

VISUAL ARTS

The Memphis connections in a landmark collage exhibition

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Derek Fordjour's "Airborne Double". (Frances Fine Art Collection/Courtesy of the artist, David Kordansky Gallery and Petzel Gallery.)

From the artwork covering the catalog, to the artist hired to create pieces in front of museum guests, a landmark exhibition has multiple Memphis influences.

"Multiplicity: Blackness in Contemporary American Collage," said to be the first major museum exhibition focused on the subject, opens Friday, Sept. 15 at the Frist Art Museum in Nashville. It'll be on view through Sunday, Dec. 31.

The term collage refers to both assembling pieces from various sources to create artwork and the artwork that process creates.

New Rhodes exhibit 'in conversation' with Brooks' 'Black American Portraits'

“Although it is a nearly ubiquitous art form used by elementary school students to the biggest names in modern art history — Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, Hannah Höch, Max Ernst, and Robert Rauschenberg — 21st century collage is an arguably understudied and undervalued medium, especially in museum exhibitions,” Katie Delmez, the Frist senior curator who conceived and organized the exhibition, wrote in the exhibition catalog.

“Multiplicity is an opportunity to spotlight the formal complexity and vibrancy of the technique and to assert its contributions to the field through the lens of some of today’s leading artists.”

The exhibition includes 80 works from 52 living artists at a variety of points in their career: up-and-coming, mid-career and established.



Brittney Boyd Bullock's "No It Ain't, Yes It Is". (Courtesy of the artist.)

With the exhibition, Delmez draws connections between the legacy of historical Black American collagists like Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Faith Ringgold to current Black American collagists like Nina Chanel Abney and Mickalene Thomas.

“For some artists it’s their primary way of making art,” Delmez said. “...But for others, it represents a chapter or a branch of their practice.”

Delmez referred to Memphis native Derek Fordjour as someone who doesn’t necessarily call himself a collage artist, but who is creating “collage-informed” works, using collage techniques.

Tina Turner, Chadwick Boseman, Grace Jones alight at the Brooks

Fordjour’s “Three Bend Deep” graces the exhibition catalog.

Many of his pieces, including the ones in “Multiplicity,” highlight historically Black college and university marching band culture. Fordjour attended an HBCU, Morehouse College in Atlanta.

Vinyl reproductions of Fordjour’s works in “Multiplicity” will be installed on the campus of another HBCU — Tennessee State University in Nashville.

“There’s such depth,” Delmez said. “He layers on so many different materials. And then he comes through ... he excavates, he has a tool that uses to kind of rip through parts of the surface.”

The show also aims to examine how collage artists showcase concepts including cultural hybridity, beauty, gender fluidity and memory. Collages included are both representative and abstract.

“The other thing I was interested in, too, was scale,” Delmez said. “I think folks often think of collages as being something really small and intimate. But many of the artists in the show are, in fact, working on a very large scale. And so that became something that I wanted: really big, great work by each artist. So rather than having a handful of smaller pieces, I wanted one really big one.”

For the first time, two of the largest US ballet companies are in Memphis

Memphis was among the cities the Frist staff traveled to, to film exhibition artists' studios and creative process. Videos will be shown alongside the artists' works.

Other artists from Memphis with works in "Multiplicity" are Brittney Boyd Bullock and Lester Julian Merriweather.



Lester Julian Merriweather's "Moment (from #BetterGardensAndJungles)". (Courtesy of the artist.)

Merriweather often works in collage. Delmez first saw his pieces at the Red Arrow Gallery, in Nashville.

"I loved the work and his critique of capitalism," she said. "And (that) notions of beauty that are often centered on witness and I definitely wanted to do something with him. ... When I went to his studio, again with his input, we chose a work that was a little

different than what I thought we were going to with. It's actually a really large multi-panel series that pays homage to gun violence and other ... situations."

Vitus Shell, a Louisiana native who attended Memphis College of Art and became co-founder of the city's NIA Artist Collective, is also featured.

Other artists in the exhibition include Mark Bradford, Lauren Halsey, Rashid Johnson, Kerry James Marshall, Wangechi Mutu, Jamea Richmond-Edwards, Deborah Roberts, Tschabalala Self, Lorna Simpson, Devan Shimoyama and Mickalene Thomas.

UrbanArt Commission director to depart in September

For "Multiplicity," the Frist hired a Memphis native artist for its inaugural Art in the Atrium project.

The now-Nashville-based collage artist TC Carruthers will create two new large-scale collages on the grand staircase landings in the museum's atrium. Carruthers first began making collages when an art teacher introduced them to the work of Romare Bearden.

Carruthers' work draws from experiences growing up in Memphis. They will create collages on Mondays, Thursdays and Fridays, with museum guests invited to watch them work and ask about their art process

From Nashville, "Multiplicity" will travel next to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and then to the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C.

The Houston art museum has another Memphis "Multiplicity" tie. Associate curator Anita Bateman is originally from Memphis and is overseeing that museum's presentation of the exhibition.

"Anita introduced me to the work of (exhibition artists) Vitus Shell and Tay Butler, and we had joint virtual studio visits with the artists," Delmez said.

Bateman also contributed an essay to the exhibition catalog.

“Multiplicity” will be on view at the Frist Museum of Art, 919 Broadway, in Nashville from Friday, Sept. 15 through Sunday, Dec. 31. Museum hours are 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Mondays; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursdays, 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 1 to 5:30 p.m. Sundays. The museum is closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Admission is \$15. The exhibition then travels to Museum of Fine Arts in Houston from Feb. 18 through May 12, 2024 then the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. from July 6 through Sept. 22, 2024.

TOPICS

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LESTER MERRIWEATHER VITUS SHELL



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A native Memphian, Elle Perry has earned graduate degrees from the University of Memphis and Maryland Institute College of Art. She's written for publications including the Memphis Business Journal, Memphis Flyer and High Ground News, and previously served as coordinator of The Teen Appeal.