

# THE NEW YORKER

Profiles

## The Art World Before and After Thelma Golden

*When Golden was a young curator in the nineties, her shows, centering Black artists, were unprecedented. Today, those artists are the stars of the art market.*

By Calvin Tomkins

February 5, 2024



More than seven hundred people came to the black-tie gala for the Studio Museum in Harlem last October. It was gala season, a time when, on an almost nightly basis, cultural institutions around the city congratulate themselves and raise money doing it, and this one draws the liveliest, the best-dressed, and by far the most diverse crowd of celebrants. Thelma Golden, the museum's director, seemed to be everywhere at once as she moved around the room welcoming Spike Lee, Nicole Ari Parker, Questlove, Julie Mehretu, David Byrne, and many more. Golden, who is fifty-eight and five feet tall, with close-cropped hair and surprisingly large eyes, was wearing a long, sparkly dress. In this world, at least, she is one of those people who, like Elvis and Oprah, do not require a last name. "Thelma is the consummate New Yorker," her friend Elizabeth Alexander, the president of the

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<sup>1</sup> Photograph by Lyle Ashton Harris

Mellon Foundation and the evening's honoree, told me. "She can talk to anybody, and she's hilarious in a New York way—precise, unpredictable, irreverent, keen, clickety-clack."

The music, by a band called Hudson Horns, was so loud that it drowned conversation. You mouthed a greeting and pretended to hear the answer, or, better, you got up and danced with the person nearest you in the space between the dinner tables. Golden never danced for more than a minute. She would see someone new to embrace, or to take by the arm to meet someone else—weaving us all into her social tapestry. "Thelma doesn't have children, but she is supremely maternal," her lifelong friend Alexandra Llewellyn Clancy had told me. "She takes care of everyone." The Hudson Horns finally left the platform, and, after brief remarks by the Studio Museum's board chairman, Raymond J. McGuire, and the gala's co-chairs, the microphone went to Golden, whose first words were about the museum's not yet completed new home. "Tonight, at this gala, we are poised on the threshold of a new era," she said. "All you have to do is walk along a Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street and there it is in concrete and glass, the first building we've ever had that's designed especially for our mission." Wasting no time, she thanked her six predecessors in the fifty-five-year history of the Studio Museum, which is the world's preëminent museum for Black artists, and introduced the painter Cy Gavin, winner of the Studio Museum's annual Joyce Alexander Wein Artist Prize. All of this took less than twenty minutes.

When the Hudson Horns returned, my wife, Dodie, and I got ready to leave. A wheelchair that Golden had arranged for me arrived, with a young man to push it, and so did Golden, who took my hand and guided the three of us, gently but firmly, through thickets of guests—each of whom wanted a slice of her attention—to the blessedly silent elevator.

I had known Thelma Golden for a decade before I fully absorbed the critical role she had played, and continues to play, in desegregating the art world. Until the nineteen-eighties, work by Black artists rarely appeared in New York galleries and museums. (Two notable exceptions were Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence.) One of the early signs that this was changing came in a series of solo exhibitions that Golden, who was then a young curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, presented from 1991 to 1996, at a branch of the Whitney that was situated in the atrium of the Philip Morris building, on Park Avenue in midtown. She was the Whitney's first Black curator. David A. Ross, who had recently replaced Thomas Armstrong III, the Whitney's longtime director, had hired Golden when she was twenty-six and put her in charge of the Philip Morris branch, with the freedom to do what she wanted.

The main museum was then uptown, on Madison Avenue, in the modernist building designed by Marcel Breuer. "At that time in the art world, there was an uptown and a downtown, and everyone my age went downtown," Golden told me. She had come to my apartment on a morning last June, after one of her twice-a-week private pilates sessions. She was wearing a

yellow-and-peach floral-print dress, which, she said, was vintage. Golden speaks rapidly, pouring out information and using both hands like an orchestra conductor. She's much in demand for public speaking, and sometimes her conversation can sound as if it's not for you alone. "Contemporary art was downtown," she said, "and I wanted to bring a bit of that to the Whitney."

The purpose of her program was to show artists whom she considered the most promising of their (and her) generation—Black artists such as Alison Saar, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, and Gary Simmons, and white artists like Suzanne McClelland. She mostly picked artists known for their conceptual work, not figuration—for example, Ligon's text-based works, Simmons's drawings of caricatures with sinister racist overtones, and Simpson's "1978-88," four photographs of braids labelled with words like "tangle," "tug," and "knot." "Lorna was well known at that point," Golden said. "She'd had a survey exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, and she and Glenn were in the 1991 Whitney Biennial, but this was early in their careers. It was also a way to engage with artists who were important to me."

David Ross loved Golden's self-assurance. "When someone on the Whitney staff asked what we were going to do about Black History Month, Thelma said, 'We are not doing anything about Black History Month,' " he recalled. "She just put her fist down on candy-ass projects to show we cared about Black history—either this museum dealt with American art history honestly or it didn't." Ross and Golden both wanted to shake up the staid and almost exclusively white Whitney. Ross added two Black trustees, the Wall Street executive Ray McGuire and the scholar Henry Louis Gates, Jr., to the museum's historically white board, and he changed the whole idea of the Biennial, the Whitney's hallmark exhibition.

In the 1993 Biennial, curators had to take responsibility for their artist choices in signed essays. "They had to put their names on the line, and take the consequences critically," Ross explained. The exhibition's curatorial team, headed by Elisabeth Sussman and including Golden, Lisa Phillips, and John G. Hanhardt, a film curator, set out to catch the new generation's embrace of conceptual art, and to do so particularly in nontraditional forms—with film and TV footage, news photographs, and amateur videos, including the shocking ten-minute tape, captured by a plumbing salesman named George Holliday, of Rodney King being savagely beaten by four Los Angeles policemen. "This video changed my relation to Black bodies, to have it recorded and seen," Golden told me. "The conversation about that really lodged in me an idea of the way in which the representation of Black masculinity in the media had so much to do with my understanding of race and gender and sexuality."

