ARTnews

# In a Timely D.C. Exhibition, Artists of Color Use Sculpture to Question Who's Worth Remembering

**BY SHANTAY ROBINSON**

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Pepón Osorio, *Las Twines*, 1998.SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Can a **sculpture** convey power? Historically, sculpture has been one of the key ways to depict who is in charge and who is worth remembering. That has been the case in the United States where the Lincoln Memorial and Mount Rushmore recall the country's most revered presidents. Sculpture as a tool of conveying power can be seen in the rise in monuments to leaders of the Confederacy both after the Civil War and in the early 20th century; for many these sculptures are alienating and oppressive. In the past five years, numerous protests have called for the removal of many of these statues, from Louisiana to Virginia to Georgia, in the wake of George Floyd's murder. By looking at the public monuments, primarily to white men, that celebrate this country's history, we can see who is especially celebrated.

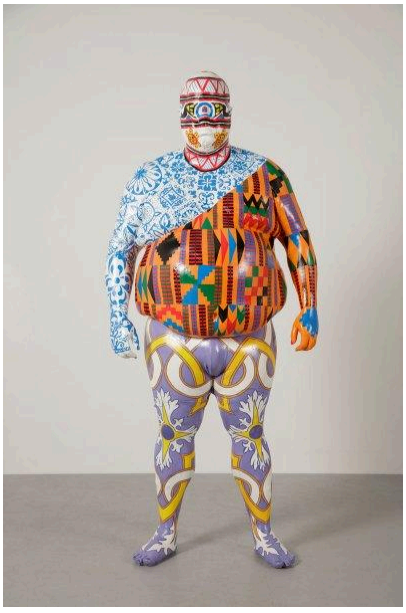
The **Smithsonian American Art Museum**'s "The Shape of Power: Stories of Race and American Sculpture" (on view through September 14) aims to upend that history, presenting a view of artists of diverse backgrounds whose sculptures take power head on. Here, everyone has power and import.

The exhibition offers a new gaze with which to look at American sculpture, which cocurator Karen Lemmey said has remained an understudied part of art history; the last major US publication dedicated to the medium was published more than half a century ago.

"There's been a real surge in interest about monuments, public art, and sculpture maybe more broadly," Lemmey told *ARTnews*. "There haven't been a lot of resources, and people would ask questions, and I would inevitably refer back to this last big survey that wasn't really up to date."

Featuring 82 artworks by 70 artists, made between 1792 and 2023, the exhibition is divided into nine themes, including "Family and Racial Identity," "Solidarity and Resistance," and "Classical and the Myth of the White Ideal."

Upon entering the exhibition, viewers encounter a video featuring cocurator Tobias Woffard, an art historian at the Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, as he questions the very notion of sculpture and its relation to power. He poses three questions about sculpture, race, and power to passersby on the National Mall, such as "When you hear the word power, what do you think?" One answer: "Power can be shared." This response sets up what visitors are about to see, just how sculpture, created by diverse artists, tells an inclusive story of America.



Roberto Lugo, *DNA Study Revisited*, 2022.SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

The show opens with four distinct approaches to sculpture. Roberto Lugo's *DNA Study Revisited* (2022) is a life-size self-portrait sculpture of the artist, depicting his ethnic make-up through varied culturally representative textile patterns. Titus Kaphar's *Monumental Inversions: George Washington* (2017) shows

the first US president atop a horse. Instead of creating an in-the-round, highly polished bronze sculpture, Kaphar shows Washington and his horse as unfinished, smudged figures in steel, embedded into a slab of wood; below, pieces of hand-blown glass representing the horse's legs lay on the floor.

Nearby is Alison Saar's 2006 mixed-media statue of a girl staring into a frying pan, titled *Mirror Mirror (Mulatta Seeking Inner Negress)*, a reflection by the artist on her mixed-race heritage. On one wall hangs *So Many Ways to Be Human* (2020), a meticulous arrangement of 30 black-and-white, hand-shaped clay figures, each measuring about 10 inches tall, by Anita Fields (Osage/Muscogee). In each of these artist's hands, sculpture becomes a reflection on the collective identity of this country.

"Sculpture can be this incredible form through which to reflect on these big ideas," Lemmey said. "Race is a lived experience, and this is an exhibition that encourages conversation, but also introspection. And so, each of those four sculptures sort of does it in a different way."

From left: Hiram Powers, *America*, 1848–50. Sanford Biggers, *Lady Interbellum*, 2020.

But the curators have also paired contemporary works with historical ones. Hiram Powers's Neoclassical plaster sculpture *America* (1848–50) shows a bare-chested woman with her hand raised and foot stepping on chains as a representation of the United States. Nearby is *Lady Interbellum*, a 2020 marble sculpture of a crouching Venus by Sanford Biggers created by combining 3D scans of a Central African Fang ancestral figure and an ancient Roman sculpture. Each depicts womanhood as representative of nationalistic ideals: *America* for an antebellum audience not yet open to slavery's end; *Lady Interbellum* for a contemporary audience in another hostile moment.

