

## At “Fictions” in Harlem, Young Black Artists Are on Fire

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Christina Quarles' "A Part Apart (Fade)" BRICA WILCOX

It began with “Freestyle,” back in 2001. Since then, every few years the Studio Museum in Harlem has held a series of influential exhibitions that are specifically intended to bring a fresh crop of noteworthy Black American artists to the attention of a broad audience.

An alliterative conceit binds together what have become known as the “F shows”: “Frequency” in 2005, “Flow” in 2008, “Fore” in 2012. Now, the museum has decided the climate is right to release a new batch of talent from the continual prospecting that is part of its mission. “Fictions,” featuring work by nineteen artists from around the country, and with a strong proportion of installation and work in unorthodox materials, opens this week and runs to early January.

That’s why the museum recently accepted a delivery of one hundred pounds of Flamin’ Hot Cheetos, says co-curator Hallie Ringle, who organized the show with her Studio Museum colleague Connie H. Choi. “It’s extremely sickening, but they are so addictive!” The staff has been munching on leftovers from the setup of *Red 40*, an installation by Los Angeles artist Jazmin Urrea that examines the appeal and impact of junk food, inspired by the artist’s upbringing in the bodega-dependent food wasteland of Watts. Urrea, a recent graduate of the California Institute of the Arts, was once hospitalized for an adverse reaction to the food dye that gives the snacks their color, and her piece its title.

“Her work investigates the lack of food resources in urban areas, and what it does to the population,” says Choi. At the museum, that work will confront viewers in the form of an acrylic-coated wall of the unnaturally colored snacks, on the way from the lobby into the main gallery. “It’s about inundating the viewer with this harsh red and overabundance.”

In the past year, the Cheeto has taken on another metaphorical valence, in connection with our current orange-hued president. But that’s just a coincidence. Politics is present in “Fictions,” but loose. The Atlanta-based artist Paul Stephen Benjamin — who, born in 1966, is one of a few outliers, age-wise, in a roster mostly made up of millennials — will show a large installation, *God Bless America*, with over forty video monitors that overlay Aretha Franklin’s and Lil Wayne’s versions of the hoary anthem atop arrays of flashing blue and red lights that evoke the interweaving of forced patriotism and policing.



**The Sleepwalkers (2017) by Deborah Roberts, at the Studio Museum in Harlem** PHILIP ROGERS

Two other artists address incarceration. Sherrill Roland, from North Carolina, brings video and on-site performance of his *Jumpsuit Project*, which originated after he spent nearly a year in prison on wrongful misdemeanor charges. His conviction was overturned and his record sealed, but Roland lives with the trauma, and has turned it into art by presenting himself in an orange outfit, setting up visitor-booth-style windows or drawing cell-size sidewalk spaces from which to interact with the public. Sable Elyse Smith, from Richmond, Virginia, presents photography from her ongoing multimedia work based on visiting her father in prison for nineteen years; she also has a solo show this season at the Queens Museum.

But others propose commentary that is oblique, or playful. Maya Stovall was last seen in this year's Whitney Biennial with a set of videos in which she performed dances in front of liquor stores in Detroit. Her work in "Fictions" is more abstract, even minimalist: an installation of mirrors and prisms made of found glass — scavenged in her Detroit neighborhood — that will greet visitors in the atrium. "The performance is the audience interacting and seeing this work, and the community space that it creates," Ringle says. Stephanie Williams, from Washington, D.C., has another food-related piece, in the form of stop-motion puppet animation; she is half Filipina, and in the piece, an army of balut, a Filipino delicacy made of a fermented embryo-stage duck egg, comes to life and interacts with Precious Moments angel figurines, Uncle Ben's rice, and Aunt Jemima syrup.

"Fictions" does include painting — by Walter Price, Christina Quarles, and Amy Sherald — as well as photography and mixed-media works on paper, but the curators say their eclectic selections reflected the unusual work they found in their studio visits. "We were surprised by how many artists were working in less-traditional material and incorporating their surroundings into their work through found objects, or objects purchased from thrift stores and other locations," says Choi. "These are ways they are in dialogue with their community."

These materials can also be tickets to phantasmagorical realms. Matthew Angelo Harrison, another Detroit artist, buys skulls of animals such as wildebeests from a wildlife preserve in South Africa and incorporates them into stark sculptures made of streamlined industrial materials. New York-based Allison Janae Hamilton employs logs, iron posts, and taxidermy — she has a thing for alligators — set out in whole-

room installations that also include fabric and regalia, lending them a countrified, ritual character in keeping with the Southern tradition of hoodoo and healing.



**Texas Isaiah's "My Name Is My Name I" COURTESY THE ARTIST**

Speculative fiction, particularly of the Afrofuturist strain, came up often in preparing the show. “Over half the artists we visited talked about Octavia Butler,” says Choi. This contributed to the title “Fictions,” which they selected only well into the process. “We’ve been talking about why so many artists

are interested in creating their own environment, and what it means to create that space to tell your truth or express an idea,” says Ringle. Loosely speaking, the title conveys a renewed interest in narration.

The F shows carry a certain authority. Conceived by the museum’s dynamic director, Thelma Golden — but with curatorial tasks delegated to younger staff, in keeping with the vibe of talent development — they have given early imprimatur to many of today’s major Black artists. “Freestyle” helped reveal, among others, Sanford Biggers, Mark Bradford, Rashid Johnson, and Julie Mehretu. “Fore,” in 2012, included, for instance, Toyin Ojih Odutola, who has a major solo show at the Whitney this season.

Like its predecessors, “Fictions” will not only turbocharge some careers; it will also propose a message about new developments in visual art by Black Americans. Under Golden, the museum has deftly balanced its mission to keep a wide-open mind as to content and form while presenting Black artists. In 2001, Golden proposed “post-Black” (long before the Obama-era “post-racial” chimera) as a provisional term for art infused with the Black experience yet unfettered by cultural nationalism or any other identity. The formal diversity and experimentalism of work by Black artists is surely now beyond question. Perhaps, with its emphasis on narration, “Fictions” will help us find paths out of the “post-facts” morass of public culture in 2017.

*‘Fictions’*

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