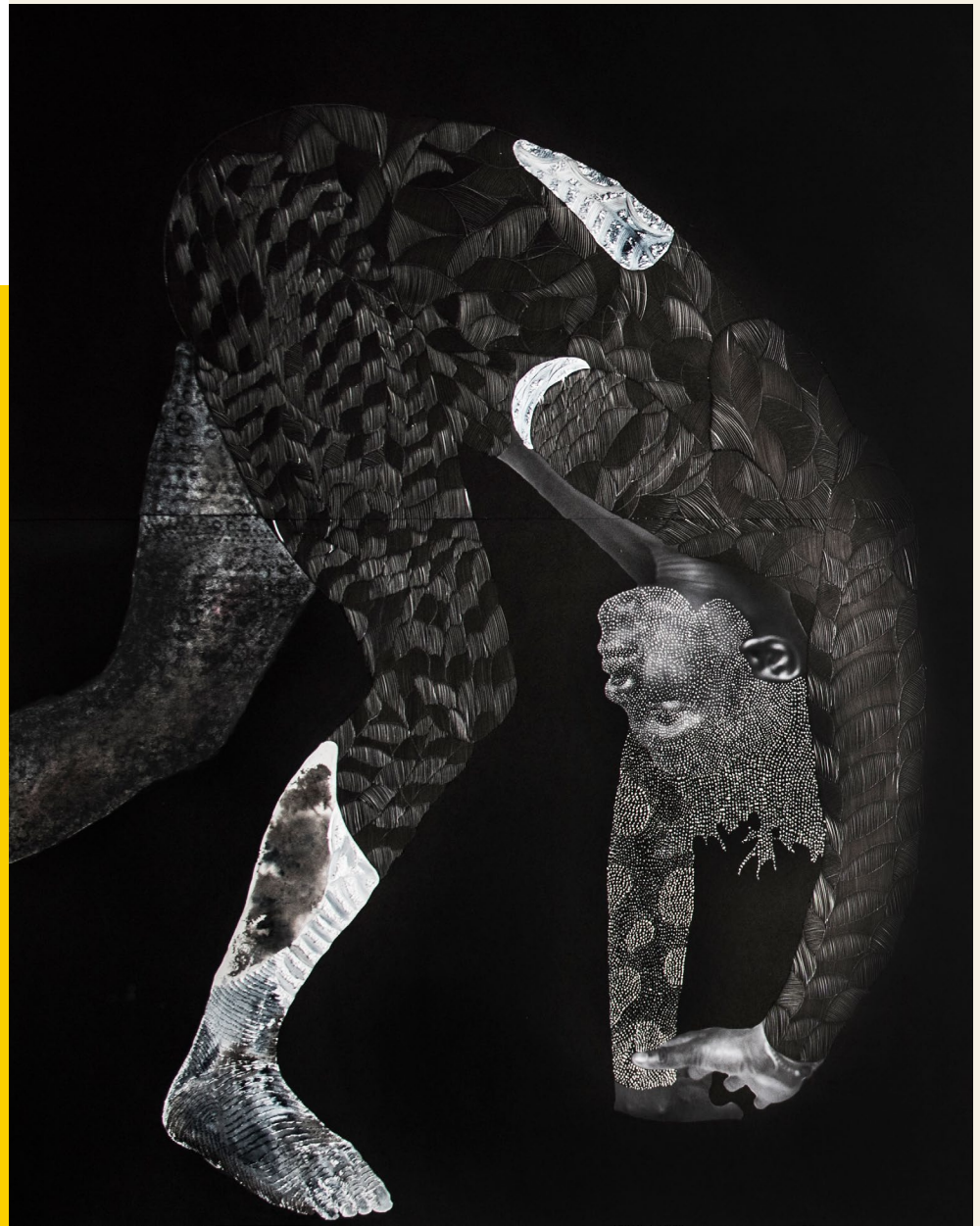
Fragile Figures: Beings and Time

Fragile Figures: Beings and Time



Fragile Figures: Beings and Time

Assembling identity in a global, digital age requires integrating projections and perceptions of self and others across real and virtual platforms, inspiring material and metaphoric transformations that respond to the influence of different media on the creation of our identities. This is eloquently expressed in works by artists such as Nate Lewis, who sculpts photographic images into figures that illuminate both complexity and empathy, highlighting human connection and intimacy. Trained as a critical care nurse, Lewis's practice is informed by the biology, aesthetics , and sociology of the human body, exploring how individuals are seen and felt, from the inside and the outside.

