

American Voices and Visions

Modern and Contemporary Art

SAAM's collection offers opportunities for connection and dialogue—between artists and ideas, between artworks and viewers, and among the artworks themselves. As you explore these spaces, we invite you to take part in this vibrant conversation.

The artworks presented on this floor reflect the explosion of possibility in American art between the 1940s and today. Using new materials and techniques, and inspired by the social, cultural, and technological changes around them, these artists have expanded the perspectives and ideas shared through art. They have invited audiences into their work, asking us to consider who and what art is for and how we might define the art of our time.

American Voices and Visions is organized by the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

Leadership support is provided by:
Whitney and Elizabeth MacMillan Foundation

Generous support is provided by:
Joanne and Richard Brodie
Carolyn and Maurice Cunniffe
Faye and Robert C. Davidson, Jr.
Elizabeth and James Eisenstein
Dorothy Tapper Goldman Foundation
Henry Luce Foundation
Jason Tilroe
Kelly M. Williams

Additional support is provided by:
Janet and Wilber James
Nina Lesavoy
Marianna and Juan Sabater
Terra Foundation for American Art

Post–World War II Abstraction

In the years following the Second World War, abstraction became an important stream within modern art in the United States. Many abstract painters in the 1940s and 1950s aspired to create a universal art, one deeply connected to the forces of nature and timeless human emotions. Emphasizing an intuitive, direct approach, they were more interested in expressing inner states of being than in representing the external appearance of a person or thing.

Abstract works of art can lead us to unexpected places. Because their aim is not realistic likeness, they remain radically open to interpretation. As you explore this gallery, consider the artists' use of color, form, texture, and line, as well as the physical process by which each work was made. What sensations or associations do these artworks provoke in you?



Claire Falkenstein

born 1908, Coos Bay, OR
died 1997, Venice, CA

Envelope

1958

steel wire assemblage

The interval, the space between, has always been as important as the form to me.

—Claire Falkenstein

A traditional sculpture is solid, made to sit firmly on a pedestal. *Envelope* is different. Created from wire and hanging in midair, it operates like a three-dimensional drawing, outlining and defining space without filling it.

Claire Falkenstein intended this piece to be seen from all sides. Notice how its contours appear to morph as you move around it. Its form might bring to mind something as vast as the galaxy or as small as a cocoon.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection, 1981.109.6



Willem de Kooning

born 1904, Rotterdam, Netherlands
died 1997, East Hampton, NY

The Wave

ca. 1942–44
oil on fiberboard

Willem de Kooning’s work is based in improvisation and free gesture. Here, an elegant line defines what could be read as a landscape, a figure, or simply a series of looping forms. Throughout his career, the artist shifted between representational and abstract modes of expression. “Art should not have to be a certain way,” he once said. “It is no use worrying about being related to something it is impossible not to be related to.”

Born in the Netherlands, de Kooning came to the United States in 1926 without a passport or visa. Arriving as an academically trained commercial artist, he went on to become a defining figure of abstract painting in New York.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift from the Vincent Melzac Collection, 1980.6.1



Clyfford Still

born 1904, Grandin, ND
died 1980, Baltimore, MD

1946-H (Indian Red and Black)

1946
oil on canvas

Clyfford Still often worked using a painter's knife, creating surfaces that are thickly slathered and carved rather than brushed. He was one of the first artists in the United States to discard descriptive titles, using a combination of dates and letters to identify his works instead. He

wanted viewers to approach his paintings without preconceptions. "I want no allusions to interfere with or assist the spectator," he stated. "I want [the viewer] to be on [their] own."

What do *you* see in the jagged shapes and rich color of *1946-H*?

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Vincent Melzac Collection through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1980.5.10



Joan Mitchell

born 1925, Chicago, IL
died 1992, Paris, France

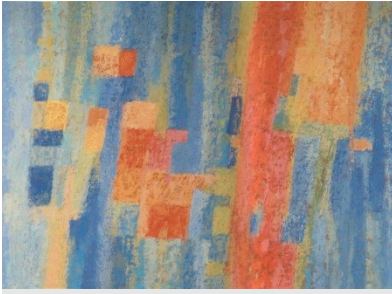
Marlin

1960
oil on canvas

Paintings are static objects, yet they contain dynamism and movement. Imagine the speed and force with which Joan Mitchell applied paint to this canvas and the rhythm of her physical actions.

The brushstrokes in *Marlin* may seem explosive, even violent, evoking, as the painting's title suggests, the movements of a powerful game fish. Inspired by nature, people, and places, Mitchell sought to capture in her work the feeling or experience of a thing rather than its appearance.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of S. C. Johnson & Son, Inc., 1968.52.16



George Morrison

Grand Portage Band of Chippewa
born 1919, Grand Marais, MN
died 2000, Grand Marais, MN

Untitled (Blue Painting)

1958

oil on canvas

“The basis of all art,” George Morrison once stated, “is nature.” Suggestions of sky, water, and rock emerge often in his abstract paintings. A member of the Grand Portage Band of Chippewa, Morrison grew up in a rural community on the rugged northern shore of Lake Superior before studying art in Minneapolis and New York City.

The luminous quality of this work was achieved through the application of small daubs of blue, green, red, and orange paint over a darker maroon background. Projecting a quiet yet joyous mood, *Untitled (Blue Painting)* suggests a sublime vision of a natural scene.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2021.12

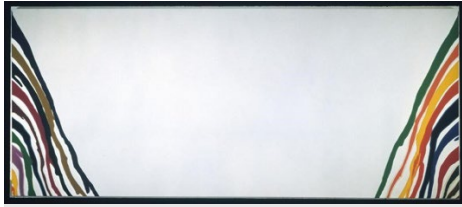
**

DC Color Abstraction

Though predominantly a city of government and politics, Washington, DC, emerged as an important center of abstract art in the 1960s and 1970s. The varied, vibrant works in this gallery were all created during those years within only miles of where you stand now.

Grouped under the label the Washington Color School, painters in DC became known for a technique of staining raw canvas with washes of intense color. Morris Louis—whose enormous work hangs on the opposite wall—was among the first to use this method to extraordinary effect. Yet color abstraction in DC was far more expansive than a single technique. The artists in this gallery pursued many different approaches: some used brushes, others poured paint, still others created “shaped” canvases or liberated the canvas from the stretcher altogether.

While looking at these works, consider the most abstract art form of all: music. Can color—like sound—express a memory, a mood, a sense of place?



Morris Louis

born 1912, Baltimore, MD
died 1962, Washington, DC

Beta Upsilon

1960
acrylic on canvas

Recently conserved, this majestically scaled work has not been seen in public for more than thirty years. Morris Louis created it by directing streams of paint down the sides of the canvas, allowing the color to soak into the fibers. He left the central expanse blank, a bold choice that creates much of the composition's visual tension.

Louis produced all of his most influential paintings in the last five years of his life. He worked in the dining room of his house in Northwest DC, a space so small he could only unroll a single canvas, or part of a canvas, at a time.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase from the Vincent Melzac Collection through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program, 1980.5.6



Sam Gilliam

born 1933, Tupelo, MS
died 2022, Washington, DC

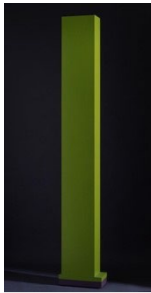
Swing

1969
acrylic and aluminum on canvas

Known for inviting chance and change into his process, Sam Gilliam created *Swing* by folding and crumpling canvas that he had soaked in paint. Once dry, the bundled fabric was opened and hung to reveal dazzling fields of spontaneous color and pattern.

The title *Swing* reflects the swagged shape of the painting, hanging free of stretcher bars. The word also evokes Gilliam's desire to "just work and let things go," like the bebop and jazz musicians he liked to listen to while painting.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. Edwin Janss Jr., 1973.189



Anne Truitt

born 1921, Baltimore, MD
died 2004, Washington, DC

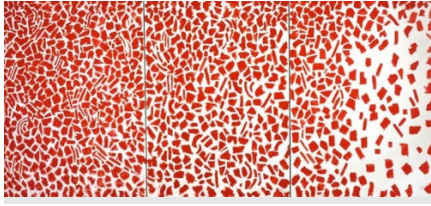
17th Summer

1974
acrylic on wood

17th Summer captures the youthful freedom Anne Truitt felt the seventeenth summer of her life. The graceful column of new-leaf green is raised slightly off the floor, giving the impression of weightlessness.

Truitt made geometric wooden structures that merge the concerns of painting and sculpture. She carefully sanded their surfaces between each application of paint to create seductively smooth planes of luminous color.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Kenneth Noland, 1991.176



Alma Thomas

born 1891, Columbus, GA
died 1978, Washington, DC

Red Azaleas Singing and Dancing Rock and Roll Music

1976

acrylic on canvas

Do you see that painting? Look at it move. That's energy and I'm the one who put it there. . . . I transform energy with these old limbs of mine.

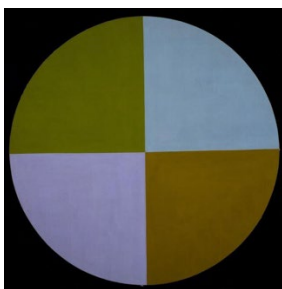
—Alma Thomas

This is the largest painting of Alma Thomas's career, created for what would be the last solo exhibition of her lifetime. Thomas painted it on three separate canvases, a format that enabled the artist to achieve ambitious scale despite her declining health and the modest size of her kitchen studio.

As the painting's title suggests, Thomas often listened to music as she worked. Here, bright red forms shimmy across the canvas as if animated by the rhythm of rock and roll.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Bequest of the artist, 1980.36.2A–C

The Smithsonian American Art Museum holds the most extensive collection of Alma Thomas's works on canvas, including thirteen paintings bequeathed to the museum by the artist. Learn more about Thomas's life and work in the exhibition *Composing Color: Paintings by Alma Thomas*, on view in the second floor galleries.



Mary Pinchot Meyer

born 1920, New York City
died 1964, Washington, DC

Half Light

1964

synthetic polymer on canvas

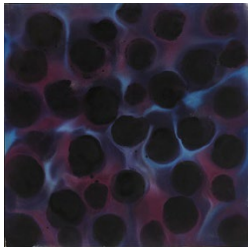
In my paintings, the color is the form.

—Mary Pinchot Meyer

The tondo—or circular canvas—was a favorite format for Mary Pinchot Meyer. *Half Light* is divided into precise quadrants. Their colors alternate in tone and hue, with pale lavender and blue contrasting crisply with earthy olive green and brown.

