Gallery 400 is thrilled to be the Chicago stop of this nationally traveling exhibition *Young, Gifted, and Black: The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art*. Including the work of 50 fantastic artists in two successive generations of Black artists, *Young, Gifted, and Black* is a timely exhibition of the lines of lineage and association in contemporary Black artists’ explorations of social relations, sexuality, gender, identity, abstraction, and much more.

Gallery 400’s utmost thanks go to Bernard I. Lumpkin and Carmine D. Boccuzzi for so generously sharing their collection. Their engaged support for artists, artist careers, and artists communities is truly inspiring. Much appreciation, also, to curators Antwaun Sargent and Matt Wycoff for organizing an exhibition that brilliantly highlights the breadth of creativity that Black artists bring to expansively exploring representation and identity. Thank you, Matt, for the essay in this publication. And thank you, Antwaun, for editing the beautiful catalogue *Young, Gifted, and Black: A New Generation of Artists* that accompanies the exhibition.

Gallery 400 has programmed six exciting programs of *Young, Gifted and Black* artists in dialogue with artists and scholars based here in Chicago. Many thanks to those artists and scholars for sharing with us and to Gallery 400 Program Manager Denis Mwaura for organizing these thoughtful talks and for assistance on the exhibition. Much gratitude to UIC graduate students Erica Schoppe and Alex Maher for their assistance on the show and programs. No show happens at Gallery 400 without the expertise of Kyle Schlie and Alexandra Schutz, Gallery 400 preparators. Thank you to them and other Gallery 400 staff and interns, Elise Griffin, Siamack Hajimohammad, and Elias Silver, as well as UIC colleagues Tenesha Edwards, Ricardo Garcia, Chris Markin, Brenda Roman, and Jennifer Reeder.

Enjoy your time with this excellent exhibition that captures what it means—in the words of Lorraine Hansberry and Nina Simone—to be young, gifted and Black in contemporary art.

Lorelei Stewart
Gallery 400 Director and Chief Curator
The exhibition Young, Gifted, and Black: The Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection of Contemporary Art is curated from the private collection of art patrons Bernard I. Lumpkin and Carmine D. Boccuzzi. The selections made highlight an emerging generation of black artists engaging the work of their predecessors, while also mining new, and in many instances more colorful, vocabularies of symbolism. Over the past ten years, the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi family has assembled a wide range of art, in all mediums, from roughly two generations of black artists. The older generation of artists represented in the exhibition is presented as both lineage and foil for the younger; while the younger generation is presented as the fruit of the older generation’s struggle for equal representation. The earliest examples on view date to the mid-1980s, past ten years, the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi family has assembled a wide range of art, in all mediums, from roughly two generations of black artists. The older generation of artists represented in the exhibition is presented as both lineage and foil for the younger; while the younger generation is presented as the fruit of the older generation’s struggle for equal representation.

The way the color black came to represent the many-hued African diaspora begins with slave owners and traffickers distancing themselves from the property and product of their trade. The owners and traffickers being white, black served as an expedient antonym for the symbolic distortion of enslaved individuals into something less than human. It’s a history no adjective seems to meaningfully illuminate. Maddening, infuriating, atrocious, and staggering all fail to describe the four hundred years of terror and denigration that indelibly linked people of African origin to the color black and its attendant symbolisms that have included, but are by no means limited to, stupidity, laziness, the devil, and an absence of visible light.

Hard-earned reclamation of the color black dramatically underlines one of the most striking visual shifts presented in Young, Gifted, and Black: a riotous and radical explosion of color, primarily among the younger painters, to represent the human form. Jordan Casteel shifts skin tones to shades of moody cobalt. Christina Quarles drapes bodies like Dalí’s clocks, while denoting skin color in ribbons of orange sherbet, peach, and midnight blue. ArmFanore Niles renders blackness in rose (think Aurox of glittering pink). And Vaughn Spann paints a lurid, Day-Glo, floral tapestry and a shirtless, two-headed man in a teal landscape donning hot-pink trousers and matching Yankees caps, one for each head. There is a jarring-contrast in the exhibition between these radically colorful works and those that are primarily black. Their separation into colored and black groupings initially feels crude and oversimplified. Claudia Rankine’s raw refrain, “What did you say?” feels apt, if only for a instant, before the switch from black to color gives way to a sense of embarkation.

