

HOLD

A MEDITATION ON BLACK AESTHETICS

hold¹ \hould\ v. **1**: trans. to keep together, retain in union or connection. lit. and fig. **2**: to keep from getting away; to grasp; to possess **3**: to keep from falling, to sustain or support in or with the hand, arms, etc.

hold² \hould\ n. **1**: the interior cavity in a ship or vessel below the deck (or lower deck), where the cargo is stowed

One of the most contentious and capacious concepts of the modern era, *black aesthetics* names both a tradition of visual art, music, and literature and a set of linkages, resonances, and breaks.

During the 1960s, black artists and intellectuals embraced the idea of a black aesthetic as an ideological alternative to Eurocentric notions of beauty and taste. Since then, black aesthetics has served more broadly as a site of convergence across the African diaspora, weaving a history of placelessness and belonging, support and constraint, holding and being held.

The works in this exhibition, ranging from the 1950s to the present, embody various ways the aesthetic realm has enabled re-imaginings of blackness. Rather than narrowly defining a genre or a mode of expression, these examples of black art speak to alternate ways of seeing, feeling, living, and being together in the world. Together, they meditate on the word “hold” as a metaphor for thinking about the diverse expressive forms that gather under the banner of black art. Ultimately, *Hold* questions what animates and brings together the expansive terrain of creativity we call black aesthetics.

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Terry Adkins, American, 1953–2014

MVET Lunar Diptych, 1989

Polychromed wood

each: 97.8 × 50.8 × 9.5 cm (38 1/2 × 20 × 3 3/4 in.)

Private Collection



Adkins once described himself as “a sculptor, musician, and latter-day practitioner of the long-standing African American tradition of ennobling worthless things.” *MVET Lunar Diptych* blurs the distinctions among seeing, listening, and feeling in order to transform the visual encounter with purportedly useless objects. It takes part of its title from the mvvet, a stringed musical instrument belonging to the Pahouin or Fang people of Gabon, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Congo-Brazzaville. The jagged edges of the two polychrome wooden ovals both suggest the carved edges of the calabash resonators that amplify the instrument’s sound and resemble oblong gears. Adkins’s play with perspective and repetition conjures a ghost of the machine that collapses the distance between a ritual performance and a cosmic vista.

Emma Amos, American, born 1938

Crown, 2002

Aquatint and carborundum

43.7 × 50.8 cm (17 3/16 × 20 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase Kathleen Compton Sherrerd Fund for Acquisitions in

American Art

2005-17



Amos has said, “For me, a woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act.” The only female member of the 1960s black artists’ collective Spiral, Amos has addressed issues of racism, black culture, and feminism in paintings, prints, and textiles. In this investigation of hair as a corporeal sign of black female identity—the phrase “your hair is your crown” is suggested by the title—Amos weaves every tendril and strand into a richly textured abstraction.

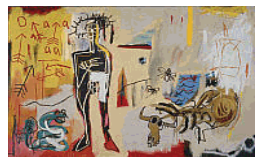
Jean-Michel Basquiat, American, 1960–1988

Poison Oasis, 1981

Acrylic, oil crayon, and paper on canvas

167.5 x 243.5 x 3 cm (65 15/16 x 95 7/8 in.)

Lent by the Schorr Family Collection



Basquiat drew on wide-ranging influences—graffiti, Picasso, break dancing, rap music, and African and Greek cultures—to create new forms of figuration and abstraction. This work centers on a full-length male that evokes the image of Christ but is also considered Basquiat’s first major self-portrait. With a crown of thorns, he stands in a vague landscape between a coiled snake and a seemingly decomposing cow. Hints of sky and tonal variation create an atmospheric space while the strident red, orange, and yellow fields allude to upheaval. Interspersed among arrows are the Greek letters alpha and omega. In the New Testament, these symbolize “the beginning and the ending”—and the belief that Jesus has existed for all eternity. Basquiat’s figure, however, appears deeply aware of his own mortality.

Romare Bearden, American, 1911–1988

Moon and Two Suns, 1971

Paper, cloth and plastic on masonite

61 x 46 cm (24 x 18 1/8 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, Childe Hassam Fund
y1972-1



Reclaiming newspaper clippings, textile scraps, and other found materials, Bearden's collages display a striking visual rhythm, a result of the artist's immersion in jazz and blues. Some exhibit the influence of African art. Such is the case with *Moon and Two Suns*, in which a male figure's visage incorporates a brass representation of the head of an oba (king) from the Kingdom of Benin. Four quadrupeds flank the figure; one may be an alligator drawn from Akan imagery (from Ghana and surrounding areas) associated with the fierceness of rulers.

