



Wadsworth's Collection Of Black Art Illuminates Experiences, Cultures And Traditions

By RYAN LINDSAY · NOV 14, 2019



Afrocsmologies: American Reflections features more than 100 works of art from Black artists beginning in the 1800s.

COURTESY: THE WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

With more than 100 works of art, from sculptures and quilts to paintings and photographs, the Wadsworth Atheneum's newest installation, *Afrocsmologies: American Reflections*, stands out as more than just an exhibit.

It's an invitation to something curator Frank Mitchell calls a celebration.

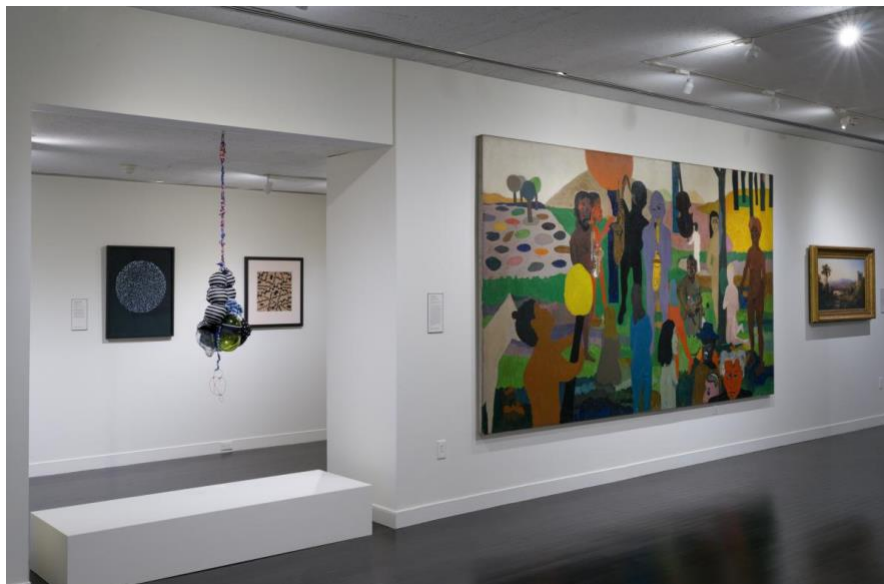
“It’s an opportunity for us to celebrate the work of Black artists who imagined a world that tilts toward the Africana,” Mitchell said, “so a spiritual world focused on and celebrating Black spirituality.”

The show is broken up into four sections: Nature, Gods & Humanity, Origins, and Ritual.

“Nature is the foundation of everything,” Mitchell said. “The captives who were brought here to the Americas believed that the spirit lived in everything -- in the grass, in the water, in the heavens, so in this section we celebrate that understanding of spirituality.”

But at times, the sections themselves as well as the show’s larger theme may seem more abstract than apparent.

“We wanted to have a balance between the moments of spirituality that would be more approachable to folks: Bible stories, references to baptism, images of Jesus, things that everyone could connect with easily,” Mitchell said. “And then we wanted to challenge people with some things that would be a little harder to read.”



Shinique Smith's "Talisman for Inner Sight" hangs next to Bob Thompson's 1960 "Garden of Music" in the Nature section of Afrocosmologies.

CREDIT COURTESY: THE WADSWORTH ATHENEUM MUSEUM OF ART

But one thing is apparent: The collection of so many Black artists and works of art outside of themes like slavery or civil rights is special. The dozens of pieces are drawn from the Wadsworth, The Amistad Center for Art & Culture, and the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art. The earliest piece dates to the early 1800s.

“It’s a little overwhelming because I see so many artists that I’ve looked up to for so long in the show,” said Carl Joe Williams, a New Orleans-based artist.

While visitors may be struck by his multicolored mattress-turned-canvas -- the piece is called *Waiting* -- Williams can’t quite get over seeing so many pieces in person by artists he knows and admires.

“Some of these pieces I’ve loved but never seen them up close,” Williams said. “If you’re an artist, then you see them in front of your face, you kind of geek out.”

In many ways, *Afrocosmologies* feels like a family reunion. There are generations of Black artists spanning decades all in the same rooms. And it’s a reunion that isn’t just happening on the walls.

Williams went to college with Radcliffe Bailey, another featured artist.

“The show is beautiful,” said Bailey, who is based in Atlanta. “It’s beautiful in many ways. I’ve met a lot of people [in the show] throughout my practice as an artist.”



From left, Carl Joe Williams, Shinique Smith and Radcliffe Bailey in conversation with Kimberly Drew about Afrocosmologies: American Reflections at The Wadsworth.

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Bailey sat in a room with a selection from the late Jacob Lawrence's 22-piece series, *The Legend of John Brown*. When the original paintings became too fragile to display, Lawrence worked with a New Haven screen printer to make prints in the 1970s.

"Jacob Lawrence was one of the first artists that I met when I was in middle school," Bailey said. "Jacob asked what did I want to be, and I said, 'I want to be an artist like you.'"

A subsection of the works are by Black artists who came through Yale's MFA program, like Howardena Pindell, Kenturah Davis, Titus Kaphar and Didier William.

Afrocosmologies also showcases the work of artists who carved spaces for themselves in the art world just after slavery was abolished, and those who couldn't care less about widespread approval or appeal in white spaces, like Bailey.

"I never really see myself as trying to fit within the art world within a particular way," said Bailey, who often closes his eyes when he speaks. "I feel like a loner in a way and a lot of us when we're in the studio, we're really doing our thing and doing what we have to do to live, not necessarily for show."

Each person featured in the show found a way to live life out as an artist, be it through painting, sculpting, photographing or combining mediums.

"If you walk through this space, you're reminded too of the changes in the careers and career opportunities for Black artists," said Mitchell, who's the executive director of The Amistad Center for Art & Culture.

Rather than focus on the struggles of being a Black artist, he said, *Afrocosmologies* showcases the strides. "It's a nice affirmation to that dedication by Black people throughout the generations and across a century to build a space and create a space where they could be professional artists," Mitchell said.