Cover: **Nate Lewis**
Signaling XX, 2019
Hand-sculpted paper inkjet print, ink, graphite, and frottage

From the micro systems at work in the human body, to the macro--the environmental, social, cultural, and political forces that shape how we see self and other, the artworks featured in *Fragile Figures: Beings and Time* illuminate the complexity of identity, revealing intersections between vulnerability and power in portraiture. Individual and group identity are approached through direct references to noted works from art history, connecting past events to current issues. From Ori Gersht's restaging of Jean-Bapiste-Siméon Chardin's 18th-century still-life as a video painting and Wim Botha's three-dimensional abstraction of a still-life, to evocations of John Singer Sargent's paintings by Nicolas V. Sanchez and Anthony Goicolea, to Ana Teresa Fernández's reimagining of René Magritte's *The Lovers* in her video referencing the separation of people by geopolitical borders, to Yvette Mayorga's inventive combination of Latinx and Rococo aesthetics, these artists quote from the canon of art history to examine the contemporary human condition. Suggesting a cyclical, rather than linear perspective on the most powerful of forces, the passage of time, these works reflect the evolution of portraiture as a platform for capturing how we construct and project our identities within the rapidly changing and precarious analog and digital worlds we inhabit.

Ana Teresa Fernández
The Space Between Us, 2022 (still)
Video

As one of the oldest art historical genres, portraiture has always been political: the faces of the wealthy and powerful are enshrined in art museums and textbooks. In *Self-Portrait with Goya*, Albano Afonso layered his own self-portrait behind a reproduction of Goya's painting, perforating the reproduction so that part of his figure appears through the centuries-old image: the screen-like pattern creates an interface between past and present projections of identity. One of a series of 30 works in which Afonso combines his likeness with an iconic historical portrait, certain elements of the image gain intense clarity– significantly, the artist's eyes appear directly behind the eyes of the patron who commissioned the original work. Goya occupies the bottom left of the frame; his form, like those of the other figures seen here, is punctured with dots, a practice Afonso uses to both destabilize identity and interrogate history and art history.

Decadence was a hallmark of the 18th-century Rococo movement associated with French painter François Boucher, whose painting of the Greek god Apollo reuniting with his mother Yvette Mayorga has transformed into the three-dimensional *Until We Meet Again, after François Boucher's "The Setting Sun" 1756*. Dressed in 18th-century style clothing, wearing Mexican Tribal boots, and holding Mylar balloons with familiar brand logos and emojis, Mayorga's figures embody a potent and pointed mashup of references to iconography, Latinx culture, consumerism, labor, and what the artist describes as "the fallacy of the American dream." Born in the U.S. to immigrant parents, Mayorga has observed first-hand the economic and social struggles that families like hers face. Her mother's labor in a department store bakery inspired Mayorga's thick, swirling application of paint, often using a piping tool designed to frost cakes. The bright pink hue that is a hallmark of Mayorga's practice references her heritage; "Mexican Pink," she says, is a popular choice for personal adornment as well as for artworks and architecture, in Mexico. Mayorga explains that she "is using pink as a weapon of mass destruction" to create visual allure, which, like the way that the availability of mass consumer goods in the U.S. suggests the promise of prosperity, also exposes historical and contemporary inequities.

The color pink is also deployed in David Antonio Cruz's diptych, *soletthemeatasylumpink*, which belongs to the artist's *dirty boy/girl* series. The title is a reference to Marie Antoinette, wife of the deposed King Louis XVI, to whom the phrase "let them eat cake" is attributed, along with the decadence and exploitation associated with the French monarchy. In contrast, this image is a carefully composed and rendered figurative double-portrait of other two everyday people, entwined with tenderness. "The painting is a humorous, playful engagement with art historical images and heteronormative ways of looking at desire, intimacy, roleplay, and the male gaze," explains Cruz. The two subjects, life-long friends, are posed in the manner of a *pietà*, but instead of a mother and son, are both men. "The pose directly references Michelangelo's *Pietà* [1498-99] and Balthus's [early 20th-century] paintings of young women and girls," says the artist, "but replaces the figures with adult men to comment on gender identity—both androgenizing the subjects and hypersensualizing them. The performative act explores the nuances of gender, queerness, and race." Cruz addresses these issues of identity through the very personal lens of his own experiences and relationships, emphasizing and empathizing with the humanity of his sitters.