Many critics were appalled. By moving beyond painting and sculpture into popular culture and social provocation, they felt, the Whitney had gone off its rocker. "I hate the show," Michael Kimmelman wrote in the *Times*. Robert Hughes, the critic for *Time*, called it "glum, preachy,

sophomoric, and aesthetically aimless.” There were many more artists of color than in any previous Biennial, and one of them, the Los Angeles-born Daniel Joseph Martinez, contributed a lapel pin, issued to visitors, with fragments of the phrase “I Can’t Imagine Ever Wanting to Be White.” Some guests received pins with the full sentence. What the critics missed was that contemporary art was changing, radically and permanently, from a mostly white, high-culture enterprise to something far more diverse and unpredictable.

There was worse to come. A year later, Golden addressed the racial dilemma head on with an exhibition at the Whitney’s main museum called “Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art.” “That was her first signature show,” Ross told me. “It looked at American art from a new perspective—the evolution of Black masculinity from 1968 to the present in all media, from mainstream cinema to the most avant-garde.” The show was informed by conversations she had with Glenn Ligon, Gary Simmons, and other artists, and also by the pop culture of the moment, with its stereotypes and caricatures of Black masculinity. “It’s hard to overestimate how predominant that mid-nineteen-nineties hip-hop culture was, and the way it was not just being consumed by those who created it but was the beginning of it living in the world,” Golden told me. In Fred Wilson’s “Guarded View,” four mannequins in museum-guard uniforms stood together, all of them headless. “Some of the Greatest Hits of the New York City Police Department: A Celebration of Meritorious Achievement in Community Service,” by Carl Pope, was a collection of trophies commemorating Black male victims of police brutality. “There was no way to speak about the image of the black male in an art exhibition without speaking about what was going on politically and culturally,” Golden later wrote in *Artforum*.

The critics, once again, were unimpressed. “Black Male,” Kimmelman wrote in the *Times*, “succumbs to chic and narrow thinking.” Hilton Kramer, in a vitriolic review for the *New York Observer*, called it “completely irrelevant for the artists and those among the public who continue to be more interested in artistic quality than in political outreach.”

Golden read one of the reviews and decided not to read any others. “People who supported me told me about them, and they were concerned,” she said. “It was vicious and unrelenting, but I did not take it personally.”

In a catalogue essay, Golden wrote that the show had been built around five historic signposts, beginning in the late sixties: the transition from the civil-rights movement to Black Power; the rise of blaxploitation films, by Black people about Black people; the debate about the endangered Black male; the dominance of Black popular music and hip-hop culture; and the pervasive influence of events like the Rodney King beating and the O. J. Simpson case.

The twenty-nine artists in “Black Male,” not all of whom were Black or male, brought a fresh perspective on what a group exhibition could be. Golden had talked with many different artists,

and what she found was that most of them were engaged in exploring what had come to be known as postmodernism. “My conversation with Robert Colescott was resonant with the one I had with Leon Golub,” she said. There was a shared current of thought among artists who were looking at race, gender, and identity through their work. Golub, Mel Chin, Robert Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons, and other non-Black participants had all made images inspired by Black bodies, and their work was often a close counterpart to that of the Black artists in the exhibition, like Carrie Mae Weems, Adrian Piper, and Barkley L. Hendricks. Jean-Michel Basquiat, the outsider whose meteoric success in the seventies and eighties had been cut short by a heroin overdose in 1988, was represented by a wistful drawing of a childlike crown above the words “Famous Negro Athletes.”

Henry Louis Gates described “Black Male” to me as “a codification, a statement, a summary” of Black postmodernism, and an important “moment in the development of different histories—of African American art, of American art, and of contemporary world art.” The catalogue was as unprecedented as the show itself. Golden wanted a lot of different voices, and to get them she turned to Hilton Als, a writer she admired, about a year before he became a staff writer for this magazine. Als, in addition to editing the catalogue, offered support and advice. When I asked him about the experience, he said that it had been a revelation. “I had never seen a Black woman take up space in that way,” he told me. “She did not shy away from her own authority. Thelma’s power is her own, and others have been lucky to follow in the wake of it.”

The art world is a different place today. Top commercial galleries compete to represent emerging artists of color; auction prices for Kerry James Marshall, Mark Bradford, Simone Leigh, Henry Taylor, and other Black art stars are in the millions; and “Black Male” is a subject of graduate dissertations. Michael Govan, the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, recently called it “one of the most important exhibitions in American history.”

Thelma Golden grew up in the heart of the Black middle class. Both her parents were born in New York, her father in Harlem and her mother in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Arthur Golden, who supported his widowed mother and his grandmother, started his own insurance business when he was a student at New York University, and he later attended law school. He married Thelma Eastmond in 1963, and the couple bought a house in St. Albans, an area in Queens that was rapidly changing from white to Black. Their first child, Thelma, was born in 1965, and her brother, Arthur, came a year later. Theirs was an extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins, most of whom “treated you as if they were your parent,” Golden said. “It was an environment where I felt a deep sense of security.” Her mother, whose social and civic life included volunteer work for the N.A.A.C.P. and other Black organizations, saw to it that her children had a full schedule of after-school activities (for Thelma, piano lessons, ice-skating, gymnastics).

Thelma started working for her father when she was ten, at his office in Queens. At first it was play work, sharpening pencils and opening letters, but as she got older he let her do more and more, filing and xeroxing and answering the telephone. “I would put on my Mary Tyler Moore voice and ask the right questions,” she said. “I just loved being in that office and learning.”

