting impact because the demographic change is inevitable.”

The online journal Culture Type is an excellent source of information on art and artists of the African diaspora. Its editor, Victoria L. Valentine, has been keeping tabs on that change and reported last August on “a wave of black curators hired over the past several years to fill plum posts at major American art museums.”

“They are relatively young,” she wrote, “mostly in their 30s and 40s – and responsible for some of the most anticipated and groundbreaking exhibitions of 2018.”

Tuliza Fleming, curator of American art at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of African American History and Culture, also sees what she calls “a phenomenal uptick” in support, brought about by black activism.

“Over time, as black people achieved greater opportunities for education and economic advancement, the number of opportunities for people to pursue careers involving the visual arts also increased,” she said. It follows “that interest in and knowledge of African American artists also improved.

“I do not see this as a fad,” she said, “but a curative course that is long overdue.”





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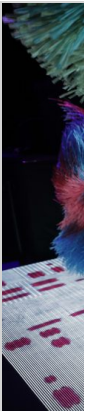
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