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By Jori Finkel
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Mapping a Bold Vision for the California African American Museum

As the new director, Cameron Shaw has developed an all-Black, all-female leadership team and is forging a five-year partnership with Mark Bradford's nonprofit.



Cameron Shaw, executive director of California African American Museum. “I love how she’s very global and local at the same time,” said Mark Bradford, who enlisted her help in creating exhibitions for his nonprofit space, Art+Practice. Erik Carter for The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — Cameron Shaw has had from an early age a knack for creating her own opportunities. Home from college the summer of 2002, she visited the offices of the Peter Norton Family Foundation in Santa Monica, was impressed by the very-contemporary art covering every wall, and asked if she could work there. The organization created an internship for her the following summer.

When she moved to New York after college to take an assistant position at David Zwirner gallery, she quickly parlayed that into a job, which did not previously exist, as its research manager.

After that, as a freelance arts writer interested in how culture could play a role in rebuilding New Orleans post-Katrina, she earned a writing grant, and won \$10,000 on the game show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” to help fund her move there. She ended up cofounding Pelican Bomb in 2011, an online publication designed to support New Orleans artists and writers.

Now she has taken her biggest professional leap yet, stepping into the position of executive director of the California African American Museum (CAAM). Hired in September 2019 as its chief curator and deputy director, she was on the job for a little over a year — a pandemic year at that — when its director George O. Davis quietly resigned after being sued for sexual harassment.

Shaw, 39, said she recognized that a “search process could be destabilizing” and immediately wrote a letter to the board of trustees, making the case that she had the vision and skill set to lead the museum. The board met with Shaw last February and though she had never led an organization with nearly CAAM’s size or budget, about \$3.8 million, she got the job that month.

“I advocated for myself,” she said. “My parents always instilled in me that nothing would be handed to me as a Black girl.”



Installation view of “Sanford Biggers: Codeswitch” at CAAM last month. The artist enters a dialogue with Black cultural history by glitter-bombing and manipulating antique quilts. Elon Schoenholz, via California African American Museum

Shaw declined to comment on the litigation against Davis, which names CAAM as a defendant and is still pending. But she said she is committed to creating “a workplace that is safe and supportive where I show up with integrity, empathy, generosity and clarity. And I’m a person in progress working toward those things.”

She talks about the power of listening (also meditating, which she has done since 15) and said her “sense of purpose comes in making space or creating platforms for others.” Her supporters agree that her form of ambition is more generous than self-serving. One is Taylor Renee Aldridge, CAAM’s new curator, who describes Shaw’s leadership as “intuitive” and “not at all hierarchical — she’s very interested in working across the aisle.”

Another fan is the artist Mark Bradford, who calls her “an amazing” collaborator. “I love how she’s very global and local at the same time,” he said. “She can see the genius, the big idea, and the detail.” Bradford got to know Shaw last year and has already enlisted her help in creating exhibitions for his nonprofit space, Art+Practice, in Leimert Park.

Art+Practice has partnered with other museums in the past, but a new five-year partnership with CAAM is its biggest commitment yet. “We are going to create the

scaffolding around CAAM’s ideas and visions,” Bradford said. (The partnership begins with a show by Deborah Roberts, adapted from the Contemporary Austin, opening at Art+Practice March 19).



A new show, “For Race and Country: Buffalo Soldiers in California,” will open April 13. “We’re privileging the lived experience of our Black creators, thinkers, and audience,” Shaw said. San Francisco Presidio Trust

