

Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage
Audio Tour Transcript

Stop 1

Director's Introduction

Hello, my name is Seth Feman, and I serve as the executive director and CEO of the Frist Art Museum. Welcome to *Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage*. Organized by the Frist Art Museum, this exhibition features an intergenerational group of fifty-two living artists and includes over eighty major collage and collage-informed works that reflect the breadth and complexity of Black identity. By assembling pieces of paper, photographs, fabric, and salvaged or repurposed materials, these artists create unified compositions that express the endless possibilities of Black-constructed narratives despite our fragmented society.

On this audio tour, you will hear selected artists speaking about their works in the exhibition.

I really hope you enjoy your visit.

Stop 2

Lanecia A. Rouse, *How She Taught Me to Carry Water*

My name is Lanecia Rouse. I'm originally from South Carolina, but I am currently based in Richmond, Virginia, and Houston, Texas.

So, the piece that has been selected for the exhibition is titled *How She Taught Me to Carry Water*, and it was a piece really inspired by three women in my life—and I actually should say four. So, Lucille Clifton's poetry definitely got me thinking about the question of being a woman in this world and how we carry life, memory—yeah, how we carry our struggles, our pains, our joys, our questions. How we not only carry, but, like, choose to live and thrive—like, the things we do to make a life in this world, what are necessary for that kind of living and making? And I went from that poetry to my mom, my grandmother, and then our daughter AJ, who died prematurely at birth, and I had to spend time really thinking about my relationship with those three women and then what they taught me about carrying life within, confronting life, making a life. And, from there, it led me to an plethora of other women who have taught me how to be the woman that I am today. And so, that piece in many ways is a homage to the

women who have made me, who's been a part of who I am, you know, to the women who have helped me in my own becoming and naming of the life that I want to make for myself and the kind of woman I want to be in the world.

Stop 3

Yashua Klos, *Uncle Scott*

I'm Yashua Klos. I'm from Chicago, Illinois, and working here in Bronx—South Bronx, New York.

Uncle Scott came out of an interest in me reconnecting with this side of my family, my father's side of the family, that I met a little over four years ago now. And I had met them once when I was seven years old, but we were out of communication, so the body of work and the portraits are really in attempt to bridge the distance between us.

The *Uncle Scott* collage is interesting to me because Uncle Scott is kind of like a wild guy, and in the portrait, he's surrounded by these wildflowers and he looks very peaceful and he looks very statuesque. And I started to think about the kind of subjectivity in portraiture and in storytelling, and how, throughout our history, a lot of the portraits that we've been shown in some ways we've accepted as objective likeness or an objective character about somebody. But that's always filtered through the perspective of the artist and whatever the desires of the artist were for the sitter. So, I really appreciate that I get the opportunity to do that with my family members, to present them within the historical framework of portraiture and also challenged the notions of kind of, like, authority that are associated with who gets portraits painted of them and who doesn't.

Stop 4

Tay Butler, *Hyperinvisibility*

My name is Tay Butler. I'm from Milwaukee, Wisconsin, originally, but now live in Houston, Texas.

I think for most people, you're making art of what you know. I grew up playing basketball. Everybody I know from where I'm from plays basketball, so you either played, used to play, your kids play, or you coach other people's kids.

As an artist, you start to investigate and ask questions and try to figure out *why*. And so, I started to ask or investigate this central question: *Why is basketball so important to black people?* Now, when you ask people that question, they give you the perks of basketball. They tell you, "You can be rich," "You can be famous," "You can have generational wealth," "You transcend racism," all of these things. But that's the benefits; that doesn't answer *why*. That doesn't investigate how we got where we got, where everybody's playing. So, I started to think about those things.

I'm very, you know, concerned with, you know, value and masculinity, and things of that nature, you know, just because I am who I am, you know? I'm a Black man from Milwaukee. Where I'm from, it's very hard to be a Black male in that city. So, your value is based on, oftentimes, how good you are at basketball and other things like that, right? And you have to have a sense of heroism to your story. It's not enough to have a decent job and take care of your family, right? Like, that's what our fathers and grandfathers aspired to. But there's this idea now that they did that so we can perform Black excellence, right? But when you see a Black man getting off work, do you see a regular man, or do you see somebody who's eligible for your Black excellence moniker? Do you see somebody who is a hero? Do you see somebody who is valuable to their community, or are they only valuable when they are famous and wearing designer clothes? You know, our masculinity is tied up in basketball. You know, who we are to our children is tied up in how other people see us. It's a lot of complicated layers. So, being that collage is based on layers, it only makes sense that I, you know, investigated through the work.