Meyer used thinned paint to penetrate the fibers of the canvas, thus melding color with form. She noted that there are no lines in her paintings, only edges “where one color stops and another starts.” The artist did, however, draw two tiny dots in this composition. Can you find them?

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Quentin and Mark Meyer, 1976.41



Kenneth Victor Young

born 1933, Louisville, KY

died 2017, Washington, DC

Untitled

1973

acrylic on canvas

I've always been interested in . . . outer space, inner space, and the development of what occurs—force, magnetism, and that kind of thing.

—Kenneth Victor Young

In *Untitled*, Kenneth Victor Young cultivates an uncertain sense of space and scale. Black orbs float in a dark field, potentially representing either a microscopic or celestial view. The colorful halos around the orbs were created by applying paint “wet into wet” and allowing it to freely blend and move.

Like Sam Gilliam, whose unstretched painting *Swing* hangs nearby, Young grew up in Kentucky and studied painting at the University of Louisville before moving to Washington, DC, in the 1960s. Only after settling in DC, did either artist begin working in a fully abstract mode.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. Val E. Lewton, 1987.46

**



Bob Thompson

born 1937, Louisville, KY
died 1966, Rome, Italy

The Spinning, Spinning, Turning, Directing

1963

oil on canvas

Figures often appear in a precarious state in Bob Thompson's art. Here, our attention is immediately drawn to a pale body in dangerous free fall. Behind the body, a winged figure rises, while characters on the ground seem unmoved by the action. The exact narrative remains elusive—is this a nightmare, an allegory, a myth?

Thompson developed his distinct style, combining figuration and expressive color, in the late 1950s. A Black American, he established his career in New York City but spent extended periods in Spain and Italy. Some of the figures in this painting were adapted from prints by the late eighteenth-century Spanish artist Francisco de Goya, reflecting Thompson's prolonged engagement with historical European art.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection, 1980.137.104



Grace Hartigan

born 1922, Newark, NJ
died 2008, Timonium, MD

Modern Cycle

1967

oil on canvas

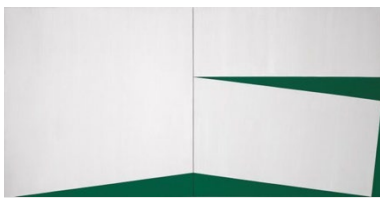
My male students at the time were obsessed with motorcycles—one even kept his in his studio—and out of sheer self-preservation I bought a poster of Brando on a bike and [of] Peter Fonda, some cycle magazines, pinned them on my painting wall and Modern Cycle was the result. It is, incidentally, one of my favorite paintings.

—Grace Hartigan

Grace Hartigan's work often combines the spontaneity and large scale of abstract painting with images drawn from popular culture or everyday experience. In *Modern Cycle*, we see fragments of people and motorbikes—a dynamic mix of human and mechanical, masculine and feminine.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection, 1980.137.33

**



Carmen Herrera

born 1915, Havana, Cuba
died 2022, New York City

Blanco y Verde

1960

acrylic on canvas

Carmen Herrera’s paintings conjure spatial tension and movement through crisp geometry and bold color. *Blanco y Verde* is from a series of paintings she created using only two colors—green and white—and sharp triangular forms. The physical edges of the canvas serve as part of the composition, defining at least one side of each triangle.

As a woman and a Cuban immigrant, Herrera faced hurdles gaining recognition within the US art world. After decades of creating her highly refined, minimal paintings, she began attracting public acclaim in the 1990s. She continued working until near the end of her life at age 106. “I believe that I will always be in awe of the straight line,” she said, “its beauty is what keeps me painting.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2011.27A–B

**

This gallery contains mature content.

Breaking the Mold: The Impact of Feminism

In the 1960s and 1970s, feminism became a mass movement in the United States, transforming the art world as well as society at large. Increasingly, women questioned male-dominated power structures and demanded equality at work and at home. Until then, art by women received little public recognition, with few female artists represented in museums, galleries, or history books.

Amid the ongoing civil rights movement, antiwar protests, and burgeoning gay liberation, this generation of feminist artists expanded what art could be—in subject matter, perspective, materials, and method. They created work that explores home life and family, militarism, gender roles, and sexuality, and incorporated performance and craft techniques. They also founded their own cooperative art spaces, developing new opportunities for women to exhibit their work



Martha Rosler

born 1943, New York City

Semiotics of the Kitchen

1975

single-channel video, black and white, and sound; 6:09 minutes

In unsmiling deadpan, Martha Rosler parodies the role of the perfect TV housewife and cook. Running through an alphabet of kitchen utensils, she demonstrates each for the camera. Her gestures of hacking and stabbing are at times unnerving—thinly veiled expressions of frustration and rage. Rosler has said of this performance, “As the woman speaks, she names her own oppression.”

A conceptual artist who has worked in many different mediums, including video, photography, and performance, Rosler made numerous pieces in the 1970s examining media representations of women’s roles.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Ford Motor Company, 2008.21.7



Martha Rosler

born 1943, New York City

Tract House Soldier, from the series ***House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home***
ca. 1967–72 (printed 2018)
inkjet print

Booby Trap, from the series ***House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home***
ca. 1967–72 (printed 2018)
inkjet print

Beauty Rest, from the series ***House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home***
ca. 1967–72 (printed 2018)
inkjet print

Red Stripe Kitchen, from the series ***House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home***
ca. 1967–72 (printed 2018)
inkjet print

Balloons, from the series ***House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home***
ca. 1967–72 (printed 2018)
inkjet print

First Lady (Pat Nixon), from the series ***House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home***
ca. 1967–72 (printed 2018)
inkjet print

House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home addresses the subject of gender as it confronts the effects of war and militarism. Collaged from advertising and photojournalistic images cut from newspapers and magazines, the artworks in this series juxtapose the “feminine” realm of domestic life with the “manly” business of waging war.

When Martha Rosler created these works, the US war in Vietnam was rapidly escalating. She observed that news images of the war often reinforced the impression that it was taking place “very far away, in a place we couldn’t imagine.” She crafted her photomontages to collapse the distance between home front and war front, essentially “bringing the war home.” In the artist’s words, “We are not ‘here’ and ‘there.’ We are all one, and that is crucial.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Norbert Hornstein and Amy Weinberg and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2021.7.7, 2021.7.9, 2021.7.14, 2021.7.19, 2021.7.1, and 2021.7.17



Miriam Schapiro

born 1923, Toronto, ON, Canada
died 2015, Hampton Bays, NY

Sherry Brody

born 1932, Santa Monica, CA

Dollhouse

1972

wood and mixed media

In 1971, Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago taught a groundbreaking feminist art class at the California Institute of the Arts outside Los Angeles. Their aim was to radically question the values of the male-dominated art world and to encourage women to make art out of their own experiences and inner lives.

The all-female class transformed an abandoned Hollywood mansion into an environmental art

space dubbed “Womanhouse.” In its rooms, they created installations and performances about gender, menstruation, domesticity, and other subjects rarely discussed by women in public.

Dollhouse was originally exhibited as part of “Womanhouse.” The piece playfully subverts the saying, “A woman’s place is in the home.” The kitchen, nursery, and boudoir represent the standards a white, middle-class woman of Schapiro’s generation felt expected to achieve as homemaker, mother, and sexual partner to her husband. Yet also included, at upper right, is an artist’s studio—a traditionally male space that Schapiro here claims for herself. Standing on the easel is a tiny replica of one of Schapiro’s own abstract paintings, and, nearby, a male model poses next to a tray of bananas—a gender reversal of the expected female nude.

“Womanhouse” was a watershed in feminist art, attracting thousands of visitors. It was also a transformative experience for Schapiro, who subsequently dedicated her work to celebrating female experience and feminine crafts. “I was trained to be an artist by men,” she said, “but I learned how to express myself from women.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Gene Davis Memorial Fund, 1997.112A–B



Audrey Flack
born 1931, New York City

Queen
1976
acrylic on canvas

What do the objects in this painting symbolize? *Queen* echoes a genre of Renaissance still-life paintings known as “vanitas” that serve as reminders of the inevitability of change and death. In such a work, a pocket watch represents the unrelenting march of time, and a dewy flower is symbolic of youthful beauty that will one day wither.

Audrey Flack has said that she made this painting “for all women, particularly women gamblers”—a reference to her mother, whose portrait appears, alongside the artist’s, in the open locket just below the queen of hearts playing card. To the left, Flack depicts another queen—a

chess piece, the most powerful in the game and therefore an emblem of female power and importance.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Louis K. and Susan P. Meisel, 2022.11.5



Judith F. Baca

born 1946, Los Angeles, CA

Las Tres Mariás

1976

colored pencil on paper mounted on panel with upholstery backing and mirror

Las Tres Mariás recalls a dressing mirror, something used to examine one's appearance and perhaps try on new identities through dress and posture. Facing it, you see yourself flanked by two archetypes of urban Chicana counterculture: on the left, a contemporary chola of the 1970s, when this work was made, and on the right, a pachuca of the 1940s or 1950s.

Judith Baca created *Las Tres Mariás* for an exhibition of Chicana artists at the Woman's Building, a predominantly white, feminist cultural space in Los Angeles. The androgynously dressed chola portrays a member of the Tiny Locas, one of the youth gangs with whom Baca worked on public murals. The cigarette-smoking pachuca was based on a photograph of Baca herself, donning the persona of one of the tough girls she both admired and feared growing up in South Central Los Angeles.

Las Tres Mariás invites the questions: Who are you in relation to these figures? Do you identify with them, fear them, desire them?

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by William T. Evans, 1998.162A–C

**

In Full Color: Multiculturalism and Art

In the 1970s and 1980s, artists of color increasingly contested the traditional narrative of American art, which was told from a white European point of view. Fresh subject matter and forms of expression arose as artists of diverse cultural backgrounds created work that challenged stereotypes and spoke of their own identities and experiences.

The paintings in this gallery reflect the vibrant range of artistic voices that emerged at this time. Many of the artists represented here were also educators and activists who fought to make mainstream art institutions more equitable and inclusive. Through both their teaching and their creative work, they opened up new possibilities for the generations of artists who have followed.



Carlos Villa

born 1936, San Francisco, CA
died 2013, San Francisco, CA

During

1982

acrylic on canvas

Paintings show the physical touch of their makers, usually using a brush or other tool. Here we see the literal imprint of the artist's body—where he pressed his chest, thighs, hands, and feet, wet with paint, against the canvas. The resulting imagery suggests a ritual or a dance.

