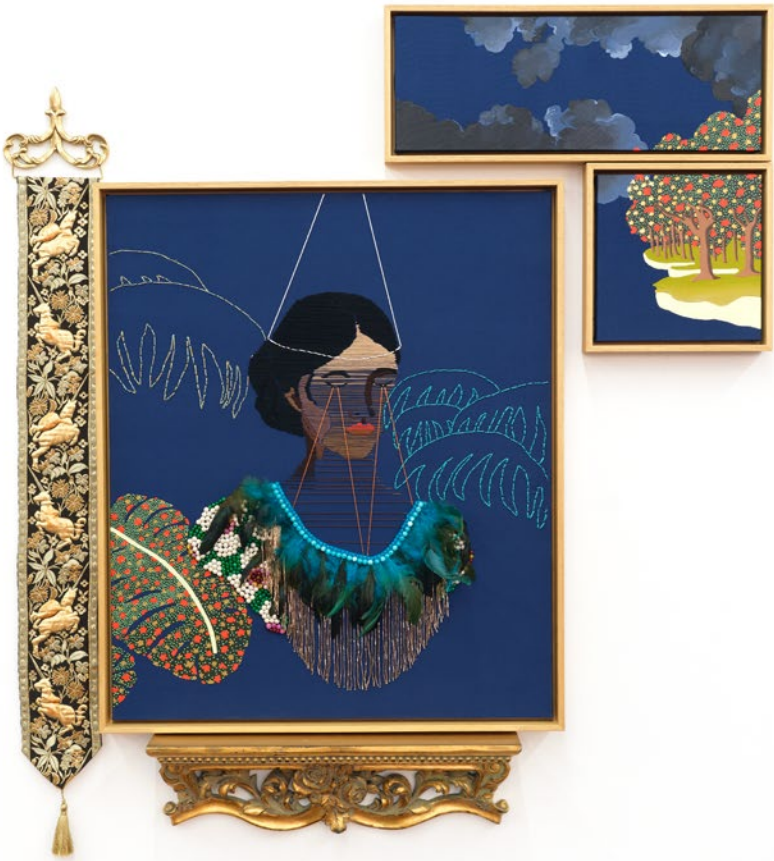


REVIVAL

Digging Into Yesterday, Planting Tomorrow

Revival:
Digging Into Yesterday, Planting Tomorrow

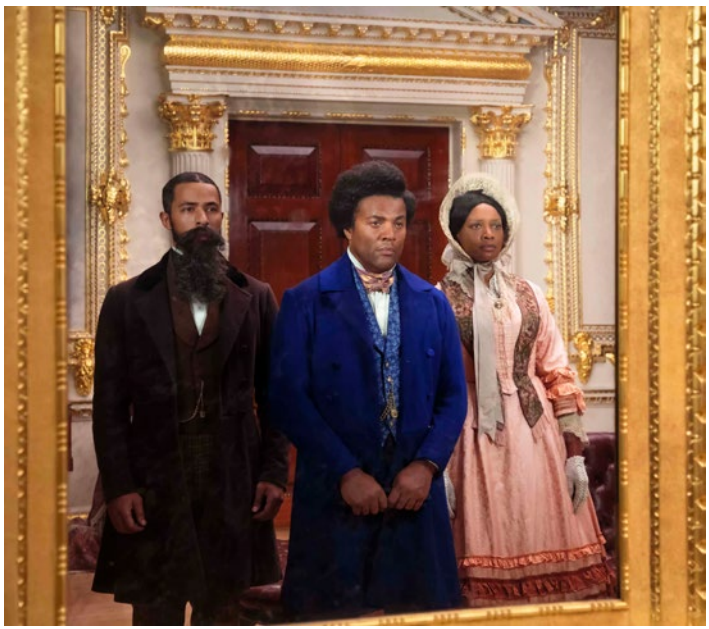
"Thus early I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of utmost importance." Frederick Douglass (1855)

