ARTnews

In the Baltimore Museum of Art's Hip-Hop Exhibition, Black Women Artists Shine Bright Like a Diamond

BY JASMIN HERNANDEZ July 13, 2023

Installation view of "The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century," 2023, at Baltimore Museum of Art, showing work by, from left, Tschabalala Self, Lauren Halsey, and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

In Missy Elliott's 2001 gargantuan worldwide hit song "Get Ur Freak On," the rap icon rightfully asserts her dominance and opens with, "Missy be puttin' it down, / I'm the hottest 'round, / I told y'all mother—, / y'all can't stop me now…" With these immortal words, Missy Elliott boasts of a lyrical confidence and demonstrates how Black American women are the co-architects of hip-hop, despite their frequent erasure and appropriation.

It's here, in the early 2000s, where, "The Culture: Hip Hop and Contemporary Art in the 21st Century," a comprehensive new exhibition at the Baltimore Museum of Art,

examines the hip-hop canon, going beyond the music to look at how this global billion-dollar genre has indelibly transformed contemporary art, culture, technology, fashion, and daily life. Yet, Black American women's lyrical, cultural, sartorial, and aesthetic innovations in hip-hop, from MC Lyte to Missy Elliott to Megan Thee Stallion, are the blueprint.

An institutional collaboration between the BMA and the Saint Louis Art Museum, organized by four women co-curators—Asma Naeem, Gamynne Guillotte, Hannah Klemm, and Andréa Purnell—"The Culture" immerses viewers into the world of hip-hop with close to a hundred works spanning painting, drawing, photography, sculpture, video, and installations. Divided into six sections (Language, Brand, Adornment, Tribute, Ascension, and Pose), the resulting show is an expansive and multi-sensory experience. A hypnotizing soundscape created by Baltimore-based musicians Abdu Ali

and Wendel Patrick sonically welcomes visitors, featuring rap royalty like Public Enemy and Ms. Lauryn Hill.

“The Culture” venerates the hip-hop zeitgeist of the past 50 years, and how the genre shattered white establishment cultural norms. “For many visual artists, hip-hop has enabled a radical interrogation of such previously stable and homogeneously white aspects of art history and culture as strategies of representation, genius, and who is the beholder,” Naeem, the BMA’s recently appointed director, told *ARTnews*.

Nearly 90 artists are included in the exhibition, but it’s acclaimed Black women artists including Carrie Mae Weems, Tschabalala Self, Lauren Halsey, Jordan Casteel, and Nina Chanel Abney, who exalt Black femininity, beauty rituals, style, sexuality, and of course, queendom, in their works, and provide the exhibition’s most Black feminist moments.

Both Self and Weems depict Black girlhood and womanhood within a hip-hop context. Self’s captivating, collaged painting *Setta’s Room 1996* (2022) features a Black teen girl (inspired by the artist’s sister Princetta) in a hyper-feminine polka dot outfit, holding a landline phone receiver with fancy yellow nails. A poster of Lil’ Kim’s explosive 1996 debut album *Hard Core* hangs on a pink wall. Self, who investigates the Black female figure and its complicated meanings in society, illustrates the over-sexualized tropes Black women face, and its expectation on Black girls’ innocence.

In the Adornment section, Weems crowns Mary J. Blige, The Queen of Hip-Hop Soul, in *Anointed* (2017), where Blige seems both victorious and vulnerable. Originally the photograph appeared in a collaboration between the two icons for *W* magazine’s Art **issue** six years ago, recreating Weems’s “The Kitchen Table Series”and “Slow Fade to Black” series. Weems places Blige, seen in profile as she is being crowned against a deep red tint, in the pantheon of Black women icons alongside Eartha Kitt and Nina Simone. The red pigment signifies power, but also blood, in a way, as Blige has, in a way, shed blood and candidly sung about grown woman heartbreak, divorce, and empowerment in her music.

Similarly, in the Tribute section, Blige’s albums *My Life* and *Share My World* (in CD form) along with other hip-hop artifacts are consecrated in Texas Isaiah’s altar-like installation *Untitled* (2023), and his collaborative portrait, Pelada: Chapter II (2021), with Black Latina trans rapper Ms. Boogie, who offers an intimate gaze, reaffirms and makes space for Black trans folks who also contribute to hip-hop.

The Adornment section continues with Halsey’s sculptural piece *auntie fawn on tha 6* (2021), featuring rows of rainbow-hued bundles of synthetic hair. Halsey draws upon the intimate relationship between Black women and our hair, and beauty supply stores as a communal Black women’s space (despite frequent surveillance and hostility from East Asian business owners). Lil’ Kim famously started the bright wig trend in the mid ’90s, revisited by Nicki Minaj, Cardi B, and other rap girls in the 2010s. Dionne Alexander, the

inventive hairstylist behind Lil' Kim's custom wigs from that era, has recreated a few technicolor wigs for the exhibit, which featured stenciled luxury brand logos.

