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What Would Ben Franklin Say? Artists Weigh the Dream of Democracy

In Philadelphia, the sun rises on a bold collaboration between two museums.

Hilarie M. Sheets | March 23, 2023

PHILADELPHIA — It’s just a few blocks on Arch Street between the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, the oldest art school and museum in the United States, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia, founded in 1976 to celebrate the achievements of African Americans from pre-colonial times to the current day. Yet rarely have visitors at one museum made the walk to the other. “How do we create this corridor between us?” posed Dejay Duckett, vice president of curatorial services at AAMP.

Now, an unusual collaborative exhibition has opened at the two institutions; together they commissioned 20 artists — including Alison Saar, Hank Willis Thomas, Wilmer Wilson IV and Dread Scott — to make new work and bring a multitude of perspectives to

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the knotty question Benjamin Franklin reportedly pondered in 1787, as the Constitution was being written: Was the sun rising or setting on American democracy?

“Rising Sun: Artists in an Uncertain America,” on view through Oct. 8, was conceived during Donald J. Trump’s tumultuous presidency by Jodi Throckmorton, then curator of contemporary art at the academy known as PAFA, in partnership with Duckett. They started conversations with artists in early 2020 that gestated throughout the pandemic lockdown, the killings of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd that reignited a nationwide racial justice movement, and the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the Capitol, all buffeting the show’s central query.



“Sketchbook, With Foreboding” (2019), left, by Renée Stout, and “Heavy Packed with Gas Mask (Amérique)” (2022), by Hank Willis Thomas, at the African American Museum in Philadelphia, in an unusual collaboration with neighboring PAFA. Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times



Photographs by Dread Scott hang in the African American Museum in Philadelphia. At left, “Slave Rebellion Reenactment, performance still 1” (2020) and, at right, “We Want Freedom” (2023). Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times

“None of us had any idea how the world would change, and that is baked into the exhibition now,” said Duckett, noting tremendous staff upheaval during this period that roiled both host institutions and the museum field at large. “All the good and the bad of this project is a microcosm of what the show is about. Democracy is fraught and being able to make sure everyone is heard is difficult.” AAMP is a smaller, less wealthy museum, and Duckett worked hard to maintain at every point that “we were staying on a level playing field.”

Throckmorton, who moved last year to the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, in Sheboygan, Wis., as its chief curator, was inspired by the oft-told story of Franklin’s uncertainty as he looked toward George Washington’s chair, with its symbolic motif carved into the back — a sun bisected by a horizon line. Franklin would conclude, “Now I have the happiness to know that it is a rising and not a setting Sun.”



“Benjamin Franklin” (1767), by David Martin, from the permanent collection of the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times

“Even at that really early moment with people who were true believers, they were questioning it — that in fact it is patriotic to question,” said Throckmorton, who in 2019 made the 15-minute walk to AAMP to bounce the idea of a collaboration off her colleague.

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When Duckett heard the proposed title she responded with the line “Facing the rising sun of our new day begun” from James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” written in 1900. “It would be almost impossible to consider an exhibition with that name without thinking about the Black national anthem,” Duckett said.

The curators split a grant from the Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, and compiled distinct lists of artists, which they refined together, with Duckett selecting Black artists exclusively, in keeping with her institution’s focus. She conceded Wilson to PAFA, where he has made alternative kinds of monuments. “All of us had to keep reminding ourselves this is one exhibition,” she said.

At AAMP, which is turning over its more than 12,000 square feet of exhibition space to contemporary artworks for the first time, the nine artists include John Akomfrah, Martha Jackson Jarvis, Demetrius Oliver and Deborah Willis.

At PAFA, which has been diversifying the artists represented in its trove of American art dating from the 1760s, Throckmorton selected 11 artists, predominantly women, including Shiva Ahmadi, Lenka Clayton, Tiffany Chung, Rose B. Simpson, Sheida Soleimani and Saya Woolfalk, and got an upfront commitment by PAFA to acquire something by each in the show. “I was looking for artists that I thought were already answering that question in their work,” Throckmorton said. Galleries in the historic landmark building were emptied for the new exhibition.



The artist Saya Woolfalk walks by her multimedia installation in the Moorish-style Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts. Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times

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Works selected by the artist Lenka Clayton from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts' permanent collection as part of "Rising Sun." Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times



Works by Sheida Soleimani, an Iranian American artist, in the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times

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The transformation at PAFA's ostentatious Moorish-style building, opened in 1876 when the city hosted the World's Fair, is striking. Throckmorton acknowledged it was a big ask of the institution to put its prized collection in storage. "But what does it mean to really shake up people's thinking?"

At the top of the grand stairwell, in place of Benjamin West's two 19th-century biblical paintings, Eamon Ore-Giron has made two monumental abstracted cosmic landscapes, each with black rays emanating from the center and a constellation of stylized orbs. One canvas could suggest dawn, the other dusk.

Image



"Black Medallion XIV (Inti)" (2022) by Eamon Ore-Giron at the top of a stair at PAFA. Credit... Aaron Richter for The New York Times

"These works are meant to position the viewer in a space where they are interpreting dawn and dusk," said Ore-Giron, who has depicted both transitional moments as fundamentally similar rather than opposite. "America's filled with this weird duality. To me this two-part exhibition structure just reinforced the idea of perspective."