An elegant figure in 19th-century dress is seen from behind, making his way through a grassy and wooded landscape, deep in thought, mysterious and powerfully compelling. The lyrical beauty of this introductory scene is punctuated and punctured by what follows when the camera pans across a quiet and disquieting view of a body. No overt explanation is offered or needed, as the film follows the protagonist onto a train and into domestic interiors, churches, lecture halls, and photographic studios where the life and lessons of the visionary activist and orator Frederick Douglass (1817-1895) unfold, seemingly in present time. Isaac Julien's *Lessons of the Hour* is a poetic meditation on Douglass's life, informed by some of the abolitionist's most important speeches, such as "Lessons of the Hour," "What to the Slave Is the 4th of July?" and "Lecture on Pictures." Douglass was the most photographed man of the 19th century and believed in the power of art and technology to shape lives and society. The still image of Douglass, his wife Anna Murray Douglass, and the noted African American photographer J.P. Ball, *Serenade*, attests to the importance of the role of representation, in both politics and aesthetics, in shaping both Douglass's groundbreaking work and Julien's artistic vision. As writer Cora Gilroy-Ware observes, "The films of Isaac Julien know what beauty can do."

Beauty abounds in this exhibition: Yinka Shonibare CBE RA, Myrlande Constant, Ebony G. Patterson, and many others deploy visual allure to illuminate how the past echoes in the present moment, as well as into tomorrow. Reviving complex histories from a global spectrum of sources that are alternately inspiring and challenging, the artworks on view highlight how paths forward often lead back, and then through, summoning reframing, transformation, and transcendence. Listening to these echoes can spur a deeper understanding of where we have come from, where we are, and where we are going. As Isaac Julien says, "these historical linkages to the present perhaps hold keys to the future."

Material embodies and and expresses meaning in works by self-proclaimed "post-colonial hybrid," Yinka Shonibare CBE RA. *The Marquise de Châtelet* and the seated figure pictured in *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters (Europe)* are dressed in patterned fabrics reminiscent of those developed in the Dutch West Indies, which later became commodified statements of cultural identity in colonial Africa. Both works are from Shonibare's series, *The Age of Enlightenment*, which depicts leading 18th-century Anglo-European intellectuals as having a handicap, illustrating, as the artist says, how "the Enlightenment thinkers who caused civilization to flourish also burdened its members with the desire to conquer."

While the politics, philosophy, and science of the Enlightenment fueled imperial expansion, colonization also sparked the spread and comingling of cultures, mythologies, and religions that nurtured resilience and resistance across the diaspora. The appropriation and amalgamation of beliefs and practices that originated in Europe and from across the African continent animate Mohau Modisakeng's *Zion*, a multi-media homage to the displaced residents of Seneca Village (now Central Park, New York City); Kudzanai Chiurai's film-like series, *We Live in Silence,* as well as his transformation of British missionary David Livingston into a Black woman in *Genesis [Je n'isi isi] XI*; Godfried Donkor's collage combining *The Financial Times* with an archival



