

NEW BRITAIN
MUSEUM OF
AMERICAN ART

30 AMERICANS



JUNE 17 — OCTOBER 30, 2022



Mickalene Thomas, *Baby I Am Ready Now*, 2007, Diptych, acrylic, rhinestone and enamel on wooden panel, 72 x 132 in. (182.9 x 335.3 cm) overall; 72 x 60 in. (182.9 x 152.4 cm) left panel; 72 x 72 in. (182.9 x 182.9 cm) right panel, Courtesy Rubell Museum, Miami

30 AMERICANS

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Stitzer Family Gallery, Robert & Dorothy Vance Gallery, Richard and Virginia McKernan Gallery

Drawn from the acclaimed Rubell Museum in Miami, Florida, *30 Americans* showcases works by some of the most significant artists of the last four decades, including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mickalene Thomas, Kara Walker, Hank Willis Thomas, and Kehinde Wiley.

This groundbreaking exhibition tells the story of Black humanity through the gaze of contemporary Black artists. Dating from the 1970s to the 2000s, the extensive group of paintings, drawings, collages, photography, portraiture, sculptures, installations, and performance artwork addresses over 200 years of American history and considers the powerful influence of artistic legacy and

community across generations. The exhibition invites us to confront the complexities of individual and collective self-making; explore the transformative paths of self-determination and self-healing; reclaim dignity and liberation of the Black body and Black sexuality; and reframe the past, present, and future of African-descended people through wonder and imagination.

Curated by scholars Dr. Dann J. Broyld, Nicole Stanton, and Dr. Brittney Yancy, the exhibition is a catalyst for community and conversation, and engages active collaboration with Museum staff and a *30 Americans* Community Advisory Group comprised of local community members.

30 Americans at the NBMAA

What does freedom mean? What does it mean to be Black + American? What is Blackness? are questions these 30 African American artists answer through reality, truth, imagination, and wonder. These questions are further explored by guest curators Dr. Dann J. Broyld, Nicole Stanton, and Dr. Brittney Yancy, and are interpreted through a series of unifying themes:

MAKING A WAY OUT OF NO WAY: RADICAL BLACK SELF-MAKING IN CONTEMPORARY ART

“Making a way out of no way” is a phrase that emerges out of Black communities to express the challenges of surviving and thriving in the face of economic, aesthetic, cultural, and political oppression experienced in the Black diaspora. From food to fashion, performance to visual practice, Black communities have found ways to weave forms of expression that imaginatively reach towards liberation and self-determination. The artists in this section build on that tradition as they radically imagine, reinvent, and celebrate Black identities. They grapple with questions of race, subjectivity, gender, beauty, and power and invite the consideration of how we might rupture past stereotypes, opening up a multiplicity of possibilities for self-identification, liberation, and states of wonder.

Artists like Kehinde Wiley upend our expectations by placing contemporary Brown and Black people in settings associated with a white historical past. His figurative works quote historical sources and position young Black men in fields of power and, in doing so, disrupt our understanding of that past and Black and Brown subjectivity. Works by John Bankston conjure fantastical yet clearly racialized images that explore personal identities, and inner landscapes made tangible. These artists speak what is often unspoken, such as Robert Colescott, who takes on racial stereotypes and other cultural tropes through a visual language that challenges, surprises, and provokes.

William Pope.L’s work tackles the language of racism, racializing, and classification, probing identity through unexpected juxtapositions

of text. He says of his work: “My focus is to politicize disenfranchisement, to make it neut, to reinvent what is beneath us, to remind us what’s to come...” From the unexpected and self-proclaimed absurdities of Pope.L, we move polyrhythmically to the work of artists like Mickalene Thomas. She probes Black women’s beauty, sexuality, and experience, creating worlds where our ways of being are explored, elevated, and commemorated. Thomas is a multidisciplinary artist who creates spaces in which Black women see themselves and can imagine new possibilities. New signs. New Wonders.