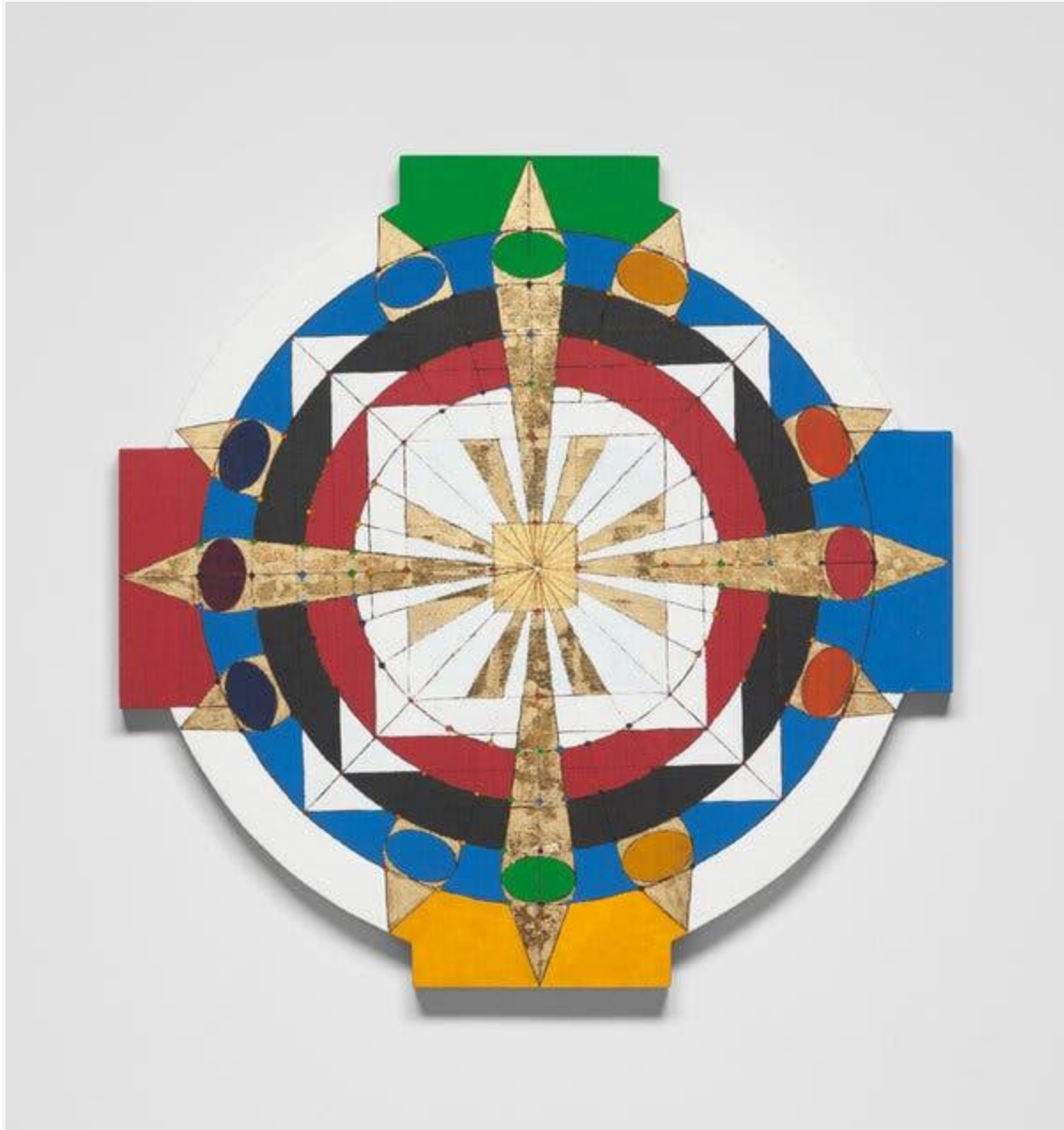
Shaw’s task is not going to be easy. CAAM, with a broad purview in both Black art and African American history, was created in 1977 by the state of California and remains primarily state-funded and free to the public. It is located in Exposition Park, a museum- and stadium-rich 152-acre parcel south of downtown Los Angeles (and a site of the 2028 Olympics). The museum is overseen by the state’s Natural Resources Agency, better known for managing parks and nature conservancies, which can create “a complex set of circumstances,” Shaw said diplomatically.

The museum has no endowment and acquires artwork only by donation — it has a policy not to spend state funds on acquisitions — which makes for a spotty permanent collection. CAAM has also been chronically understaffed, with only 17 full time employees at present.

Then there's the potential competition as so many museums scramble to show and acquire work by Black artists. It raises the question of what CAAM's particular role should be going forward. What does CAAM offer when the Los Angeles County Museum of Art across town is hosting the celebrated Obama portraits and organizing an acclaimed show of Black portraiture to accompany it?

“I want LACMA to have a Black American portrait show. It's important for Black people to see themselves in that space; it's important for others to see Black artists and Black faces in that space,” Shaw said.

