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ART

A sweeping look at the inventive, vibrant art of collage

“Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage,” a show of 49 artists, combines formal intricacy at extravagant scale.

Review by Mark Jenkins

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Derek Fordjour, “Airborne Double,” 2022, Acrylic, charcoal, cardboard, oil pastel, and foil on newspaper mounted on canvas. (Photo: Daniel Greer/Derek Fordjour/Frances Fine Art Collection/David Kordansky Gallery/Petzel Gallery)

The artworks in “Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage” are dense, layered and intricate. But what’s immediately striking about many of the pieces is their size. This is a big show — filling galleries on three levels of the Phillips Collection — of big art. Although slimmed slightly from its original incarnation at Nashville’s Frist Art Museum, “Multiplicity” is a sweeping overview of recent Black American collages. It includes work by 49 artists, most in midcareer. The most venerable participant, Howardena Pindell, was born in 1943; the youngest, Kahlil Robert Irving, in 1992.



Howardena Pindell, “Untitled #5,” 2009. Mixed media on paper collage. (Howardena Pindell /Garth Greenan Gallery)

That connection clearly occurred to curator Katie Delmez. The seven-section show ends with “Toward Abstraction,” which features nonrepresentational assemblages by such notable artists as Sanford Biggers (who had a Phillips show in 2021-2022), McArthur Binion and Mark Bradford.

The last, whose epic “Pickett’s Charge” has engulfed the inner circle of the Hirshhorn Museum’s third floor since 2017, offers “C’Mon Shorty.” Typical of Bradford’s early work, the 2002 assemblage is constructed of end papers used at his mother’s beauty parlor to protect hair during perms. Some of the papers have singed edges, which adds drama to the composition, while Bradford’s use of the castoff materials hints at autobiography.



Installation view of "Multiplicity" at the Phillips Collection. (Lee Stalworth/Fine Art through Photography)

Such subjective undertones are also present in what initially appears to be the most formalist of the "Toward Abstraction" entries, a seven-foot-square drawing that's part of Binion's "Modern: Ancient: Brown" series. A grid of rough squares-within-squares rendered in multiple hues, the picture appears to be purely an exercise in color and geometry. But submerged within the paint-stick lines are personal photos and documents, making this as much of a historical testament as anything here.



Helina Metaferia, "Headdress 61," 2023. Mixed-media collage. (Helina Metaferia)

The title of the show's first section, "Fragmentation and Reconstruction," could be applied to nearly all the artworks. The process of devising new wholes from repurposed shreds is a metaphor for building individual and cultural identity. Both projects invoke Black Liberation struggles. Derrick Adams's picture of a man in a pool, all bold blocks of paint-and-fabric color, was inspired by a photo of a lighthearted Martin Luther King, Jr. In Helina Metaferia's mixed-media portrait of Frist curatorial fellow Chase Williamson, the subject is wearing a crown made of 1960s newspaper clippings about the civil rights movement. Evoking the Middle Passage, Radcliffe Bailey places depictions of African sculptures in a stormy, red-spattered sea. Draped above the surface are actual ropes, suggesting nautical gear as well as human bondage. A white picket fence frames an ominously dark scene in Kerry James Marshall's collage-painting, a comment on the obstacles to Black home-ownership. Mostly realistic, the picture includes abstract touches and its own title, "Century Twenty One," scrawl-painted at the top.

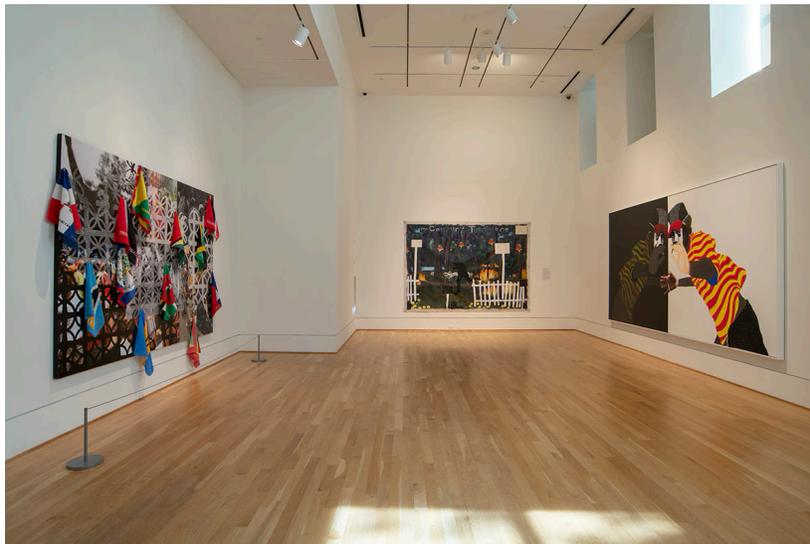


Devan Shimoyama, "Tasha," 2018. Colored pencil, oil, collage, sequins, glitter, silk flowers, beads, and Flashe (vinyl emulsion paint) on canvas stretched over panel. (Photo by Oriol Tarridas/Collection Pérez Art Museum Miami)

Another section, "Gender Fluidity and Queer Spaces," partly overlaps with "Notions of Beauty and Power." Both include elegant and often gem-encrusted collages by Mickalene Thomas and Devan Shimoyama.

Several collages depict bodies that nearly merge with landscapes. Perhaps the most immersive of these is Lester Julian Merriweather's 28-panel "BetterGardensandJungles," initially inspired by the killing of the artist's brother. One of the figures who appears about to be swallowed by lush

vegetation is Tupac Shakur, in a photo taken just before his fatal shooting. The flora, Merriweather has explained, represents the concrete jungle of the urban United States.



Installation view of "Multiplicity." (Lee Stalworth/Fine Art through Photography)

Seemingly more upbeat is Joiiri Minaya's print of a smiling woman whose face and body contain scenes of an island paradise. It's one of a series of collages the artist made from old postcards designed to entice tourists to the Dominican Republic, where the New York-born artist was raised. The picture challenges simplistic notions of both gender and the tropics.



Yashua Klos, "Uncle Scott," 2022. Woodblock prints on archival paper, Japanese rice paper, acrylic, spray paint, colored pencil, and wood mounted on canvas.

(Collection of Marc Rockford and Carrie Gish/Sikkema Jenkins & Co)



Rod McGaha, "Family Freedom," from the Regeneration series, 2021. Inkjet print on paper. (Rod McGaha)

Among the most elaborate works is Ebony G. Patterson's three-dimensional, multi-panel construction, in which butterflies and torn and cut paper evoke a rainforest, interspersed with small bodies. The stern face of Yashua Klos's "Uncle Scott," assembled from segments of woodblock prints, is softened by garlands of flowers. In Rod McGaha's stark "Family Freedom," bodies both perch on and become part of bare tree trunks. McGaha's inkjet print is included in "Digital Stitching," a section devoted to computer-made collages. It includes some powerful images, and yet is the show's least involving chapter. The digital products lack the tactile appeal and sheer physicality of such thickly tiered pieces as Derek Fordjour's "Airborne Double," in which twinned drum majors leap above a field of torn, red-painted newsprint that might as well be infinitely deep. Their levitating forms, like so much of "Multiplicity," express as much joy as conflict.

If you go

Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage

Phillips Collection, 1600 21st St. NW. phillipscollection.org. 202-387-2151.

Dates: Through Sept. 22.

Prices: \$10-20.