Issac Julien
Serenade (Lessons of the Hour), 2019
Photograph mounted on aluminum

Cosmo Whyte
Stretch Marks and Keloids, 2019
Charcoal and mixed media on paper

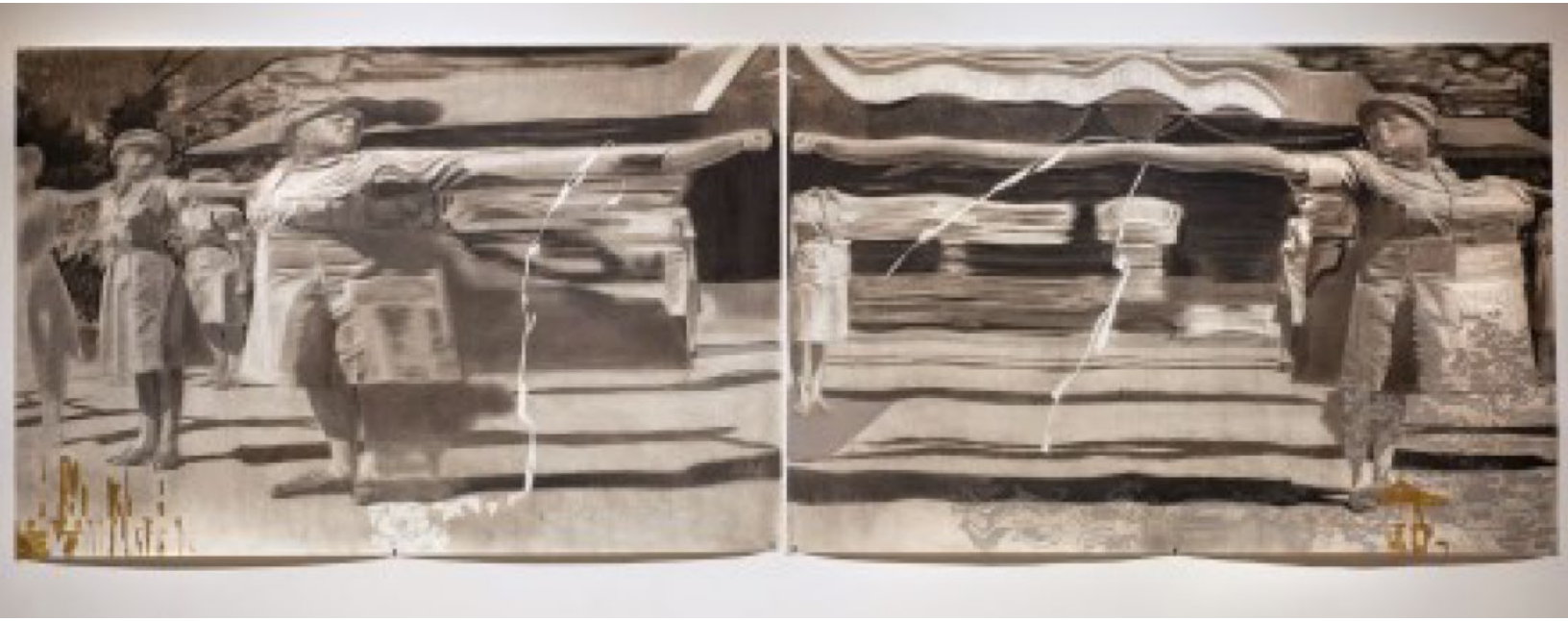


image of a conscripted boxer, beatified as Saint Joseph; and Hank Willis Thomas's *Baron of the Crossroads*, a photograph of artist Sanford Biggers dressed in top hat and tails, inspired by an image of a 19th-century African-American performer, which also invokes the Haitian Vodou figure of Baron Samedi, the Iwa (spirit) of the dead, and of resurrection.

Resurrection and remixing are hallmarks of Haitian Vodou, a religion that combines sources originating from across Central and West Africa with European Catholicism. This hybrid belief system played an important role in nurturing the resilience of diasporic communities in the Caribbean and beyond, as illustrated in works inspired by drapo Vodou by Kapwani Kiwanga, Madame Moreau, and Myrlande Constant. Kiwanga employs flags as emblems of both ideology and resistance her *Nations* series, which commemorates the role of Vodou religion in the Haitian Revolution, and in particular the geometry, embroidery, and beading associated with flags (drapo) used in Vodou ceremonies, such as the rites performed in August 1791, when the revolt against the French began. The beads and historical imagery in Moreau's *Henri Christophe Flag* pay homage to a complex hero of the Haitian revolution, while Constant's *GUEDE (Baron)* features contemporary and historical references, including the spirits of fertility and the dead, altars and crosses, mythical and hybrid beings, rendered in textile and glass beads through the artist's innovative transformation of traditional drapo, a practice historically dominated by men. Trained as a wedding dressmaker, the artist applies the French embroidery technique of tambour to her large-scale, intricate works, drawing the imagery on one side while the beading and embroidery are applied on the other, unseen until completion. She consistently includes her name: "Constant" acts as a central connection point in works that center her presence and perspective within an evolution of the ceremonial and the quotidian, remixing religion, culture, and time itself. Cecilia Alemani, curator of the 2022 Venice Biennale observes, "I look at her works, and I see an exuberant and effervescent universe. It's a world that has no boundaries between what's alive and what's dead."