Her parents valued culture, and took their children to concerts at Carnegie Hall, Broadway shows, and museum exhibitions. Golden started going to museums on her own when she was fifteen, taking the E or F train, both of which stopped very close to the Museum of Modern Art. She already knew that she wanted to be involved with art somehow, even though she had no interest in or talent for making it. She became friends with the guards at MOMA, a number of whom were Black. “That’s how I first saw Jacob Lawrence’s ‘Migration Series,’ ” she said to me. “A guard told me about it.” Today, she has long-standing relationships with guards throughout the city. “I hate going to museums with Thelma,” Ligon, one of her closest friends, said to me, jokingly. “It’s twenty minutes to see the show and an hour to talk with the guards.”

Thelma and Arthur went to private schools, first Buckley Country Day School, in Roslyn, Long Island, and then, in Thelma’s case, the New Lincoln School, a progressive school on Manhattan’s Upper East Side. (Arthur went to Fordham Preparatory School, in the Bronx.) New Lincoln offered a highly personalized education, and it was open to different ways of learning. It was also more integrated than other New York private schools at that time. The principal was an African American woman named Verne Oliver. At their first meeting, Oliver gave Golden a paperback copy of Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” and told her to read a section of it every week, and then come to her office and discuss it. “I think maybe Verne saw that I was going to live a life of the mind, and that it would be rooted in the African American community,” Golden said. “She gave me a sense of my own ability to understand the world that I would not just enter but help to create.”

Golden met Alexandra Llewellyn in the fall of their first year at New Lincoln. Golden was fifteen, and although Llewellyn was a year younger, and in the class behind her, they quickly became best friends. “We were completely different,” Llewellyn, who married the best-selling novelist Tom Clancy and now lives in Los Angeles, told me in a recent telephone conversation. Eight inches taller and more outgoing than Golden, Llewellyn admired her friend’s self-possession—she herself had no idea what she would do in life. They had similar West Indian backgrounds—Jamaica and Barbados for Golden, Jamaica for Llewellyn, whose father was an extremely successful businessman. “I thought Thelma had the most wonderful parents,” she said. “It was a happy household. You could feel how much they loved Thelma, and when I was there I was included in that. We did everything together—after school and on weekends we’d go to her place or mine, which was on the West Side, or to a museum, or to Bloomingdale’s to look at clothes. After the Black designer Willi Smith came out with his line, we bought matching raincoats. We’ve been friends for forty years.”

The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a high-school internship program, and Thelma interned there two years in a row. Every day, she hoped to meet Lowery Stokes Sims, the Met's only Black curator, whom Thelma knew about because her father had shown her an article on Sims. (He often clipped stories about notable Black people for his children to read.) They didn't meet then—Golden was too shy to seek her out—but a few years later Sims became one of her mentors. Sims met Golden's parents, and her warm, inclusive authority helped convince Arthur Golden that museum work could be a viable career for his daughter.

Golden had decided that she wanted to work in a museum, and not just any museum; in her college applications, she specified that her goal was to be a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Why the Whitney? Because the art that most intrigued Golden was contemporary and American. She applied to seven colleges, and her first choice, Barnard, was the only one that turned her down. In 1983, she entered Smith College.

Kellie Jones, a curator and art historian who would later hire Golden, described her to me in a way that sounded like the quintessential Smith woman: "Always put-together, always has the right answer, smart beyond smart, can fit into any situation, one of those people who knows what she wants to do and pursues it at the top level." In the winter of 1985, Golden interned at the Studio Museum, an experience that, she told me, "sealed and cemented" her future curatorial path. "I was so excited," she recalled. "That was when the museum was not just opening doors for Studio Museum artists but for artists generally. It was a place that needed and welcomed everyone's involvement. I knew I would major in art history, but when I went back to Smith that fall I decided to double-major in African American studies."

Golden understood that the art history she had learned so far was incomplete, because art by Black people was mostly absent from her assigned reading. When she told one of her art-history professors at Smith that she wanted to write about Black art, he pulled out a catalogue of Frank Stella's black paintings. (She clarified that she meant Black artists, and he discouraged the idea.) In the academic world, few people taught Golden anything about Black art, but she had grown up with it. Several of her parents' friends were serious collectors, and she had read about Faith Ringgold, Charles White, and other artists in the Black press. In the Smith library, she found the catalogue for "Two Centuries of Black American Art," David Driskell's pioneering 1976 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. The library also had a 1973 book called "The Afro-American Artist: A Search for Identity," by Elsa Honig Fine. "I studied every artist in those books," Golden told me. "I sort of committed them to memory."

Some of the earliest artists in the Driskell catalogue—Patrick Reason, Robert S. Duncanson, and other nineteenth-century portraitists and landscape painters—were clearly influenced by Thomas Cole and other white artists of the Romantic period. Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937), the first African American painter to be widely known, studied with Thomas Eakins and painted scenes

that depicted Black people, but in 1891 he went to Paris, where he stayed for the rest of his life, becoming, in effect, a European artist. In later generations, Aaron Douglas, Augusta Savage, Charles Alston, Selma Burke, and Norman Lewis forged art careers in America, despite the odds against them. (Burke's portrait of Franklin Delano Roosevelt is believed to be the model for his profile on the dime.) All of these artists were part of the Harlem Renaissance, in the nineteen-twenties and thirties, an explosion of innovation in the arts which established Harlem as the creative center of Black culture. Black musicians of the era—Louis Armstrong, Eubie Blake, Duke Ellington—certainly reached white audiences, but it would be seventy more years before the white art establishment took serious notice of what Black artists were doing.