Sanford Biggers, American, born 1970

Tunic, 2003

Bubble down jacket and feathers

91.4 x 91.4 x 47 cm (36 x 36 x 18 1/2 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund 2003-147



Tunic takes inspiration from a work in the Museum's collections: a plumed ceremonial cape made in twentieth-century Cameroon. Biggers's updated version is a bubble down jacket completely covered with feathers and similar to the original African garment in its dramatic impact. The meeting of these two artifacts sets in motion a collision with historical, geographical, and cultural ramifications. The urban meets the rural, while hip-hop mingles with Bamileke men's initiation dance.

directed by Sanford Biggers, American, born 1970

performed by Terry Adkins, American, 1953–2014

Cosmic Conundrum

Video

duration 3:21



Collaboration is a key tenet to both Adkins's and Biggers's artistic practices. This clip is from a live mixed-media performance crafted and directed by Biggers and staged at the famed New York art and performance space The Kitchen. Adkins, with brass bells hanging from his neck, plays the saxophone in Biggers's GhettoBird Tunic (2006), a variation on his earlier Tunic, seen here. This performance doubles as an overture to the diasporic drift, or *dérive*, staged in Biggers's otherworldly vignettes of "live video mixing, improvised music, and a small ensemble of dancers whose choreographed movements cast geometric light patterns through space."

Thorton Dial, American, 1928 - 2016

You Can't Get Away from the Business, 1992

Charcoal, graphite, and red chalk (rubbed) on tan wove paper

76.2 x 112.4 cm (30 x 44 1/4 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Donna Howell and her sons Matthew and Jonathan in memory of her husband James S.S. Howell, Class of 1974
2001-287



In *You Can't Get Away from the Business*, the repetition, movement, and interaction of tigers and human women saturate the paper's surface with a lyrical play on gendering. Part alter ego, part symbol of black manhood, Dial's tigers also carry political resonance. He has associated them with the Black Panther Party and with Perry L. "Tiger" Thompson, a black labor organizer and fellow worker at the Pullman Standard Plant in Bessemer, Alabama. Dial's women and tigers dance, contort, and fade as if to dramatize the complex entanglements of sex, love, harm, and betrayal. This is just one example of what the poet Amiri Baraka described as the "fearful symmetry" of Dial's works on paper "that will shake you once you are fully, or more fully, hip to it."

Leonardo Drew, American, born 1961

Number 25D, 2005

Fabric, cotton thread, and graphite on white paper

58.4 x 58.4 x 3.8 cm (23 x 23 x 1 1/2 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund 2005-95

Drew forges abstract works of art from humble, cast-off materials rich with symbolic and historical connotations—in this case, to the natural cycles of birth and decay as well as industrialization and the antebellum South. Cotton, wood, rope, rags, and rust feature frequently in his work. In *Number 25D*, Drew constructs an asymmetrical grid—a foundational element of modern art—out of cotton fabric and thread. Strands of extraneous thread rest on top of and between the small squares that compose the grid, introducing disorder, vulnerability, and tactility to a format that is more typically associated with stability, science, and standardization. Rather than remain in a fixed position, cotton—and its resonance with slave labor—spills out of the grid, as if to suggest its irrepressible historicity.



Melvin Edwards, American, born 1937

In collaboration with Randy Hemminghaus and Alex Kirillov at Brodsky Center

Curtain for Friends, 2015

A set of two color lithographs (diptych)

71.1 x 119.4 cm (28 x 47 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1920, Fund 2017-12 a-b

Over the past five decades, Edwards has produced abstract sculptures and installations that address issues of race, labor, and violence. This recent print foregrounds two prominent motifs and materials—chains and barbed wire—used by the artist. The composition recalls his massive *Curtain for William and Peter*, named for William T. Williams and Peter Bradley, two painters who shared a studio with Edwards in the late 1960s. When first displayed, *Curtain* had profound historical associations to younger African American artists, including David Hammons, who commented, "this was the first abstract piece of art that I saw that had a cultural value in it for black people. I didn't think you could make abstract art with a message."