Boundaries between the living and the dead, between past and present also dissolve in Jeannette Ehler's video, *Black Magic at the White House*, in which a ghostly figure of a girl performs a Vodou dance in Marienborg, once the summer residence of Danish Naval Commander Olfert Fischer, who in 1744 sold it to

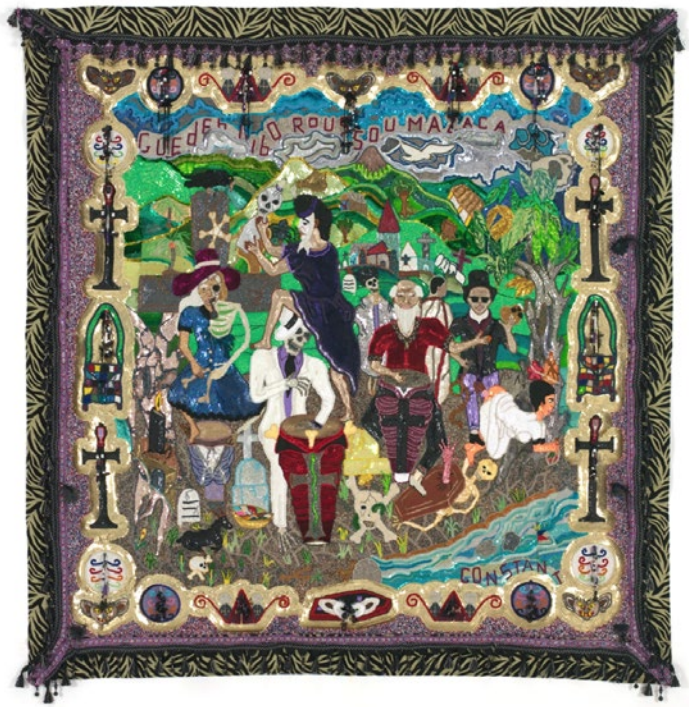
Myrlande Constant
GUEDE (Baron), 2020
Sequins, glass beads, and silk tassels on cotton

Peter Windt, a sea merchant who amassed a great deal of wealth from the slave and sugar trades. While Ehlers's work highlights the invisibility of the history of enslavement in Denmark and its colonies, the video is also suggestive of the histories of other nations whose wealth was first built by bondage. "The title of this work may even induce one to think of another famous white house," Ehlers's studio notes, "one in which a seemingly almost magical political change took place at the time when Ehlers was creating her work as America's first Black president was elected."

"We have to do with the past only as we can make it useful to the present and to the future. To all inspiring motives, to noble deeds which can be gained from the past, we are welcome. But now is the time, the important time." Frederick Douglass (1852)

A fluid temporality flows from *Lessons of the Hour* throughout the exhibition. Sara Sonié Joi Thompson-Ruffin revives personal and collective American histories in her textile, *Black Cherokee*, which honors the experience and legacy of the Trail of Tears, the displacement of indigenous and enslaved Americans forced to walk from Tennessee to Arkansas 1830-1850. "Slaves were forced to walk alongside their Native American owners to Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kansas, and Missouri," explains the artist, whose ancestors were among both groups. "My work embodies historical significance of the complexities of African American life. The journey I am on is the legacy gifted to me by an extraordinary people, their book has been written, I am still writing my chapter." Thompson-Ruffin's self-determination is echoed in Tyler Mitchell's ethereal, classically composed photograph of a regal figure gracefully unfurling a monumental pastel cloth in *Time for a New Sky*.

Time is both material and metaphor in works by Kelani Abass, Nate Young, La Vaughn Belle, Stan Squirewell, and Hank Willis Thomas, each of whose unique processes incorporate past lived experiences into present moments. Using a 20th-century stamping tool from his father's printing press in Abeokuta, Nigeria, Abass recreates anonymous, archival photographs in his series, *If I Could Save Time …* Within the artist's performative process, as described by his studio, "Abass attempts to make a statement of the future, that acknowledges the interdependence of different moments, one in which time is process and reality, is abstract yet tangible, is conceptual yet solid, of history yet of the moment, existing in the past as well as the present." An ongoing, long-durational performance is the source and subject of Young's *In Black Untime No. 4*, a graphite drawing of a horse and rider, whose facial features are blurred. "My great-grandfather escaped from North Carolina in the early 1900s, at the beginning of the Great Migration, to travel north to Philadelphia on horseback" explains the artist. "So, in order to think about the accuracy of this story, I figured the best way would be to reproduce the action central to the story, to embody the story." Young is intentionally collapsing time, as performance and illustration of what he calls "untime:" "For me this opens up a space of possibility that the past is not only something we can visit in our memory, but it is actually something we construct in the present time, and maybe could in turn visit. I'm learning to ride, with the goal of recreating my great-grandfather's journey, so the journey is temporal, but it's unclear in which time frame the real journey is produced as a historical sequence."