Taken together, these new, sensationally colored works invoke surrealism and psychedelic histories to tackle issues of race and identity, but one doesn’t catch a whiff of the defiant 1960s proclamation to “turn on, tune in, drop out.” The work is about being in, not dropping out. Needless to say, dropping out of the mainstream is a much less appealing prospect to someone who has been systematically barred from entry. From this view, the celebration of drug culture itself can be seen as indicative of privilege. The absence of drugs and dropping out amid the use of psychedelic imagery points to a lineage of black thinkers, such as Malcolm X, who have railed against drugs and alcohol as tools of the oppressors. But what is psychedelia without the drugs?

The surrealistic and psychedelic imagery on view represents a dramatic reworking of visual histories that updates twentieth-century responses to rapid social change, shifts in moral and ethical boundaries, and expanding notions of identity. D’Angelo Lovell Williams’s photograph The Lovers (2017) reimages René Magritte’s 1928 surrealist painting with two black men veiled in do-rags locked in a kiss, Allison Janae Hamilton’s Untitled (Three Fencing Masks) (2017) transforms fencing masks into uncanny personal tokens, and Jacobly Satterwhite’s video animation Reifying Desire S (2013) constructs a queer, psychological dreamscape. Perhaps the intoxicant for the younger generation represented here is access to new and wider audiences in the art market, rather than drugs, and the effect is exhilarating.

The artists represented in Young, Gifted, and Black are also bringing this informed, expressive sensibility to representations of nature. Cy Gavin’s paintings call to mind the psychedelic in his use of color—roiling landscapes streaked with saturated primary colors (red, yellow, blue) and electric secondary colors (orange, purple, green). But his surging seas, skies, and archipelagos are also filtered through the graffiti-culture language of walls streaked with oversprayed burners. Here, there is an opposition to the history of landscape painting that romanticizes the idea of nature: the land literally feels overwritten. Gavin’s landscapes pry open a space between the idea of nature and the often bloodied and contested land itself, making room for histories of racial inequality. This space is haunted by a history in which enslaved individuals were property, treated no different than drugs, and the effect is exhilarating.

Of the artists represented here, Gavin confronts the landscape most directly and consistently, but one also catches fresh approaches to nature and the landscape in the paintings of Quarles, Caitlin Cherry, Tunji Adeniyi-Jones, Jennifer Packer, and, I might argue, the installations of Eric N. Mack. Not to mention the volumes that should be written on Clifford Owens’s self-portrait as a recumbent, hands-up-don’t-shoot, neutered (tucked) nude amid a verdant green, pastoral landscape. Elizabeth Alexander’s poem “American Sublime” might fit to key the many representations of nature on view in the exhibition. Alexander’s “violent sunshine,” “genteel luminosity,” and “vast, crayon, un-/domesticated” landscapes occur entirely in parentheses.

Young, Gifted, and Black also features a wide range of portraiture, including painting (Lynette Yiadom-Boakye), sculpture (Lonnie Holley), collage (Wardell Milan), mixed-media (Ellen Gallagher), and photography (LaToya Ruby Frazier). The invention of photography, in 1839, marked a radical turning point in the history of portraiture and is a fundamental frame of reference for all the works of portraiture on view. Photography not only created a new, more accessible and expedient medium in which to represent individuals, but it also challenged artists in traditional mediums, such as painting and sculpture, to profoundly reimagine how, and with new urgency why, they represent the human form. In the 180 years since photography appeared on the scene, ideas about
what constitutes a portrait continue to expand. It is in this spirit that text-based works, such as Glenn Ligon’s Study for Impediment (2007), which frames the use of racial slurs as a physical and ethical impairment, and Adrian Piper’s My Call-ing (Card) #1 (1986) and My Call-ing (Card) #2 (1986), which render the artist’s personal perspectives on hand-deliverable business cards, are included as examples of conceptual or nontraditional portraiture.

The works of portraiture selected for the exhibition also demonstrate the many ways contemporary black artists shape, and reshape, the black experience through figurative representation. In doing so, they further the concerns of a lineage of African American portraiture that ranges from the portraits of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, to the studio photography of James VanDerZee, to the pioneering photography of Gordon Parks. In Paul Mpagi Sepuya’s Dark Room Mirror Study (0xSA1531) (2017), for example, the artist questions the relative absence of representations of gay men and the mask.