Carlos Villa's face-print can also be seen, emerging from and disappearing into the background. Including his face was, for Villa, a way to affirm his identity as a Filipino American artist. As a student in the 1950s, Villa had been stung when a teacher told him, "Filipino art history doesn't exist." He went on to uncover—and create—this art himself. Recognizing Filipino culture as a mix of Indigenous, Asian, and Western influences, Villa developed a personal aesthetic that drew form and iconography from a wide array of cultural sources.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible through Federal support from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center and the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2023.26



Fritz Scholder

La Jolla Band of Luiseño Indians
born 1937, Breckenridge, MN
died 2005, Phoenix, AZ

Indian Image

1972

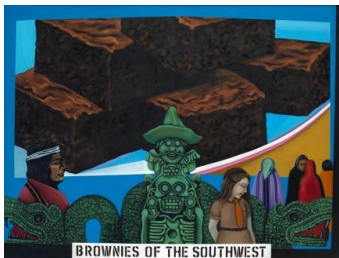
acrylic on canvas

The figure in *Indian Image* appears to be just that: a flat image, as if cut from paper and pasted onto a colorful background.

An artist of Luiseño and European ancestry, Fritz Scholder both did and did not identify as American Indian, and early in his career, he chose not to paint American Indian subjects. He changed his mind in the 1960s, after encountering countless artworks that depict American Indian people two-dimensionally, as doomed figures existing only in a romanticized past.

By contrast, Scholder asserted a modern American Indian aesthetic. Enlivened by pop-art color and energetic brushwork, his paintings are pointedly contemporary in style, even when based—as is *Indian Image*—on a historical photograph.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 1973.151



Melesio Casas

born 1929, El Paso, TX
died 2014, San Antonio, TX

Humanscape 62

1970

acrylic on canvas

Humanscape 62 satirizes the trivialization of brown cultures—both Mexican and Indigenous—in American advertising. Melesio Casas depicts the Frito Bandito (a racist cartoon mascot of the Frito-Lay Company) as part of a Mesoamerican jade pendant. He juxtaposes this with images of American Indian and Mexican American people, a Brownie Girl Scout, and a tray of brownies, labeling them all “Brownies of the Southwest.”

A central figure of the Chicano arts movement, Casas created *Humanscape 62* the year Frito-Lay began to phase out its use of the character in response to lobbying by Chicano activists. The painting both documents the character’s existence and confronts the power of mass media to shape and perpetuate cultural stereotypes.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2012.37



Kay WalkingStick

Cherokee Nation

born 1935, Syracuse, NY

Two Women II

1973

acrylic on canvas

How easily can you find the two women of the title? The painting’s eye-popping hues and lack of volumetric detail create playful confusion between the figures and the background.

A Cherokee woman, Kay WalkingStick has been a double trailblazer in American art. She describes this painting as a joyful expression of female self-determination and sensuality. Produced amid the women’s movement and the sexual revolution of the 1970s, it offers a rejoinder to the long history of male artists depicting the female nude.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2021.30.1



Ching Ho Cheng

born 1946, Havana, Cuba
died 1989, New York City

Kiss

1971

gouache and ink on rag board

Kiss has the cool and verve of a great psychedelic album cover. Yet the imagery of disembodied mouths flying through masses of sperm and red blood cell–like forms is influenced by ancient Taoist ideas about the human being as a microcosm of the universe.

Ching Ho Cheng read the *Tao Te Ching*, a classic Taoist text, as a young man and was fascinated by its philosophical teachings. At the same time, he rebelled against the expectation that his art should look “traditionally Chinese.” Born in Cuba, where his father was a diplomat for the Chinese Nationalist government, and raised in New York City from the age of three, Cheng created his own unique and utterly contemporary painting style.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 2021.6

**

Art is an invitation to see the world with fresh eyes.

Throughout this gallery, soda bottles, floorboards, antlers, and tar have been transformed into art. Although these objects may be familiar, their meanings are new.

“I only want materials that have been used by people,” claimed the artist Thornton Dial. For Dial and others, the process of working with old, sometimes discarded objects grounds their art in human experience. Inspired by quilting and other folkways that draw on tradition and memory, these artists embrace creative reinvention. Their art connects past and present and turns ordinary materials into things of wonder.

These works preserve everyday objects as an act of care and attention. They encourage us to take another look at the possibilities contained in things that society has cast off and in people and stories often overlooked.



Mark Bradford

born 1961, Los Angeles, CA

Amendment #8

2014

mixed media

What words or phrases can you make out on the surface of this painting? The text comes from the Eighth Amendment of the US Constitution, which forbids the use of “cruel and unusual punishments.”

This work is part of a series Mark Bradford made about the Bill of Rights. Inspired by the idea that a piece of paper could embody fundamental human liberties, Bradford used paper as his medium—wetting it, building it up, and scraping it down so that it became a dense cake of multicolored pulp.

The words are buried within the paper’s layers. While some are visible, most float in and out of legibility, just as certain people and ideas have come into focus at different times in our history. Reflecting on the Constitution, Bradford marvels that “we will never understand the entire document. . . . Its meaning glimmers.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Lohrfink Foundation and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2015.34



Theaster Gates

born 1973, Chicago, IL

Ground rules. Free throw

2015

wooden flooring

To make *Ground rules. Free throw*, Theaster Gates reconfigured the varnished wood planks of an old high school gym floor. The colored stripes and flecks are the rearranged markings from the athletic court, and the scuff marks testify to how heavily it was used. Gates salvaged the floors from a school that was closed down by the city of Chicago, where the artist grew up and lives today.

Gates says his work begins with a desire to “re-envision place . . . not just as an art project, but as a way of living.” Thinking about the community that no longer has a school, he asks what is lost when kids no longer have access to organized sports. How do we learn how to follow the rules when the structures that teach them disappear?

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2017.40



Alison Saar

born 1965, Los Angeles, CA

Rouse

2012

wood, bronze, paper, antler sheds, and stamped ceiling tin

The word “rouse” means to awaken and animate, and this sculpture evokes the self-awakening and personal transformation we often experience when encountering a turning point in life.

Alison Saar made *Rouse* when her daughter left for college. The artist began thinking about “being menopausal . . . moving into new territory in my work . . . ready to let this other part of me mature and come out and be realized.”

The massive antlers cradle a delicate, translucent adult figure in a fetal position, like a creature preparing to emerge from its cocoon. Scattered on the ground below are antlers that suggest a root network and, as the artist notes, mark “the passage of time to bring a child to adulthood.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool, administered by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative, 2022.32A–C



Kerry James Marshall
born 1955, Birmingham, AL

SOB, SOB

2003

acrylic on fiberglass

What might this woman be thinking and feeling? Her facial expression, along with the thought bubbles “SOB... SOB...,” hints at what artist Kerry James Marshall calls “that place in between where you experience both a certain sadness and also a certain kind of anger about the things that you’ve discovered.”

The book *Africa since 1413* sits beside her, and the shelf behind her includes works by prominent Black writers and history volumes on Africa and the African diaspora.

SOB, SOB is an example of Marshall’s signature style: monumental paintings with Black figures as their central subject. His work counters the exclusionary narratives in art history and art museums that push Black figures to the margins or off the canvas entirely.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2010.29



Thornton Dial Sr.
born 1928, Emelle, AL
died 2016, McCalla, AL

The Beginning of Life in the Yellow Jungle

2003

plastic soda bottles, doll, clothing, bedding, wire, found metal, rubber glove, turtle shell, artificial flowers, Splash Zone compound, enamel, and spray paint on canvas mounted on wood

“When I start making something, I gather up the pieces I want to work with,” Thornton Dial once explained. “Everything I pick up be something that done did somebody some good in their lifetime. . . . When you make things beautiful out of another person’s ideas, it make the world more beautiful.”

Dial mastered the art of speaking through objects—he gathered, combined, and painted them to create artworks that ask us to look closely and think carefully. Here, he invokes a jungle landscape, a place where survival can be hard. In Dial’s junglescape, wild and urban realms are indistinguishable: plastic cups and bottles are plants, rubber gloves and rags are vines. The entire scene is conjured from something found, repurposed, and reimagined.

Across nine decades in Alabama, Dial experienced racism and oppression firsthand, but he discovered that he could speak freely through artmaking. Dial’s critiques of race relations were often somber, dark in color and mood. Yet here, warm hues shower the day in optimism; polarized divisions of black and white give way to a sunny palette of possibility.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Partial gift of Debbie Simon and Tim Grumbacher and museum purchase, 2020.80



Martin Puryear

born 1941, Washington, DC

Vessel

1997–2002

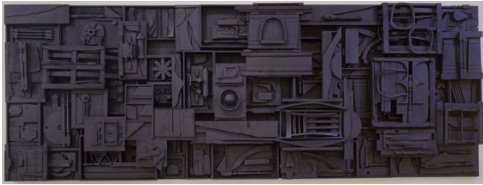
Eastern white pine, mesh, and tar

The overall form of *Vessel* is a head that lies face down on the ground, with its neck and crown rising up in opposite directions, like the bow and stern of a ship. Contained within this openwork structure are a solid wooden sphere that resembles a period and a black ampersand that swells to fill much of the interior space.

Vessel remains open to multiple interpretations. Some visitors have described it as a bottle washed up on shore, containing a cryptic message visible through the wooden form. For others, the title refers to sinister human trafficking; the large black ampersand—suspended by a metal shackle—suggests a folded body crouched in the hold of a slave ship crossing the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas. Still others see a human head containing two symbols of written language, a visual metaphor for abstract thought.

The artist rarely refutes interpretations of his work. Instead, he prefers that it gain meaning over time, as each viewer draws on personal experience and ascribes new significance to his art.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Nion McEvoy and Leslie Berriman in memory of Nan Tucker McEvoy, gift of Lucy S. Rhame, and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2017.18



Louise Nevelson

born 1899, Kiev, Russia (now Kyiv, Ukraine)
died 1988, New York City

Sky Cathedral

1982

painted wood

Can you identify any of the everyday objects in the black field of *Sky Cathedral*?

Louise Nevelson was an avid collector of objects, and she assembled various found wooden scraps—table legs, bannisters, rolling pins, milk crates, moldings, and other architectural fragments—to create her sculptures.