By the nineteen-sixties and seventies, however, more and more of them were emerging, some working abstractly and conceptually, others dedicated to making figurative, narrative art about Black people and their lives in a society that was becoming increasingly mixed. They showed their work at historically Black colleges and universities, and, eventually, in a few galleries that featured Black artists, such as Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown, on West Fifty-seventh Street in Manhattan, and the Brockman Gallery, in Los Angeles. Now and then, in the seventies and eighties, one of the big museums would show an African American artist. "Everybody puts their big Black shows on the books, they get their corporate funding, it goes all around the country, it's a big extravaganza, and then it's over," Golden once said, in a roundtable discussion. Recognition came slowly, and often faded. It was not until the turn of the century that Black artists started to receive steady, continuing support from the white art establishment, and it took a dozen years more before their work began to sell at prices comparable to those of their white contemporaries. Most of the artists in Golden's shows at the Whitney have become prominent in a transformed art world where, now that the blinders are off, there is no doubt about the importance and centrality of their work in America's cultural history.

"At Smith, they were teaching me to be an art historian, but I wanted to work in museums, to learn how to be a curator," Golden told me. After graduating, in 1987, she took a one-year fellowship at the Studio Museum. After that, she became a curatorial assistant to the Whitney curator Richard Armstrong, a droll and original thinker who would become the director of the Guggenheim Museum in 2008. "The key thing about Thelma is that she never complained, and she became indispensable," Armstrong told me. She didn't stay long. Kellie Jones, the daughter of the poets Hettie Jones and Amiri Baraka, recruited Golden to help her run the Jamaica Center for the Performing and Visual Arts, a community space in Queens. "Kellie introduced me to many artists, and she let me learn how to manage," Golden told me. "It was really my master's in arts administration."

In 1991, Golden went back to the Whitney, where David Ross put her in charge of the Philip Morris branch, and later made her an associate curator in the main museum. It was her schoolgirl wish come true. Then as now, Golden was inexhaustible, out most nights, constantly working, as



hungry for social connection as she was for art. Ross said, “Thelma was the kind of person who would stay out until two or three in the morning with the artists, being part of the New York art scene, and then she’d show up at ten in the morning, fresh as a daisy. Thelma was an unlimited energy source, and she was just plugged into everything that was going on.”

Ross and Golden both left the Whitney in 1998. Thelma-philosophers like to imagine what might have happened if they had stayed and continued to carry out the radical changes they had set in motion. Golden curated many memorable shows at the Whitney, from “Black Male” to a retrospective of Bob Thompson, a Black artist whose radiant, unexpected color combinations in paintings of men and women, birds and other animals, and unreal landscapes were influenced by the Old Masters. His brilliant career had ended early, like Basquiat’s, because of a heroin overdose, when Thompson was twenty-eight.

Golden left the Whitney, abruptly, while the Thompson show was still on the walls. Ross had resigned to take the director’s job at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and Maxwell L. Anderson, his successor, from the Art Gallery of Ontario, began to revamp the Whitney’s curatorial structure. Golden, whom Ross had made head curator of the 2000 Biennial, found that she was no longer in charge of it. (Anderson claims that he merely asked her to share the position.) Golden felt that she was being given a role with less freedom and authority than the one she’d had before, and, as she told me, “I chose not to take it.” She was not alone. Within four months of Anderson’s arrival, at least four other people on the staff had resigned. The list included Lisa Phillips, who left to become the director of the New Museum, and Adam Weinberg, who went to head the Addison Gallery of American Art. (In 2003, Weinberg replaced Anderson as the Whitney’s director.)

“It felt horrible at the time,” Golden recalled. But museum directors across the city—including Glenn Lowry at MOMA, Arnold Lehman at the Brooklyn Museum, and Alanna Heiss at P.S. 1 Contemporary Art Center—reached out to her. She eventually accepted an offer to work as a special-projects curator for the collectors Peter and Eileen Norton, whose focus was on emerging artists. Six months later, she received a telephone call from Ray McGuire, who had recently joined the board of the Studio Museum, and was heading a search committee to find a new director. He had first called Lowery Sims, at the Metropolitan Museum, who had guest-curated several shows at the Studio Museum, to ask if she would be interested. As McGuire describes it, she said, “Listen, Ray, you ought to be thinking about Thelma Golden. If Thelma was interested, I could be, too.” McGuire put Sims on hold, called Golden, and asked if she would be interested in a two-person hire—Sims as director, Golden as deputy director and chief curator. “The opportunity to work with Lowery was really all I needed to hear,” Golden said. Sims had been at the Met for twenty-seven years. “I could have stayed there until retirement,” she told me, “but it had been in my mind to be a museum director, and I’d never done anything daring, so why not?”

She was clear that her tenure as director would be limited—she would step down as soon as she and Golden both felt that Golden was ready to take over.

The Studio Museum, which opened in 1968 to show work by African American artists, worked hard to define its mission during its first ten years. Several of the founding trustees were white, and served on the Junior Council of the Museum of Modern Art. The idea had been to show African American art in the context of, and on the same terms as, contemporary white art, but the world had changed—the push for liberal integrationist politics had given way among many Black people to the demand for a more radical politics. In the late sixties, according to Susan E. Cahan, in “Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power,” when Romare Bearden was asked to join the Studio Museum’s board, he refused, citing his belief that white people were using the museum for their own purposes. (When I asked Golden about this period, she said she suspected that Bearden’s refusal had more to do with his already being on the Harlem Cultural Council. She hopes the question of what happened will be resolved in a forthcoming history of the museum that she has commissioned.) The Metropolitan Museum’s infamous 1969 show “Harlem on My Mind,” which included documentary photographs but no fine art—there was not a single painting or sculpture by Harlem’s Black artists—offended almost everyone. That same year, Bearden, Ernest Crichlow, and Norman Lewis started the Cinque Gallery, to show work by Black artists.

Two extraordinary Black women directors, Mary Schmidt Campbell, who led the Studio Museum from 1977 to 1987, and her successor, Kinshasha Holman Conwill, guided it toward what it is today—a showcase for Black art that is also a cultural and educational center, with studios for artists-in-residence and, equally important, internships and fellowships for aspiring curators and museum professionals who are Black or from other underrepresented groups. Dozens of museums around the world now have curators who were trained by the Studio Museum.