Suspended in movement and rendered in tones of black and white that extend beyond the flat plane of paper, meticulously excavated with a scalpel, the figures Nate Lewis sculpts illuminate empathy, highlighting human connection and intimacy. Trained as a critical care nurse, Lewis's practice is informed by the biology and aesthetics of the human body. Says the artist, "I am interested in the unseen. By altering photographs, I aim to challenge people's perspectives on race and history through distortion and illusion. Treating the paper like an organism itself, I sculpt patterns akin to cellular tissue and anatomical elements, allowing hidden histories and patterns to be uncovered from the photographs."

David Antonio Cruz
soletthemeatasylumpink, 2016
Oil and latex on wood panels

Like Lewis, Tamara Kostianovsky's interest in the human form was inspired by an experience in medicine. "During my adolescence, while working in a surgeon's office, I began to discover a hidden world beneath the skin," she explains. "This fascination with the body became central to my work, inspiring me to use such imagery as a lens through which to explore themes of consumption, ecology, and the insatiable needs of the human body." Kostianovsky's kinetic sculpture, *In the Shape of Home*, made with recycled clothing (both found and her own), resembles a hanging rack of rib meat, alluding to the history of her homeland, Argentina, and what the artist describes as "the carnal and often violent history tied to nation-building, as well as our societal obsession with cutting into flesh." While referencing her Argentine identity, Kostianovsky's work invites viewers to contemplate their own relationships with their homelands and the ways in which these complex histories and cultures influence identity.

Nicolas V. Sanchez
La mariposa en Jalisco, 2021
Oil on canvas

In their larger-than-life self-portrait, *Ntozabantu VI, Parktown* from the series *Somnyama Ngonyama* ("Hail the dark lioness") Zanele Muholi explores multiple elements of their personality as a Black, queer person, while undoing the psychological damage of growing up in a society that devalued their appearance and identity. "When I was young, I was told that I was ugly, and I had to grow up with that sense of ugliness and shame," Muholi describes themself as a visual activist rather than an artist, and their photography a personal expression of resistance. Nandipha Mntambo used a cast of her own body to create the two torsos that comprise *Duality*, which echo in form and color the classical *Winged Victory of Samothrace* (200-190 BCE), transforming the Hellenistic figure of heroism into a contemporary vision of female strength, formed with cowhide rather than sculpted in stone.

LaToya Ruby Frazier's triple-portrait captures her own reflection alongside that of fellow artist Abigail DeVille within a view of the Mojave Desert landscape where pioneering artist Noah Purifoy (1917-2004) lived and worked. "Abigail and I wanted to make a pilgrimage and pay homage to someone who is clearly an ancestor and a predecessor for each of us. We wanted to witness our history in Purifoy's work in the Joshua Tree Outdoor Museum," Frazier says. The photograph poignantly captures an art historical legacy of three artists who sought or are currently seeking creative solutions to racial injustice.

Racial discrimination and its costs are also illuminated in the work of Titus Kaphar, an artist whose practice interrogates history, often drawing attention to historical and contemporary institutionalized racism. *The Jerome Project (Asphalt and Chalk) XXV and Trayvon Martin, Tamir Rice*, are both composite portraits of African American men and boys who were either incarcerated or killed by police or vigilante violence. The layering causes a visual blurring; the contours and features of one person bleed into the next; multiple people become indistinguishable. This dizzying effect alludes to the high numbers of Black men and youth who have been subject to a discriminatory, at times brutal, justice system. Kaphar's decision to use chalk on asphalt bears another connotation: a body outline drawn on the street. The portraits of these men and boys record their histories, assert their presence, and draw parallels between the identities and experiences of those who inspired this body of Kaphar's work.

Alfred Conteh's painting, *Aaron*, is part of his ongoing visual exploration of how African diasporic societies are fighting social, economic, educational, and psychological conflict both internally and externally. Using acrylic paint, soil, and atomized steel, Conteh paints people in everyday environments, utilizing this unexpected combination of materials to highlight his subjects' simultaneous heroism and vulnerability. Conteh writes, "The honest and false narratives of history embodied in this series are primarily personified in patinated colossuses that commemorate the people, culture, and battles that the populations they tower over have fought and continue to fight. We are at war on two fronts."