Stop 5

Derek Fordjour, *Airborne Double*

My name is Derek Fordjour. I'm from Memphis, Tennessee, and I'm based in New York.

I'm attracted to the drum major because it takes the form that predominantly white institutions use. I mean, so band culture is kind of like the same if you look at uniforms. But what happens in HBCU culture is this kind of variation on a theme where the gestures, the movement, the canon of music that they're using is just kind of drenched in sort of Black culture. And I enjoy moments I felt finally be very American, where, almost, Black life is like a subset of the kind of broader American life.

But then, the sheer athleticism of, like, flying, if you think about sort of like Air Jordan and like these ideas of superhuman feats that come from just the body, which I think is also particularly African American.

In the background of *Airborne Double*, somehow the background references, like, kente cloth. And I'm Ghanaian, and I had recently taken a trip to Ghana, and I think I was attracted to those colors. I don't know if I was consciously doing that, but I really love the repetition in the pattern in the background and how it has a—it's almost an abstraction of kente cloth, which has this really bright orange and bright blues as a kind of backdrop. As a concept, that piece, to me, holds so much cultural information.

Stop 6

Lester Julian Merriweather, *#BetterGardensandJungles*

My name is Lester Julian Merriweather, and I'm originally and now from Memphis, Tennessee.

The work that's featured in *Multiplicity* is a series called *#BetterGardensandJungles*. The first piece that was done was inspired by the death of my brother. He was murdered in Nashville, on Lafayette Street, I believe. The first image that became an inspiration is the image of Tupac in his BMW being driven by Suge the moments right before he was murdered. There's this really specific innocence in his eyes. As much of a larger-than-life figure as he was, there was this vulnerability. It brought to mind, you know, thoughts about my brother and what those last moments must have been like for him.

So, outside of that image, the next thing that came to mind was, like, this idea of the concrete jungle swallowing up young Black men in various ways. So, the entire series titled *#BetterGardensandJungles* is kind of this idea of how Black men are viewed as they navigate the quote-unquote "concrete jungle." But, utilizing these more lush forms, I was able to go back into a lot of the source material that I already, you know, had on hand, which just became a metaphor, utilizing the lush greenery of the jungles.

Stop 7

Yashua Klos, *The Face on Mars*

I'm Yashua Klos. I'm from Chicago, Illinois, and working here in South Bronx, New York.

I've always been fascinated with architecture and ancient ruins, things that other civilizations have built and left behind. So, I think about the Colossi statue of the ancient Egyptians or those large heads in Easter Island, or Olmec heads, which are these large boulders with faces carved into them, and how throughout human existence, we have sort of carved and created images of ourselves that we want to propose as an almost a heroic or ideal self, an ideal identity. So, I've always been interested in that. And for me, *The Face on Mars* is a reference to an ancient ruin or possibly some sort of architectural relic that is decomposing or breaking down over time—and there's a face on it if we look closely, but we still don't know who that person is. It's not a portrait in the same way that *Uncle Scott* is, like, based on Scott's likeness. This one is a lot more mysterious, and it allows us to maybe project our own ideas about our identities into *The Face on Mars*.

Stop 8

Helina Metaferia, *Headdress 61*

My name is Helina Metaferia. I'm from Silver Spring, Maryland, and I live in New York City.

My art is often inspired by lineage and history—sometimes our personal lineage or familial lineage, sometimes our artistic lineage or political lineage. And I'm constantly bringing that forward, either in a direct way where I'm weaving that throughout my practice or in an indirect way where they're just an inspiration sent to me. But I will say, my personal lineage that is most profound for me is my mother, who was an Ethiopian women's rights activist. When she passed away in 2016, I felt very compelled to uphold her legacy by upholding the legacy of other women activists.

So, in the workshops, I asked the participants—we do a number of things that there is no camera involved. We're trying to build a sacred space. And so, we're working with BIPOC-identifying women to think about *what is their everyday revolution?* What are micro and macro ways in which you can resist society as it is that may not want to make a place for you. How can you make a place for yourself? And some of that is internal work; some of that is also communal work. So, there's this balance of personal care and self-care. There's also looking at the macro—like, how I can be strong so that others can also see that strength, and then that continues.