“But like all things, the experience or understanding of art and archival objects is transformed by context,” she added, mentioning factors like neighborhood and audience. “When CAAM is presenting this work, we are bringing a definitively Black context and history to bear. And we're privileging the lived experience of our Black creators, thinkers, and audience.”



“Center” (2019), from the show “Matthew Thomas: Enlightenment,” which opened Feb. 5. Shaw is following artists who think about abstraction as an act of resistance. A curator cites the artist’s “sacred geometric abstractions.” Matthew Thomas

Shaw has not been chasing the art-market trend that has made Black figuration, and portraits in particular, so valuable, but following instead a group of artists thinking about abstraction “as a pointed act of resistance to the demands for legibility and the demands to make visible the Black body.” She points to the museum’s recent survey of work by Sanford Biggers, who enters a dialogue with Black cultural history by painting, glitter-bombing, cutting up and otherwise manipulating antique quilts.

She has identified Black abstraction, which she sees at play in music as well as visual art, as one of “four pillars” for CAAM, and an organizing theme for the museum’s programming. Another is “Black lives, green justice,” or as Shaw asks, “How do we move forward in this moment of sincere environmental crisis?”

Her third pillar focuses on Black spirituality and “ancestral technologies,” which she interprets as “thinking about Indigenous African knowledge and the way it’s carried by Black people in this country both intentionally and unconsciously.” She’s especially interested in how spiritual traditions have anchored Black protest movements, from abolitionism to Black Lives Matter. On Feb. 5, CAAM opened a survey of what Aldridge, the curator, calls “sacred geometric abstraction” by Matthew Thomas, an artist who moved from L.A. to Thailand a decade ago to study Buddhism.

The fourth pillar involves positioning CAAM as a resource for presenting African-American historical materials from its own collection as well as from other museums, libraries and the archives that live “in our basements, garages and underneath our beds,” Shaw said.

Next up on that front: a show on Buffalo soldiers in California, organized by Susan D. Anderson, CAAM’s history curator, that explores, in Anderson’s words, “the role of Black soldiers in the Army’s history of violence against Native American people” and the debate in the Black community over its participation in wars.

“I find the way she’s defined her pillars very interesting and inspiring,” said Thelma Golden, director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, who sees these themes as building on CAAM’s existing strengths. “She’s as invested in the history of the California African American Museum as she is in creating a future for the institution.”



“White-centered museums are asking themselves what it means to center Black artists, BIPOC artists,” Shaw said. “CAAM has been doing that work for more than 40 years.” Erik Carter for The New York Times

History and art don’t need to be separated, Aldridge said. “So much of what I’ve gleaned from artists, especially artists practicing in California like John Outterbridge and Betye Saar, is that the creative and the historical are not separated at all, they are entwined in beautiful ways.”

Aldridge and Anderson are both hires that Shaw made to rebuild the curatorial team after several staff retirements. She also named Isabelle Lutterodt as deputy director, Essence Harden as a visual arts curator, and Aleksandra M. Mitchell as manager of education and programs, making for an all-Black, all-female leadership team.

Shaw notes that for the most part the new team members don’t have traditional art museum backgrounds but have founded their own organizations or worked independently, which “fuels a sense of ambition and experimentation.”

Her own trajectory was also marked by periods of working outside organizations, or inventing her own. She grew up in L.A., where her father worked as an architect and her mother helped with his business, while her aunts worked in entertainment. Shaw studied art history at Yale. In New York she left David Zwirner after three years to go out on her own as a writer and editor.

In New Orleans, she and Amanda Brinkman started Pelican Bomb, an arts criticism website that ultimately became an exhibition incubator, too, from 2011 to 2018. “A lot of people enter into conversations with an outcome in mind, but she really entered into conversations to see where they went naturally,” Brinkman said.

With her team in place at CAAM, Shaw is now lining up financial donors beyond the state, she said, to create flexibility in acquisitions, exhibitions and more. She’s also looking back at CAAM’s history in anticipation of its 50th anniversary in 2027 to find ways to share its achievements so far.

“Historically white-centered museums are asking themselves what it means to center Black artists, BIPOC artists,” she said. “CAAM has been doing that work for more than 40 years.”