Paul Anthony Smith creates work that explores his autobiography as well as issues of identity within the African diaspora, referencing W.E.B. Dubois's concept of double-consciousness and the effects of colonialism, alluding to African rituals, and likening his art making techniques to scarification. The figure in Paul Anthony Smith's *Port Antonio Market #2* is disguised with a shimmering mask created by small incisions, a French technique known as picotage, which recalls 19th-century French Pointillism. Removed from the original context from which the photograph was taken, the title references the artist's hometown in Jamaica before he and his family relocated to the U.S. Hiding rather than revealing, Smith sees the act of disguising identity as a way to connect with a hidden nature; "You get this spirit, nobody knows who you are, it comes with this sort of power," Smith says.

Costume and character are linked in the works of Hassan Hajjaj, whose vibrant tableaux juxtapose highly saturated, brightly-colored images of musicians, cultural icons, and people he meets on the streets, with common brands of soda, food, and brightly patterned textiles normally found in the markets of Marrakesh. The images evoke the traditional studio photography of important Malian photographers Malick Sidibé (1936-2016) and Seydou Keïta (1921-2001), while celebrating fluid sexuality, the camp culture of the contemporary dandy, and a global economy that allows the artist to sample, like a disc jockey, from a wide range of sources. Self-possessed and idiosyncratically styled, Hajjaj's sitters become regal figures, presented as secular altarpieces: 21st-century heirs to Andy Warhol's iconographic Pop Art portraits of celebrities and consumer goods, all rendered with reverence for their subject matter.

History and memory, both personal and collective, inform the work of Alex Hernández, Valérie Belin, Letitia Quesenberry, and Stephen Irwin, who obscure their figures to reveal deeper, cultural truths. For Quesenberry and Irwin, the obscured and fragmented images of the human form provide a platform for capturing emotion, embracing nostalgia, and revealing vulnerability and desire. Quesenberry charts the evolution of her psyche and her art practice in *peeled*, a series of images derived from daily Polaroids taken over the course of a summer long past—a project undertaken in the midst of a difficult breakup. When Kodak terminated the production of Polaroid film, Quesenberry retrieved the photos, pulled them apart and printed the hazy, interior images on aluminum, affixing and aligning memory and media. Irwin's untitled portraits are images of isolated body parts from pornographic magazines, removing the absence of sexual imagery, hinting at the difficulty of preserving memory, pleasure, and desire.

Tamara Kostianovsky
In the Shape of Home, 2024
Discarded textiles and other fabrics

John Brooks pays homage to the intersection of memory and desire in narrative portraits inspired by the people, places, and works of art that sustain him and his practice. Titled after a song by gay musician Rostam Batmanglij, *Bike Dream*, the artist explains, "is part of a body of work begun in 2021 entitled *We All Come and Go Unknown* in which I combined images from various sources -- film, literature, art history, my own personal life - to create new, complex, compositions that both hint at narratives but feel ultimately unknowable and just out of reach. The figure on the bike is a friend of mine named Ryson. He is an avid cyclist and has been in several drawings and paintings over the last few years. The figure on the left is borrowed from a 1931 August Sander photograph entitled *Secretary at West German Radio, Cologne*. Germany--particularly Berlin--between WWI and WWII is a source of great interest for me as an artist and for reasons related to my family. As a Queer person, that time and place is also fascinating because there was real Queer life and real Queer freedom prior to the Nazis taking over."