Although it's possible to see the shapes and outlines of these elements, they are absorbed into the large, uniformly painted black wall. Nevelson aimed to create a spiritual experience out of everyday objects, transforming them from the material to the immaterial. *Sky Cathedral* evokes what Nevelson called “the heavenly spheres, the places between the land and the sea” that lie beyond our experience of ordinary things.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of an anonymous donor, 1994.85A-AA



Alfred Jensen

born 1903, Guatemala City, Guatemala
died 1981, Livingston, NJ

Honor Pythagoras, Per I–Per VI

1964

oil on canvas

Alfred Jensen strove to reveal the connections between art, science, and spirituality.

For him, the thousands of strokes of color that he applied across these six conjoined canvases expressed the unity of all things. The colored triangles represent prisms that break white light into brilliant hues, and the geometries and numbers underlie the basic order of the universe. Jensen was inspired by mathematics, but also by visual forms from around the world, including calendars and counting systems from Arabic, Mayan, and Chinese cultures.

The painting—one of the artist’s largest—contains complex symbols and ideas, yet it operates very simply on another level: undiluted color, shape, and rhythm combine to create a harmony that appeals to the eye and the body as much as to the mind.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Hugh W. Downe and museum purchase made possible by the American Art Forum, 2001.35A–F



Charmion von Wiegand

born 1896, Chicago, IL
died 1983, New York City

“Nothing that is wrong in principle can be right in practice.” —Carl Schurz, 1829–1906, from the series *Great Ideas of Western Man*

1966

oil and pencil on canvas

Charmion von Wiegand was entranced with “the multiplicity of things which lie just beyond the world of appearance.” For her, art was a way of tapping into the underlying structures of the universe and revealing its spiritual essence.

The title of this painting refers to the work of Carl Schurz, the journalist, statesman, and reformer who was known for his advocacy of idealism in American civic life.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Container Corporation of America, 1984.124.300



Simon Gouverneur

born 1934, Bronx, NY

died 1990, Washington, DC

Mara

1989

egg tempera, acrylic, and colored pencil on canvas

With its rings of colorful shapes and patterns, abstracted eyes, hands, pyramids, and letters, *Mara* appears to be at once puzzle and code. Simon Gouverneur constructed his compositions from a visual vocabulary of images and symbols derived from various religions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, Jewish mysticism, and ancient American traditions. Influenced in part by the painter Alfred Jensen—whose work is on view nearby—he sought to reveal a universal language that joined spiritual practices across cultures.

Gouverneur worked very slowly: he mixed his own pigments, rather than relying on commercially available paints, and applied his paint with many tiny, meditative strokes. His methodical process connected him to generations of artists but existed in tension with the expansive and mystical experiences he aimed to create.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Michael Abrams and Sandra Stewart, 2022.60.2



Truman Lowe (Wakajahųkga)

Ho-Chunk Nation

born 1944, Black River Falls, WI

died 2019, Madison, WI

Totem for Kunu (Totem for Eldest Son)

1986

milled lumber and peeled willow

Totem for Henu (Totem for Eldest Daughter)

1986

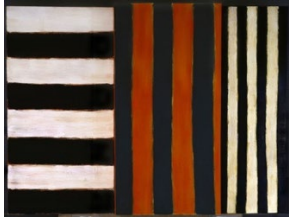
milled lumber and peeled willow

These two sculptures share similar forms, materials, and traits, yet each one is distinct, just like the siblings they represent. Truman Lowe made these works with his two children in mind. But instead of titling them with their personal names, he used Ho-Chunk words that signify “firstborn son” (Kenu) and “firstborn daughter” (Henu). The bent willow branches recall the materials and techniques of basket weaving that Lowe learned from his parents, bringing another generation into this abstract family portrait.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2022.9.2 and 2022.9.3

Building Space

The artists in this gallery explore the construction of space. Whether using exaggerated perspective or heavy, building-block canvases, they each create an alternate universe through art. Often, they use history as a model: Sean Scully’s and Tom Nakashima’s updated depictions of Renaissance sacred space—like altarpieces and chapels—draw on tradition to create a deeply personal vision of the world.



Sean Scully

born 1945, Dublin, Ireland

Maesta

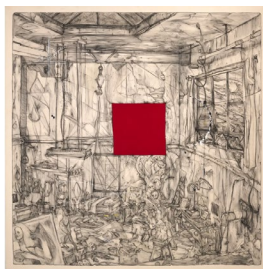
1983

oil on canvas

Sean Scully says that his stripes “push out into the world, trying to be more than paintings.” He thinks of color and light as expressions of life, and his thick, multipaneled works are meant to create an experience that is at once physical and spiritual.

Made with bolted canvases and housepainter’s brushes, Scully’s paintings evoke the solidity of architecture. Yet *Maesta* also conjures a more transcendent realm. The work is titled after a famous multipaneled altarpiece by Duccio, the late thirteenth-century Italian painter. The power of Duccio’s *Maestà* (1308–11) emanates from the unbroken rows of angels and saints surrounding the Virgin Mary, much as Scully’s stripes, in contrasting lights and darks, appear to vibrate outward into the viewer’s space.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2004.1A–C



William T. Wiley

born 1937, Bedford, IN

died 2021, Greenbrae, CA

Studio Space

1975

acrylic and charcoal on canvas

Studio Space is an oversized drawing of a densely cluttered artist's studio filled with painter's tools, sculptures, books, and furniture—a chaotic assemblage of objects that mirrors William T. Wiley's real-life studio.

A flat red square blocks entry into the room both visually and psychologically, creating a contrast between its stark geometry and the detailed rendering of the room. The two different types of images exist together, but their relationship is unclear. Is the artist proposing that one style is superior to the other? Or do they exist in some sort of harmony, like the controlled chaos of the studio space itself?

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of James A. and Marsha Perry Mateyka, 2018.19



Tom Nakashima

born 1941, Seattle, WA

Sanctuary at Western Sunset

1992

oil on canvas

The translucent fish swimming to the center of this painting is a self-portrait of the artist. Adopted by Tom Nakashima as a symbol of fluidity, it represents his journey through life. In many of his works, he uses this animal's associations with Christianity and Asian cultures to explore his Japanese American heritage.

The fish approaches the threshold of a large chapel, a place of refuge inspired by the Arena Chapel in Padua, Italy, decorated with religious-themed frescoes by Giotto, a famous fourteenth-century Italian painter. For Nakashima, his structure serves as a path to Japan and represents safe passage across landscapes, times, and cultures.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Gail and John Enns, 2008.38

Urban Expressionism

The artists gathered in this space drew inspiration from the cities in which they lived and worked, engaging with the public space of New York, Miami, and Los Angeles through a personal visual language. Each developed their own form of urban expressionism that matched the city's energy with their own.



Jean-Michel Basquiat

born 1960, New York City

died 1988, New York City

Untitled

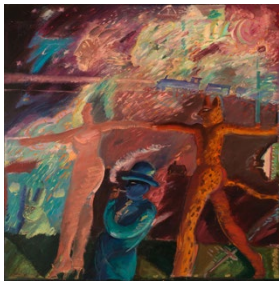
1982

acrylic and oil paint stick on canvas

Ringed by black lines that vibrate with a spiky intensity, a skeletal figure raises a fist. His body appears as an X-ray, while his left arm floats beside him as a bone. All around, colors dash in and out of view, creating an electric scene of clashing shapes and unruly energy.

Jean-Michel Basquiat was a graffiti artist early in his career, and he carried the spontaneity of painting on the streets of New York into his paintings. In *Untitled* and other works, he explored his own experience as a Black man in the United States, pictured as a complex brew of brilliance and death.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Schorr Family Collection



Carlos Almaraz

born 1941, Mexico City, Mexico

died 1989, Los Angeles, CA

Europe and the Jaguar

1982

oil on canvas

A train runs through a cityscape of vibrant pink and blue, chugging past an array of mysterious figures that populate the night sky. Below, a Mesoamerican-looking jaguar with blocky, stylized

features holds hands with a nude woman. Their joined arms stretch above a dapper man smoking beneath them.

Carlos Almaraz uses these cryptic characters to suggest larger ideas and to reflect on the complex relationship between the cultures of Mexico, where he was born, and the United States, where he moved as a child. Here, symbols of ancient America, modern Europe, and the contemporary United States are joined. Untethered to a specific time and place, Almaraz's figures frolic across a noirish and dreamlike urban landscape.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift from the Trustees of the Corcoran Gallery of Art (Gift of The Friends of the Corcoran), 2020.20.7



Purvis Young

born 1943, Miami, FL
died 2010, Miami, FL

The Struggle

1973–74
acrylic on wood

Purvis Young lived his entire life in a segregated district of Miami known as Overtown, commonly called “Colored Town” before the late 1960s. When his neighborhood of African Americans and Caribbean immigrants was boarded up to make way for an overpass bridging more affluent sections of Miami, Young knew he had to do something.

Inspired by the Black activist murals in Chicago and Detroit, he began painting the boarded-up facades of shops along a once thriving baker’s row, which locals called “Goodbread Alley.”

For the rest of his life, Young made paintings focusing on the perils of being poor and socially disempowered in the United States. *The Struggle* shows individuals left with next to nothing fighting over what’s left. It shows people hitting the road, moving on, making a way out of no way.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Grumbacher-Viener Collection in memory of Nancy Grumbacher, 2014.15



Tiffany Chung

born 1969, Đà Nẵng, Viet Nam

reconstructing an exodus history: boat trajectories from Vietnam and flight routes from refugee camps and of ODP cases

2020

embroidery on fabric

Delicate trails of scarlet thread embroidered across oceans of fabric represent the real-life journeys of refugees who fled Vietnam in the late twentieth century. Tiffany Chung compiled these routes to capture a perspective that had never been told: those of people like her family, who were forced to escape after the war ravaged their home country.

For Chung, the map is a way to frame her own experience. Having lived through the war and a subsequent move to the United States, she is fascinated by how political events change the world in ways big and small, shaping large-scale geographies as much as individual lives.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and through the American Women's History Initiative, 2021.37



Firelei Báez

born 1981, Santiago de los Caballeros, Dominican Republic

Untitled (Premiere Carte Pour L'Introduction à L'Histoire du Monde)

2022

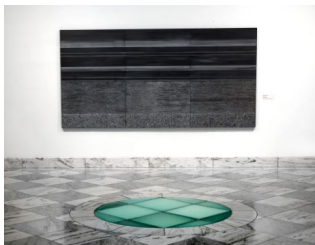
oil and acrylic on archival printed canvas

What do you see in Firelei Báez's plumes of orange, red, and blue? Her painting might evoke the eye of a hurricane, an exploding supernova, or consuming flames. Beneath the swirling streams of paint lies an image of the *Atlas Historique*, a map created in 1718 to document the recently

conquered European colonies. Charting the farthest reaches of human knowledge at that time, the *Atlas* joined the earth, the solar system, and the constellations into one view.

