



'30 Americans' comes to Cincinnati Art Museum

Carol Motsinger, March 25, 2016

Art is a vehicle for social interaction. A museum? A superhighway of conversation.

Brian Sholis, curator of photography at the Cincinnati Art Museum, sees his work that way. And in his latest effort, "30 Americans," that idea is on display. Literally. Quotations from several of the artists in the provocative show hang in the gallery. "My work should operate as a mirror," one from Leonardo Drew reads. Still, "we didn't want to over-determine the response people had" to the work, said Sholis, who was part of a curating team for "30 Americans." That's also why the wall text for the around 60 artworks are sparse, he said.

"30 Americans" showcases work from some of the most important African-American artists from the last three decades. Think Nick Cave, Kara Walker, Kehinde Wiley and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Iconic images you will recognize, too, like Hank Willis Thomas' "Branded Head." His striking photograph is of a black man's profiled head etched with the Nike logo. The work in this traveling exhibit ranges in content and concern. There are myriad mediums, too, from drawing, painting, photography, video and installation. There's neon lighting. Carpet and blocks of cotton. Record sleeves and a rope. And they tell just as many stories about life, love, race, gender and politics. The results are everything from humorous to heartbreaking.

The works come from Rubell Family Collection, Miami, as well as from the Cincinnati Art Museum's permanent collection. (Featured artists Nick Cave and Mark Bradford both had shows at CAM.) Some of the "30 Americans" pieces also interact with CAM's permanent collection. That point is punctuated dramatically in the Schmidlapp Gallery.

Kehinde Wiley's massive 2008 painting, "Sleep," now dominates one wall in the space dedicated to the icons of the permanent collection. The bright oil on canvas portrait is 25-feet-long. It's both a showstopper and the introduction to the show that's in several galleries on the first and second floor of the Eden Park institution. Inspired by classic portraits of nobility, Wiley explores representations of African-Americans in art. Wiley reinterprets an 18th-century Restout painting of the same name.

Wiley's "Sleep" is now flanked in CAM by two examples of the classic paintings that inspire the Los Angeles native. Starting in May, "30 Americans" will occupy even more space at the museum. The curators will transform a gallery space across the cafe into The Forum. It will contain resources like books and videos, as well as other examples of African-American art in CAM's collections, Sholis said.

Here's a closer look at three of the 30 Americans:

Kara Walker

Walker's silhouettes have transformed a first-floor gallery at CAM. Her intricate cut-outs are applied directly on the wall as a reference to this traditionally Victorian art form. This contemporary artist from California explores contradictions and complexities with race, sexuality and violence in her work. Using images familiar from the Antebellum South, her images are often grotesque and somewhat scary.

Her confrontational approach is juxtaposed by the delicate line of her figures. She explored these themes in a different medium two years ago in Brooklyn. In what the New York Times called "one of the most substantial works of art to hit New York in years," Walker produced "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby" using some 30 tons of sugar.

Nick Cave

"30 Americans" features two of this Missouri-born performance artist's ornate "soundsuits." In a museum setting, his elaborate pieces appear as a vibrant sculpture. But these whimsical pieces are designed to be worn and are activated in Cave's

dance-based performances.

They also function as a second-skin that completely obscures the person inside. And are a dramatic blend of texture, color and shape that is loud without making a sound, according to the museum. An accomplished fiber artist, Cave constructed the soundsuits of both found and original objects. He's been creating since childhood. Some of his first work: Handmade birthday cards and clothes.

Jean-Michel Basquiat

He is now one of the brand names of New York City's New Bohemia. But before the world knew him, Lower Manhattan met him as a graffiti artist/character named SAMO, who often used a copyright symbol in his language-based work.

A New Yorker, Basquiat burst onto the vibrant scene at just 17. He died at 27. In just 10 years, he cultivated an expressive, explosive voice all his own. "Bird on Money," featured in the show, exemplifies how street art aesthetics defined his more traditional painting style. It's graphic and layered, with a striking color palette.

Who are the 30 Americans?

Nina Chanel Abney
John Bankston
Jean-Michel Basquiat
Mark Bradford
Iona Rozeal Brown
Nick Cave
Robert Colescott
Noah Davis
Leonardo Drew
Renée Green
David Hammons
Barkley L. Hendricks
Rashid Johnson
Glenn Ligon
Kalup Linzy
Kerry James Marshall
Rodney McMillian
Wangechi Mutu
William Pope.L
Gary Simmons
Xaviera Simmons
Lorna Simpson
Shinique Smith
Jeff Sonhouse
Henry Taylor
Hank Willis Thomas
Mickalene Thomas
Kara Walker
Carrie Mae Weems
Kehinde Wiley
Purvis Young