Wim Botha
Untitled (Bywoner 3), 2013
Encyclopedia Britannica, steel rods, wooden base

Time, like love and memory, is fleeting and often undefinable. Figurative works by Anthony Goicolea and Sebastiaan Bremer obscure chronological order and question the primacy of memory. Goicolea's *Bed Ridden*, a time-lapse image of a young man confined to his bed, is purposely ambiguous: the hatch marks on the headboard may signify pain or pleasure, tallying the passage of time during his illness or providing a record of romantic encounters. The boy's figure appears in multiple: limbs intertwining and transparent, at times seeming to melt or morph together. The lone figure in Goicolea's *Lotus* also suggests a dream-like state. Three bright, white lotus blossoms—a plant associated with spirituality—surround a young man, half-immersed in water and rendered in dark tones, alluring, isolated, and fragile. In *Ave Maria 3*, Sebastiaan Bremer returns to an image of his wife, Andrea, when she was twenty-three years old, enlarging and embellishing it with swirling lines and marks that reference the automatic drawing of the Surrealists, the gaps inherent in memory, and the pixelated, mathematically-derived appearance of some digital media. Bremer applies the same technique to archival images, such as his reimagined portrait by Rembrandt, and *Little Leda and the Swan*, as well as to his self-portrait, *Die Liebe*, which captures the artist's youthful identity.

Nostalgia and desire also suffuse Hans Op de Beeck's video, *Night Time*, which animates hundreds of black and white watercolors the artist created over several years after sundown. Enigmatic journeys through invented, nocturnal settings that are sometimes populated with unknown figures, the film shows land and cityscapes and domestic interiors, are rendered with mesmerizing intimacy. Many of the frames recall cinematic tropes: establishing shots, grand panoramic views, as well as close-ups of bodies, faces, animals, and other details from every day experiences. Op de Beeck's multi-media work is described as "a wide-ranging reflection on the tragicomic way in which humans stage and organize their lives...and how we often lose the plot along the way." This lyrical animation of the hidden and unseen mixes praise and mourning for the fragile worlds and psyches shrouded in darkness and dreams.

Assembling identity in a global, digital age requires integrating projections and perceptions of self and others across real and virtual platforms, inspiring material and metaphoric transformations that respond to the influence of different media on the creation of our identities. Today, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, TikTok, and other forms of social media extend our cultural fascination with celebrity and perpetuate an illusion of universal connectivity—that everyone is accessible; their lives and identities can be shared with our own. The individual self may easily merge or evolve into fractions of the identities we admire and those we create to project and exchange online, like Slater Bradley and Ed Lachman's obsessive exploration of the late actor River Phoenix in his final film role as the star of *Dark Blood*, and in the avatars that Eva and Franco Mattes photographed on *Second Life*. Launched in 2003, Second Life is an online world built completely by the users/residents, where humans create online personas who can interact with each other, build homes and businesses, and can purchase body parts, hairstyles, facial features, cars, lamps and furniture to amplify or improve the lives of their online personas The diverse and detailed faces Richard Streitmatter-Tran paints on metal dining plates are anonymous profile portraits posted on Facebook: projected identities selected for social media. In utilizing everyday kitchenware as his canvases, Streitmatter-Tran highlights the quotidian ubiquity of creating and managing multiple identities, in lived and virtual reality.

The young woman featured in Mayorga's *Resting Scrolling, after François Boucher, "Madame De Pompadour," 1756* is managing multiple identities across time, space, and cultures, at home in her bedroom and onscreen, all at once. Thickly painted and decorated in the artist's signature "Mexican pink," and composed like the subject of Rococo painter Boucher's 18th-century portrait of Louis XV's mistress, Mayorga's work combines references to art history, colonialism, labor, Latinx culture, consumerism, surveillance, and social media, all within the contexts of mixed-use reality and COVID-19. "I asked my sister to send me a picture of herself in the peak of the pandemic in 2020," says the artist. "She was wearing leopard print pajamas, tilting her head like François Boucher's 'Madame de Pompadour.' It was a way to communicate and connect with my family digitally from afar by collaborating through exchanging posed photos that I would later turn into paintings. Her photo is collaged with imagery from Boucher's 1756 composition and remixed with my contemporary iconography, such as the Barbie car, Hello Kitty chains, cherubs, toys, and iPhone and laptop. The portrait is flanked by a calendar from our Midwestern store with an image of a rural Mexican landscape. A longing for what was left behind. The reflective car wrap vinyl shines and glistens like a squeaky-clean whip, so you can see your reflection and fix your hair. Surveillance [googly] eyes emerge from underneath my sister's faux Louis Vuitton Rococo garb as a sinister reminder of the way are bodies are policed in leisure. My sister had her stomach pumped at 17 for eating too many hot chips—the Takis are a marker of this moment—and an ode to the consumerism that is prescribed to us. Her nails are layered, painted, jeweled, and polished with an Amazon search for 'nail gems.' It is radical resistance to lay in your leopard print pjs and doom scroll on your phone while the world collapses." While an atmosphere of decadence and apathy animates both Mayorga's painting and its Rococo precedent, the subject here is searching for connection, not just self-satisfaction, looking to locate herself and others. Immersed in the infinite realm of the digital, she is seeking, as we all do, human intimacy and understanding of self and others.