In the early eighties, Campbell moved the museum from its original location—on a single floor over a liquor store and a fast-food restaurant on upper Fifth Avenue—to a five-story bank and office building at 144 West 125th Street, which the African American architect J. Max Bond, Jr., redesigned and renovated as a museum. The early-twentieth-century building “was never an architecturally distinguished space,” Golden told me. “The ceilings were different heights, never high enough.” Initially, the third, fourth, and fifth floors were rented out, providing funds for the museum. Over time, there were many changes and additions—a small theatre, an atrium, a sculpture court. It was never an ideal museum building, but the things that happened in it endeared the place to everyone who went there.

In January, 2000, when Sims and Golden joined the museum, they made a list of concerns that needed to be addressed, and at the top of it was the mission statement, which had come to seem

too limiting in focussing solely on African American artists. Art was international, and not all Black artists were American. After lengthy talks with the influential Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, Sims and Golden reworded the mission statement to read, in part, “The Studio Museum in Harlem is the nexus for artists of African descent locally, nationally, and internationally.”

Another problem was the collection. The museum had been created to show art, and did not immediately begin acquiring it, but over the years it had received many donations of art, some of them substantial. By 2000, the museum had seven hundred or so art works. Sims, working with Nancy Lane, a board member whose outstanding collection of African American art would later come to the Studio Museum, appointed the museum’s first acquisitions committee, which actively sought funding to fill gaps in the collection. Today, the museum owns more than nine thousand works, from early artists like Joshua Johnson and contemporary ones like Kara Walker. In 2018, the museum’s fiftieth-anniversary year, it received more than four hundred works of contemporary art by artists of African descent, the largest single gift of art work in its history, in a bequest by the arts patron and civil-rights activist Peggy Cooper Cafritz.

Sims and Golden also focussed on the museum’s relationship with its Harlem neighbors. “The museum was thirty years old, but people could go to the Starbucks on Lenox Avenue and not know there was a museum around the corner,” Sims told me. “Building that relationship was one of our main jobs in the first few years.” The Studio Museum began organizing many more programs for the public, one of which, the summer Uptown Fridays!, eventually drew more than five hundred people, who danced to d.j.’d music in the courtyard and the galleries.

The artists Golden had shown at the Whitney in the nineties were now in mid-career, and she wanted to engage with artists who were starting out at the dawn of the new millennium. This led to an eye-opening group exhibition in 2001 called “Freestyle,” which Golden described as “me trying to begin the process of presenting the next generation of artists.” The “Freestyle” artists were concerned with Black individuality, and they went all out to find new ways of expressing the self.

“It’s her most exuberant exhibition yet, a hip and witty survey of 28 emergent African American postmodernists,” Greg Tate wrote in the *Village Voice*, when the show opened. He also said that Golden and Sims were “performing not just a makeover but a resurrection.” Golden, in her catalogue essay, mystified and annoyed some viewers by referring to the “Freestyle” artists as “post-Black.” How could a Black person be post-Black? Her point, arrived at in discussions with Glenn Ligon, was that, for these artists, Blackness contained multitudes and need not be the defining characteristic of their work.

Mark Bradford, an artist from Los Angeles, who had worked as a hairdresser in his mother's beauty salon, made his major art-world debut in "Freestyle." His immense "Enter and Exit the New Negro," an abstract collage made of hair endpapers used in the salon, introduced his lighthearted, ironic take on identity and gender. He was one of the many "Freestyle" artists whose power and originality registered with the white art establishment, which was now in the midst of an almost comical scramble to represent and exhibit Black talent.

"How many people can say they built a canon, as Thelma has done many times?" Rashid Johnson, one of the youngest artists in "Freestyle," asked me. "Every artist who comes out of 'Freestyle'—Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, Sanford Biggers, myself—and everyone who comes after that—Hank Willis Thomas, Kehinde Wiley—all came through a door kicked wide open by Thelma Golden. The landscape that you see today, which is filled with Black creative voices, that's what Thelma built. None of us felt we had to be representatives for the culture. We could just be anonymous critical thinkers. We could just be the artists we wanted to be."

"Freestyle" was the first of five "F" exhibitions at the Studio Museum, all of which showed emerging or insufficiently known Black artists. The others were "Frequency" (2005-6), "Flow" (2008), "Fore" (2012-13), and "Fictions" (2017-18); "Freestyle" was the only one curated by Golden. In 2005, Sims decided that Golden was ready to take over as director, and Golden made "an arbitrary decision that I was not going to curate exhibitions," she told me. Curating and directing were very different, she felt, and she would not be able to give the required degree of intensity and dedication to either if she did both. "It was a profound shift for me," she recalled. "As a curator, I immersed myself in my work with art and artists. Becoming director meant I had to be responsible for the institution. It was like going from high school to college, and, in order to do it in a way that I felt had authority and integrity, I had to stop curating. Being a director really is about leadership, which includes being a diplomat."

Golden promoted an assistant curator, Christine Y. Kim, who had been trained at the museum and had worked on "Freestyle," to associate curator, and turned over a lot of the day-to-day curatorial work to her. Each of the remaining "F" shows was organized by a different team. Golden's last show was Chris Ofili's "Afro Muses"—vivid, small-scale watercolors of Black men and women, where all the men are seen in side views and the women are in a three-quarters pose or facing the viewer. Ofili, a British artist of Nigerian descent, was an example of the museum's expanded mission. He was fascinated by Golden. "She had a very striking belief in the past, present, and future of Black art," he told me. "It's very infectious. I used to go up to the museum on a Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street just to be in the aura of that belief, and to see it as an inspiration. Thelma goes ahead of all the titles that are attached to her. Her height helps—Thelma is short, but you never lose her in a crowd. The clarity of her voice helps. The way she looks at you when she speaks helps. And there's a kind of no-doubt way that she moves

around. She's also in touch with the vulnerabilities of life." The Ofili show opened in April, 2005, and Golden became the director on July 1st.