One thing I loved, working in the Nashville Public Library archives and Fisk University Library archives, was that there were these stories of sit-ins from the 1960s in Nashville, very local to where the workshop was taking place, and so there was a direct history that felt very visceral to me as I was looking at the photographs, as I was looking through the images. I was doing that work, and then, the next day, I was also doing a workshop, and I was doing the work with students. They were helping me, in the archives, kind of look through images, scan images. I was working collaboratively with librarians. There was a community ready to do this work. And so, it's not a depletion of my energy, it's not an exhaustion on my part because it invigorates me as well. And so, that's something that I think is really beautiful and sacred that comes out of the workshops.

Stop 9

Paul Anthony Smith, *CARICOM*

Hi, my name is Paul Anthony Smith. I'm originally from Jamaica and I currently live in New York City.

I'm from Jamaica, and I never really hear much about the other Caribbean nations or the network of Caribbean countries. And so, I was trying to collapse these ideas within one work.

So, CARICOM is a Caribbean community, and I gave the work that title because we're, out of many, one people, right? And my grandfather came from Cuba when he was young, and migrated to Jamaica. And I've heard stories of other people migrating from other countries in the Caribbean. But mostly when you go to—you know, people from Jamaica want to visit and become a resident of Canada, America, or the UK. And so, I was just thinking about the Caribbean network and the cross-pollination of those cultures and stories that I've heard, and, you know—which is why there's so many flags included in *CARICOM*. It's thinking about just like the network of people, you know—they're in-cross pollination of people over time, and just the cultural influences that people from those islands have on the world. And it's also those same CARICOM networks are places where people travel to vacation. You know, snowbirds—people travel in Thanksgiving, in December to some of those places when it gets cold here in the States to spend their time, right? So, it's about wealth, in some ways.

Stop 10

Jamea Richmond-Edwards, *Archetype of a 5 Star*

My name is Jamea Richmond-Edwards. I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, and I'm currently based in Detroit.

I was essentially inspired by my upbringing in Detroit. Detroit has historically always had a Black middle class and so, like, I grew up in, I would say, opulence, right? So, like, my mother had furs and, you know, Chanel, and diamonds, and my mother was part of that era of Motown. So, in terms of how I understand my body and how I understood Black women fashioning themselves was in a very opulent way. So, I was inspired by the rap song by Trina called *Five Star*—and she's just talking about being, like, a really classy woman, really—you know, just being a fly chick—and understanding that as an archetype of queen, you know, and/or the archetype of a mother.

You know, I was just envisioning, like, *what does a perfect woman, what does a queen look like?* and it was like, "Oh yeah, she's a five-star chick," and that's what I view myself as. So, I've always done self-portraiture that, although they weren't, like, literally me, they were—it was my likeness in these pieces, the likeness of the women in my family. And so, that's me kind of really standing on my upbringing, being of that '90s era, and also wanting to sample language from that era, how I grew up.

Stop 11

Jamea Richmond-Edwards, *Holy Wars*

My name is Jamea Richmond-Edwards. I was born and raised in Detroit, Michigan, and I'm currently based in Detroit.

The piece titled *Holy Wars* was really inspired by, you know, everything that started unwinding since the pandemic—you know, living in a post-'rona society. And, you know, a lot of things transpired politically, socially. And, for me, I just felt like there's this war that's going on and these wars within myself, right? These wars with being in lockdown for a year, you know—it's a lot to kind of have to deal with yourself. Me, personally, that was a lot, and there were a lot of things that kind of surfaced, a lot of, like, traumas. But it was great because it was an opportunity for me to address it. And I decided to illustrate myself as a victor in these wars. And, you know, we tend to think about it as, like, this physical war, but the war is actually in my mind, you know?

The body of work that this was part of was called *Currency*, and thinking of currency outside of the, you know, the US dollar, and, you know, it's interesting being in this world where you have, like, the dollar bill is shifting. And, you know, it's kind of—we're going in this transition in terms of, like, value and physical money and understanding that the true—there's different types of currency and looking at, you know, myself as a form of currency, looking at creativity, intellectualism as a form of currency versus the dollar. So that piece, *Holy Wars*, was very indicative of, like, this self-struggles. And, again, I, you know, I felt like I had the agency to illustrate myself as the victor of the conscious mind.

