



Culture Talk: Arnold Lehman on Curating ‘American African American,’ a Selling Exhibition at Phillips London

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Nov 1, 2017 • 12:58 pm
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AMONG THE HALLMARKS of Arnold Lehman’s nearly two-decade tenure as director of the Brooklyn Museum was his focus on community engagement, popular culture, and the visibility of African American artists. After retiring in 2015, he transitioned from the museum world to the auction world, joining Phillips as a special adviser to the CEO, Edward Dolman. The role has Lehman serving as a resource to specialists, identifying museum exhibitions Phillips should support, trotting the globe as the auction house considers its expansion strategy, and curating selling exhibitions. “I don’t get directly involved with the auctions,” Lehman says.

His second exhibition for Phillips is called “[American African American](#).” It opens Nov. 8 in London and picks up where the Tate Museum’s “[Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power](#)” left off, presenting works produced in the 1980s to the present. The selling exhibition features 26 works by three generations of critically recognized contemporary artists, including Jean Michel-Basquiat (1960-1988), Nina Chanel Abney, Derrick Adams, Sanford Biggers, Leonardo Drew, Theaster Gates, David Hammons, Rashid Johnson, Adam Pendleton, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Jack Whitten, and Fred Wilson, among others. I spoke to Lehman about his vision for the exhibition, desire to further expose a European audience to African American artists, transparent pricing, and Kehinde Wiley painting President Obama’s portrait.

CULTURE TYPE: How did the exhibition come about? Is this your first major project with Phillips?

ARNOLD LEHMAN: Well, it's a larger project than I did before. I did an exhibition for them a year ago about contemporary artists who work with light. It was a much smaller project, so this is a lot larger to tackle. But, as former director of the Brooklyn Museum, I've done numerous exhibitions dealing with African American artists, either as large solo exhibitions or in large group exhibitions. That's one of the things that I think has set the Brooklyn Museum apart over many, many years—along with other museums like the Studio Museum in Harlem—showing both the incredible activity and the growth in importance and in, I guess you would say, “space” that African American artists are now taking up in the United States.

Of course I am familiar with your long tenure at the Brooklyn Museum. You were there during the Chris Ofili flap with Giuliani (during the 1999 exhibition “Sensation: Young British Artists From the Saatchi Collection,” in which the mayor objected to the artist's depiction of the Virgin Mary) and then Kehinde Wiley's had major shows there, Wangechi Mutu, and Mickalene Thomas, and many others...

Right. And then we did huge shows like 100 black photographers [“Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers” (2001)] and smaller shows like shows of Lorna Simpson's. We've gone from one end of the spectrum to the other. But even before that, I did work on African American artists, which has always interested me, when I was director of the Baltimore Museum. And so, it is very good to see that in the past 20 years that there is such presence and significance in this work and that it is now something that people are avidly collecting, Not only black collectors, but white collectors are putting together collections, are really very interested to see artists who I call in this exhibition “American” African American.

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AWOL ERIZKU (b. 1988), “Oh what a feeling, aw, fuck it, I want a Trillion,” 2015 (mixed media with seven regulation size basketball rims and Spalding NBA Brooklyn Nets team basketball, 148 1/8 x 18 7/8 x 24 3/8 inches / 376 x 48 x 62 cm, Unique). I Copyright the Artist. Courtesy Ben Brown Fine Arts, London

I am glad you went there because that was going to ask you about the title of the exhibition. How did you came up with it and what does it mean?

I think for this generation, and actually for several generations, there still is an interest on the part of the artists in their blackness and in black culture, which I have written in the text for the exhibition. I think they are also tackling and approaching being an artist very much like any other artist. I think they need to be sort of taken out of that category, in which they find themselves, or have been finding themselves, as African American artists. So, I simply added “American” at the beginning of this to emphasize that. I think it's very true if you look back over the past 20 or 30 years, they are affected and influenced by exactly the same things that any other artist who is interested in their environment and what's going on in our culture and our politics, and then they put that back into their art.

With the title, you are emphasizing that they are American artists. However, you have Awol Erizku in the exhibition, for

example. I am not sure who else is in the exhibition because you've just highlighted some of the artists so far. Are there other black artists who were born elsewhere, other than in the United States or the Americas?