"There is an idea of a director as someone who's always on an airplane, a different city every day, because we live in this international-culture world," Golden told me. She rarely goes to the art fairs that have proliferated around the globe, but, whenever one of the artists she works with has an opening, Golden is there. "With me, what's tied to international travel is an engagement with artists and their work," she said. No other museum has the kind of relationships with artists that the Studio Museum does. Every year, three Black artists, working in any media, are given studio space in the museum and a stipend. (The current amount is thirty-seven thousand five hundred dollars.) They are encouraged to work in the studio full time. At the end, the three artists have a group show. (While the Studio Museum has been under construction, shows have been at MOMA PS1.) There have been nearly a hundred and fifty residents so far—David Hammons, Njideka Akunyili Crosby, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, and so on. The experience is like learning how to be an artist.

In 2007, Golden moved from Park Slope, in Brooklyn, where she had lived since she graduated from college, to a Harlem apartment four blocks from the Studio Museum, and she's still there. "It has incredible light, south light," she told me during a Zoom conversation—she moved her computer around to show me. "The view makes me think of the famous Bearden collage, 'Uptown Looking Downtown.'" She lives with a lot of books and plants and color, and "not as much art as you might imagine for a curator. It's art that is personal." She didn't want to identify the artists. "I think of this apartment as a sanctuary."

Golden told me that she had felt instantly at home in Harlem. She had come to know Harlem when she was a child, listening to her father's memories of borrowing books from a local library branch named for Countee Cullen and going to jazz concerts at the Apollo Theatre, and when she was older she absorbed the vitality of Harlem life, with its bars and restaurants, churches, street vendors, and stoop conversations. It vibrated with the same energy that made working at the Studio Museum such fun. Naomi Beckwith, who is now the deputy director and chief curator of the Guggenheim, was one of many young curators mentored by Golden. She spent four years as a curator at the Studio Museum, and told me, "At the time, I couldn't think of working anywhere else. It was an incredibly vibrant space, an intellectual home and a social home. We ate lunch together, we knew what was happening with each other's families. Thelma was already becoming legendary at that point—she had paved the way for almost every Black curator in sight." The staff offices were on the second floor of the long building, and to save time when visiting her curators Golden navigated the corridors on a bicycle.

A year before she moved to Harlem, Golden had met Duro Olowu, a London-based Nigerian British fashion designer and curator, and they were married two years later. It was a transatlantic

marriage, with Olowu living in London and both of them making trips back and forth. They appeared to be remarkably well matched, and she wore his richly colored, ankle-length gowns to many public events.

Golden seemed to know everyone in Harlem, both inside and outside the art world. One of her friends was Marcus Samuelsson, the fast-rising Ethiopian-born chef who was preparing to open a new restaurant, Red Rooster, on Lenox Avenue. Samuelsson wanted to create an environment that would speak to the culture of Harlem, and Golden was one of the first people he asked for help. “Thelma gave me a language,” Samuelsson told me during lunch with Golden at Hav & Mar, a restaurant he opened a little more than a year ago in Chelsea. “She said, ‘You are a creative person. Here are other art forms that you may or may not know, and here is my tribe of people.’” She introduced him to many artists, almost all of whom started eating at Red Rooster, which opened in 2010. “We couldn’t do this without Thelma,” he said. “The first art dinner we gave was for Mark Bradford—it was for a hundred people.” Golden loves restaurants and people, and greatly enjoys bringing them together. “The Rooster brought many people uptown for the first time in years,” she said, “and it gave me a way to experience the restaurant world which I would not have had otherwise.” (Samuelsson has made her a partner in Hav & Mar.)

Golden has always been very ambitious, not for herself but for her vision of a world in which Black excellence is recognized and supported. Impeccably cordial, she has pursued that vision with undiminished focus. “I feel I’ve never had to protest, because I am the protest,” she once told Ian Parker, who profiled her in this magazine in 2002. Golden persuades people by inviting them into her world, and, during nearly twenty-five years at the Studio Museum, her influence has become national and global, and because of this so has the reputation of the Studio Museum. She was recently asked to join Bizot, a little-known but high-powered society of directors of the world’s leading museums, putting the Studio Museum in conversation with the Louvre, the Prado, the British Museum, and others in the top echelon of museology.

Is Thelma Golden too good to be true? No one I talked to really had a negative word to say about her. Even those early bad reviews now reflect poorly on the reviewers, rather than their subject. Richard Armstrong, the Whitney curator she worked for at the beginning of her career, said, “Thelma can get under my skin sometimes. She can scold you if you make a mistake. She has that little edge, which is basically in the service of progress.” Glenn Ligon told me that she could be “overgenerous with her time.” Her life is full of deep friendships and affection. The artist Lorna Simpson, a close friend of Golden’s, recalled that when she was pregnant, Golden said, “I’m not coming to the birth. Call me when it’s done.” Golden and Simpson were together on the street when Simpson’s water broke, however, and James Casebere, her husband at the time, was not in the city, so Golden took her to the hospital and stayed in the delivery room until Zora, Golden’s godchild, arrived.

The Studio Museum's building was showing its age. After agreeing, in 2006, to participate in a travelling exhibition of panels from Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series," Golden was distressed to learn that her museum's H.V.A.C. system had failed, keeping it from meeting the climate-control requirement. She called Adam Weinberg, who saved the day by presenting the panels at the Whitney, as a collaboration with the Studio Museum. After that, Golden and the board had an engineer come in and study "the guts of the building." The subsequent report showed major problems with the plumbing, the electrical system, and the interior ductwork, as well as with the air-conditioning—problems large enough to close the museum for at least a year. This led Golden and the board to start thinking about a capital campaign. After many more conversations with financial and technical experts and discussions with the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, the board took a deep breath and voted to tear down the old building and build a new one. The target for the capital campaign eventually rose to three hundred million dollars. The new building would be designed by Sir David Adjaye, the Ghanaian British architect.