And then there’s the mask, which traverses notions of identity, history, and the land at a clip. The dizzying array of masks created on the African continent is tied to the land by centuries of use in ceremonies that accompany planting, harvesting, birth, and death. These masks seem to get at the root of all human emotions, while somehow maintaining a fearsome understanding that everything is subject to the earth. Use of costume and the mask in the work of black artists has long addressed lost relationships to ancestral homelands and has become a deeply symbolic well of meaning for black heritage and identity. A short list of mask imagery represented in the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection includes: mannequin as mask (Narcissister), buttons as mask (Lonnie Holley), scrubbies as mask (Rashid Johnson), plastic garbage bag as mask (William Pope, L.), rock salt as mask (Felandoz Thames), Ellsworth Kelly as mask (William Villalongo), do-rag as mask (D’Angelo Lovell Williams), brick wall as mask (Derick Adams), fencing mask as mask (Allison Janae Hamilton), and, perhaps the most revelatory, the camera lens as mask in Sepuya’s smart, historically savvy seductions. This flux and reinvention is not unlike an aspect of the Internet in which new terms are created to describe what is essentially very old human behavior, for example: ally theater, sucked into a follow, Tわr, vaguebook, finsta, and nontroversy. Young, Gifted, and Black presents similarly updated (sometimes pithy, often profound) takes on the ancient arts of costume and the mask.

Symbols do change meaning, after all. As with the color black, shifts in our use of symbols often require a concerted effort, although circumstantial and historical forces are also at work. Two points give important context to the exhibition: the sustained efforts of liberals to be good amid the political right’s flirtation with totalitarianism and the golly-gee insanity of an art market fueled by gigantic accumulations of private wealth. Amid these forces’ ebb and flow, there is perhaps more of a sense now, a belief even, that social change can occur, is in fact occurring, through the wheels of the art market. For many, there is a near-constant back-and-forth between a firm belief that art can and does make change, and a question of to what extent it should overtly try. Many of the artists in Young, Gifted, and Black are at the very heart of this debate. It raises a question central to the exhibition: Can one look at the work of this emerging generation of black artists without the lens of identity politics?

One answer to that question is rooted in Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity.” Given this perspective, one might say that black artists have largely been denied the opportunity to choose whether their work is political or not. Artists in the exhibition, such as LaToya Ruby Frazier, Jordan Casteel, and Chifon Thomas, present subjects whose very matter-of-factness affirms their rightness on the scene, while at the same time raising questions of identity politics. The persistence of identity politics in the work of these artists is an issue of historical circumstance, but it is also, and importantly, one of intent. Through their reworking of the color black, psychedelia, landscape, nature, portraiture, and the mask, the artists featured in Young, Gifted, and Black are finding new ways to address the history and meaning of blackness. They are also pointing to the fact that a true equity in seeing and being seen seems to be the clearest way out of the racial paradox that exists in the United States and elsewhere. We can view the work of black artists as being about asserting black identity and representing lived experience. (Consider the difference between the two.) Staring at Vaughn Spann’s Staring back at you, rooted and unwavering (2018) feels almost like a game of stack hands, in which the contest of seeing and being seen vie for the top. In Toni Morrison’s famous framing of the “process of entering what one is estranged from,” she writes, “imagination is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it of what constitutes a portrait. Becoming Young, Gifted, and Black are at the very heart of this imagination (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 4.

For the past ten years, Matt Wycoff has worked as collection curator for the Lumpkin-Boccuzzi Family Collection. Wycoff is also an artist, woodworker, and writer living in Brooklyn and Stephentown, New York. His work can be seen at www.mattwycoff.com.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya, Dark Room Mirror Study (0xSA1531), 2017. © Paul Mpagi Sepuya, courtesy the artist and team (gallery, inc.), New York


For an example of how blacks have been likened to the devil, see James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village,” in Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), 178.


Exhibition Checklist

Derrick Adams
The Great Wall, 2009
Digital photograph and metallic paint
25 × 22 in.

Chase Hall
San Francisco, 2020
Acrylic and coffee on cotton canvas
20 × 16 in.