SIGNS AND WONDERS

In this exhibition section, be raptured by wonder, step into a realm of marvel, where ancient alignment awaits new prospects. “Signs and Wonders” is a colloquialism or turn-of-phrase used in the African American community to describe both spiritual and



Barkley L. Hendricks, *Noir*, 1978, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 in. (182.9 x 121.9 cm), Courtesy Rubell Museum, Miami

FEATURED ARTISTS

Nina Chanel Abney
John Bankston
Jean-Michel Basquiat
Mark Bradford
Nick Cave
Robert Colescott
Noah Davis
Leonardo Drew
Renée Green
David Hammons

Barkley L. Hendricks
Rashid Johnson
Glenn Ligon
Kalup Linzy
Kerry James Marshall
Rodney McMillian
Wangechi Mutu
William Pope.L
Rozeal
Gary Simmons

Xaviera Simmons
Lorna Simpson
Shinique Smith
Henry Taylor
Hank Willis Thomas
Mickalene Thomas
Kara Walker
Carrie Mae Weems
Kehinde Wiley
Purvis Young

CURATORS



 DR. DANN J. BROYLE
UMASS LOWELL



 NICOLE STANTON
WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY



 DR. BRITTNEY YANCY
GOODWIN UNIVERSITY



Henry Taylor, *The Long Jump by Carl Lewis*, 2010, Acrylic on canvas, 87 1/2 x 77 in. (222.3 x 195.6 cm), Courtesy Rubell Museum, Miami

space-like acts that occur with enchantment. They captivate and awe us into amazement, enlightenment, and illumination. Make us look to the Gods, constellations, and spiritual realm for explanations. They dazzle us with delight and leave us dazed in stardust. These acts open us to the possibilities and coloration of liberation, self-determination, and the wide world of signals, mirrors, and miracles. Mark Bradford, Jean-Michele Basquiat, and Glenn Ligon are just a few of the artists whose abstract compositions conjure these ideas.

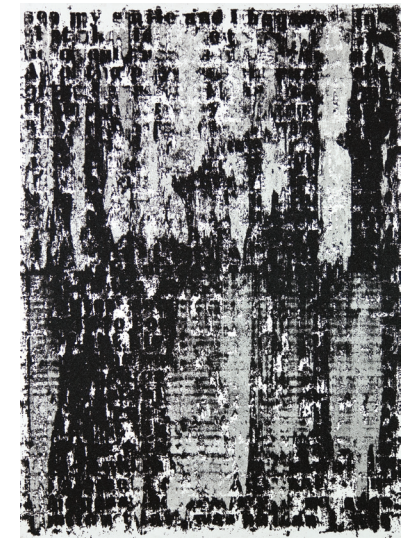
Are the zodiac signs reflected in the whimsical works of the artist? Has art been influenced by the sun, moon, and the Milky Way? Can stars and earth's orbit be held within us and the artist, as a replication of the heights and the adornment above? Have you searched your inner constellations to seek revelations? Enter this museum space open to messages asserted by the planets, and exit in a world of deep astrological exclamations! Turn upward bound, and endeavor to never let the artist be grounded in gravity's grasp. Gather in this gallery the embellishment of the galaxies. In each art piece, search the zodiac signs for a clue higher than the present and the ether.

BLACK WONDERMENT AND FREEDOM DREAMS: ADORNMENT, IDENTITY & FREEDOM

Wonderment, Afrofuturism, materiality, and adornment present artistic visualities that reclaim Black humanity, reimagine freedom, and restore Black identity and culture to our everyday world. Historian Robin D.G. Kelley reminds us that imagination has the power to transform society, and in his work *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*, artists, in particular, transport us towards a free world. The artists in this section demonstrate how the practice of wonderment and imagination are embedded in the African diasporic experience; the ancestral spirit of faith, resilience, and imagination is rooted in the African tradition and spans generations across the diaspora. These artists are freedom dreamers who envision a world shaped by liberation, empowerment, and full personhood. Black wonderment relies on a universal worldview that allows for self-definition, and the artists of *30 Americans*, in particular, elevate the tradition of adornment and materiality in the self-making process.