"I had a few intentions," Biggers said of the impetus behind *Lady Interbellum*. "One was an interest in making work that was based on classics. When I say classics, of course, I mean Western European, but

also including artwork from various countries within Africa, because I think at this point those works can be considered classics as well. They've had so much influence on contemporary and modern art."

"The Shape of Power" also includes a special focus on Black women sculptors, showing their lineage from the 19th century to today, with works on view by the likes of Edmonia Lewis, Augusta Savage, Betye Saar, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Joyce J. Scott, and Simone Leigh. Their dexterity in formal skills is matched by their conceptual prowess. Lewis's *Hagar in the Wilderness*, a lifelike marble statue of a racially ambiguous woman made in 1875 depicts the Biblical story of Hagar who was impregnated by her enslaver's husband—a story relatable to the recently freed Black women who she likely had in mind when she made the work. Creating sculpture almost 150 years later, Leigh abstracts the head of what might be Black female figure so that it is almost unrecognizable, wielding her power to make Black female identity known or not.

Simone Leigh, *Village Series*, 2020.PROMISED GIFT TO THE SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM FROM THE COLLECTION OF KELLY WILLIAMS & ANDREW FORSYTH

The "Family and Racial Identity" section looks at how artists have used sculpture to deconstruct race as fixed, homogenous categories. *Las Twines*, a 1998 installation by Pepón Osorio, show twin sisters, one dark skinned with black hair and one light skinned with blond hair. They sit on a swing, dressed in elaborate white communion dresses, with boxing gloves and purses decked out in the Puerto Rican flag. Osorio points out both the absurdity of racial categorization based on physical appearances, especially in a place like the Caribbean, while also stressing that racism and colorism are pervasive within the Latinx community.

Racism in society and the violence it begets is the subject of several other works in “The Shape of Power,” like *Kultur* (1939) by Aaron J. Goodelman, a Russian-born sculptor who immigrated to New York in 1905, having escaped the Jewish pogroms. Made of polished pearwood and a found iron shackle and chain, the five-and-a-half-foot-tall sculpture depicts an abstracted figure whose upstretched hands are bound by the shackle, a clear denunciation of lynching. A registered communist, Goodelman draws a parallel between the lynchings of African Americans in the United States and rising antisemitism in 1930s Germany. (The work’s title refers to the Nazi ideology of cultural superiority; Goodelman, however, relates that culture to one of violence.)

Aaron J. Goodelman, *Kultur*, 1939.©1940 AARON GOODELMAN/SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

Goodelman’s sculpture, features in the exhibition’s “Solidarity and Resistance” section, which “condemns the widespread lynching of African American in the United States,” according to the wall text. Nearby is Nari Ward’s *Swing* (2010), a car tire embellished with shoe tips, shoe tongues, and a rope. Though a tire swing may indicate play, the rope that it hangs from is, in fact, a noose. The pairing of these two artworks show solidarity through a shared mission to denounce racial violence. Works like Goodelman’s, Lemmey said, “are early evidence of interracial solidarity and protest about community. We might envision a monument to be how various communities thought about using sculpture for representation or representation of an idea, if not of a self or a community specifically.”

“The Shape of Power” ends on an optimistic note, with a section titled “Future Stories.” Young Joon Kwak’s 2023 *Divine Ruin (My Face Bronze)* shows a bronze cast of the artist’s face, their eyes closed as if they are sleeping. Its exterior is bedazzled with whiterhinestones. From Kwak’s dream, a truer form of the future takes shape.

Nari Ward, *Swing*, 2010.©2010 NARI WARD/SMITHSONIAN AMERICAN ART MUSEUM

The work included aren't just contemporary projections of a utopic future, however; among the pieces included is *Ethiopia Awakening* (1921), a 12-inch maquette by Harlem Renaissance artist Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller. The artist's depiction of an elegant woman as a relic of the past is meant to symbolize an imagined future for African Americans. "Here was a group who had once made history," Fuller once said of the work, "and now after a long sleep was awaking, gradually unwinding the bandage of its mummied past and looking out on life again, expectant but unafraid and with at least a graceful gesture."

The exhibition's 82 artworks, spanning 200 years of art history, range from ones that could fit into the palm of a hand to monuments that tower over the viewer. They come in a variety of mediums from durable wood to fragile ceramics. The diversity on view here extends from its creators to the works' forms as well as their meanings. A new understanding of the power inherent in sculpture emerges. Here is a true depiction of what America is—and what it can be.