

Vibrancy of diversity: Mattatuck gives powerful show, 'A Face Like Mine'

BY TRACEY O'SHAUGHNESSY REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN May 22, 2021



The Mattatuck Museum has mounted its most powerful, provocative and exuberant exhibit in decades, a signal that the freshly reopened Waterbury mainstay will dramatically shift its approach to more contemporary art reflective of the city's increasingly diverse community.

"A Face Like Mine," a collaboration between the Mattatuck and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, presents a century of Black figurative art in the United States, from 1921 to 2021, a period of radical change for Blacks and museums alike.

What: "A Face Like Mine"

Where: Mattatuck Museum, 144 West Main St., Waterbury

When: Through Sept. 12

How: Call 203-753-0381 or visit mattatuckmuseum.org. Timed admission tickets must be purchased online prior to the visit. Visitors are asked to keep their visits to no more than 90 minutes and to arrive no more than five minutes ahead of timed admission.

This explosive exhibit of 75 works, from sculpture to painting, photography and mixed media, is a densely loaded revelation. It speaks not only to the way American Blacks have seen themselves, but the way they have experienced themselves being seen. It is threaded with references to horror and humiliation as well as resilience and reappropriation. It is jubilant and celebratory, indignant and accusatory, folksy and sophisticated.

All of this is overdue, of course. The Mattatuck has lagged behind other, larger museums that have wrestled with issues of inclusion and representation. But because the Mattatuck has long been simultaneously a history and art museum, and, for most of its past, exclusively focused on Connecticut and the Naugatuck Valley, it has been able to legitimately dodge many questions that have vexed its competitors. Increasingly, however, it has actively sought to present previously underrepresented artists, a tilt one could date to 2013, when the institution buried the bones of the slave, Fortune, which had long been a mainstay of the museum's history exhibit.

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"A Face Like Mine," which includes some of the country's premier Black artists, including Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Kerry James Marshall, Lorna Simpson, James Van Der Zee and Kehinde Wiley, showcases how these artists depicted their reality through their own lens. The gratifying tension in the exhibit rises from the way Black artists engage with the Western canon, through quotation and irony, while reproaching a system that oppressed and marginalized them.

Take Wiley's enormous "Portrait of Pablillos de Valladolid, Jester of Phillip IV," which greets viewers exiting the second-floor elevator. Here is a Black male dressed in sneakers, ripped jeans and a sweatshirt emblazoned with the word "Harlem." The figure stands against and inside an ornate maroon-and-gold Baroque filagree. The

ornamentation seems alternately vegetal and bestial – is that a meandering floral or barbed wire? – and the gesture contemporary and urban.

Wiley's reference is a 17th century Diego Velazquez portrait of a jester and actor at the court of Phillip IV. Wiley's uses the figure's similar stance and declamatory gesture to signify his own incorporation in art history.

The choice of the jester figure is significant. The hip-hop artist is the entertainer of today's court. Wiley accents his portrait with four bluebirds that perch judiciously on several vines. Look closely and you'll see gold comma-like sperm, an allusion to the stereotype of Black male hypersexuality.

These kinds of references and inversions percolate through "A Face Like Mine." Black sculptors, like Elizabeth Catlett, for instance, craft stunning cubist sculptures, like "Singing Head," crafted of taxo stone on black marble. Cubism draws much of its inspiration from "primitive" artifacts, including African masks. In works like "Singing Woman," Catlett reclaims that cultural heritage in a breathtaking stonework of exquisite texture, balance and form. Her nearby "Seated Woman," in yellow onyx, displays Catlett's extraordinary fluency with material. The figure is smooth, delicate and regal, the material a smooth butterscotch hue accented with geometric striations.