In a gallery at PAFA once filled with 19th-century marble figurative sculptures, Petah Coyne's majestic black tree now holds the floor. Its boughs are weighted with more than a dozen white peacocks, as if in conversation. She described it as symbolic of her generation, whose members are now in their 70s and 80s. "A lot of us are disappointed," Coyne said of the dream of democracy. "My generation tried very hard but I think we failed."

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Image



A sculpture by the artist Petah Coyne (Untitled #1383 (Sisters—Two Trees), from 2013–2023 at the Pennsylvania Academy. Credit... Aaron Richter for The New York Times



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“Untitled #1551 (Color of Heaven),” from 2021–2023, by Petah Coyne. Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times

Yet Coyne answers the exhibition’s question with a vision of hope. Climbing a specially-built stair, viewers can poke their heads into the light-filled rafters where 11 glorious wax-dipped bouquets of silk flowers are suspended, with three bright blue peacocks perched in the wings. “Looking to the next generations, I can see their hunger for solving so many of the problems,” said Coyne.

At PAFA, Dyani White Hawk was inspired by “Lift Every Voice and Sing” for her meditative video and sound wall piece composed of mirrored glass panels. Viewers can see themselves reflected amid images of human, animal, plant and spiritual life projected on triangles, connected by letters spelling “relative.” “I want the work to feel like an offering,” she said.

As a Native American artist, acutely attuned to power dynamics, White Hawk said she hopes the partnership between PAFA and AAMP upsets the scales of perceived importance between the institutions. “If they’re doing it right, PAFA has a tremendous amount to gain from the storytelling and listening and networking that can take place through the community that AAMP will inevitably bring.”

Image



“Relative” (2023), by Dyani White Hawk. Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times

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arc of the exhibition prompt. For her 35-foot lyric video spanning a ramp between floors, Belle shot the sunrise in St. Croix, the easternmost point of the U.S. territories, where she is based, and sunset in Guam, the westernmost territory.

“So much of Manifest Destiny was about settling all these different places,” she said. “This is about unsettling the history and mythology about what America is.”

When Renée Stout was approached to contribute, she had long felt pessimistic about the state of the country and her work is a form of escapism. At AAMP, she is showing drawn portraits from her series “Hoodoo Assassins,” of people of all races and genders, with lists detailing their special powers. “I’ve created an army who protect my parallel universe where all people were equal.”



At the African American Museum in Philadelphia, clockwise from top left: Renée Stout, “Hoodoo Assassin #9 (Ogun),” 2021; “Hoodoo Assassin #10 (Poisonous Herb Specialist),” 2021; “Hoodoo Assassin #13 (Chameleon 2),” 2021; “Hoodoo Assassin #12 (Antennae),” 2021 Credit...via Renée Stout

Unaware of how the others were responding to the mission, Stout wondered if all the optimists would be at PAFA: “How’s the conversation between these two parts going to break down?”

Mark Thomas Gibson tried to imagine a world without white supremacy. On the floor of a darkened gallery, he has made a gypsum-cast grave with a tombstone inscribed “Klansman.” Sprouting from the dark soil is an animatronic daisy, which moves searchingly to music that begins as a dirge and swells to something anticipatory. “I’m using elements with a little spectacle attached as bait on the hook,” Gibson said.

During the height of the pandemic, Gibson felt museums were beginning to take an honest “look under the hood” but now are back to polishing the car, he said. “It’s up to the institutions to go beyond the lip service,” he added.



“Their Failure Is Our Reward” (2022), by Mark Thomas Gibson, at the African American Museum. The work, which will run only a few times a day, features an animatronic flower and music. Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times

Duckett hopes to be able to acquire some works from the exhibition for AAMP’s permanent collection but wants community feedback before making strategic decisions. With an annual operating budget of less than \$3 million and no endowment, AAMP is in a very different financial position than PAFA, which has a \$20 million annual operating budget and a \$52 million endowment.

“We are partners but we are two very different institutions,” Duckett said. “For us to be able to talk candidly about equity and make sure at every step that was respected, it was very good for both institutions.”

Throckmorton said the collaboration proved humbling in ways. “It asked us to take a hard look at what we mean by partnerships,” she said. “Are we willing to share resources and come to the table again and again, and also let artists challenge us?” The curators tried to let the artists’ voices lead the project.

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Judith Tannenbaum, an independent curator brought in by Anna Marley, chief of curatorial affairs, stewarded the project on the PAFA side after Throckmorton moved to Wisconsin. Tannenbaum described the logistical challenges of group decision making: “How do you write a wall text jointly?”



The curators Anna Marley, Dejay Duckett and Judith Tannenbaum at the African American Museum, with works by Renée Stout being installed. Credit...Aaron Richter for The New York Times

Last month, two similarly disparate neighboring institutions — the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and the Museum of the African Diaspora — announced the creation of a joint curatorial position to develop projects bridging both.

Monetta White, executive director and chief executive at the Museum of the African Diaspora, hopes that “other institutions will look to these kind of partnerships, especially those that include Black institutions, as examples of what is possible,” she said. The challenge, she said, lies in the vast difference in size and pocketbook. Historically Black museums are “not coming to the table with apples to apples,” White said, adding it takes a commitment from leadership to see “how this could help both institutions.”

So, is the sun rising on such mutually beneficial teamwork between historically white and historically Black museums?

Duckett laughed. “If they dare.”

A correction was made on: March 23, 2023

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An earlier version of a picture caption with this article misspelled the name of a musician who contributed to “Their Failure Is Our Reward.” She is RaShonda Reeves, not Rashanda Reaves.