Adjaye seemed like the inevitable choice. He had succeeded J. Max Bond, Jr., as the outstanding Black architect of his era. In 2008, Bond had invited Adjaye to join him and another Black architect, Philip Freelon, in planning what became the National Museum of African American History and Culture, on the Mall in Washington, D.C. After Bond's death, in 2009, the team, with SmithGroup, won the competition to build the museum, and Adjaye was the lead designer. The museum was almost universally admired when it opened, in 2016, and Adjaye went on to become an international star, knighted in 2017 by Prince William, with buildings on five continents and offices in London, New York, and Accra.

Adjaye and Golden were nearly the same age—born on the same day, September 22nd, Adjaye one year after Golden. They had known each other since 2000, and in 2014 they bonded over the idea of a new Studio Museum. "We just had a meeting of minds," Adjaye told me last spring. "Thelma and the board came up with a very beautiful brief, which was basically three ideas. They wanted a space that would connect not only with artists and intellectuals but to the residents of Harlem. No. 2, they wanted to invite the street into the museum—this was really important to them. And the third part had to do with the artists' studios. I've never done a building where the artists are built into the DNA of the institution." He often referred to it as "a living laboratory." He had pushed for the building to have two more floors, but "the board seemed very scared by the numbers. I designed it so you could add to it." Adjaye signed on as the architect, working in cooperation with the New York-based architecture and urban-design firm Cooper Robertson. Demolition of the old museum began in 2019.

"Thelma became my boss, but we didn't let that change the friendship," Adjaye continued. "She's the sister I never had. We have this strange relationship—we can totally disagree, but we

never fight.” For each of them, the new Studio Museum would be an apex of a glittering career, and a test of greatness.

On July 4th of last year, however, the *Financial Times* ran a long, extensively researched story in which three Black women who had worked for Adjaye Associates accused the architect of sexual assault and harassment. Their accounts were damning. One of the women told the paper, “I felt overpowered, both emotionally and physically . . . There was this domineering feeling of ‘I’m going to have my way with you, and that’s it.’ ” Adjaye denied the sexual-misconduct charges but admitted to consensual relationships that “blurred the boundaries between my professional and personal lives.” He said that he would get help to create a corporate structure that would prevent “these mistakes” in the future, and confirmed that he was stepping back from some of his ongoing projects. To Adjaye’s many friends, it was an almost inconceivable catastrophe.

Golden has not spoken publicly about the situation. When she talks about the new building, as she did at the gala, she does so without mentioning David Adjaye. “She was David’s greatest champion,” Darren Walker, the head of the Ford Foundation and a close friend to both of them, said to me. “She saw them as a team, working to imagine, create, and execute this great building for the Studio Museum.”

Golden has guarded her private life so carefully that people sometimes assume she doesn’t have one—that all her energy goes into her work. She and Duro Olowu separated some time ago, but, in talking with her friends, I was surprised to find that only the closest of them were aware of the separation. Nobody seemed to know what had gone wrong between them. She doesn’t talk about it. For Golden, 2023 had been an *annus horribilus*, both personally and professionally, but the one thing that everyone who knows her could be certain of was that she would deal with the two crises in her own way, effectively and decisively. I couldn’t help thinking about what David Adjaye said to me last spring, that Golden had “absorbed a lot of pain” in her life, and “frozen it somehow.” The vilification that greeted her “Black Male” show was “a takedown of a young curator who dared to say and do what she believed,” he said. He added, “She’s stoic about these things. There’s a deep, deep modesty, but also a wall of steel. She’s a warrior.”

Golden carried on with her tireless schedule. She went to Italy for a wedding; to Brazil for the opening of the São Paulo Biennial “to connect with the amazing Brazilian art community”; to Washington, D.C., for an event celebrating Black artists at the residence of Vice-President Kamala Harris on the grounds of the Naval Observatory. She also attended board meetings at the Mellon Foundation and other institutions. “She understands that Thelma Golden has to show



up,” Darren Walker said. “There are too many people who rely on her.” Above all, Golden made it clear that the new Studio Museum was on schedule to open in 2025.

Some of her greatest admirers are other museum directors. Adam Weinberg, who ran the Whitney from 2003 until last year, has known Golden since she was a curatorial assistant in the late eighties. “I think of her as both an older sister and a younger sister,” he told me, half seriously, and then added, “After Thelma became a full curator at the Whitney, I would say that what she did planted the seeds of what the Whitney is today.” Michael Govan put her on the board of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, which, like the Studio Museum, is now undergoing major reconstruction. (Golden is also on the boards of the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the Obama Foundation.)

Glenn Lowry, MOMA’s director, was struck by Golden’s ability to recognize the artists who were going to define their generation, and the curators who would work with them. For years, Golden and Lowry have been having a conversation about bringing more people of color into the museum world. In 2015, they introduced a joint two-year fellowship, funded by MOMA, for college graduates from underrepresented groups who are interested in curatorial and museum work; each fellow spends a year at MOMA and a year at the Studio Museum. When the Studio Museum shut down for its reconstruction, Lowry invited Golden to present exhibitions at MOMA and MOMAPS1, and shows began appearing twice a year. Once in a while, Lowry told me, he and Golden get together and chuckle over the persistent rumor that she will succeed him as MOMA’s next director.