That mix of fragility and authority runs throughout the exhibit, particularly in the presentations of Black women. Vanessa German's "A List of Things to Never Be Forgotten" (2016) could serve as a talisman for the ways in which Black women artists have inverted representations of them, transforming them into representations of strength and struggle. German, a mixed media artist, creates these medley sculptures with objects that define and restrict Black women. The sculpture stands on a wooden box, its hand outstretched, holding a birdcage filled with ceramic figurines of white aristocrats. The figure's face is that of an African mask layered with necklaces of cowrie shells and keys. A statuette of an African elephant sits on its head. The body incorporates assorted domestic staples from placemats to pieces of fabric to bags of coffee to two straw whisk brooms that adorn its shoulders like epaulets. It is as if a Home Economic class collided with an African Art exhibit. In the middle of the statue's chest is a 1942 Lux alarm clock with two blackface heads, complete with bulging eyes, enormous white teeth and ribbons in their hair. At the heart of this African female figure is a revolting timepiece of bigotry.

Other figures, like Joyce Scott's "War Woman II," are equally powerful if more ambiguous. Scott's mixed media work takes a traditional African wood carving of a female figure and places it on a dazzling mosaic glass tabletop, held aloft by carved African heads. Around the woman's waist hangs an elegantly beaded belt, from which hang a series of cast glass guns. Tiny red beads lace around a translucent assault rifle tethered to the figure's back. The guns' purpose is elusive. Are the weapons intended to suggest subjugation? Or are they representative of the violence that holds the figure hostage?

Look beyond that sculpture to Barkley L. Hendricks' "Brenda P," a large-scale portrait of an elegant Black woman, hands on hips, hair wrapped in kente cloth, eyes hidden by enormous sunglasses, bell bottoms draped over fat cork sandals. The assertiveness of the pose, the set of the jaw, the furious red blouse combine to express a figure with palpable power.

Even in the most elegant of depictions, however, a sense of visceral hurt and occasional rage – whether overtly political, as in Alison Saar’s “Rise” Black power gesture, or Robert T. Freeman’s Manet-like “Black Tie,” which features a female figure draped in white silk, saucily engaging the viewer with a “well-who-are-you” stare – radiates through the exhibit.

This fusion of sexuality and conquest, power and fragility, elegance and degradation, reverberates throughout this exhibit, whether it’s Faith Ringgold’s raucous quilt, “Mama Can Sing, Papa Can Blow,” or the pained look of defiance in the figure’s eye in Emma Amos photograph “Slow Time.”

It’s the complexity of these objects that lends them a harrowing urgency. Alison Saar’s “Ulysses,” a color woodcut, depicts a Black man lynched upside-down, the blood red background suggesting both tree and coffin, the Black faces above suggesting the trauma of witness. It’s impossible to fully consume such chilling beauty without coming face-to-face with slavery and its racist aftermath.

Take Kara Walker’s etching “Restraint” among the most searing pieces in an exhibit steaming with them. Here is one of Walker’s familiar silhouettes of a female. Her head is shackled with a manacle from which two iron, barbed rods protrude. From the manacle, another iron rod loops around the back of her neck, where it divides into three, Calder-like wires from which bells hang. Lashed to the woman’s head is another metallic leash that extends slightly beyond the figure’s lips, where it resolves in a perforated metal claw. Move and we hear you. Speak and we cut you.

This type of iron bridle was used to punish and humiliate slaves, preventing them from speaking, swallowing or lying down. Even in a post-modern culture, awash in cynicism, it is impossible not to gasp.

Still, to characterize this as an exhibit of a scared and wounded people exposing those lesions with aesthetic vitality would be a mischaracterization. The pieces here resound with a joy, color and musicality so buoyant it is almost audible. Tajh Rust’s “Someday” explores Black domesticity in an intimate dining room scene that incorporates Western art idioms – the Joseph Albers painting, the stately mantel clock – with elements of Black domesticity, which include a black panther rug under the table.

Perhaps Michael Collins’ “Satin Doll” synthesizes it best. This dazzling quilt-like piece, featuring a central female figure with a shimmering iridescent yellow gold dress, pulses with energy and rhythm even as the face of the figure is ridiculously stereotypical. The vibrant central collage is rimmed with a black margin in which it’s written, chalkboard-like, the names of celebrated and unacknowledged Black female singers, from Lena Horne to Alberta Hunter to Sarah Vaughan to Hazel Scott. Collins has stitched together glorious images of musicians, kente cloth, American flags and references to Harlem in a percussive composition that radiates euphoria. It is a tribute to the gifts these women left us, and the synthesis of anguish, heritage and sheer talent that produces such artistry.