Yvette Mayorga
Resting Scrolling after François Boucher, Madame de Pompadour, 2022
Acrylic nails, Nike shoes, false eyelashes, collage, plastic ring, plastic gummy bears, cherry nail rhinestones, rhinestones, car wrap vinyl, and acrylic piping on canvas

The search for connection and knowledge is a defining aspect of human experience, unbound by linear time. In Mat Collishaw's video installation, *Leda and the Swan*, a marble sculpture of a young woman and a bird rests atop a mirror facing a projection of the moon; dark clouds move across the moon's surface, foreshadowing the legendary tragedies described in W.B. Yeats's 1933 poem of the same title:

A shudder in the loins engenders there
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
And Agamemnon dead.

Far surpassing the history of the Trojan war, and the story of Leda's rape—which resulted in the birth of Helen of Troy, whose abduction ignited war with the Greeks—this is a haunting meditation on desire, power, and violence, on the nature of human frailty and fragility, projected through past and future time into an eternal present moment.

Alice Gray Stites
Museum Director, Chief Curator

ABOUT 21c MUSEUM HOTELS

21c Museum Hotels, an award-winning hospitality company based in Louisville, Kentucky, is pushing the boundaries of both the museum and hotel worlds to create a new kind of travel experience.

The company was founded as a single property by contemporary art collectors and preservationists Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, whose mission was to share innovative contemporary art with the public and participate in the revitalization of downtown Louisville. The couple opened the first 21c in 2006 along downtown's West Main Street, rehabilitating a series of 19th century warehouses to create a union of genuine hospitality, thoughtful design, and culinary creativity—all anchored by a contemporary art museum.

21c is 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. 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, Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Creative Capital Foundation, Creative Time, and others.
Guests can enjoy 21c Museum Hotels in Louisville, Kentucky; Cincinnati, Ohio; Bentonville, Arkansas; Durham, North Carolina; Lexington, Kentucky; Chicago, Illinois; and St. Louis, Missouri.

For more information visit
21cMuseumHotels.com

ABOUT 21C CINCINNATI

21c Museum Hotel Cincinnati is a boutique hotel, contemporary art museum and restaurant housed in downtown Cincinnati's historic Metropole Hotel, a 100-year-old landmark listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The 156-room property features over 8,000 square feet of exhibition space presenting rotating curated exhibitions, dynamic public art installations, and cultural programming. Exhibition space is free and open to the public, 365 days a year. The Metropole restaurant, led by executive chef Corey Cova, features a menu built around seasonal, local ingredients and dishes meant to be shared.

Follow us on Facebook and Instagram at @21ccincinnati

ABOUT 21c MUSEUM HOTELS

21c Museum Hotels, an award-winning hospitality company based in Louisville, Kentucky, is pushing the boundaries of both the museum and hotel worlds to create a new kind of travel experience.

The company was founded as a single property by contemporary art collectors and preservationists Laura Lee Brown and Steve Wilson, whose mission was to share innovative contemporary art with the public and participate in the revitalization of downtown Louisville. The couple opened the first 21c in 2006 along downtown's West Main Street, rehabilitating a series of 19th century warehouses to create a union of genuine hospitality, thoughtful design, and culinary creativity—all anchored by a contemporary art museum.

21c is one of the larges
museums in the U.S., and
collecting museum dedic
the 21st century. 21c pres
programming curated b
Chief Curator Alice Gr
both solo and group exh
the global nature of art t
specific, commissioned
a variety of cultural ever
collaborates on arts ini
and organizations worldw
Art Museum, North Caro
Contemporary Arts Cente
Capital Foundation, Creati
Guests can enjoy 21c Muse
Kentucky; Cincinnati,
Arkansas; Durham, North
Kentucky; Kansas City, Miss
and St. Louis, Missouri.

For more information visit
21cMuseumHotels.com

21c MUSEUM HOTEL
CINCINNATI