Stop 12

Lovie Olivia, *Dark Tower*

I am Lovie Olivia Nolan, born and raised in Houston, Texas. I work and live in Houston, Texas.

The work in this show is called *Dark Towers*. And that space was only open for a year in Harlem, but the impact that that space had on the future of queer Black spaces—if that one didn't exist, then it would look very different, you know? And so, this was our first safe space, first place of freedom. People have opinions about A'Lelia Walker spending all her mom's money and all that stuff like that—the point is, she wanted to create a space for folks that were on the edges of society, that were marginalized, that were considered "freaks of nature." The fact that she called it the Dark Tower just created this visual, for me, that's like this cascading, illuminating, full-of-jubilee type of party space.

I took these three folders, and I started building them from some of the content that I have, but also digging into the archive of, like, A'Lelia and Madam C. J. Walker, and, like, just that Black history alone, but then you throw the queer history on top of it. And to learn that the type of people that would visit Dark Tower are some of my other favorite folks, like Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin, as a youth—and so, it was just interesting to hear that there was a place that these folks that were working so hard for our future had a place to go and, like, let go and not be ostracized or not be judged, or not consider being put on the outskirts of what society was—that they deserve that type of love.

Stop 13

Wardell Milan, *Pulse*

Wardell Milan—I am originally from Knoxville, Tennessee, and I currently live in New York City.

It's a direct reference to Pulse nightclub in Orlando, and the referencing not only the mass shooting and mass murder that occurred there but thinking about sanctuaries. When I started creating the first *Pulse*, I was very much thinking about the idea of sanctuary and how those who were on the margins, where do they go to find, you know, solace or to be affirmed? It's the Black church, it's, for the gay and queer people community it's, like, the clubs, it's the vogue house. And so, really beginning to consider not only, like, brown and queer people but also women, and then all those who are constantly pushing up that rock up—Sisyphus. You know. I always think about Sisyphus, that myth, the idea of constantly pushing up this rock up a mountain.

And so I didn't want to depict the violence; I really wanted to depict the celebration that I know was happening in that nightclub before that gunman came in and murdered all those people. And not only the celebration that occurred or that was happening in Pulse but also the celebration and that sense of freedom that you find in a sanctuary.

Stop 14

Brittany Boyd Bullock, *No It Ain't, Yes It Is*

I'm Brittney Boyd Bullock from Memphis, Tennessee, and I live and work in Memphis, Tennessee.

So, the work that's featured in the *Multiplicity* show is a larger collage. It's actually one of size that is a first for me, so I've never made a collage that's quite this big. And I really wanted to tell the story of—maybe more about a dichotomy of ideas, right? This idea of, when you look at the images that are in the piece, you start to question, like, what's happening here? Are they talking with one another? Are they, do they know one another? Like, what's happening? And so, the idea is for you to look at the images and then decide for yourself the conversation that they're having, if at all one, right? And that conversation might be, you know, do you see what's happening behind us? Is that a thing? Do you see it? Is that chaos? Is that worldbuilding? Is this futuristic, Afrofuturistic even, right? And so, the work that I made for the show is really about this

idea of what we see, is it real or imagined, right? What we think, is it true or not? And really, like, looking at these different, opposing ideas based on your perspective.

Stop 15

Paul Anthony Smith, *The Tales of Tourism*

Hi, my name is Paul Anthony Smith. I'm originally from Jamaica and I currently live in New York City.

I think I sort of came up with that collage in October 2020, after traveling to Mexico, and I was thinking about the history of our tourism, and what tourism really is, and the idea of vacation, and where does vacation come from.

And so, I was thinking about, you know—both of my parents worked on a cruise ship in the 1980s, and a lot of my work involves the blue sky because I always think about what they were seeing from the cruise ship decks, and how they're catering to someone else's lifestyle and, you know, hundreds of people being on the ship on their vacation or honeymoon or whatever that is. And so, I was thinking about myself being on vacation and how that really is, and it's like, "Oh my gosh, I'm on vacation," right? It's a luxury. And so, it's amazing to capture those moments, but how—what's the history of it, and what did it take for me to get there? You know, I had a lot of family who worked in the servitude industry, in hotels and so on, and so I'm grateful that I'm able to travel and be on vacation in another foreign country.

Sponsor Acknowledgments

Hello, this is Seth Feman again. I hope you enjoyed your visit.

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Thank you for visiting the Frist Art Museum.

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