Well, let me think about that. Uhm. Hmm. You know I'm not sure. Actually, when you talk about Awol, I was actually surprised to find he was born in Ethiopia. But, you know, he grew up here. Where somebody had been born was not a critical factor to me. As I just said to you, I didn't even realize that he'd been born in Ethiopia. You know the truth is, I don't know. But I do know they are all now thoroughly Americans. That was not of great concern to me. Clearly.

(The other 25 artists in the exhibition were born in the United States.)

The exhibition is positioned to piggy back on “Soul of a Nation” as it is closing at the Tate and will travel to the United States. Why, other than that nice timing, is this exhibition in London as opposed to in New York at Phillips?

It's a very good question you've asked. I must tell you a lot of my colleagues at Phillips here in New York are, I don't know if disappointed is the right word, but they said that they wished that I had done the show in New York. But I knew that “Soul of a Nation” was happening in London. I had some opportunities for different times of the year to do this exhibition. We don't have that much open space because of our auction schedule and I felt that introducing this large number of artists to a British and a European audience was really more important, for them as artists, than showing them in New York, where there have been so many shows at the Studio Museum. So many shows at the Brooklyn Museum. This was more important. I thought it was better for the artists.

It fit chronologically perfectly with “Soul of a Nation,” which strangely enough, not strangely, but coincidentally is coming to the Brooklyn Museum. People who went to see “Soul of a Nation,” will see the next step with Basquiat, in a sense the fulcrum between breaking from what was going on with artists in “Soul of a Nation,” and moving on to a whole new phase of contemporary art, not just for African American artists, but for artists as a whole.

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XAVIERA SIMMONS
(b. 1974), “Index
Seven Composition
Seven,” 2015 (color
photograph, 65 x 50
inches, Edition of 3). I
Courtesy David Castillo
Gallery





How long has “American African American” been in the planning? How long have you been working on this and what is the source of the art that is being shown and sold?

It started in the spring, probably the middle of the spring, sometime in April or May. I've been working on it pretty diligently since. And the sources come from galleries, private collectors, and artists directly.

Phillips has had success selling works by African American artists in the 20th Century & Contemporary Art sales. Is this exhibition a test to see if you might consider having an auction dedicated to African American art? Is that something Phillips would consider?

Nothing has ever been discussed about that. They just asked me what I'd like to do as an exhibition. I thought about it for a couple of days and I said this because it's been an interest of mine for 25 or 30 years and all that time I've been the director of the museum, not the curator. Although I've been

very intimately involved. So, this is my own thing. And, I must tell you, you do appreciate curators who write labels, when here I am, sitting at home, slaving over my computer writing labels.

You've had this wonderful career working at the Brooklyn Museum, the Baltimore Museum seeing all this work throughout your career and various experiences. Are there any particular works in this exhibition that you haven't seen, that have been with a collector for decades, or maybe there are new works from artists, that have caught your attention?

There are many works. Although I know most of these artists pretty well. You can't know all of the works they've produced. Except for those artists who are fairly new to me, and who interest me a great deal, like you mentioned Awol, for instance, most of them I know the work. I may not know the specific work that I was determined to find for the exhibition or sometimes I wasn't able to get for the exhibition and I decided I would try for something else, within a range of works that I was interested in and from a time period. It's not like I was doing a museum exhibition, which normally we start three years out, maybe four years out. This is based, really, on my personal knowledge and some research and the time I've spent in so many galleries and gallery exhibitions and museum exhibitions all over the world.

It's very good to see, actually, in Britain, in London, you are beginning to see more and more exhibitions dealing with African American artists. In fact, one of the artist's in the exhibition, who I know very well, Hank Willis Thomas, is having an exhibition, simultaneously, I think at Ben Brown Gallery in London. In fact, the second time, maybe the third time, that I saw Awol's work was also by seeing it in a British gallery, when he showed at the Armory show in New York last spring.

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MEQUITTA AHUJA (b. 1976), “Sales Slip,” 2017 (oil on canvas, 84 x 80 inches / 213.4 x 203.2 cm). | Courtesy the artist

A painting by Baltimore-based artist Mequitta Ahuja is featured on Phillips website promoting the exhibition. How were you first introduced to her work?

