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Portraits in Unlikely Spaces

This fall, work by a trio of Black portraitists, Mickalene Thomas, Renee Cox and Lyle Ashton Harris, is in the spotlight at Yale, Princeton and Duke.



A portrait of Rose Prentice (1771-1852) by the artist Sarah Goodridge, circa 1837-38, is on display at the Yale University Art Gallery. Credit: Yale University Art Gallery

By Eilene Zimmerman

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Three groundbreaking Black portraiture artists have exhibitions this fall at university art museums, two of which are Ivy League schools — historically white spaces with pasts that are entangled with slavery.

The shows speak to the evolution of art institutions as they confront calls to diversify, which began in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020 when museums nationwide were charged with racism and discriminatory practices.

Lauren Haynes, director of curatorial affairs and programs at the Queens Museum in New York City, and co-curator of one of the three university exhibitions, said she hopes these are part of a sustained effort by museums of all sizes to create exhibitions and collections that reflect their communities and the larger world in which they exist.

Yale University's history includes the use of enslaved African labor and faculty members who led the American Eugenics movement of the 1920s and 1930s. The first nine presidents of Princeton University owned enslaved people, and a slave auction took place on campus in 1766. Duke University's history is entwined with slavery, post-Emancipation segregation and white supremacy. In 2018, the university's trustees voted to change the name of a building honoring an early benefactor of the school, Julian Carr, who was a white supremacist and Ku Klux Klan member.

The exhibition at Yale University Art Gallery, "Mickalene Thomas/Portrait of an Unlikely Space," which opened on Sept. 8 and runs through Jan. 7, 2024, centers on a collection of small-scale portraits — miniatures, daguerreotypes, silhouettes and engravings — of pre-Emancipation-era African Americans, alongside works by co-curator Mickalene Thomas and other contemporary artists. Ms. Thomas, 52, earned her M.F.A. at Yale University School of Art and lives and works in New York City.

"When you think about Yale University and what it is, and that its museum is now exhibiting these images and portraits that were mostly hidden away — it is an unlikely space for that," she said.

The portraits are a remarkable record of the life of everyday Black Americans living between the late 18th and mid-19th centuries, with sitters often painted wearing their finest clothes and looking straight at the viewer. Far more often, said Ms. Thomas, we are presented with images that speak to the trauma and servitude of Black Americans, "rather than the quality of their lives and the excellence contained in those lives."

It was the acquisition in 2016 by the gallery of a tiny, intricately detailed portrait on ivory of Rose Prentice, a domestic worker painted in her Sunday best, that inspired the exhibition. It was also the first miniature of a Black sitter in the museum's large collection of American miniatures. The portraits are arranged on walls, in cases and on top of furniture, so that the viewer feels as if they've walked into someone's home, said Ms. Thomas. The stories they tell — a woman sitting at a writing desk, another holding a banjo, Rose Prentice's pearl cluster earrings and printed head scarf — are important, she said, "when you think of Black families and how long we've been seen as invisible in mainstream American culture."

"The Ten Commandments of Renée Cox," which opens at Princeton University Art Museum's new gallery in downtown Princeton, N.J., on Nov. 18 and runs through Jan. 28, 2024, is a mini-retrospective. Among the issues Ms. Cox's work explores are Black womanhood and motherhood, sexism, and gender fluidity, as well as the dehumanization and commodification of the Black body.

But rather than portraying Black people as victims, her work (largely photography) celebrates their power, talent and beauty. It is also the first public showing of Ms. Cox's earliest self-portrait, done while she was an undergraduate studying photography at Syracuse University. The artist, 63, who was born in Jamaica and grew up in Scarsdale, N.Y., often photographs herself naked or in costume, playing a character, as a way of deconstructing historical stereotypes. "I see myself as flipping the script," she said. "I

have found there is great strength in that, and in representing self-love, which is lacking within the Black community to some degree.”

For Ms. Cox, that has sometimes meant rewriting history, as in her photographic montage “Yo Mama’s Last Supper,” a recreation of Leonardo da Vinci’s famous painting, in which all the figures are Black men except for Jesus, who is portrayed by a nude Ms. Cox, and Judas, who is white.

In her “The Discreet Charm of the Bougies” series (a play on the 1972 Luis Buñuel film, “The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie”) she is the fictional, privileged “Missy” — pearl-wearing and poodle-owning — photographed in a variety of situations, including sitting on a couch while being served by her white maid. The series, Ms. Cox said in an interview with *Aperture*, shows Missy moving from a depressive state to one where she is able to live a life of joy, which, she explained, has also been Ms. Cox’s personal experience. It has led to one of the most fundamental realizations of her life, she said, and one of her Ten Commandments. “Don’t wait for people to validate you — validate yourself.”

“Lyle Ashton Harris: Our First and Last Love,” a retrospective showcasing 35 years of the artist’s work, opened on Aug. 24 at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University and runs through Jan. 7, 2024. The exhibition is anchored by nine pieces that are part of Mr. Harris’ “Shadow Works” series. These are detailed assemblages constructed of personal photos, shells, beads, pottery shards, Polaroids, Post-it notes, newspaper clippings, postcards, and even cuttings of the artist’s hair — all set within frames of stretched Ghanaian textiles. Ms. Haynes of the Queens Museum, who co-curated this exhibition, said the “Shadow Works” series “comments on the moment we are living in, on identity, trauma, loss, relationships and the notion of legacy.”

Mr. Harris, 58, who was born in the Bronx and raised in Tanzania and New York, is a meticulous archivist; his archive contains thousands of photos, lists, notes, fabric swatches and other items collected throughout his life, including more than 100 personal journals. Mr. Harris draws upon that archive for many of his works, including “Obsessão II,” a collage that’s more than 10 feet wide, comprising hundreds of photos and ephemera from his archive.

“The multiplicity of elements with which to engage resonates deeply with people; they get to time-travel,” he said. “It’s not just hundreds of photographs of me, we’re looking at a club from the ’90s that doesn’t exist anymore or the fortune cookie that became the title of the show.”

In 1993, Mr. Harris was eating Chinese food with a friend in Seattle when he opened his fortune cookie and removed the slip of paper inside. It read: “Our first and last love is self-love.”

Although not focused on portraiture, “Silver Linings,” the first national tour of works from the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art’s permanent collection, features nearly 40 artists of African descent, dating from 1908 through 2017. Liz Andrews, Ph.D., the

museum's executive director, said although the museum was founded in 1996, the historically Black women's college has been collecting art since 1899, and this exhibition includes works of sculpture, painting, drawing and mixed media.



Lyle Ashton Harris has a retrospective showcasing 35 years of the artist's work on display at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University. Credit...Lloyd Foster, via the artist

“Silver Linings” is making its first stop at the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center at Vassar College. It opened Sept. 29 and runs through Jan. 28, 2024. Like Spelman, Vassar was founded as an all-women college but admitted its first Black student unknowingly in 1897 because she was passing as a white woman. It would be another four decades before the school truly opened its doors to Black students. “It’s incredibly important that a place like Vassar is recognizing Spelman as its peer,” said Dr. Andrews. “I think people have come to understand that

historically Black colleges and universities are essential to the life and culture — and the arts — of this nation.”