In this section, artworks including Nick Cave's *Soundsuit*, Lorna Simpson's *Wigs (Portfolio)*, Mickalene Thomas's *Whatever You Want*, and David Hammond's *The Holy Bible, Old*

Testament send us to a world where the tradition of fashion and adornment are central to African Americans' pursuit of self-definition and freedom making. The works in this section invite us to confront the complexities and fluidity of individual and collective self-making; explore the transformative paths of self-



Glenn Ligon, *Mirror #7*, 2006, Acrylic, coal dust, silkscreen, gesso and oil stick on canvas, 84 x 60 in. (213.4 x 152.4 cm), Courtesy Rubell Museum, Miami



Nick Cave, *Untitled*, 2006, Fabric, sequins, fiberglass and metal, 100 x 26 x 13 in. (254 x 66 x 33 cm),
Courtesy Rubell Museum, Miami

determination and self-healing; reclaim dignity and liberation of the Black body and Black sexuality; and reframe the past, present, and future of African-descended people through wonder and imagination.

ABOUT THE CURATORS:

Dr. Dann J. Broyld is an associate professor of African American History at UMass Lowell. He earned his Ph.D. in nineteenth-century United States and African Diaspora history at Howard University. His work focuses on the American-Canadian borderlands and issues of Black identity, migration, and transnational relations, as well as oral history, material culture, and museum-community interaction. Broyld was a 2017-18 Fulbright Canada scholar at Brock University and his book *Borderland Blacks: Two Cities in the Niagara Region During the Final Decades of Slavery* (2022) is published with the Louisiana State University Press.

Nicole Stanton is a dance artist, educator, and leadership professional. She is currently Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs at Wesleyan University, as well as a faculty member in the Department of Dance, Department of African American Studies, and the College of the Environment. Through choreography and performance, she explores the intersections between personal, political, and physical experiences with an eye towards celebrating the complexities of Black cultures and creating platforms that cultivate community. Her artistic practice emphasizes collaboration, including work with historians, scientists, anthropologists, musicians, and

media artists. Nicole received her MFA from Ohio State University and her BA from Antioch College.

Dr. Brittney Yancy is an Assistant Professor of Humanities at Goodwin University, where she has been a faculty member since 2015. She is the Goodwin University's Content Coordinator for History. Brittney has completed her Ph.D. at the University of Connecticut and her undergraduate studies at Hampton University. Her research focuses on 20th Century US social movements, urban radicalism, critical race theory, women's activism, and Black women's political and intellectual history. Professor Yancy has published with Oxford University Press and Greenwood Press, and her research has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Harvard University's Schlesinger Library Grant, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Social Science Research Council, the National Council of Black Studies, and the Connecticut Humanities. Her honors include being selected as one of the 100 Women of Color in Hartford, the UConn Women of Color Award, and a host of awards from the National Council of Black Studies and the University of Connecticut. She is a member of the American Historical Association, the National Council of Black Studies, and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History.



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SIGNS & WONDERS:

AN ANALYSIS OF ARTISTS AND ASTROLOGY

by Dr. Dann J. Broyld, UMass Lowell

Wedged between and throughout the “Making a Way Out of No Way” and “Black Wonderment and Freedom Dreams” sections of *30 Americans* is “Signs and Wonders.” It inquires if zodiac signs and the constellations can tell us something about artists, history, and ourselves. Each label in the *30 Americans* exhibition at the NBMAA includes the Western zodiac sign of the artist (they are different from Chinese astrology). These signs act as a vital tool for examining both the artist and the art, and it was an additive the curators specifically elected to include to elevate the visitor’s experience. With the key to the twelve signs in your hands, allow a fresh interpretation to be grasped in the galleries.

