



# CARVING A NEW TRADITION

THE ART OF LATOYA M. HOBBS

January 26–April 28, 2024

Gordon Contemporary Artists Project Gallery

As a painter and a printmaker, Hobbs visualizes the experiences of Black women through portraiture and other figurative artwork. She says, “I use figurative imagery to facilitate an on-going dialogue about the Black female body in the hope of showcasing a more balanced perception of our womanhood, one that dismantles prevailing stereotypes.”<sup>1</sup> While Hobbs’s sitters are personal—herself, her friends, and members of her community—her artwork explores the universal themes of womanhood, family, labor, and self-care. Hobbs favors relief printmaking, in which one carves away material from a surface to create an image.

She sees her carving as connected symbolically to the process of removing stereotypes to reveal the true version of an individual. Traditionally, the artist carves the *matrix*—the printing surface—leaving a raised image. The artist then applies ink to the matrix, presses paper to its surface, and runs the paper and matrix through a printing press to create a print. In this process, the matrix is used as a tool to produce the displayable print. While Hobbs does create traditional woodblock prints, she also carves a new tradition by displaying the painted print matrixes themselves as finished art objects, such as the multipanel work *Carving Out Time* (2020–21) on view in this exhibition.

In 2018, Hobbs began her ongoing *Salt of the Earth* series inspired by the Bible verse Matthew 5:13: “Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of man.”<sup>2</sup> Hobbs says, “I see the scripture

as being in two phases: [Black women] being the salt of the earth, the preservers of family, culture, and community. The second part of the scripture represents the kind of duality in the Black experience as a woman: the strength that we possess, but also what happens when we are not preserving ourselves, not taking care of ourselves. I think we see that too often, we are cast out.”<sup>3</sup> Hobbs deploys self-portraits and portraits of her friends, family, and community members as vehicles to query the role of Black women as preservers and how these women are asked to constantly pour out and give of themselves.

Hobbs’s masterful installation *Carving Out Time*, on its debut loan from the Baltimore Museum of Art, anchors the exhibition. Comprising fifteen panels organized into five scenes and measuring eight feet in height and sixty feet in length in total, *Carving Out Time* is a monumental “portrait of a day” in Hobbs’s life. The double entendre of the title *Carving Out Time* calls

attention both to the daily negotiations one makes to get everything done and to the time the artist had to “carve out” or set aside to finish this ambitious and labor-intensive project.

The 96-by-144-inch cherrywood panels *Scene 1: Morning*, *Scene 2: Homeschool and Housework*, *Scene 3: Dinner Time*, *Scene 4: Bedtime for the Boys*, and *Scene 5: The Studio* follow Hobbs through her full day as a woman, mother, wife, and an artist. An example of what Hobbs terms “narrative portraiture,” she pictures herself, her husband Ariston Jacks, and their two young sons in highly detailed domestic spaces. The life-size scale of these scenes places viewers in the room with Hobbs and her family,<sup>4</sup> and the level of detail makes it impossible to ignore the artistic and physical labor required to complete the work; Hobbs draws the viewer’s attention to both content and form.

On the walls of these interior spaces, Hobbs reproduces artworks by Jean-Michel Basquiat,



Elizabeth Catlett, Kerry James Marshall, Valerie Maynard, and Alma Thomas, a group of African American artists from whom she draws inspiration.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in *Scene 1: Morning*, Elizabeth Catlett's 1981 lithograph *Roots* hangs next to an Alma Thomas painting. Hobbs considers Elizabeth Catlett one of her "art mothers." Like Hobbs, whose hybrid practice involves painting and printmaking, Catlett worked between two mediums: sculpture and print. Collaborating in the 1940s and 1950s with the Mexico City-based Taller de Gráfica Popular, Catlett made a career out of visualizing the

lived experiences of Black and Brown women. *Roots*, with its layered heads—one abstract and one realistic—speaks to the significance of legacy. Hobbs's continued reference to and reproduction of Black artists' work places her within this lineage as she continues to expand upon it and introduce new forms of representation into the art-historical canon. The large scale of *Carving Out Time* is akin to that of Western history painting, typically utilized to tell the grand historical narratives of white men. Yet, with its positive depictions of a Black family and Black female artistry, *Carving Out Time* marks a shift in canonical representations.



**Fig. 1**  
Kerry James Marshall.  
*Untitled*, 2009. Acrylic  
on PCV panel; 61 1/8 x  
72 7/8 x 3 7/8 in. Yale  
University Art Gallery,  
Purchased with the Janet  
and Simeon Braguin Fund  
and a gift from Jacqueline  
L. Bradley, B.A. 1979.  
© Kerry James Marshall.  
Courtesy the artist and  
Jack Shainman Gallery,  
New York

The final panel, *Scene 5: The Studio*, shows Hobbs seated with palette in hand in the middle of her home studio, where finished and in-progress artworks surround her (cover). Hobbs borrows her pose from Kerry James Marshall's 2009 *Untitled*, which depicts a Black female artist gazing directly at the viewer with a paint-filled palette and brush in hand (fig. 1).

The Studio hints at Hobbs's process and future artistic directions. On the floor in front of the seated artist is a partially carved portrait of a mother and child, a pair of gouges atop its surface as if Hobbs might kneel and start carving.<sup>6</sup> Stacked against the right wall is the outline of a Black woman shown in profile, a portrait in progress—Hobbs's process begins with photographs of her subjects, many made during collaborative photoshoots by her husband Ariston Jacks; preliminary graphite underdrawings; the application of a painted black ground followed by a white pencil drawing; and then, finally, the carving.