Originally from the Dominican Republic, Báez thinks about the ways her own life has been shaped by the legacies of colonialism. She sees her art as a conversation with this earlier period, opening up space for questions and alternative histories. Here, she might be imagining the world represented by the *Atlas* ending in dramatic fires and floods. Or she could be continuing its traditions: her own imagery was inspired by the fantastical pictures of outer space transmitted by the James Webb Space Telescope in 2021—today’s equivalent of the eighteenth-century star map.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the American Women’s History Initiative Acquisitions Pool administered by the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative and the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2023.32



Teresita Fernández
born 1968, Miami, FL

Nocturnal (Horizon Line)

2010

solid graphite on panel

Teresita Fernández made this artwork entirely of graphite, the same material found in pencils.

Look closely and a horizon line across a large body of water begins to emerge amid the three sections of the artwork. The top part is very smooth, almost as if the graphite has been painted onto the surface. The middle layer of polished drips brings to mind water glistening in the moonlight. In the bottom section, chunky clumps suggest the land and look like graphite in its natural state beneath the earth.

The luster of this piece is most evident if you consider it from various angles. “What animates that surface, in fact, is the viewer moving around it,” said Fernández.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2012.38A–C

Art and Protest

Art can offer uplift and beauty. It can also stimulate critical thought and ignite social change. Working across a diversity of media, from textiles to television, the artists in this gallery address issues of contemporary American life, using creative expression to question authority, protest injustice, and amplify marginalized voices.



Luis Jiménez

born 1940, El Paso, TX
died 2006, Hondo, NM

Man on Fire

1969

fiberglass in acrylic urethane resin on painted wood fiberboard base

How would you portray a childhood hero? *Man on Fire* references the historical figure Cuauhtémoc, the Aztec ruler who was tortured with fire during the Spanish conquest of Mexico. Growing up in the Southwest borderlands, Luis Jiménez heard stories of Cuauhtémoc’s bravery from his grandmother and thought of him as a mythic figure, a “kind of Superman.”

Rendered in glossy fiberglass, the burning man stands defiantly upright, one arm aloft, even as he is wrapped in flames. Jiménez made the sculpture at a time of growing dissent against the Vietnam War among many Chicanos. *Man on Fire* draws on the famous photographs of Thích Quảng Đức, a Buddhist monk who set himself aflame in protest of the US-backed South Vietnamese government. For Jiménez, the monk’s act resonated with his own antiwar stance. *Man on Fire* thus references martyrdom and resistance spanning multiple continents, cultures, and centuries.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Philip Morris Incorporated, 1979.124

Luis Jiménez’s *Man on Fire* holds a special place in the history of the Smithsonian American Art Museum: it was the first significant work by a Latinx artist to enter the museum’s collection, in 1979. Another work by Jiménez—the monumental outdoor sculpture *Vaquero*—was acquired in 1990 and greets visitors at SAAM’s north entrance.



Luis Jiménez, *Vaquero*, modeled 1980 (cast 1990), acrylic urethane, fiberglass, and steel armature, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Judith and Wilbur L. Ross, Jr., Anne and Ronald Abramson, and Thelma and Melvin Lenkin, 1990.44, © 1980, Luis Jiménez

AfriCOBRA

Now more than fifty years old, AfriCOBRA is an artists' collective that helped define the visual aesthetics of the Black Arts Movement in the 1960s and '70s. Its name stands for African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.

Founded in Chicago—a longstanding hub of Black political and cultural activism—AfriCOBRA sought to create art that would empower Black communities and speak directly to Black audiences. Their 1969 manifesto included the goal of “preach[ing] positivity to the people.”

These works, by two of the original members of AfriCOBRA, Jeff Donaldson and Barbara Jones-Hogu, exemplify the core aesthetic principles of the group: the use of bold “cool-ade” color, symmetrical pattern, and messages of Black power and self-determination.



Jeff Donaldson

born 1932, Pine Bluff, AR
died 2004, Washington, DC

Victory in Zimbabwe

1980
mixed media on cardboard

Jeff Donaldson played a pivotal role in founding the artists' collective AfriCOBRA in Chicago in

1968. He then continued as an artist in Washington, DC, where he became a professor, gallery director, and eventually dean at Howard University.

Victory in Zimbabwe displays many hallmarks of AfriCOBRA aesthetics: symmetrical design, rhythmic pattern, and Afrocentric imagery. It also highlights Donaldson's unique practice of working with corrugated cardboard, a method he developed in the mid-1970s. By exposing the ribs of the cardboard and cutting and coloring intricate patterns in the material, he created an exuberant work celebrating Zimbabwe in the year it formally became independent from British rule.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum Purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2019.1



Barbara Jones-Hogu

born 1938, Chicago, IL

died 2017, Chicago Heights, IL

One People Unite

1969

screenprint on gold paperboard

When Styling

1973

screenprint on paper

Rise and Take Control

1971

screenprint on paper

Barbara Jones-Hogu was the only trained printmaker among the early members of the artists' collective AfriCOBRA. Her knowledge of silkscreen was crucial to the collective's success in getting their messages out. Screenprints have long been used for social critique and raising awareness because they are inexpensive to produce and easy to distribute. Intent on reaching everyday people, AfriCOBRA created prints in small editions and sold them at affordable prices in Black-owned bookstores and record shops.

Jones-Hogu is known for the expressive lettering in her prints. Her texts range from simple slogans to passages of poetry, such as the quote that appears in *Rise and Take Control* from "For My People" (1937) by Margaret Walker, a leading poet of the Chicago Black Renaissance. The message in *When Styling*—"When Styling Think of Self-Determination-Liberation"—celebrates fashion and hairstyle as important forms of Black creativity and political resistance.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Thom Pegg, Tyler Fine Art, 2020.59.1 and 2020.59.2, and Museum purchase made possible by the American Art Forum, 2021.26.2



Barbara Kruger

born 1945, Newark, NJ

Untitled (We Will No Longer Be Seen and Not Heard)

1985

nine prints: photo offset lithograph and screenprint

Barbara Kruger is known for pairing incisive text with found photographs, usually taken from old advertisements or magazine illustrations. In this piece, she recasts an English proverb—"Children should be seen and not heard"—as a "we" statement of refusal and protest. The force of each word is underscored by an image of an expressive hand gesture.

Who do you think is the "we" in this statement?

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1986.50A–I



Consuelo Jimenez Underwood

born 1949, Sacramento, CA

Run, Jane, Run!

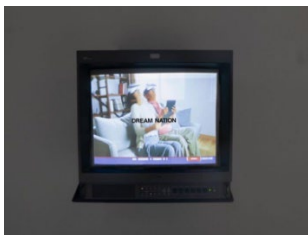
2004

tapestry: woven cotton, linen, and other fabric with barbed wire and caution tape

In the early 1990s, while driving along the 405 Freeway in San Diego, Consuelo Jimenez Underwood became distraught at the sight of an “Immigrant Crossing” sign of parents running with a small child. She identified with the little girl and was shocked at how easily a group of people could be dehumanized. She began depicting this motif threaded with barbed wire, caution tape, and yellow cotton in many of her weavings. The tapestry pays homage to the families killed on the highway and reinforces their humanity. The title, *Run, Jane, Run!*, references the *Dick and Jane* reading primers for young children.

Jimenez Underwood has made weavings about immigration at the US-Mexico border for much of her career. Her father was an undocumented field worker in California, and her family regularly crossed the border. She says she wove this tapestry from “the gaze of the Indigenous woman of long ago.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by the Alturas Foundation, 2021.51



Gretchen Bender

born 1951, Seaford, DE

died 2004, New York City

TV Text & Image (DREAM NATION)

1989

live television broadcast on a monitor with vinyl lettering

How does today’s news relate—or not—to your idea of a “dream nation”?

Unlike most screens in an art gallery, this monitor is not showing prerecorded, artist-made imagery. Instead, the artist intervenes in regular broadcast television by printing DREAM NATION on the surface of the screen. Gretchen Bender’s work invites you to contrast your current take on these words with what is on TV at this very moment. When displayed in the nation’s capital of Washington, DC, it can also feel site-specific, invoking this country’s dreams and dreamers.

Bender was part of a generation of artists, including Barbara Kruger (whose work is on view nearby), who responded to the rising power of mass media. Using what she described as “guerilla tactics . . . to make some kind of break or glitch in the media,” Bender took on television to make the “underlying patterns of social control” visible.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Scott Hoffman, 2022.65A–B

Apocalyptic Visions

The art gathered in this section pictures the terror of a world out of control. In their depictions of crises both spiritual and political, they represent different kinds of hell on earth, from flames and rivers of blood to social unrest in our communities. Giving form to our darkest fears, these works offer visionary horror over solutions and salvation.



Frank Romero

born 1941, East Los Angeles, CA

Death of Rubén Salazar

1986

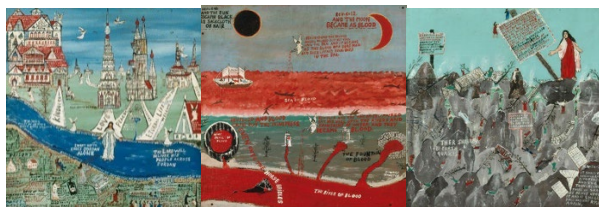
oil on canvas

In this painting, Frank Romero interprets the death and legacy of Rubén Salazar, a civil rights activist and writer for the *Los Angeles Times* in the 1960s. In the aftermath of a major Chicano protest in East LA in 1970 against the Vietnam War, police fired tear-gas canisters into the Silver Dollar Bar and Café, where Salazar and two others were struck and killed.

Romero combined the large scale of Mexican Revolution murals with the bold colors of the barrio (the Spanish-speaking neighborhood). He depicts authoritarian force muscling in on lowrider culture, using symbols and hues that embody its vibrance and resilience.

To the left of the café, the Casa de Cambio, a money exchange, also suggests the idea of change in the community. To the right, a movie theater marquee announces a film based on Salazar's death, envisioning a world in which the event is enshrined in history.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible in part by the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 1993.19



Howard Finster

born 1916, Valley Head, AL
died 2001, Rome, GA

***THE LORD WILL DELIVER HIS PEOPLE ACROSS JORDAN
AND THE MOON BECAME AS BLOOD
THER SHALL BE EARTH qUAKES***

1976

enamel on fiberboard

In 1976, after some four decades of preaching, Howard Finster responded to a vision in which God directed him to “paint sacred art.” Finster believed that pictures would help people grasp the enormity of the Word of God. His painted sermons on life, death, salvation, and damnation eventually covered almost every inch of Paradise Garden, his four-acre art environment in Summerville, Georgia.