I've seen images of it. I was very interested because she works in Baltimore and I was the director of the Baltimore Museum for 20 years, but that was way before her involvement there. As I said, I saw a number of these images and then I read about her work a little bit and found that it's almost entirely about portraiture and it's about her portrait. She works her portraits into her canvases in many different ways, but I don't think you can't, not for a moment, not

understand them, at least in some ways, as portraiture. She has a very engaging face, which she moves around a great deal. She paints in a very bold, very interesting way, blending a kind of a straightforward, sometimes even a little traditional, way with a very engaging manner. Almost everything she does has a good deal of color.

The one I was able to secure for our show is particularly interesting because it's in a sense a painting being shown in a studio, which is the background. We've already heard that there are people interested in this painting. I am delighted to have this in the exhibition. It's a very bold picture and it's very large. And she's wonderful. I never met her in person, but I've had many telephone conversations with her and she is just dynamite.



Kehinde Wiley contributed a new painting from 2017 to the exhibition and its untitled. I haven't seen the image. I was curious what the subject matter is because he is well known for his portraiture, but he has an exhibition coming up at Stephen Friedman in London that represents a new direction. He is showing some new maritime paintings. What is this painting?

It is a portrait, and in fact, I don't remember that title. It's a portrait of a male sitter in Harlem.

You have some African American artists represented in your personal collection, including Kehinde Wiley. Who are a few others?

Mickalene Thomas. I shouldn't say African American alone because also people like Yinka Shonibare. Nina Chanel Abney. Now you've got me I'm tongue tied now, but a good number of them. I am really delighted to have that and happy I was able to afford buying them when I did.

JEAN-MICHEL BASQUIAT (1960-1988), "Untitled," (acrylic, oil stick, pencil, spray paint, paper collage on wood, 48 x 30 x 1 1/2 inches / 122 x 76.2 x 4 cm), Signed, dated and inscribed "NYC 81 Jean-Michel Basquiat" on the reverse / Courtesy Phillips

Speaking of buying, how does the selling exhibition work? Are there fixed prices or are there estimates? Do people make offers? How does the whole selling part of it work?

It's exactly as if you walked into a gallery. It's exactly as if you'd walked into Stephen Friedman or Gagosian. There are prices. We are going to do something that I always appreciate when I go into a gallery. We are going to have the prices on the wall so that they will be right out there. We don't have a lot of wiggle room, but on some, we might have a teeny bit. What we meant to do is to price these very accurately. That's why we are very pleased to be able to literally put them on the wall. They will also be in the e-catalog, so there's no magic about it.

Let me ask you one question. I know you're headquartered in D.C., so I am taking for granted that you know that Kehinde has been asked by Obama to paint his official portrait.

I do.

Good, okay. I assumed that, but I just wanted to say it.

I appreciate that. And Amy Sherald is doing Michelle Obama's. It's a really exciting, important development.

It's terrific. It's terrific. And I must say I am very proud of President Obama for making that kind of a choice. Because it's young, it's youthful. It's exciting. Even though Kehinde can be, in a way, among the most traditional painters, he still is totally 21st century.

Definitely. It will be interesting to see how they will approach the commissions, what the portraits will look like.

I'm only wondering if he is going to put Obama on the back of a horse.



DERRICK ADAMS (b. 1970), "Pastime Paradise," 2014 (mixed media collage on paper, Triptych, Overall 120 x 30 inches). Image courtesy the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery

You've spent all of this time in the museum world and now you're working at an auction house lending your expertise. How has the transition been for you? You are an adviser to the chairman and CEO of Phillips, but exactly what do you do?

It was very easy, first of all. I've known Ed Dolman for probably, at this point, 18 years. I knew him when he was the chairman for many, many years of Christie's. I knew and worked with him a little bit when he was the head of museum program in Qatar. I knew him then and did some work with him at that point and he is an extraordinary, knowledgeable, and delightful person. I think one of the reasons that attracted me to come is the same reason that so many other major auction folks over the past couple of years have come to Phillips. They are coming because of Ed. He's an amazing, unbelievably professional person and a delightful person to deal with. That's the reason I went there. They more or less asked me what I'd be interested in doing and so my role, which is not perfectly defined, is that I maintain, and I hope enhance, our relationship with the museum community.