Nayland Blake
4.3.0, 2019
Colored pencil on paper
12 × 9 in.

LaToya Ruby Frazier
Momme (Floral Comforter), 2008
Gelatin-silver print
20 × 24 in.

Cy Gavin
Reef, 2018
Acrylic, chalk, and oil on denim
60 × 48 in.

Allison Janae Hamilton
Untitled (Three Fencing Masks), 2017
Found vintage fencing masks, painted feathers, horsehair, velvet, cotton trimming, and acrylic paint
64 × 13 × 14 in.

LaToya Ruby Frazier
Momme (Floral Comforter), 2008
Gelatin-silver print
20 × 24 in.

Chase Hall
San Francisco, 2020
Acrylic and coffee on cotton canvas
20 × 16 in.

Caitlyn Cherry
Ghost, 2018
Oil on canvas
57 × 101 in.

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Untitled (Three Fencing Masks), 2017
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Chase Hall
San Francisco, 2020
Acrylic and coffee on cotton canvas
20 × 16 in.
Narcissister
Untitled, 2012
C-print
40 × 30 in.

Adam Pendleton
System of Display, X (EXPRESS)/Poro secret society mask, Mano, Liberia, 2016
Screen-printing ink on Plexiglas and mirror
9½ × 9½ × 3½ in.

Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas
12 × 11 in.

Nari Ward
At any time prior to no later than, 2009
Stencil and basketball cards on paper
24½ × 32 in.

Clifford Owens
Untitled, 2015
C-print
30 × 30 in.

Arcmanoro Niles
The Night I Don’t Remember, the Night I Can’t Forget, 2016
Oil, acrylic, and glitter on canvas
72 × 70 in.

Willmer Wilson IV
Pres, 2017
Staples and pigment print on wood
96 × 48 × ½ in.

Paul Mpagi Sepuya
Dark Room Mirror Study (3xSA153), 2017
Archival pigment print
51 × 34 in.

Lorna Simpson
Gold Head #1, 2011
Ink and embossing powder on paper
10 × 8½ in.

Chiffon Thomas
A New Dad, 2017
Embroidery thread and fabric
11½ × 12 in.

Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2011–13
Oil on canvas
42 × 30 in.

Chiffon Thomas
A mother who had no mother, 2018
Embroidery floss, acrylic paint, and canvas on window screen
57 × 44½ in.

Christina Quarles
Now Top That, 2016
Acrylic on canvas
50 × 40 in.

Andy Robert
A song for us, 2016
Oil on canvas
30 × 24 in.

Gerald Sheffield
Jib contractor (Iraq 2007), 2018
Oil and Acrylic on Paper
10 × 8 in.

Jacobby Satterwhite
Refusing Desire 5, 2013
HD Digital Video, color 3-D animation
8:46 minutes

Henry Taylor
Split, 2013
Acrylic and charcoal on canvas
Two parts: 72 × 60 × 2½ in. each

Lorin Simpson
Gold Head #1, 2011
Ink and embossing powder on paper
10 × 8½ in.

Vaughn Spann
Radiant Sunshine, The Morning After (For Lula), 2017
Oil and Acrylic on Paper
99½ × 78½ in.

Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2014
Oil on canvas
12 × 11 in.

Chiffon Thomas
Non Loin d’Ici, 2010
Oil on canvas
11¾ × 9⅞ in.

Jennifer Packer
Untitled, 2011–13
Oil on canvas
42 × 30 in.

Sable Elyse Smith
8032 Days, 2018
Digital C-print, suede, and artist’s frame
48 × 40 in.

Lynette Yiadom-Boakye
Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires, 2011
Mixed Media Collage
23¾ × 31¼ in.

Chiffon Thomas
A mother who had no mother, 2018
Embroidery floss, acrylic paint, and canvas on window screen
57 × 44½ in.

Nari Ward
At any time prior to no later than, 2009
Stencil and basketball cards on paper
24½ × 32 in.

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Ink and embossing powder on paper
10 × 8½ in.

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10 × 8½ in.

Selected Literature


For details on the numerous public programs planned with Young, Gifted and Black artists or to arrange a group tour, please visit gallery400.uic.edu or email us at gallery400@uic.edu.