His concerns about a world of suffering and destruction drove Finster to create the artworks he called “signposts to salvation.” In this triptych, he depicts trials encountered in the Bible’s Book of Revelations, conveying his belief that no matter what problems loomed, God would protect and deliver the faithful.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Herbert Waide Hemphill Jr., 1988.74.6, 1988.74.7, and 1988.74.8



Roger Brown

born 1941, Hamilton, AL
died 1997, Atlanta, GA

World's Tallest Disaster

1972

oil and magma on canvas

In *World's Tallest Disaster*, fire engulfs the upper floors of a skyscraper. People seen through illuminated windows gesticulate wildly, frantic and full of panic. Just a few floors below, others remain calm, blissfully unaware of the terror above.

Known for his trademark silhouettes and flattened, colorful landscapes, Roger Brown was inspired by the work of self-taught artists, advertisements, and comics in his desire to create art that would be accessible to everyone. In his series of imagined disasters, natural forces wreak havoc on urban skyscrapers, as these symbols of modern cities descend into chaos.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1974.91

Photography, Self-Representation and Misrepresentation

From the moment of the first photographic portrait, in 1839, photography has been used to represent the self and to misrepresent others. The artists in this gallery use portraiture to interrogate identity and representation. Their work explores how ideas of race, class, gender, and sexuality are conveyed through photographs.

In the 1960s, after a decade spent unhappily working as a fashion photographer, Diane Arbus made portraits of persons not commonly portrayed by the mass media. Arbus was drawn to individual expressions of humanity by those excluded from representation due to class, ability, sexuality, and other aspects of identity that have been denied a civic presence. Ken Ohara, Arbus's contemporary, cropped his portraits closely, altered their color tone, and created a gridded series of faces to reduce the perception of difference. His portraits standardize the representation of humanity. In self-portraits, Tseng Kwong Chi played with dress and posture, the conventions of studio portraiture. Made in iconic tourist settings to underscore his perceived "foreignness," his photographs show how such conventions are used to misrepresent by stereotype.



Ken Ohara

born 1942, Tokyo, Japan

ONE

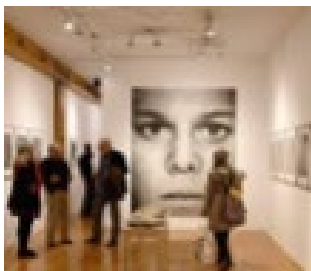
1970 (printed 1998)

gelatin silver print

All these faces have the same tightly cropped, eye-level view. The uniformly dark tone of the prints makes skin color appear more similar. Both of these techniques establish an equivalence among subjects and emphasize individuality through details of facial features. How might this influence your perspective of individual and group identity?

In 1962, Ken Ohara moved from Tokyo to New York City, where he worked as an assistant to photographers. On his days off, he photographed on the streets and in city parks, gathering faces for *ONE*. Originally published as a book without text, Ohara thought of this collection of over five hundred portraits as “a telephone book of faces.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Setsuko Ono, 2017.44.1



Ken Ohara

born 1942, Tokyo, Japan

Grain P-128

1993

eighty-one 8-x-10 in. gelatin silver prints and masking tape

For the monumental portrait series *Grain*, Ken Ohara prepared ninety-five-by-seventy-eight-inch sheets enlarged from the negatives made for his portrait series *ONE* (on view nearby). Wishing to experiment with scale in works that referenced the earlier series, he cut the sheets into eight-

by-ten-inch panels and recomposed them as grids, forming one large portrait. The seams separating the panels were made using reflective silver tape.

While serving the practical function of adhering the paper prints to their transparent coverings, the tape also performs a perceptual trick by seeming to appear or disappear. Depending on your distance from *Grain P-128*, you might see the singular portrait, or you might see the parts that make it a photographic object: paper and silver.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Ohara Family, 2017.42A–CCCC



Diane Arbus

born 1923, New York City

died 1971, New York City

A young Brooklyn family going for a Sunday outing, N.Y.C. 1966

1966

gelatin silver print

Diane Arbus once said, “A photograph has to be of something and what it’s of is always more remarkable than the photograph. And more complicated.” Her photographs of couples, children, cross-dressers, nudists, pedestrians, families, and circus performers, among others, make up a diverse and compelling portrait of humanity.

Arbus was a friend of photographer Ken Ohara (whose work is on view nearby), and they sometimes roamed the streets and parks of New York City together. Although they shared a common approach to picture making and the same urban terrain, each created a distinctive body of work. Ohara sought to reduce difference in his portraiture, while Arbus sought to highlight it in hers.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1986.41.2



Diane Arbus

born 1923, New York City
died 1971, New York City

A family on their lawn one Sunday in Westchester, N.Y. 1968

1968

gelatin silver print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1986.41.3



Diane Arbus

born 1923, New York City
died 1971, New York City

The King and Queen of a Senior Citizens Dance, N.Y.C. 1970

1970

gelatin silver print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1986.41.4



Diane Arbus

born 1923, New York City
died 1971, New York City

Boy with a straw hat waiting to march in a pro-war parade, N.Y.C. 1967

1967

gelatin silver print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1986.41.7



Diane Arbus

born 1923, New York City

died 1971, New York City

Xmas tree in a living room in Levittown, L.I. 1962

1962

gelatin silver print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase, 1986.41.11



Diane Arbus

born 1923, New York City

died 1971, New York City

A lobby in a building, N.Y.C 1966

1966

gelatin silver print

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Jeffrey Fraenkel and Frish Brandt, 2017.43.3



Tseng Kwong Chi

born 1950, Hong Kong, China

died 1990, New York City

New York, New York, from the series East Meets West

1979 (printed 2020)

gelatin silver print

Disneyland, California, from the series East Meets West

1979 (printed 2013)

gelatin silver print

Provincetown, Massachusetts, from the series East Meets West

1979 (printed 2008)

gelatin silver print

In his signature series *East Meets West*, Tseng Kwong Chi inhabited a persona he called the “Ambiguous Ambassador.” Wearing a Mao suit (the gray uniform associated with the Chinese Communist Party) and mirrored sunglasses, he posed next to landmarks and monuments, many of them emblems of American national identity.

Tseng highlighted the signifying power of dress, gesture, and posture. As an immigrant and person of Chinese descent, he was also conscious of how Asians are stereotyped in the West. His donning of the Mao suit in public was a tongue-in-cheek performance of “Chineseness” that both played to and subverted assumptions about race, culture, and nationality.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment and the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, 2021.14.2, 2021.14.3, and 2021.14.4

Language and Communication

We may understand language as the words we know and share, but we rely on all our senses and abilities to communicate. Sometimes words are clear and powerful. Other times they are only the beginning. And for some, words just don’t work. Conventional or customized, here language is explored as a tool, and art as language unto itself. These artists invite reflection on the power and flexibility of words, as well as the infinite realm of communication beyond them.

Jenny Holzer investigates texts as vehicles of authority and control, while Mel Bochner explores the rich and often colorful vocabulary of money—a topic so common as to require an evocative

wellspring of slang to describe it. Jesse Howard believed in free thought and speech and creatively arranged the painted word to compel viewers to “read on, and on, and keep on reading.”

Yet words aren’t for everyone. In the only language in which he was fluent, James Castle manifested the saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” Other artists move beyond both words and pictures to describe themselves, their views, and their experience—using abstraction to speak, uniquely but effectively—in a language they had to invent for themselves.



Jenny Holzer

born 1950, Gallipolis, OH

For SAAM

2007

electronic LED array with white diodes

Jenny Holzer created *For SAAM* especially for this gallery of high ceilings and open space.

Since the 1970s, the artist has created public art, sculptures, and projections that present bold phrases out of context. These snippets of advice, cautions, and desires are stated as if self-evident, despite being subjective and debatable. Holzer’s work encourages us to ask, “Who is speaking and in whose interest?” when ideas are pushed on the public but we do not know from where or why.

The texts presented here are written in different voices and come from four series that span decades of Holzer’s career. The words appear to swirl and rotate at varying speeds as little lights across the column turn on and off. This constant movement rewards viewers who slow down to piece together what *For SAAM* has to say.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2008.3



Mel Bochner

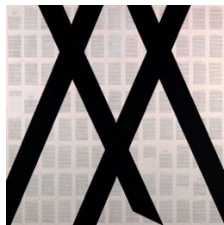
born 1940, Pittsburgh, PA

Money

2005

acrylic and oil on canvas

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James F. Dicke Family, 2013.49.1



Tim Rollins

born 1955, Pittsfield, ME
died 2017, New York City

K.O.S.

founded 1982, New York City

By Any Means Necessary (after Malcolm X)

2008

matte acrylic and book pages on canvas

Black diagonal lines intersect at multiple points to form the letter *M* and three *X*'s. Pages from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* cover the surface of the canvas like wallpaper.

Artist Tim Rollins formed K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) in the 1980s with a group of high school students in the South Bronx. Many of their collaborations are inspired by literary classics. Published in 1965, months after the human rights activist's assassination, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has sold millions of copies and influenced generations of readers.

This artwork's title comes from a refrain often found in Malcolm X's speeches:

We want freedom by any means necessary.

We want justice by any means necessary.

We want equality by any means necessary.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2010.18



James Castle

born 1899, Garden Valley, ID

died 1977, Boise, ID

Untitled

ca. 1931–77

found paper and soot

James Castle used drawing and collage to speak his mind. Although he was best known for drawings of the Idaho landscape, Castle's creative investigations of letters, numbers, and punctuation marks are among his most intriguing.

For Castle, spoken and written language presented realms beyond reach. The artist was deaf from birth and, despite some schooling, never became fluent in alternative communications such as lipreading, signing, reading, or writing. Over many decades, Castle made unique arrangements and booklets that stabbed at deciphering texts from the world around him: communiques that prompted conversation for others, but remained, for him, impenetrable.