I am involved in our program called Arts Partnership in which we help to support museum exhibitions in different areas of the country and in Europe and in Asia, where we're located. Recently, we helped to support a number of exhibitions. One being the great Robert Mapplethorpe show that was done a couple of years ago at LACMA. The Kerry James Marshall exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Lots and lots of shows. Unfortunately, you know one of these days maybe we'll have a lot more money. But right now, we try to make the best of what we have and support really important 20th century and important contemporary exhibitions.

The other thing I do is a little bit of global strategy in terms of looking at places where we haven't done business very much in the past and maybe we should be doing business. Last year I was in South Africa and spent time there with the collectors, the galleries, the museums getting to know that art community with the possibility that we might be doing business there some time in the future.

In addition to that, I'm involved with the specialists. I try to give them advice when they have questions about artists that I may have a long history with like Basquiat, for instance. I don't get directly involved with the auctions.

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— Arnold Lehman



LYLE ASHTON HARRIS (b. 1965),
"Ecstasy #1," 1987-88 (black and white
 silver gelatin print, 60 x 40 inches,
 Edition 3/6). | Courtesy David Castillo
 Gallery

Before I spoke to you, I wanted to confirm your title. I was looking at all the staff online and there is no diversity at Phillips. We've talked a lot about how over the past 20-30 years recognition of African American artists has really grown and in the museum world there are more curators of color and opportunities...

Not enough

Right. And that's not the case at Phillips and the same thing at Sotheby's and at Christie's. Do you have a comment or any thoughts about that situation?

Well, the museum world of course is much, much larger. It overwhelms the auction world in staffing, in terms of numbers, and you have to make it a priority about diversity and inclusion. And we have certainly been talking at Phillips to some potential staff members, specialists of color. So far, it's not because we don't want to have them join us, but so far, we've not been successful. And I have to tell you, that's not for want of trying. We are going to continue to try and hopefully we will make a difference.

What is your goal, as a curator, and what is Phillips's goal, as an auction house, in presenting this exhibition?

Well my goal, which I think is the same as Phillips's, has always been to provide a forum for so many really great artists. To find a place within the consciousness of British and European collectors, who might not otherwise have a chance to see the work. And that's basically it.

When you think about the enormous number of museum exhibitions over these past 30 years, overall the number given over to African American artists is a drop in the bucket. And they've affected me because that has been a great interest of mine. I personally collect, at least in part, in that area. But as an overall segment of what the American museum community is doing, and forget about the European community of museums, it's nothing. So again, this gave me a real opportunity to wave the flag for something I believe in. **CT**

This interview has been edited for brevity and clarity.

TOP IMAGE: Then Brooklyn Museum Director Arnold Lehman at Frieze New York (May 15, 2015) | Photo by Mireya Acierto, [Getty Images](#)

The e-catalog for "American African American." including prices, will be released when the exhibition opens on Nov. 8. The exhibition checklist follows:

1. **Mequitta Ahuja** (b. 1976)

"Sales Slip," 2017
(oil on canvas)
84 x 80 inches / 213.4 x 203.2 cm

2. **Kehinde Wiley** (b. 1976)

"Untitled," 2017
(oil on canvas)
Unframed: 30 x 24 inches / Framed: 39 x 33 inches

3. **Jean-Michel Basquiat** (1960-1988)

"Untitled," 1981
(acrylic, oil stick, pencil, spray paint, paper collage on wood)
48 x 30 x 1 1/2 inches / 122 x 76.2 x 4 cm
Signed, dated and inscribed "NYC 81 Jean-Michel Basquiat" on the reverse

4. **Awol Erizku** (b. 1988)

"Oh what a feeling, aw, fuck it, I want a Trillion," 2015
(mixed media with seven regulation size basketball rims and Spalding NBA Brooklyn Nets team basketball)
148 1/8 x 18 7/8 x 24 3/8 inches / 376 x 48 x 62 cm
Unique

5. **Jack Whitten** (b. 1939)

"Site VII," 1987
(mixed media on board)
12 x 12 inches / 30.5 x 30.5 cm

6. **David Hammons** (b. 1943)

"Basketball Installation," 1995
(tree trunk, basketball hoop, African vessel, dirt, and basketball)
Dimensions vary with each installation
Signed and dated on drawing of authenticity: "David Hammons 10/1/98"