Viewable from both front and back, La Vaughn Belle's *Swarm* is an archival photograph from the Danish West Indies whose surfaces have been cut and burned, rendering the original image of a colonial plantation life that was made possible by enslaved labor difficult to decipher, and creating a more mysterious and nuanced visual in its wake. The processes to which Belle subjects the archival photographs offer a subtle, yet powerful reference to the violent treatment of the enslaved population and natural resources of the islands under Danish colonial rule. One of a series, Belle explains that "The amorphous interventions into the photographic image penetrate time and space while transforming the colonial hierarchies of the constructed image."

Stan Squirewell conceives of his mixed-media practice as "bridging the gap between the past and the present," transforming archival images through colorful collage into new, multi-valent perspectives on both known and obscured histories. The nine teenage boys featured in Squirewell's *Scotts No More* transcend the fixity of the original photograph, taken at the time of their arrest in 1931, in Scottsboro, Alabama, where they were falsely accused of rape and subsequently imprisoned. Here, their vibrant presence suggests a range of potential narratives, and aligns them with the two landmark Supreme Court rulings that their civil rights had been violated; they are not victims of an unjust history, but active participants in shaping a more just future.

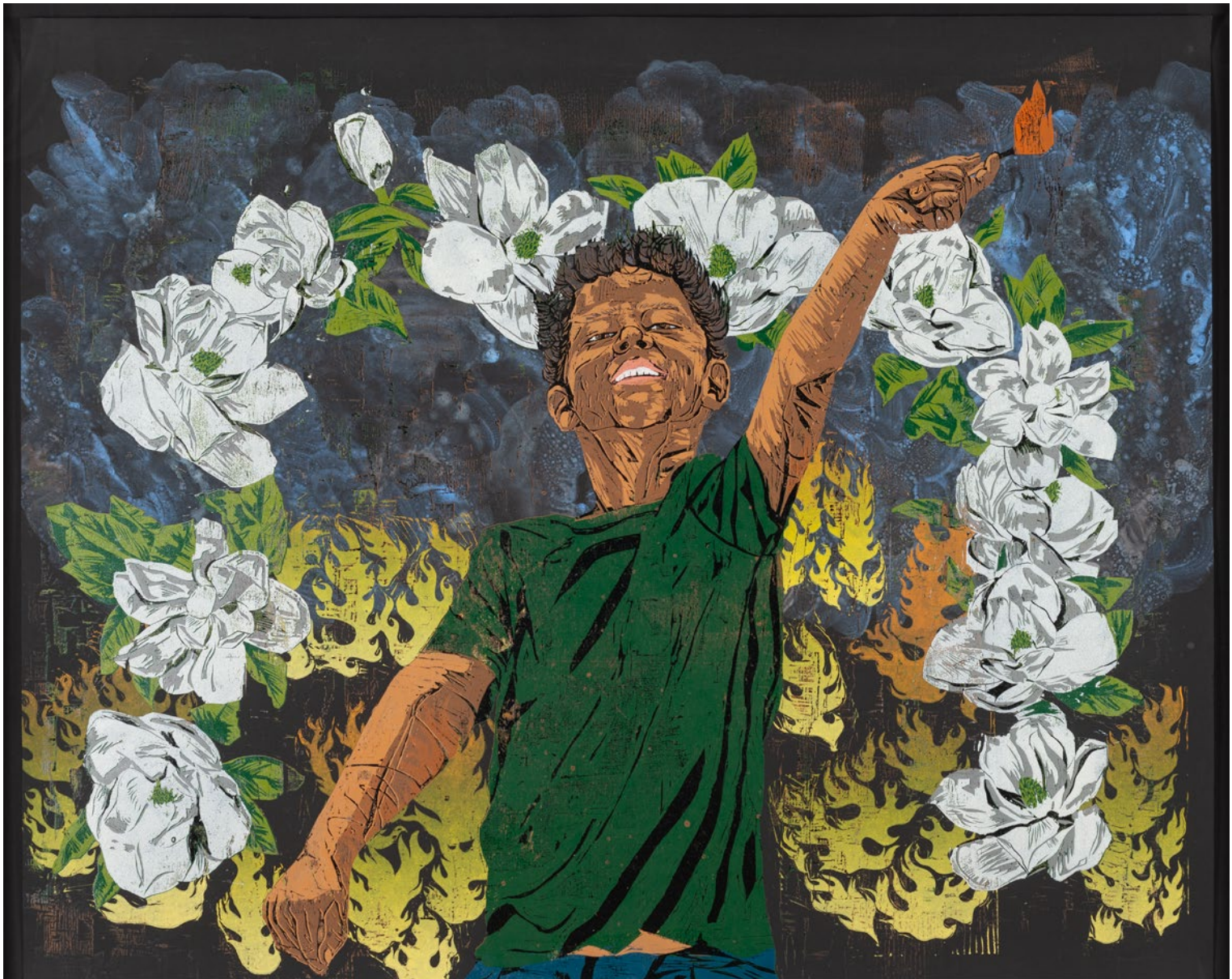
Hank Willis Thomas's use of retroreflective screen-printing technology offers viewers the opportunity to actively engage with the past in the immediate present moment. *Race Riot (With Interference)* belongs to the artist's series created with retroreflective vinyl, a material that both obscures and reveals the archival images embedded within these works. To see the images in full, viewers must use the light from the flash of their camera or mobile device. Here, this light metaphorically and physically shines through the "interference" to reveal photographs of police officers with dogs attacking protesters in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963. Through the augmented gaze of the camera's lens and flash, the images document instances of racial and social injustice, transforming the use of a cell phone camera from an option into a necessity in order to view his work, and giving contemporary viewers the choice to reconsider history through an act of everyday participation.