Although Castle's quest to unlock the secrets of the written word did not prevail, his artworks reveal, uniquely and powerfully, a decoder's approach to understanding the world and the artist's lifelong pursuit of human connection.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James Castle Collection and Archive and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2013.27.3

James Castle

born 1899, Garden Valley, ID

died 1977, Boise, ID

Untitled

ca. 1931–77

found paper and soot

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James Castle Collection and Archive and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2013.27.27

James Castle

born 1899, Garden Valley, ID
died 1977, Boise, ID

Untitled

ca. 1931–77
found paper

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Driek and Michael Zirinsky in honor of Leslie and Ron Melnick, 2015.28.1



Jesse Howard

born 1885, Shamrock, MO
died 1983, Fulton, MO

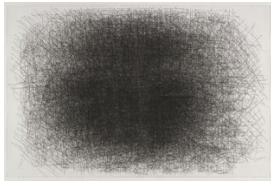
The Saw and the Scroll

1977–78
acrylic and crayon on canvas and wood; acrylic on metal and wood

Much like the ferocious teeth of the two-man tree saw anchoring *The Scroll and the Saw*, Jesse Howard's words had bite. Howard made his opinions clear, no matter how incendiary. He became known for populating his farm in Fulton, Mississippi, with hand-lettered signs and painted objects emblazoned with his visually shouted views on politics, faith, unethical businessmen, government corruption, the threat of communism, and various people who had done him wrong.

Howard's own community largely failed to appreciate his provocative project. But by painting his cantankerous views as pictures, he captured far more attention than he might have by writing alone. Howard spent the last fifteen years of his life touring an international array of visitors around the word-saturated world on the farm he called Sorehead Hill, a place where his arguments were art.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 1997.124.26A–B



Dan Miller

born 1961, Castro Valley, CA

Untitled

2016

ink on paper

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Patricia Tobacco Forrester Endowment, 2017.15.3



Dan Miller

born 1961, Castro Valley, CA

Untitled

2016

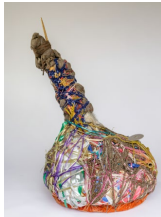
acrylic, pen, and ink on paper

Can you read a drawing? Top to bottom, side to side, a tangle of scrawled marks converges and covers almost every inch of this long paper scroll.

Dan Miller's art is a graphic communication made in the moment—written and over-written words and letters that capture and convey thoughts, emotions, and memories, both fleeting and long-lasting.

Layering his texts well past the point of legibility, Miller, who is autistic, creates abstracted word-clouds that use color, density, and scale to convey memories and feelings he is unable to express verbally and to connect with those around him.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Creative Growth Art Center, 2017.17



Judith Scott

born 1943, Cincinnati, OH
died 2005, Dutch Flat, CA

Untitled (JS39)

ca. 1990–2005
mixed media

Judith Scott’s sculptures hold secrets. Nestled within each string- and yarn-enshrouded bundle are objects borrowed from the everyday world—shoes, tools, furniture, and more. An intricate system of webbing and layering softens the forms until only a suggestion of shape remains—this became her signature style.

Scott experienced physical and cognitive challenges from birth, but she found her medium of fiber in 1988 at Creative Growth Art Center, a nonprofit in California where adults with disabilities flourish through artmaking.

Scott’s works are not autobiographical in a traditional sense, yet they shape an alternate language sought and found. Her sculptures initially drew international notice for their mysterious power, but it was her method of using art as a tool to wordlessly describe who she was and connect with others that forever altered an art world that had long excluded the disabled.

Collection of Douglas O. Robson, Promised gift to the Smithsonian American Art Museum



Sister Gertrude Morgan

born 1900, Lafayette, AL
died 1980, New Orleans, LA

Let's Make a Record

1971

album cover: tempera, acrylic, pencil, and ink on paperboard; vinyl record

Around the time Sister Gertrude Morgan made this record album, she remarked “You can hear my singing all over the neighborhood!” Morgan was equal parts musician, painter, poet, and evangelist. She saw creative expression as a powerful means of communicating her faith, spreading the Word of God, and energizing her own sanctified journey.

In *Let's Make a Record*, Morgan's title plays with the flexible meaning of “record,” both an action and a result. With help from her advocate and gallerist E. Lorenz Borenstein, she recorded gospel hymns and original compositions that conveyed her spiritual joy in a lasting, effective, and far-reaching way. Onto album covers printed with track titles and “True Believer Records,” Morgan hand-painted herself, her brethren, and biblical passages. Although Morgan's expressively scrawled words are sometimes hard to make out, her passion and personalized style always ring clear.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Chuck and Jan Rosenak, 1981.136.5A–B



George Widener

born 1962, Covington, KY

28-28

2014

mixed media on paper

According to George Widener, numbers can say as much or more than words. As someone with Asperger's syndrome, Widener's mind processes mathematical information at a depth and speed that is profound. He favors a calendar-like format for conveying figures and sums as a language that reaches beyond words.

In *28-28*, Widener plays with a connection between the numbers of his own birthdate (2/8), and his then-girlfriend's (4/28), which he also understands as $(2 \times 2)/28$. Widener explains that he sees the numbers in his mind and enjoys envisioning all their possible connections. He called this painting a “portrait/snapshot” of the two of them at that time.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Carl and Kate Lobell in honor of Graham Roach, 2015.20.2



Chryssa

born Athens, Greece, 1933

died Athens, Greece, 2013

White Relief

1960

gesso over plaster on wood

As you move around this work, its appearance shifts as changes in perspective and light create shadows that move, shrink, and expand. Referring to her relief sculptures as “experiments in static light,” Chryssa explored ways to make them appear dynamic without any actual moving parts.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David K. Anderson, Martha Jackson Memorial Collection, 1980.137.18

**

Art is an invitation to experience the world from someone else’s point of view.

In bold color and neon light, with sequins and sparkling crystals, the artists in this space announce their presence. While their works grapple with a broad range of concepts, they are joined in imagining new ideas about identity and in picturing their worlds in unexpected ways.

The artist Mickalene Thomas has spoken about wanting “to make things that I haven’t seen before.” She and others aim to expand the possibilities of art, drawing on their own experiences to explore issues of race, culture, gender, and sexuality. Envisioning new relationships between personhood and the public sphere, they broaden the ways that American life is seen and understood.



Jeffrey Gibson

Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians and Cherokee descent

born 1972, Colorado Springs, CO

Watchtower

2018

polyester satin, printed chiffon, polyester organza, canvas, tin jingles, nylon fringe, assorted glass, plastic, and stone beads, acrylic mirrors, sheet acrylic, nylon thread, artificial sinew, and tipi pole

A Little Bit Louder

2018

printed polyester, canvas, sequined fabric, nylon ribbon, copper and tin jingles, plastic beads, artificial sinew, and tipi poles

WITHOUT YOU I'M NOTHING

2018

polyester satin, neoprene, polyester, acrylic felt, canvas, acrylic paint, assorted glass, plastic, stone, and bone beads, brass grommets, acrylic yarn, batting, polyester laces, artificial sinew, and tipi poles

Move around the three garments suspended above you. How might it feel to put one of them on?

Jeffrey Gibson based these oversized tunics on the Ghost Shirts worn by members of the nineteenth-century Sioux Lakota Tribe, who believed they could summon ancestral spirits and deflect bullets. Of Indigenous heritage himself, Gibson was drawn to the idea of a garment that transformed its wearer. He saw parallels to the way people approach clothing today: putting on a uniform, dressing in drag, or donning a special outfit to go out dancing.

Resting across tipi poles, the garments are adorned with sequins and jingles and emblazoned with the lyrics of pop songs. For Gibson, each element represents a building block of identity—a public marker of how others see us and how we come to know ourselves. As the title of one garment proclaims, “without you I’m nothing.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2020.5.1, 2020.5.2, and 2020.5.3



Marie Watt

Seneca Nation (Turtle Clan)
born 1967, Seattle, WA

Edson's Flag

2004

American flag (from US military burial) with Army wool blankets, satin, and thread

Artist Marie Watt has asked, “What happens when American art includes Indigenous art in [the] narrative? How does that shift the stories we tell about what it means to be American?”

In *Edson's Flag*, Watt, a member of the Seneca Nation, pays tribute to Indigenous warriors and war veterans, including her great-uncle Edson. She makes a unified piece from pieces that might not seem to fit easily together—a section of patchwork quilt, wool blankets evoking trade-goods (one army-green, one red), and an American flag. Invoking icons of America that are overtly connected to mainstream white culture, she summons an alternate set of associations from these same forms—specifically those related to intergenerational, Indigenous memory.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Driek and Michael Zirinsky in honor of Jane Beebe and Spencer Beebe, 2015.28.7



Mickalene Thomas

born 1971, Camden, NJ

Portrait of Mnonja

2010

rhinestones, acrylic, and enamel on wood panel

Mickalene Thomas covered the surface of *Portrait of Mnonja* with sparkling rhinestones that adorn the reclining figure's clothing, makeup, and high-heeled shoes. The colorful plastic gems are not usually found on paintings or in museums, but they are at the heart of Thomas's art.

Although she first started working with rhinestones because they were inexpensive, Thomas finds them to be the ideal material to represent the Black women who are her subjects. She loves to use an element of women’s crafts that is often dismissed as unimportant.

In *Mnonja*, the straightforward appeal of the stones emphasizes the sitter’s powerful presence and sensuality. “Beauty has always been an element of discussion for Black women,” Thomas explains, “whether or not we were the ones having the conversation.”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2011.16



Nick Cave

born 1959, Fulton, MO

Soundsuit

2009

fabric with beads and sequins

Trained as a fiber artist and dancer, Nick Cave named his ongoing series of *Soundsuits* for the rustling he heard as he moved around in them.

He created his first suit in response to the beating of Rodney King by Los Angeles police officers in 1991. He imagined his extravagant costume-sculptures to be protective shields that masked a person’s identity and scrambled notions of race, class, and gender.

This suit is composed of doilies that he collected from thrift stores, while other suits in the series incorporate discarded toys, hair, and buttons. In giving these objects new life, he asks, “How do we . . . look at things that are devalued, discarded, and bring a different kind of relevancy to them?”

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the James Renwick Alliance and museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, 2012.34A–B



Miguel Luciano

born 1972, San Juan, Puerto Rico

Double Phantom/EntroP.R.

2017

1952 Schwinn Phantom bicycles and flags

Pa-lan-te

2017

neon

Two cherry-red Schwinn bicycles, decked out with horns and American and Puerto Rican flags, are joined to form one three-wheeled, double-headed creature.

The word *pa'lante*, Spanish slang meaning “forward,” glows above. The term became famous as the name of a civil rights newspaper in Puerto Rico in the 1960s. In following years, it has evoked Puerto Rican independence and statehood and become a mindset of strength and resilience in the face of hurricanes and other hardships.