The art professional world has used various means, including time period, philosophical approach, and the Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS), to evaluate artistic form, movement, color, lines, space, and shape. But what about the actual date the artist was born and/or time-of-day? What is their zodiac sign? Does this help to explain the art and wonderment they present to the world? Is this the examination art professionals, historians, astronomers, and scholars have been awaiting? What does this tell us? Is this the North Star in the galaxy by which we have operated and now can clearly outline its orbit?

With all the enlightenment and advancements in technology, has the modern world ignored the ancient knowledge of Egyptians and Babylonians or the astrological systems discussed in the classic societies of Mother Africa, Greece, and Rome? Can the earthly search for meaning making be solved by simply glancing up to the midnight sky? Certainly, the artist has been ushered to earth in perfect timing, so the corresponding longitudes have something to say. They plead with you to listen. But are we tranquil enough to hear in the traffic and toil of our days? Beyond the

city lights is a height and ways-of-knowing that are solar, sacred, and scholarly. Space above whispers a song stellar that echoes beneath in the human heart. Have our forward-looking future thoughts not allowed us to witness the wonderment circling miles beyond us? Let’s seek fresh frequency away from the stalling static.

The Fire, Earth, Air, and Water Signs that are woven into our design—from Aries and Aquarius to Capricorn and Cancer, as well as Libra and Leo—inform of a deeper extraterrestrial meaning; even the spiritual and Godfearing align. The zodiac signs are as ancient as the scriptures with meaning perhaps parallel to parables. So, what is the message written into the constellations? How does it alter the artist? People are complex webs of intersecting beliefs. Perhaps, the zodiac signs are not authoritative, but more suggestive, yet they are an intersection of ideas worthy of probing. You can attempt to separate an artist, or yourself, from the zodiac signs, but their inscription is imprinted upon the inter-spaces and actions, which mirror the sequence of stars and planets on your birthday. Call it mythology until it materializes; give happenstance a chance. Call it odd, a conundrum, or God(s). In life, miraculous, out-of-this-world things occur—miracles, signs, and/or wonders.

Each astrological sign has its own traits, desires, and ways of viewing the world. Gemini is deemed to have mutable modality and dual personalities, and the Taurus fixed manner is noted to be strong and dependable. Of course, not every person or artist is an identical match to their zodiac sign. This is not arithmetic with exact outcomes, but rather we speak of uniquely crafted individuals. Despite deviations, people of the same sign possess similar elements: they rhyme, and they are said to partner in love best with some signs over others. Each sign has value, virtue, waywardness, and various shades

of gray hues. Scorpio and Sagittarius are ruled by Pluto and Jupiter; the Sun and Moon partner in a role in this circuit of ideology; and Venus, Uranus, and Neptune play a tune in humanity’s formation.

Let’s celebrate the zodiac abstraction of artists and the speculation and experimentation of astrological sentiment. Why not decipher deeper the chronicles of outer space in our inner selves, dusting off ancient intellect into a present-day tech and form, from Mercury to Saturn. Pause, right now, to take in the beauty of the atmosphere’s darkness that yields illumination. Seek what this exhibition speaks. Let’s ascend to richer recognition of the times and seasons of the artist and our creation. With all the pontificating on high thought in the art and historical world, the altitude of the constellations has not quite been reached. To glance at an artist knowing they are a Virgo or Pisces is another instrument to gather the influence of the galaxy and their dynamic artwork.

30 Americans at the NBMAA is a rainbow sign, signaling a new analytical approach to the artist

and their works. Let’s bring to earth what is designed in the stars and planets. Just think—the wonderment of the cosmos is standing right next to us and is sketched into the artist’s composition. Possessing the posture of looking at art by way of zodiac signs can and will provide a new lens.