7. **Nick Cave** (b. 1959)

"King o f the Hill," 2014
(mixed media including Golliwog costume, afghans, mannequin and metal)
114 1/2 x 95 x 47 inches

8. **Fred Wilson** (b. 1954)

"I Saw Othello's Visage In His Mind, 2013
(Murano glass and wood)
64 x 51 x 7 inches
3 of 6 + 2 APs

9. **Sanford Biggers** (b. 1970)

"Slimm," 2014
(three antique quilts, assorted textiles, spray paint, spray glitter, treated acrylic paint, tar, felt, thread)
61 x 113 inches

10. **Lyle Ashton Harris** (b. 1965)

"Ecstasy #1," 1987-88
(black and white silver gelatin print)
60 x 40 inches
Edition 3/6

11. **Paul Sepuya** (b. 1982)

"Self- Portrait study with Two Figures (1506)," 2015
(pigment print with artist frame and wood)
80 x 60 inches
Edition of 5

12. **Rashid Johnson** (b. 1977)

"Color Men," 2016
(ceramic tile, spray enamel, soap, wax)
96 x 80 inches

13. **Shinique Smith** (b. 1972)

"Bale Variant No, 0021 (Christmas)," 2011
(clothing, fabric, objects, wrapping paper and ribbon)
79 x 30 x 30 inches

14. **Adam Pendleton** (b. 1984)

"Black Dada (D)," 2012
(silkscreen ink on canvas)
Two panels, Each 48 x 76 inches / 121.9 cm x 193 cm,
Overall 96 x 76 inches / 243.8 cm x 193 cm

15. **Derrick Adams** (b. 1970)

"Pastime Paradise," 2014
(mixed media collage on paper)
Triptych, Overall 120 x 30 inches

16. **Hank Willis Thomas** (b. 1976)

"Scandalously Good!," 2009
(aluminium letters on wood and inkjet print)
Overall 80 x 40 inches / 203.2 x 101.6 cm

17. **Kara Walker** (b. 1969)

"Forging Freedoms," 1996
(cut paper and charcoal)
56 x 48 inches / 142.2 x 121.9 cm

18. **Deana Lawson** (b. 1974)

"Wanda and Daughters," 2009
(inkjet print, mounted on Sintra)
35 x 44 inches print, 36 x 45 inches framed
Edition 2 of 6

19. **Xaviera Simmons** (b. 1974)

"Index Seven Composition Seven," 2015
(color photograph, 65 x 50 inches)
Edition of 3

20. **Theaster Gates** (b. 1973)

"Event of a Race Riot," 2011

(square patched wood and decommissioned fire hose, wood, glass)
27 x 27 x 6 inches / 69.9 x 69.9 x 15.9 cm

21. **Rashaad Newsome** (b. 1979)
"Grand Prize!," 2016
(collage in custom frame with leather and automotive paint)
Framed dimensions: 43 x 53 in. / 109 x 135 cm

22. **Nina Chanel Abney** (b. 1982)
"The Money Tree," 2008
(acrylic on canvas)
Approximately 88 x 66 inches

23. **Carrie Mae Weems** b. 1953
"The Tate Modern," 2006-present
(digital c-print)

Image 49 x 49 inches / 125.7 x 125.7 cm, Framed 73 x 61 x 2 inches / 186.7 x 156.2 x 5 cm
Edition L1 of 5, with 2 artist proofs

24. **Mickalene Thomas** (b. 1971)
"Kiss me and I'll Kiss you Back," 2006
(rhinestones, acrylic and enamel on wood panel)
48 x 60 inches / 121.9 x 152.4 cm

25. **Leonardo Drew** (b. 1961)
"Number 195," 2016
(wood, paint)
64 x 31 x 15 inches / 162.6 x 80.6 x 38.1 cm

26. **Jacolby Satterwhite** (b. 1986)
"Untitled," 2017
(VR work, sound, color, 1)



SANFORD BIGGERS (b. 1970), "Slimm," 2014 (three antique quilts, assorted textiles, spray paint, spray glitter, treated acrylic paint, tar, felt, thread, 61 x 113 inches). | Courtesy Massimo De Carlo, Milan/London/Hong Kong