Paired with a bicycle that can go in two directions at once—and so goes nowhere—the word also takes on an ironic meaning. Luciano’s sculpture brims with Puerto Rican pride while acknowledging the difficulties that hinder the island’s forward motion.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Museum purchase made possible by Marianna and Juan A. Sabater, 2020.25.1 and 2020.25.2



Hank Willis Thomas

born 1976, Plainfield, NJ

Pledge

2018

screenprint on retroreflective vinyl mounted on Dibond

To fully experience *Pledge*, stand in front of it and illuminate it with the flash of a cell phone camera.

In ordinary light, you see an American flag hovering against a plain background. When the camera flash strikes, it lights up the surface to reveal the full picture. The full image shows boys of various ethnicities saluting the flag. As the flash dissipates, the image fragments again, leaving only the hovering flag.

Hank Willis Thomas based this work on an earlier photograph taken by Dorothea Lange. She made her image for the War Relocation Authority in 1942, to document Japanese Americans in the San Francisco area before and after their forced relocation to concentration camps. Lange captured the image at a public school before the students of Japanese descent were relocated.

Willis Thomas says that his retroreflective works illuminate “images, stories and parts of history that are often overlooked or have become . . . lost.” The boys’ removal from the image in *Pledge* stages their removal as citizens from American history. By rephotographing the artwork, viewers engage with history, bringing to light this lost story and reclaiming the boys’ visibility within it.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the Elizabeth and James Eisenstein Family, 2023.12

**



Nam June Paik

born 1932, Seoul, Korea (now South Korea)
died 2006, Miami Beach, FL

Zen for TV

1963, 1976 version
manipulated television set (black and white, silent)

In a 1963 exhibition in Germany, Paik displayed a room full of electronically altered and arranged televisions, making him one of the first artists to use actual TVs and broadcast content to make art. One set arrived broken, compressing all received signals into a thin line of light. Paik embraced its broken state and titled it *Zen for TV*, playfully and profoundly linking its accidental minimalism to the meditative focus of Zen Buddhism, a religious reference he often used to signify an Asian perspective in Euro-American contexts. *Zen for TV* became one of Paik’s signature works, and over the years he created select versions like this one.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of Byungseol and Dolores An, 2006.20



Nam June Paik

born 1932, Seoul, Korea (now South Korea)
died 2006, Miami Beach, FL

Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii

1995

fifty-one-channel video installation (including closed-circuit television feed; color, sound), custom electronics, neon lighting, steel, and wood

Paik predicted, in 1965, that “someday artists will work with capacitors, resistors, and semiconductors as they work today with brushes, violins and junk.” Over the decades, his own work stayed in constant conversation with how new technologies reshape the world. *Electronic Superhighway* playfully engages three such forces—the US interstate highway system, cable television, and the emergent internet of the 1990s.

In this TV map, neon-outlined states play a mix of borrowed and original footage. Each distinct channel reveals Paik’s associations with or understanding of that state. Some video collages draw from personal connections, like Paik’s recordings of longtime collaborator and cellist Charlotte Moorman filling the screens in her home state of Arkansas (along with images of then president Bill Clinton, also from Arkansas). Others incorporate existing media representations, with the movie musical *Oklahoma!* filling Oklahoma, and edits from a documentary on the 1950s Montgomery bus boycotts echoing from Alabama. A closed-circuit camera marks Washington, DC, where gallery visitors can see themselves in real time. This suggests the map is also a portrait, reflecting how media and mediation shape views of ourselves and each other at national, regional, and individual levels.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift of the artist, 2002.23

Audio Note: Synced television sounds match a handful of states’ channels, so the audio spreads and blends across the length of the map. At different moments, various soundtracks become louder and dominate; at other times it is a noisy collage. The appropriated movie musicals—*Oklahoma!* in Oklahoma, *Meet Me in St. Louis* in Missouri, and *The Wizard of Oz* in Kansas—are each audible when standing nearby and as their songs reach a crescendo. Uniquely, the audio related to the Montgomery bus boycotts, which includes speeches by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., plays through speakers on both sides of the map, not just near Alabama, making it the most prominent and legible part of the sound mix.

The Nam June Paik Archive

Nam June Paik helped redefine art in the second half of the twentieth century through his interdisciplinary experimentation with music, performance, media art, installation, and television production. Born in Seoul, Korea, and educated in music composition in Japan and Germany, Paik made New York City his home in 1964. His immense impact on contemporary art is reflected in the Museum's holdings of major works and its stewardship of the Nam June Paik Archive. This 2009 gift from his estate makes the Smithsonian American Art Museum the primary research destination for this groundbreaking artist.

The archive's thousands of documents, objects, and recordings tell many stories from Paik's five-decade career. This selection, relating to three ambitious satellite broadcasts of the 1980s, attests to his long-standing interest in media's potential for navigating geographic and cultural distances, themes he further explored in *Electronic Superhighway*.

Nam June Paik

born 1932, Seoul, Korea (now South Korea)
died 2006, Miami Beach, FL

Letter to Michael Kustow of BBC, 9/8/83, second page
1983

***LA Times* review of *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, first page**
December 31, 1983

***Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* postcard**
date unknown

Postcard reproducing *Space Invaders* print with *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* participants
1984

In George Orwell's dystopian novel *1984*, TV was a tool used solely for mind control. Paik's *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell*, which broadcast on January 1, 1984, aimed to show that this technology could amplify creative free expression and cultural exchange as well.

In a letter to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Paik outlines how telecom satellites could allow live mixing of avant-garde artists and pop stars from studios around the world. While the BBC did not sign on, Paik was successful in grabbing significant press attention. Millions worldwide watched the program, produced live with studio performances in New York City and Paris, on New Year's Day.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift to the Nam June Paik Archive from the Nam June Paik Estate, 2009

Nam June Paik

born 1932, Seoul, Korea (now South Korea)
died 2006, Miami Beach, FL

***Wrap Around the World* promo headshots**

***Wrap Around the World* promo card**

ca. 1988

Paik expanded each satellite program's international scope. *Bye Bye Kipling* (1986) connected stations in Korea, Japan, and the United States, and included live footage from the Asian Games in Seoul. *Wrap Around the World*, in 1988, simulcast a dozen broadcasters from Rio to Jerusalem to Beijing, contributing to an unusual variety show—one anchored by comedian Al Franken trying to convince aliens of humanity's ability to cooperate. Prerecorded segments helped cover for the unreliability of the satellite signal.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift to the Nam June Paik Archive from the Nam June Paik Estate, 2009

Nam June Paik

born 1932, Seoul, Korea (now South Korea)
died 2006, Miami Beach, FL

***SAT-ART III* booklet**

SAT-ART III

wooden box with three VHS tapes; cotton bandana

Postcard promoting *SAT-ART III*

1988

After each live event, Paik and his assistants would edit the simulcasts, which differed across the globe, into shorter, singular edits for future presentations. All three satellite event recordings were distributed in special edition boxed sets. Each set came tied in a traditional cloth wrapping with an artist-designed graphic emphasizing that bouncing signals into space brought these “art stars” and projects together.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift to the Nam June Paik Archive from the Nam June Paik Estate, 2009

Nam June Paik

born 1932, Seoul, Korea (now South Korea)
died 2006, Miami Beach, FL

Untitled video stills (with David Bowie)

Untitled video stills (with Laurie Anderson)

1995

color prints

From 1969 to 1971, Paik collaborated with engineer Shuya Abe to build the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer, the first machine designed to manipulate existing or live video footage. Paik used it to instantaneously create the layered colors and visual effects that became hallmarks of his video collages.

Dazzling, distorted performances by crossover pop stars and performance artists Laurie Anderson and David Bowie were highlights of Paik's *Good Morning, Mr. Orwell* and *Wrap Around the World*, respectively. These prints show how this footage continued to inspire Paik, as he played it through his video synthesizer to create and capture new imagery.

Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift to the Nam June Paik Archive from the Nam June Paik Estate, 2009



Friedrich Rosenstiel, *Untitled video still of Nam June Paik with Paik-Abe Synthesizer*, 1977.
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Gift to the Nam June Paik Archive from the Nam June Paik Estate, 2009

**

“Art in Dialogue” Labels

Discover Connections

When is being held a comforting experience, and when is it a constricting one?

Both Claire Falkenstein's *Envelope* and Martin Puryear's *Vessel* are sculptural forms that invite you to consider the interplay of open interior spaces and structural surroundings. Their titles suggest everyday objects that are designed to hold something, or perhaps someone.

How do you imagine you would feel being held within them?



Claire Falkenstein, *Envelope*



Martin Puryear, *Vessel*

Discover Connections

In contrast to the white male gaze that dominates traditional art history, both *Portrait of Mnonja* and *Two Women II* feature female subjects created by women artists of color.

While Mickalene Thomas depicts a full view of Mnonja leaning back on a couch, Kay WalkingStick shows the outline of two reclining figures (one green and one orange) from the waist down only.

How might the ways each artist poses their subjects further the idea of female empowerment?



Kay WalkingStick, *Two Women II*



Mickalene Thomas, *Portrait of Mnonja*

Discover Connections

Both Jenny Holzer's *For SAAM* and Alexander Calder's *Nenuphar* were specifically created for this museum.

Calder built this work to mark the 1968 opening of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The artist is best known for his “mobiles”—suspended sculptures made of wire and metal that move with the air. Toward the end of his career, he turned to large-scale “stabiles” like *Nenuphar*, which takes its title from the Sanskrit word for water lily. How might this piece still *imply* movement?

Artist Jenny Holzer, known for integrating words into light-based sculptures and projections, designed *For SAAM* in 2006 for this gallery. The phrases are programmed to rotate around the piece at varying speeds, producing the illusion of movement. If you'd like to experience *For SAAM* in its entirety, you may want to have a seat—it takes seven hours for the animated program to complete a loop.



Alexander Calder, *Nenuphar*



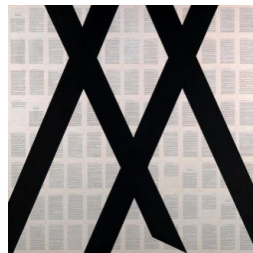
Jenny Holzer, *For SAAM*

Discover Connections

How might images and words work together to convey a message?

Both this piece by Barbara Kruger and *By Any Means Necessary (after Malcolm X)* by Tim Rollins and K.O.S. incorporate text to amplify declarations of empowerment. While Kruger pairs words and gestures with repurposed mass media images, Rollins and K.O.S. wallpaper their canvas with pages from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*.

What additional visual similarities do you see?



Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (We Will No Longer Be Seen and Not Heard)*

Tim Rollins and K.O.S., *By Any Means Necessary (after Malcolm X)*