For example, encompassed within Capricorn Jean-Michel Basquiat’s *One Million Yen*, 1982, somewhere between his signature crowns, the “Flat Fee,” and the “1 Million Yen,” is the tell of his astrological sign’s inner state of independence. The amalgamation of the cross-heart is serious and soulful. The chosen canvas is earthy, and the blue tint is cold. Both the Taurus and Cancer could find themselves compatible or captured by the oeuvre’s mysticism. These signs have symbols—including the Ram, Bull, Crab, Lion, and Goat. But beyond the optics is substance. If this is taken as a serious endeavor, will we ever return to earth the same? Will this methodology of approaching the artist and their art escort us further than the rocket’s reach? Let not the rain clouds and ozone layer be the limitations to our thoughts.



Jean-Michel Basquiat, *One Million Yen*, 1982, Oil on canvas with wood and jute, 60 x 58 x 3 3/4 in. (152.4 x 147.3 x 9.5 cm), Courtesy Rubell Museum, Miami



AQUARIUS
(JANUARY 20 - FEBRUARY 18)

The symbol for Aquarius represents a pair of water ripples. They are independent, deep thinkers who often fight strongly for progressive and idealistic causes.



PISCES
(FEBRUARY 19 - MARCH 20)

The symbol for Pisces represents two fish swimming in opposite directions. They are artistic, friendly, and compassionate, and their intuitive nature helps them form strong emotional connections with others.



ARIES
(MARCH 21 - APRIL 19)

The symbol for Aries represents a ram. They are confident, organized, and determined, and their desire for action often reveals their competitive nature and courage.



TAURUS
(APRIL 20 - MAY 20)

The symbol for Taurus represents a bull. They are reliable and realistic people who are skilled at committing to things for extended amounts of time.



GEMINI
(MAY 21 - JUNE 20)

The symbol for Gemini, which resembles a Roman numeral two, represents a companion. They are versatile, curious, open minded, and quick to change or show different sides of their personality.



CANCER
(JUNE 21 - JULY 22)

The symbol for Cancer represents the claws of a crab. They are sentimental, imaginative, persuasive, and care strongly for those who are close to them.



LEO
(JULY 23 - AUGUST 22)

The symbol for Leo represents a lion. They are creative, generous, and passionate, and their confidence and loyalty tend to make them natural leaders.



VIRGO
(AUGUST 23 - SEPTEMBER 22)

The symbol for Virgo is the letter "M" with a loop or curl, which could stand for the word "Maiden" or represent the idea that despite the ups and downs, things tend to happen in a way that circles back to the beginning. They are kind and practical hard workers who pay close attention to details and have a strong sense of humanity.



LIBRA
(SEPTEMBER 23 - OCTOBER 22)

The symbol for Libra represents a set of scales. They are diplomatic and social individuals who believe in fairness and peace.



SCORPIO
(OCTOBER 23 - NOVEMBER 21)

The symbol for Scorpio is the letter "M" with a sting on the end, which represents the sense of drive connected to this sign, as well as the idea of moving on after multiple ups and downs. They are resourceful, determined, and passionate individuals whose dedication and courage makes them strong leaders.



SAGITTARIUS
(NOVEMBER 22 - DECEMBER 21)

The symbol for Sagittarius represents an arrow. They are generous and idealistic, and their curiosity and energy often give them a desire to explore the world and new opportunities.



CAPRICORN
(DECEMBER 22 - JANUARY 19)

The symbol for Capricorn represents a goat with a fish tail. They are responsible and independent individuals with strong self-control, and their tendency to make practical and realistic plans often makes them successful leaders.



Front Cover: Kehinde Wiley, *Equestrian Portrait of the Count Duke Olivares*, 2005, Oil on canvas, 108 x 108 in. (274.3 x 274.3 cm), Courtesy Rubell Museum, Miami

Above: Wangechi Mutu, *Non je ne regrette rien*, 2007, Ink, acrylic, glitter, cloth, paper collage, plastic, plant material and mixed media on Mylar, 54 1/2 x 92 1/2 in. (138.4 x 233.7 cm), Courtesy Rubell Museum, Miami

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