Including Alexander's visionary hairstyling in "The Culture" is imperative because glam squads (mainly Black creatives and primarily Black women) were foundational to the image-making of Lil' Kim, Foxy Brown, Eve, and other rap queens, as the internet exploded in the early 2000s. Lil' Kim's make-up artist, NZINGHA, created Lil' Kim's vibrant makeup looks and introduced her famous client to surrealist photographer David LaChapelle, whose images of Lil' Kim would later be used for the album art for *The Notorious K.I.M.* and a 1999 *Interview* magazine cover of a nude Lil' Kim covered in Louis Vuitton logos.

Black women fashion designers and stylists were the architects behind legendary looks worn by hip-hop queens in the '90s and 2000s that now appear on brands' mood boards and Pinterest pages decades later. Revered stylist June Ambrose innovated Missy Elliott's (very Afro-Futurist) black vinyl balloon suit for her very first music video "The Rain." Misa Hylton, a renowned stylist and fashion designer who has collaborated heavily with Lil' Kim, Blige, and countless greats, designed Lil' Kim's lavender jumpsuit pasty moment that she wore to the 1999 MTV VMAs.

Shinique Smith, *Shortysugarhoneybabydon'tbedistracted*, 2002.

"They call it hip-hop fashion but for me it's always been my fashion and what I love and what I gravitate to and what I celebrate," Hylton said in an interview in the exhibition's extensive catalogue, which includes contributions from over 50 other creatives, artists, and scholars who interpreted the universe of hip-hop.

Kimora Lee Simmons founded Baby Phat in 1999, an essential 2000s womenswear brand that mixed sex, streetwear, and sophistication. In the Adornment section, a white cotton Baby Phat tracksuit (ca. 2000) is displayed alongside tracksuits by Wales Bonner, Willy Chavarria, Telfar, and Dapper Dan for Gucci. It's important to note that as the hip-hop economy grew exponentially in the late '90s, Black women magazine editors including Danyel Smith (at *Vibe*) and Kierna Mayo and Joicelyn Dingle (at *Honey*) editorialized Black women rappers and their cultural impact.

Several Baltimorean (born or based) Black women and Black LGBTQ+ artists bring regional authenticity to “The Culture” and reveal what hip-hop personally means to them. In the Language section, Baltimore-born artist Shinique Smith’s textile sculpture, *Shortysugarhoneybabydon’tbedistracted* (2002), features abstract gestures in acrylic on vinyl, a nostalgic ode to her graffiti-writing days as a youth in Baltimore during the ’80s and ’90s. (Smith is also working on a BMA-commissioned public mural at Lexington Market for local engagement that will extend the show’s life beyond its closing this month.)

In the Pose section, Baltimorean non-binary artist Amani Lewis captures the pulse of West Baltimore rapper Butch Dawson’s live performance in a mixed-media portrait titled *Swamp Boy*(2019), named after the rapper’s 2018 debut EP. Lewis connects with elements of Baltimore’s underground rap scene, and their canvas almost throbs from the raw energy of the crowd depicted.

Baltimore-based artists Murjoni Merriweather and Megan Lewis give Black women their flowers in their stunning works. Merriweather deifies Black American girl aesthetics—braids and gold bamboo hoops—in her 2022 ceramic sculpture *Z E L L A*, which is completely covered in synthetic hair hand-braided by artist.

Regarding her contribution to the show, *Fresh Squeezed Lemonade* (2022)*,* Lewis stated in an interview, “Black women continuously turn lemons into lemonade.” In the oil-and-acrylic painting, a young Black woman in a ’90s updo, fresh nails, and heavy gold jewelry, with lemons serving as the backdrop, represents Black American girl-invented beauty and cultural trends, and an incessantly appropriated template in mainstream pop culture. Monica Ikegwu’s oil-on-canvas diptych *Open/Closed* (2021) shows the Baltimore-born artist in a monochromatic brick red look in expressive moods. Ikegwu often paints contemporary Black youth grounded in realism, and in a range of emotions with saturated color compositions.

Hip-hop is infinite, it shapeshifts, and continues to be defined by Black women, especially as next-gen rap girls, like Doja Cat, Coi Leray, Rico Nasty, Glorilla, Flo Milli, and Lola Brooke, are leading us into another golden age of women in hip-hop. An electrifying representation of this new era of rap girl reign comes in the form of Caitlin Cherry’s oil painting, *Bruja Cybernetica* (2022), which depicts the City Girls, Bia, and even avatars from *The Sims 4*.

Black women entertainers are in a constant state of performance to the world, even offstage, and under intense social media scrutiny, and in Cherry’s own words, “I consider how the history of painting has simultaneously neglected and warped images of Black femmes and how technology can stand to do the same or redeem or liberate our self-image.”

Out of the 90 artists in “The Culture,” fewer than a third are Black women artists, which is a head-scratcher given the greater amount of Black women artists working today and visible online. What is highly evident in “The Culture” is the close and intimate

relationship Black women visual artists have with Black women artists in hip-hop, from Weems' coronation of Blige to Self's teen adoration of Lil' Kim, as well as Halsey's, Merriweather's, and Lewis' playful yet sanctified interpretations of fashion and beauty staples originated by Black American women in hip-hop. Black women artists in "The Culture" have clearly forged a love letter to Black women in hip-hop, revering them as the blueprint.