Cell phones, headphones, and other implements of contemporary technology, alongside other 21st-century waste products, appear in works by Uuriintuya Dagvasambuu, Alberto Baraya, and Duke Riley, creating anachronistic visions that illuminate the complexity of the present and the weight of the past. A contemporary master of Mongol Zurag painting, Dagvasambuu combines traditional Mongolian and Buddhists motifs with contemporary themes, chronicling everyday life across the seasons in her post-nomadic homeland in dreamlike fashion. The figure on horseback in Baraya's *Miami Beast Hunter* is dressed as a "viajero," referring to 18th and 19th-century European travelers who undertook botanical explorations in the name of science and in the service of colonization. Here, the viajero gathers industrial, automotive trash from the surrounding beach, manufactured specimens, rather than nature's bounty. "I behave like the scientists that Western education expects us to become," he explains. "By changing the goals of this… task I resist this 'destiny.' In that moment all assumptions are put into question, even history." The environmental costs and consequences of global commerce are central to Riley's multi-media practice, seen here in his scrimshaw etchings on discarded plastic containers, entitled *Echelon of Uncertainty (Bad Guys*). In his contemporary interpretations of scrimshaw—ink drawings traditionally etched into bone by sailors—Riley replaces the medium's customary whale teeth with repurposed plastic containers, detergent bottles, toothbrushes, and other waste. The works incorporate the maritime imagery traditional to scrimshaw to portray international business executives that the artist identifies as responsible for the perpetuation of single-use plastics. These *(Bad Guys)* depict the CEOs of the oil companies that were responsible for Brooklyn's Newtown Creek disaster, ongoing now for nearly a century.

Digging into the detritus of the past not only illuminates historical harms, but looking back also fertilizes future potential, nurturing new visions of what may persist and may be planted in tomorrow's gardens. Personal and collective memory is honored, celebrated, and transformed in Andy Llanes Bultó's

Katrina Andry
Black Imaginings of the 1811 Past and Future Possibilities, 2022
Color reduction woodcut and monotype, Mylar on paper

gold-leafed *Garden of Memory*,Simone Elizabeth Saunders's lushly saturated tufted Art Nouveau-style tapestry, *Sun Rays*, and in Richard Jonathan Nelson's textile, *Language of exported flowers were too quiet for his ears to hear*, which explores Black, queer identity inspired by his family relationships. Flora and fauna bloom and burst in in Carolyn Castaño's *After América (femmage landscape) (Ana*), which belongs to the artist's series of work which, she says, "mix materiality with content in pieces that consider how the Latin American body and the Latin American landscape remain inextricably linked, even as their surrounding



media and political contexts are increasingly virtualized, digitized and globalized." The monumental figure in Stacey Gillian Abe's self-portrait, *Last Night*, is rendered in the blue hue of indigo, the colonial crop once harvested by enslaved and indentured laborers from across the African diaspora; their implanted histories now surfacing and suffusing on her skin, imbuing her with a futuristic, other-worldly power.