Amos Ferguson, Bahamian, 1920–2009

Bahamian Dancers, 1983

Enamel on cardboard

91.4 x 91.4 cm (36 x 36 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of Margaret Hedberg and Gregory S. Hedberg, Class of 1968, in honor of Dr. Chika Okeke-Agulu

2016-43

Ferguson has said that he "paints by faith, not sight." *Bahamian Dancers* reflects the intimacy he finds between his religious belief and artistic practice. The painting features three black figures who bang on goat-skin drums as part of the Bahamian parade known as Junkanoo. Ferguson's use of house paint on cardboard flattens the surface, presses the figures close to the picture plane, and creates distinctive compositions of space, rhythm, and movement. His play with color and perspective verges on a kind of "second sight" as he translates the dazzling choreography and musicality associated with this Afro-Caribbean tradition onto the smooth surface of the painting.



Sam Gilliam, American, born 1933
Printed at Vermillion Editions, Ltd., founded 1977 Published by Middendorf-Lane Gallery
Coffee Thyme II, 1980
Lithograph, screenprint, etching and embossing
79 × 103 cm (31 1/8 × 40 9/16 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of James Kraft, Class of 1957
2006-221



In the 1980s, Gilliam stated, "Figurative art doesn't represent blackness any more than a non-narrative media-oriented kind of painting, like what I do." Consistently committed to abstraction since the 1960s, the artist radicalized painting by dispensing with stretchers and frames, draping, hanging, knotting, and folding his stained and saturated canvases into colorful three-dimensional rhythms. This print relates to Gilliam's *Black Paintings* series of the late 1970s, in which he enhanced the rugged asphalt-like surface by dragging a shag-rug rake across gel-thickened acrylic paint, producing encrusted and poetically evocative expanses of shifting patterns.

Wadsworth Jarrell, American, born 1929
Revolutionary, 1972
Color screenprint on white wove paper
82.5 × 66 cm (32 1/2 × 26 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Felton Gibbons Fund
2017-200



In the late 1960s, Jarrell cofounded AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), an artists' collective formed in Chicago with the intent of exploring and defining a global black aesthetic grounded in a shared African heritage. This vibrant, agitprop screenprint derives from Jarrell's iconic *Revolutionary (Angela Davis)* (1971, Brooklyn Museum), painted in homage to the renowned political activist and intellectual. As in the painting, Davis wears a "revolutionary suit" designed by Jarrell's wife, Jae, which incorporated a cartridge shoulder belt. Davis speaks into a microphone, with words and phrases—"love," "resist," "I have given my life to the struggle"—as well as the capital letter B (for "black," "bad," and "beautiful"), spilling into and completely filling the pulsating surface, which is executed in high-keyed "Kool-Aid" colors intended to evoke an uplifting response in the viewer.

Wifredo Lam, Cuban, 1902–1982
Soeur de la gazelle (Sister of the Gazelle), from the album *Pleni Luna*, 1974
Color lithograph on Rives BFK paper
64.9 × 49.7 cm (25 9/16 × 19 9/16 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of David L. Meginnity, Class of 1958
1996-4



This dramatic lithograph demonstrates Lam's affinity with Surrealism as well as his practice of drawing heavily from Afro-Caribbean symbolism, folklore, and religious beliefs. Here he collapses the divide between the real and unreal, human and animal, marvelous and mundane. Lam considered his paintings a form of decolonization, dramatizing the dehumanizing effects of colonialism. Seen in this light, this lithograph calls to mind the poet Aimé Césaire's description of Lam's work as "[n]othing except the shivering spawn of forms liberating themselves."

Norman Wilfred Lewis, American, 1909–1979

Untitled, 1954

Oil and ink on cream wove paper

58.4 × 83.8 cm (23 × 33 in.)

Private Collection, USA



Emerging as a social realist painter during the Great Depression, Lewis was greatly influenced by leftist politics, his involvement in the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Arts Project, and the jazz scene of postwar New York City. *Untitled* represents part of the artist's turn away from his "protest paintings" and toward abstract expressionism. Where Lewis's earlier works sought to represent social reality and inspire political action, *Untitled* conjures scenes with barely inked figures that are as calligraphic as they are social. This atmospheric work plays with shadows, focus, and depth to create a poetic field of light and movement.

Glenn Ligon, American, born 1960

Printed by Megan Moorhouse and Rachel Gladfeller Dieu Donn  Papermill Inc.

Published by Dieu Donn  Papermill Inc.