On a chilly, overcast day in October, I met Golden at the back entrance to the Studio Museum, on 124th Street. She had organized a hard-hat tour of the new building, and our group included the site manager, the museum’s director of public relations, two construction workers, and Glenn Ligon. Golden was wearing black jeans and a stylish yellow-and-black striped overshirt, and she was full of affectionate concern for everyone, warning us to be careful where we stepped because this was still a worksite. We put on hard hats and orange vests and took a battered, creaky hoist to the sixth floor. In the old building, this had been the roof, Golden explained, and the museum didn’t use it because the elevator didn’t come this high. We came out on a six-thousand-square-foot rooftop with two large structures that housed mechanical equipment. “What you get here is this incredible view of the city,” Golden said. The view was impressive, stretching from Yankee Stadium to midtown. “What’s blocking the view are the church steeples,” Ligon said, getting a laugh. (Harlem has hundreds of churches.) There will be café service on this floor, Golden said, and maybe sculptures.

We went down floor by floor, picking our way around big holes and obstructions that made the interior seem a long way from being finished. On three of the floors are high-ceilinged galleries and project areas whose combined space will be roughly twice that of the gallery space in the old building. The resident-artist studios are grouped together on the fourth floor; they share a lounge area, which will be visible to people on the street. The third floor was having active work done, but Golden wanted us to see it, and the site manager acquiesced. The museum's expanded education program will occupy this floor, and there will be workshop space dedicated to families, children, and seniors, as well as a separate space for teens. "This is the first room for young people in our museum's history," Golden said at one point. "And this one is big enough to accommodate two New York City public-school classes at the same time."

The tour ended in the ground-floor lobby, which had a twenty-six-foot-high ceiling and tall windows that brought 125th Street into the museum. A massive black-and-white terrazzo staircase in the center of the room—it looked like a monumental sculpture—zigzagged its way toward a skylight in the roof. Another staircase was embedded in a wide, wooden seating area that led to the lower level. "We call this the inverted stoop," Golden said. "You can sit on it and hear a lecture or see a film." All of this will be public space. No ticket will be required to come in, sit down, hang out, and use the café. Ligon's work "Give Us a Poem," which hung for ten years in the atrium of the old building, will be just to the right of the front door. "I really had to fight for that wall space," Ligon said.

"No, no, no," Golden said, laughing. "Years and years of graduating classes have been photographed standing in front of it." The piece consists of the words "ME" and "WE," made of black PVC and white neon and stacked so that "ME" rests on top of "WE." The words are from a talk by Muhammad Ali at Harvard in 1975. Someone in the audience had asked him to "give us a poem." Ali had thought for a moment and replied, "Me, We," and Ligon, who often uses text in his work, turned the four letters into a wall sculpture that could be seen from the street at night. "People would ask where the museum was, and I'd give the address, and they'd say, 'Oh, the Me-We,'" Golden said.

David Hammons's red-black-and-green flag, which hung above the entrance to the old building, will preside over this one, and a new commissioned work by the Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates will incorporate architectural fragments from the demolished building, evoking historical memories. Golden wanted to honor what had been the museum's home for nearly forty years. On the last night before demolition began, she said, "there was a community party, with d.j.s and dancing. We danced our way out of the old building."

She had been talking and answering questions for more than an hour. I wondered how painful it was for her to say nothing about David Adjaye, and how long it would be before she would, if ever. He had given her the iconic "living laboratory," which he had talked about in their many

conversations, and his unique, occasionally jarring, always fluid style was embedded in every detail of the architecture.

We went outside, crossed to the north side of 125th Street, and walked a block west to get a better view of the building. Golden stopped on the way to talk with a street vender she's known for many years, a man who sold leggings, hats, scarves, gloves, and tote bags. The vendors keep her informed about what's going on in the neighborhood, she told me, and they ask about the museum—how close it is to being finished, when it will reopen. Harlem is bursting with energy and life—a big new hotel, the Renaissance, has opened on 125th Street; the Apollo Theatre has announced a major renovation; the Schomburg library is preparing to celebrate its hundredth birthday—and the vendors can tell you all about it.

Seen from the street, the museum's façade is half glass and half concrete, a gray-black precast fabricated in Quebec. The building is much bigger than I had realized. It looked like an exuberant stacking of irregular blocky components, of varying sizes and heights and materials, fitting together with a complex but convincing logic. The effect was joyful, and oddly welcoming. I remembered something Adjaye had said to me, that the new Studio Museum would echo Marcel Breuer's Whitney Museum on Madison Avenue. I also remembered Golden saying to me, very quietly, "There really hasn't been anything bigger in my life than this building."

The others said goodbye, and Golden and I headed to a temporary office space that the museum rents in a nearby high-rise. (Its main offices during the reconstruction are in the building that houses Red Rooster, a block away.) She told me about how the neighborhood informed her vision for the museum. "I experience Black culture everywhere in Harlem," she said, after we had settled in the featureless conference room. "To go to a restaurant in Harlem, to be in the stores, to be on the street, means we are experiencing Black culture. When Coco Gauff played her first match at the U.S. Open last summer, people were packed into a bar and a band was playing between points or during them. The musicians played and watched at the same time. Museums are traditionally hushed environments, and I want our museum to provide that, but I also want it to provide a lot of different things, and one of them is the experience of being on the street in Harlem. Let the museum be a place to encounter art, but also to encounter each other. People talk about getting into a museum before or after hours, but nothing about that interests me. I do not want to go to a museum without people. To me, that is half of the experience." At museums, when Golden sees people who look as though they are wondering where to go, she talks to them, asks questions, makes suggestions. "Just hearing the way different people experience art makes it more meaningful to me," she said. "You know when I love a museum most? On a Sunday afternoon at three o'clock."

Golden added, "When I was fifteen, I decided I wanted to be a curator. There's probably something terrible about that, because I've never done anything else. I was always on that path,

and it was frictionless all the way. I understood that my time was never my own, it had to make sense for others. It had to open up space for others. But I feel that I am where I want to be, doing exactly what I am meant to be doing.” ♦