Suchitra Mattai repurposes and transforms vintage tapestries, embroidering brown faces and figures over the original white, European imagery, and adding found materials (like the servant bell pull in *Eclipse*) to explore her family's migration history from India to Guyana. "I am interested in how memory and myth allow us to unravel and re-imagine historical narratives," says Mattai. "Using both my own family's ocean migrations and research on the period of colonial indentured labor during the 19th century, I seek to expand our sense of 'history.' I re-imagine vintage and found materials that have a rich past as a way of creating a dialogue with the original makers and the time periods in which they were cherished as well as a means of navigating my own personal narrative. Combining, re-contextualizing, and reconfiguring disparate materials is a way of making sense of the world around me and of reconciling multiple cultural spheres that I inhabit as an Indo-Caribbean woman."

Floral motifs are integral to the form and function of works by Ruth Owens and Katrina Andry. 19th and 20th-century floral patterning is interwoven into Owens's figurative works, which often feature her family members in outdoor settings, dressed in stylized, often historical clothing. Explains the artist, "I use William Morris (1834-1896) wallpaper designs, created for the nobility of Victorian Europe, as the background for portraits of people from the African diaspora. These designs provide a setting that speaks to the dominance of a culture that presents a beautiful, albeit stylized, sanitized, and controlled view of nature. The paintings show the Black figure situated in a visually engaging design of nature that belies a destructive dominance which is ever-present and exerting its influence as a standard of beauty, arbiter of social hierarchy, and possessor of power over people and land. I am interested in challenging this polemical attitude and point to the connectedness of cultures, and of humans and the environment."

An arc of flowers surrounds the figure in Andry's woodcut, *Black Imaginings of the 1811 Past and Future Possibilities*, a colorful contemporary vision that directly references a specific history: the largest uprising of enslaved people in the U.S., which took place on a plantation in Louisiana that belonged to a family with whom the artist shares her last name. Personal memory and history intermingle in Andry's works, which challenge stereotypes of race and gender, highlighting the role of representation in both art and life. The artist describes this vision of transformation and hope as "a portrait of an exuberant Black child lifting his arm to the sky, behind him the ashes of a past and a re-imagined future."

Ebony G. Patterson issues an invitation to re-imagined futures in her immersive installation, *when the land is in plumage...,* which presents a sculpture of a peacock covered in delicate white flowers, atop a pile of gold conch shells from which two hands extend, palms up. The peacock's gaze is focused on the trail of pearl-like beads that spread across the floor and up onto the wall behind, connecting to a jacquard tapestry. Sparkling strands of jewelry and glitter are interwoven with the forms of vines and dangling arms. Danger and beauty, life and loss, have long lurked within Patterson's garden tableaux, alluding to violence and erasure as well as to fecundity and decay. The artist explains, "I have been exploring the idea of gardens, both real and imagined, and their relationship to postcolonial spaces. I am interested in how gardens–natural but cultivated settings–operate with social demarcations. I investigate their relationship to beauty, dress, class, race, the body, land, and death. … We come to pause, to bear witness, and to acknowledge…" And now, as critic Olive Senior writes, "If this garden is overgrown, Patterson's work asks, who once tended it? And why are they no longer present? Surrounding her figures with creatures that morph, molt, and shed their skins, Patterson enmeshes humanity in the natural world, where we might learn how to transform." Historically associated with royalty and divinity, the peacock symbolizes rejuvenation and regrowth, dignity and integrity. Here, the peacock balances on gold conch shells, symbols sacred in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, associated with purity, and

fertility, and imbued with the sounds of the cosmos. Patterson's vision integrates and expands upon all these allusions, reviving past histories as she plants a garden for the future, wherein we might hear and heed the call to assemble, and collectively, transcend and transform.