Self Portrait at Eleven Years Old, 2004

Handmade paper with cotton base sheet and stenciled linen pulp painting

91.5 x 76.2 cm (36 x 30 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase Kathleen Compton Sherrerd Fund for Acquisitions in American Art

2005-18



Ligon frequently incorporates stenciled literary texts and images of cultural heroes in his complex explorations of personal, racial, and gender identity. The richly textured *Self-Portrait at Eleven Years Old* refers to the artist's identification with his childhood idol Stevie Wonder and derives from the cover of the singer's greatest-hits triple LP, *Looking Back* (1977). For this print, Ligon enlarged a drawn copy he had made of the cover and used a stencil to create tightly clustered circles of black linen pulp that mimic the benday dots of the original. According to Ligon, paper pulp was the most effective medium in which he could achieve a sense of the handmade, which put the image "into the teenage bedroom or the collages of an obsessed fan."

Kerry James Marshall, American, born 1955

Printed in collaboration with Pam Paulson at Paulson Bott Press

Vignette (Wishing Well), 2010

Color aquatint etching with drypoint, chine coll , and hand coloring
plate: 113.7 × 85.8 cm (44 3/4 × 33 3/4 in.)

sheet: 135.5 × 103.3 cm (53 3/8 × 40 11/16 in.)

Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Felton Gibbons Fund

2017-13



In addressing what he has described as the "vacuum in the image bank" of the Western canon, Marshall has made the historical invisibility of the African American experience powerfully visible in his figurative work. While many of his large painted narratives feature contemporary settings like hair salons and housing projects, others are more dreamlike—most notably his ongoing *Vignettes* series, from which this monumental print derives. Inspired by the amorous fantasies of eighteenth-century French Rococo artists such as Boucher and Fragonard, the *Vignettes* situate black couples in imaginary landscapes, framed by pink hearts and flowers. In this enigmatic scene a woman throws coins in a wishing well while being spied upon by a man crouching in the bushes.

Chris Ofili, British, born 1968
Untitled (Orange Dress), 1999
24.1 × 15.6 cm (9 1/2 × 6 1/8 in.)
Courtesy of the Petrucci Family Foundation of African American Art



Of Nigerian descent, Ofili gained international renown in the 1990s for exuberant layered paintings that collapse religious and secular imagery—most famously in his *Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), which incorporates elephant dung and images of female genitalia. This work relates to a series of more than 180 watercolors, entitled *Afro Muses*: whimsical, stylized portraits of black women and black men featuring colorful costumes, ornate jewelry, elaborate hairdos, and subtly nuanced facial expressions. While Ofili considers such luminous works “springboards” of inspiration for his larger canvases, they also convey an icon-like presence.

Howardena Doreen Pindell, American, born 1943
Printed by Judith Solodkin and Patricia Branstead at Aeropress
Kyoto: Positive/Negative, 1980
Two-sided color lithograph and etching with punched-out and collaged dots on five strips of buff Japanese rice paper
67 × 52 cm (26 3/8 × 20 1/2 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Gift of James Kraft, Class of 1957
2006-320



Beginning in the 1960s, Pindell developed a highly refined and craft-driven formal aesthetic while maintaining a commitment to political activism. She exposed racism in the art world in written reports and in the scathing video *Free, White, and 21*—produced in 1980, the same year as this print—which incorporates the hole-punching procedure of her layered painted collages. The confetti-like surface pulsates with tiny vectors and sequences of numbers, which had personal significance to the artist, whose father was a mathematician. Together with the title, *Kyoto*, the delicate rice papers evoke Pindell's first trip to Japan, in 1979. The red dots may allude to a childhood memory of a root beer stand where she and her father were given mugs with red circles on the bottom—a means of designating utensils for use by African Americans.

Lorna Simpson, American, born 1960
Counting, 1991
Photogravure and screenprint
187.5 x 96 cm (73 13/16 x 37 13/16 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, gift of Sarah Sage McAlpin, honorary member, Class of 1920
x1992-1



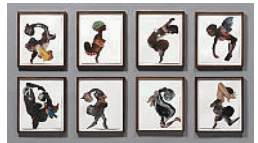
Simpson manipulates text and the photographic image to expose America's social, historical, and political investments in the black body. *Counting* consists of three seemingly unrelated images stacked vertically: a coil of braided hair, a brick hut, and the upper torso, neck, and mouth of a black body. The placards that frame the images on three sides feature different kinds of counting: measures of time as well as numbers of twists, braids, locks, bricks, and years. Like many of Simpson's "phototexts," *Counting* questions dominant techniques of observation and modes of classification that ascribe social meanings to the black female body. Similar to the allusions to labor, work, and care conveyed by the placards, the black female body can only be inferred in *Counting* demonstrating that the experiences of black women exceed categories of seeing and knowing.