As a documentation of daily life, *Carving Out Time* offers a glimpse at new directions in Hobbs's practice. In *Scene 5: The Studio*, a double portrait of two young Black women hangs on the wall behind Hobbs, with a stool, a paintbrush, and a rag beneath it. Visitors to the Frist can view the finished portrait: *Erin and Anyah with Hydrangeas*. Completed in 2023, the



**Fig. 2**  
LaToya M. Hobbs. *Erin and Anyah with Hydrangeas*, 2023. Acrylic and collage on carved wood panel; 48 x 60 in. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Ariston Jacks

double portrait depicts the artist's stepdaughter Erin and niece Anyah (fig. 2). The hydrangeas and green foliage found in the background, a newer element in Hobbs's art, reflect the sense of healthy growth and "flourishing" she has experienced recently in her career and personal life.<sup>7</sup> The theme of flowering and thriving continues with the 2023 *Flourish*, a portrait of Mahari Chabweara, the founder of the East Baltimore artist incubator Studio House. Chabweara is perched in the corner of a plant-filled room, looking out at the row house-filled cityscape.



**Fig. 3**  
LaToya M. Hobbs. *A Moment of Care*, 2023.  
Woodcut; 32 1/4 x 24 in.  
Courtesy of the artist

While *Carving Out Time* highlights labor (domestic, familial, and artistic), Hobbs' other *Salt of the Earth* pieces—among them the woodblock prints *A Moment of Care* (fig. 3), *In Need of Rest*, and *Unbothered* as well as with the panels *Sunday Morning*, *Note to Self: Joy Comes in the Morning* and *Note to Self: No Rest for the Weary*—offered Hobbs an opportunity to consider what was missing from her day as documented in *Carving Out Time*. Hobbs calls attention to what it looks like when

you are “poured out.” She states, “I want to highlight the importance of self-preservation and examine how Black women engage in acts of self-care or the lack thereof.”<sup>8</sup> These new works, all completed in 2023 and exhibited for the first time in a museum setting, flesh out the multifaceted nature of womanhood and speak to the themes of self-care, self-reflection, and rest.

Hobbs's large-scale portraits of herself, her family, friends, and community work to shift viewer's perceptions. While images of Black labor, domestic and otherwise, abound in Western art history, Hobbs charts a new course, carving a new tradition in which depictions of the Black family, Black women, Black rest, and Black creative labor are recognized, celebrated, and elevated.<sup>9</sup>

**Dr. Rebecca VanDiver**, 2023–25 Chancellor's Faculty Fellow and associate professor of African American art, Vanderbilt University

## About the Artist

Hobbs received a BA in painting from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and an MFA in printmaking from Purdue University. She is a professor at the Maryland Institute College of Art and a founding member of Black Women of Print, an artistic collective that seeks to make the past, present, and future work of Black women printmakers more visible. You can find her work in the permanent collections of Harvard Art Museums, Samella Lewis Contemporary Art Collection at Scripps College, the Baltimore Museum of Art, the David C. Driskell Center at the University of Maryland, the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Milwaukee Art Museum, the Smith College Museum of Art, the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art, the Rockefeller Foundation, and more.

## Notes

1. LaToya M. Hobbs "Artist Statement," LaToya M. Hobbs Studio, accessed November 1, 2023, <https://www.latoyamhobbs.com/artist-statement>.
2. King James Version.
3. Angela N. Carroll, "LaToya Hobbs' Portrayals of Black Mothers," *Bmore Art*, May 13, 2019, <https://bmoreart.com/2019/05/latoya-hobbs-angelic-portrayals-of-black-mothers.html>.
4. LaToya M. Hobbs interview with Jenny Gill, "In the Studio: LaToya M. Hobbs," Joan Mitchell Foundation, July 31, 2023, <https://www.joanmitchellfoundation.org/journal/in-the-studio-latoya-m-hobbs>.
5. In order of appearance, the artworks cited in *Carving Out Time* are Elizabeth Catlett, *Roots*, 1981 (Scene 1); Margaret Burroughs, *Face of Africa*, 1954, and Elizabeth Catlett, *Seated Woman*, 1962 (Scene 2); Kerry James Marshall, *Untitled (Club Couple)*, 2014, and Valerie Maynard, *Senufo*, 1987 (Scene 3); Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Pez Dispenser*, 1984 (Scene 4); and LaToya M. Hobbs, *Birth of a Mother*, 2019 (Scene 5).
6. Hobbs later pulled the 2023 print *Ark of Safety* from this matrix.
7. Hobbs interview with Gill, "In the Studio."
8. Hobbs, "Artist Statement."
9. Brittany Webb, *Carving Out Time*, *ASAP/Journal*, b.O.s. 18.1, July 25, 2022, <https://asapjournal.com/b-o-s-18-1-carving-out-time-brittany-webb/>.

**Cover:** LaToya M. Hobbs. *Carving Out Time* (detail), 2020–21. Oil-based printing ink and acrylic paint on carved cherry plywood panel; 15 panels: 96 x 720 in. overall. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Anonymous Gift; and Art Fund established with exchange funds from gifts of Dr. and Mrs. Edgar F. Berman, Equitable Bank, N.A., Geoffrey Gates, Sandra O. Moose, National Endowment for the Arts, Lawrence Rubin, Philip M. Stern, and Alan J. Zakon; BMA 2022.11. Image courtesy of the Baltimore Museum of Art

Organized by the Frist Art Museum with Dr. Rebecca VanDiver,  
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