– **Alice Gray Stites**, Museum Director, Chief Curator

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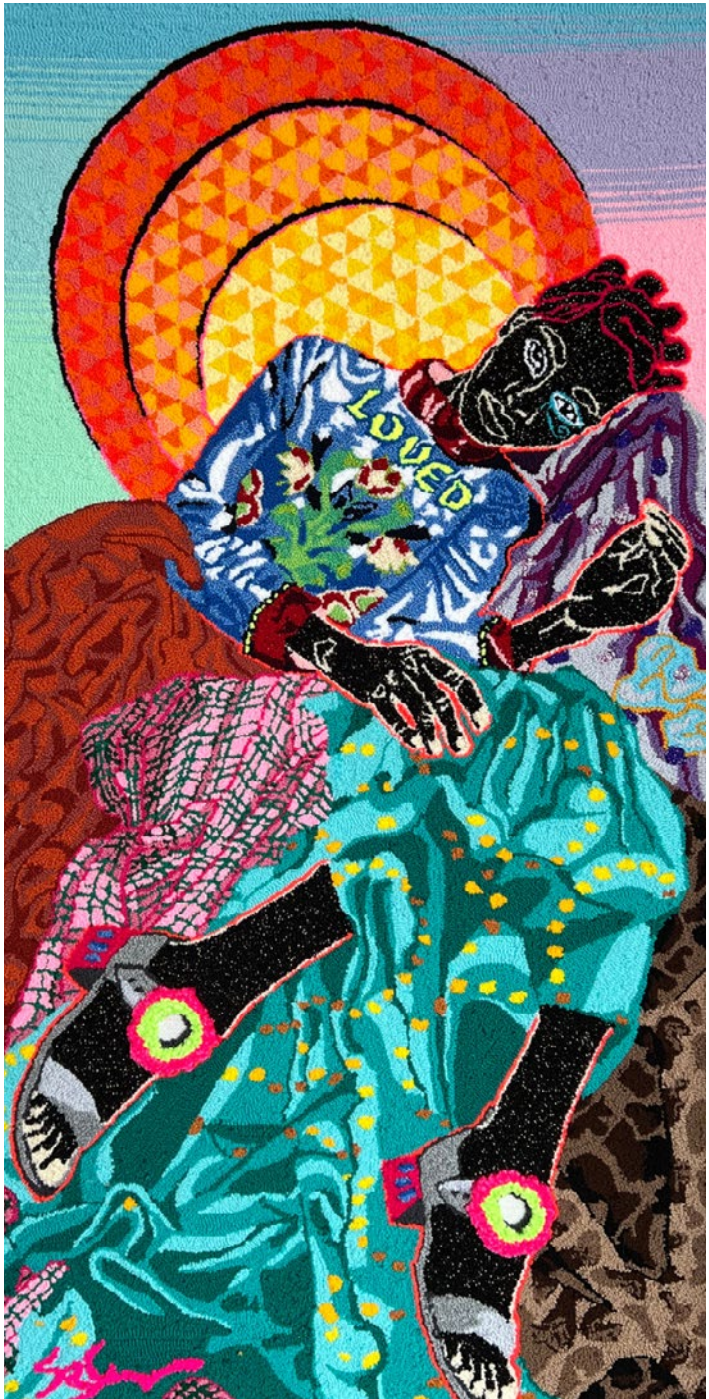
Simone Elizabeth Saunders
Sun Rays, 2022
Tufted wool fibers



ABOUT 21c MUSEUM HOTELS

21c Museum is a multi-venue museum located in eight cities. One of the largest contemporary art museums in the U.S., and North America's only collecting museum dedicated solely to art of the 21st century, each property features exhibition space open free of charge to the public, combined with a boutique hotel and restaurant. It was founded in 2006 by Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson; philanthropists, preservationists, and collectors, committed to expanding access to contemporary art as a means of catalyzing revitalization and civic connection. 21c presents a range of arts programming curated by Museum Director, Chief Curator Alice Gray Stites, including both solo and group exhibitions that reflect the global nature of art today, as well as site-specific, commissioned installations, and a variety of cultural events. The organization collaborates on arts initiatives with artists and organizations worldwide, including Speed Art Museum, North Carolina Museum of Art, MASS MoCA, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Creative Capital Foundation, Creative Time, and others.

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Cover:
Suchitra Mattai
Eclipse, 2023
Embroidery floss, acrylic gouache, beads, vintage servant bell pull, and vintage shelf