Kara Walker, American, born 1969
no world, from the series An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters, 2010
Etching, aquatint, and drypoint
plate: 60.6 x 90.5 cm. (23 7/8 x 35 5/8 in.)
sheet: 76.8 x 103.5 cm. (30 1/4 x 40 3/4 in.)
Courtesy of the Petrucci Family Foundation of African American Art



Like her monumental installations of cut-paper silhouettes, Walker's prints subversively utilize a genteel medium to produce exquisitely horrific images that aim to exorcise what she has called the "maladies" of slavery and racism that plague American history. In *no world*, Walker meditates on the transatlantic slave trade, collapsing ambiguous narratives in a drama of modulated black and gray tones punctuated by whiteness. The title is a pun on the fabled "New World" of freedom and opportunity to which European colonialists aspired—and which they denied African slaves.

Wangechi Mutu, Kenyan, born 1972, based in the United States
Chorus Line, 2008
Watercolor and collage on paper
78.7 x 132.1 cm (31 x 52 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund 2008-72 a-h



The female forms in these eight amalgamations of watercolor and found photographs have been subject to deformation, an effect that simultaneously suggests violence and jubilation. Mutu modeled the voluptuous, distended bodies on the Paleolithic fertility sculpture *Venus of Willendorf* as well as on Saartjie Baartman, an enslaved Khoikhoi woman from the area of South Africa. Baartman was traveled by her owner throughout Europe, where she was subjected to humiliating public display from 1810 until her death in 1815. Mutu's collages address the fantasies and fears that society often has attached to women and people of color.

Carrie Mae Weems, American, born 1953
White Patty You Don't Shine, 1987–88
Gelatin silver print
image: 47.6 x 39.4 cm (18 3/4 x 15 1/2 in.)
sheet: 63.6 x 53.5 cm (25 1/16 x 21 1/16 in.)
Princeton University Art Museum. Museum purchase, gift of Robert J. Fisher, Class of 1976, and Mrs. Fisher 2001-146



Weems pairs staged photography with language in ways that confront rather than consume stereotypes about black life. "White patty" is an African American slang term to describe a Caucasian girl. In *White Patty You Don't Shine*, a young black girl wearing boxing gloves firmly challenges the gaze of the camera. She is armed to resist her societal or personal foe through the powers of poetry and physical might.

I say river corrosive
kiss of guts
river gash enormous embrace
in the smallest swamps
forced water frantic at the sluice gate
for with fresh tears
I built you into a river
poisonous
 spasmodic
 triumphant
which toward the flowering shores of the sea
tears open the slash of my manchineel course

Excerpt from “**Your Portrait,**” 1983
by AIMÉ CÉSAIRE, Martinican, 1913–2008

They connect their sockets
to spermatic strings
of dried centipedes
moving in half steps toward
center of the darkness of the dot
to become ancestral shadows
saturated between Damballah's tattooed toes
and Qya's fishhook fingers
between Ogun's rust colored neck
and Oshun's wine coated tongue
between Shangó's red leaves matted to
tiny pyramid teeth of a barking sorcerer
and Yemayá's silver-rimmed eyelids expanding
and contracting into a cyclonic breeze of
double-headed bats

Excerpt from "**When I Look at Wifredo Lam's Paintings,**" 1984
by JAYNE CORTEZ, American, 1934–2012

Amos Ferguson came up from the grave to
lend outrage a name. A lizard donned a
red bowtie but not really. I twas a whim had
its
way with us, we wanted color and paint ...
In the dark outskirts we were in we were
told keep moving. Nub's minions gassed us,
polis made us weep. We booked, we put our
bird
book away, we kept stepping ... No matter
we'd be long since gone we'd read we'd win, the
we
we'd have been
we'd be

Excerpt from "**Song of the Andoumboulou: 154,**" 2016
by NATHANIEL MACKEY, American, born 1947

I talked to a fellow, an' the fellow say,
"She jes' catch hold of us, somekindaway.
She sang Backwater Blues one day:

*'It rained fo' days an' de skies was dark as night,
Trouble taken place in de lowlands at night.*

*'Thundered an' lightened an' the storm begin to roll
Thousan's of people ain't got no place to go.*

*'Den I went an' stood upon some high ol' lonesome hill,
An' looked down on the place where I used to live.'*

An' den de folks, dey natchally bowed dey heads an' cried,
Bowed dey heavy heads, shet dey moufs up tight an' cried,
An' Ma lef' de stage, an' followed some de folks outside."

Dere wasn't much more de fellow say:
She jes' gits hold of us dataway.

Excerpt from "**Ma Rainey**," 1939

by STERLING ALLEN BROWN, American, 1901–1989