

ARTNEWS

Brooklyn Museum Partners With Equal Justice Initiative to Survey ‘The Legacy of Lynching’

BY ***Robin Scher*** POSTED 07/25/17



Tarabu Betseraï Kirkland and Mamie Lang Kirkland photographed in Los Angeles, California, 2017. KRIS GRAVES FOR THE EQUAL JUSTICE INITIATIVE

The Brooklyn Museum recently teamed with the nonprofit Equal Justice

Initiative for “The Legacy of Lynching: Confronting Racial Terror in America,” a group exhibition opening July 26 and running through September 3. Alongside work from the museum’s collection, the show will feature some of the initiative’s research into the history of violence against African-Americans and their communities. This research—which includes an [interactive online presentation](#) developed in collaboration with Google, video interviews with descendants of lynching victims, and commissioned photographs such as the one pictured above—aim to add context and perspective to more than a dozen works by artists including Sanford Biggers, Mark Bradford, Elizabeth Catlett, Melvin Edwards, Theaster Gates, Rashid Johnson, Titus Kaphar, Jacob Lawrence, Glenn Ligon, and Kara Walker.

“This exhibit is a prelude to a larger effort to change the landscape of the United States, which is largely silent about our history of racial terror and lynching,” Bryan Stevenson, a public-interest lawyer who founded the Montgomery, Alabama-based Equal Justice Initiative, told *ARTnews*.

The show was conceived as a first step toward prompting “important cultural conversations” in curated spaces, Stevenson said. Next year, for instance, EJI will begin placing markers across lynching sites in the American South. In Montgomery, EJI will also establish the country’s first national memorial commemorating more than 4,000 black lives lost to lynching and race-based murders between 1877 and 1950. There are also plans in the works to open a racial-justice museum that draws historical links between slavery and mass incarceration, and broader efforts to broaden both online and educational resources to include more information on this history.



Rashid Johnson, *Thurgood in the House of Chaos*, photolithograph, 2009.
COURTESY THE ARTIST AND BROOKLYN MUSEUM/GIFT OF EXIT ART

“Our work is very focused on changing the narrative of racial difference that has been cultivated in America for centuries,” Stevenson said. “I think we’ve been compromised by our history of racial inequality, and that most of what we debate and discuss today, from police violence to criminal justice to immigration and equity, is shadowed by history that we don’t fully understand. We believe our future is tied to a more meaningful and informed appreciation of our past.”

Essential to that effort and the exhibition—before the opening of which a preview talk will be held Tuesday evening with Stevenson, Ligon, Biggers, and Elizabeth Alexander—is an emphasis on individual stories. This includes recorded interviews with relatives as well as survivors who were found by EJI during years of research into archives, newspaper reports, and visits to the communities surrounding former lynching sites. As Stevenson noted, “Lynching never involved a single victim.”

Imagery is another means of conveying history, but Stevenson said efforts were made to explicitly avoid graphic photographs that objectify victims over telling stories of “society’s complicity in tolerating terror.” To that end, audio recordings will accompany images of crowds of white observers who stood witness to acts of violence—another facet that Stevenson believes “tells an important story about the legacy of lynching.”

Among the works in the show are several paintings by Jacob Lawrence, one depicting a scenario in its title: *Harlem Street Scene* (1975). A linocut by Elizabeth Catlett, *I Have Special Reservations* (1946), features a stoic-looking woman seated

in the “colored only” section of a bus. Other works include Kara Walker’s silhouette figurines made of steel, *Burning African Village Play Set with Big House and Lynching* (2006), as well as a framed fire hose by Theater Gates titled *In Case of Race Riot II* (2011) and Jack Whitten’s *Black Monolith II (For Ralph Ellison)*, 1994, an enigmatic portrait that incorporates such materials as molasses, copper, salt, coal, and razor blade.

From the Brooklyn Museum’s standpoint, Anne Pasternak, the institution’s director, told *ARTnews*, “We do believe that art has the power to communicate truths about an experience, a history, a problem that can’t always be effectively done with text. There’s every reason to expect that the Equal Justice Initiative’s extensive research will be new to many and spark an important conversation about this country’s history and its impact on today’s society. It is urgent we face this history, and that’s why we are partnering to make this show a reality.”

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