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The mutual joy of James Baldwin's many brilliant friends

For Baldwin's centenary, a National Portrait Gallery show examines his joyful connections with Nina Simone, Toni Morrison and many others.



"Nina Simone With James Baldwin," Bernard Gotfryd, 1965. Gelatin silver print. (Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture)

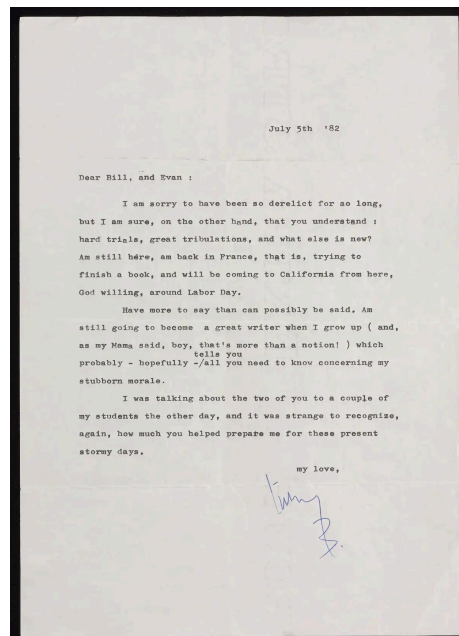
Review by Jacob Brogan
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James Baldwin opens his 1953 essay "Stranger in the Village" by describing the disconcerting experience of finding himself in a "tiny Swiss village" in which "no black man had ever set foot." Greeted by the bafflement of the locals, he writes, he fell back on his accumulated experience confronting the differently textured qualities of American racism, grinning in the hope that it would show him to be likable, or at least human. "This smile-and-the-world-smiles-with-you

routine worked about as well in this situation as it had in the situation for which it was designed, which is to say that it did not work at all,” he writes. “They did not, really, see my smile and I began to think that, should I take to snarling, no one would notice any difference.”

Baldwin’s smile, famously gap-toothed, unreservedly inviting, finds a different purchase in three photos by Bernard Gotfryd from 1965, placed near the back of the small gallery that houses “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon: James Baldwin and the Voices of Queer Resistance,” an exhibition celebrating the writer’s Aug. 2 birthday centennial now open at the National Portrait Gallery. Baldwin poses with his friend Nina Simone: In one image, their heads touch in easy intimacy, while in another their gazes are turned toward something or someone out of frame. In each, the pair exudes a confident, mutual joy.

“This Morning, This Evening, So Soon,” curated by Rhea L. Combs with the Pulitzer-winning critic Hilton Als, revels in such moments of companionship and possibility. “I think one of the things that is essential to our understanding of Baldwin is ... the way in which he made families wherever he lived,” Als observes in the exhibition’s companion book. The gallery’s walls and cases testify to that attitude: here a photo of Baldwin with the actors Diana Sands and Burgess Meredith, there a set of poignant letters he exchanged in 1982 with Orilla Winfield, who had been his elementary school teacher and mentor almost half a century before. Elsewhere an elegant letter from Toni Morrison, thanking Baldwin for providing a quotation that would accompany her novel “Sula” and apologizing that Random House, her employer at the time, would not be buying his “If Beale Street Could Talk.



Letters between James Baldwin and Orilla “Bill Miller” Winfield, James Arthur Baldwin, 1982. Ink on paper. (Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University/Permissions Company LLC/James Baldwin Estate)

The show bills itself as a “collective portrait,” revealing “how his sexuality, faith, artistic curiosities and notions of masculinity — coupled with his involvement in the civil rights movement — helped define his writing and long-lasting legacy.” Studying some of the images and artifacts with this context, it is tempting to read the exhibit as a testament to Baldwin’s circle throughout the years — those who supported him, and those he directly supported in turn.



Installation view of “This Morning, This Evening, So Soon: James Baldwin and the Voices of Queer Resistance.”
(Mark Gulezian)

The actual progression of the exhibit, however, at once undercuts and complicates that impression. Much of the Baldwin-focused material is tucked into the back of the room, behind a broad central pillar. Entering the gallery, one instead first encounters — almost trips over, really, since it is in a case that angles up from the floor — a large quilt made by Faith Ringgold in honor of the Black and queer filmmaker Marlon Riggs, who had died of AIDS not long before she made it. (A small image of Baldwin appears at the upper right. Cramped script near the bottom describes him as one of Riggs’s mentors.)



“bell hooks and Marlon Riggs, New York, early 1990s,” Lyle Ashton Harris, 2019. Ektachrome film photograph. (Lyle Ashton Harris)

On a wall nearby, there is a Lyle Ashton Harris photograph from the early 1990s of Riggs with bell hooks, their poses echoing those of Baldwin and Simone, though the companionship here feels specific to a wholly different moment. A closely cropped, grainy video of Rep. Barbara Jordan testifying in favor of the impeachment of Richard M. Nixon — part of a larger work of video art by Donald Moffett — runs on the wall opposite the entrance. As one moves through the space, Jordan’s voice presses up against and overlaps with that of Simone, singing “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” on a separate screen nearby.

This crisscrossed jumble of images, individuals and forms of address can be disconcerting, especially if one comes to the exhibit in search of the more coherent narrative at which the explanatory placards sometimes seem to hint. Most of the subjects and artists are Black, and most of them were queer, too. But there is no one story here about, say, the juncture of Blackness and queerness in American art and letters. In its place, however, “This Evening, This Morning, So Soon” leaves us with a welcoming mesh of connections and contingencies, one that maintains the possibility of subsequent bonds.



"Baldwin With Diana Sands and Burgess Meredith, opening night of 'Blues for Mr. Charlie,'" unidentified artist, 1964. Gelatin silver print, 1964. (Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress)



"James Baldwin and Crowd, Taksim Square, Istanbul," Sedat Pakay, c. 1965. Chromogenic print. (Sedat Pakay)

Nowhere in the gallery is this more evident than in the contemporary conceptual artist Glenn Ligon's monochromatic "Untitled (Hands/Stranger in the Village)," which hangs on the column at the center, facing out. On the surface of the canvas, Ligon has printed lines from Baldwin's own "Stranger in the Village" in clean, legible lettering. But Baldwin's words are obscured by a mass of coal dust that covers much of the work.

There is a similarly palimpsestic quality to much of the exhibit. Every object offers itself to be overwritten — but somehow also reinforced — by new communities, new action and new forms of life. No map could connect every one of these objects to every other, but their promise resides in the sometimes-unbridged spaces between them, voids as open and welcoming as the one at the center of Baldwin's grin.

If you go

**This Morning, This Evening, So Soon: James Baldwin and the
Voices of Queer Resistance**

National Portrait Gallery, Eighth and G streets NW. 202-633-1000

Dates: Through April 20.

Prices: Free.