

# The Framing of Race

A supplement to works in the Allen Memorial Art Museum



## The Framing of Race and Works in the AMAM Collection

In the fall of 2014, photographs of protesters with hands raised became one of the most prominent visual symbols of the Black Lives Matter movement. Artists have long turned to visual culture to grapple with contested meanings of race. In spring 2016, the Allen Memorial Art Museum invited me to assign seminar students to write entries for a brochure highlighting works currently on view that address the theme of “The Framing of Race.” This seminar, *Text Based Research (CAST 303)*, involves interdisciplinary research focused on document collection and analysis of texts ranging from music, film, and photography to archival materials, the Internet, and social media. More specifically, we discuss the politics of representation in order to investigate relationships between visual, oral, and other expressive cultures and social justice activism.

In putting together the brochure, which was the first assignment of the seminar, students developed foundational skills necessary for the analysis of visual culture and its role as a form of social inquiry, a critique of social injustice and, at times, an activist tool. Each student researched an artwork (from a list provided by the museum) and wrote a short entry discussing how it frames race through elements such as subject matter, the context in which it was produced, and its intended audiences. The authors offer observations about the ways in which gender, sexuality, class, ability, legal status, and nationality intersect with race to shape perspectives on race, racism, and racialization.

This brochure is part of “Think/Create/Engage,” an initiative launched by Oberlin College in 2016 to explore pressing social issues across the college, the conservatory, and the art museum. This year’s theme, “The Framing of Race,” addresses the historical, political, economic, cultural, and social processes that produce white supremacy and the violent enslavement, genocide, and oppression of people of color.

—Wendy Kozol, *Professor of Comparative American Studies*



## KING SCULPTURE COURT

### Thomas Satterwhite Noble

(American, 1835–1907)

*The Present*, 1865

Oil on canvas

R.T. Miller Jr. Fund and James K. (OC 1946)  
and Anne Fassett (OC 1947) Sunshine  
American Art Fund, 2014.30

One of a series of three paintings titled *The Past, Present, and Future Conditions of the Negro*, Thomas Satterwhite Noble's *The Present*, painted in July 1865, depicts a Black woman in an interior that might be her home during the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. The artist, a former Confederate soldier, confronts the injustices of racism and enslavement in provocative ways. *The Present* affords us an intimate moment

with the subject: she returns our gaze as we look at her. On the wall behind her hang a portrait of Abraham Lincoln, a horseshoe pointing upward, and a feather – symbols of emancipation, luck, and freedom respectively. The woman rests her feet on a book, perhaps as a reference to existing laws against slave literacy. Fruits and vegetables, emblematic of nature's fecundity, lie strewn across the floor as if suggesting that her offspring have been forcibly taken away from her. The woman is adorned with gold jewelry, namely earrings and two wedding bands, whose glow matches the glint in her eye to evoke future possibilities and to symbolize some level of economic means or personal property.

But does this image truly capture what life was like for a Black woman recently freed from enslavement and trying to survive in Reconstructionist America? Or is it simply a product of Noble's imagination, appropriating an archetypal narrative to fulfill the needs of the painting?

The location and content of *The Past*, the first painting in the series, are unknown, but it likely portrays a scene of enslavement. *The Future* depicts a Black man reading in a study, suggesting that one day Black people will occupy positions of recognition and prestige in American society. Does *The Present* tell the story of the specious hope of newfound Black prosperity and presence in American life? Or does it remind us that the present can never escape the past—that the United States can never escape its origins of white supremacy and racialized violence?

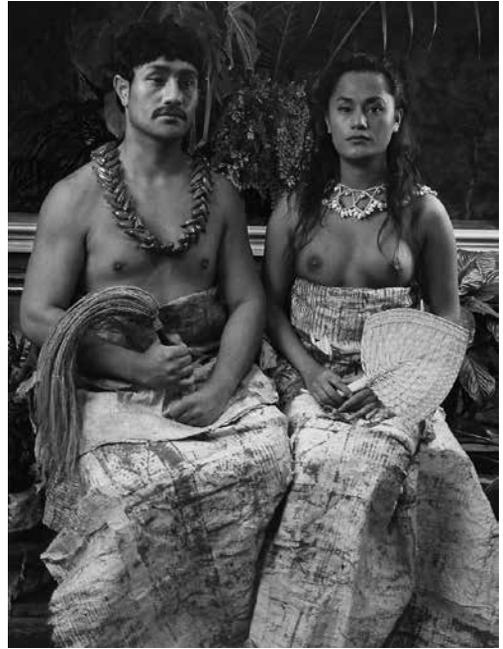
—Sarah Minion (OC '16)

**Shigeyuki Kihara** (Samoan,  
b. 1975)

***Ulugali'i Samoa: Samoan  
Couple***, 2005

Chromogenic print

Ruth C. Roush Contemporary Art Fund,  
2013.49



**S**higeyuki Kihara identifies as *fa'afafine*, a non-binary gender traditionally recognized in Samoa. The photograph is a double self-portrait: Kihara sits on the right, while the male sitter on the left bears Kihara's face altered to look masculine and photographically superimposed onto his body. The image intentionally recalls late 19th-century postcards, which showcased photographs staged by Westerners that depicted exoticized fantasies of native peoples from colonized lands. Key details here, however, such as the direct eye contact one of the subjects makes with the viewer, differ from and challenge that tradition. Kihara's work explores the impact of Western colonization and offers gender as a frame through which to investigate the colonial racialization of Samoan peoples and cultures.

The artist believes that transphobia and homophobia were introduced to Samoa during Western colonization, and that *fa'afafine* identities were once more accepted and respected than they are today. The literal splitting of Kihara's gender into two masculine/feminine gendered people portrays these new transphobic gender rules that Samoa has adopted since colonization. The title of the series to which this photograph belongs—*Fa'afafine: In a Manner of a Woman*—might itself be seen as a pun on the gender binary.

Kihara's mother is Samoan, and her father is Japanese. She is currently based in New Zealand. The artist's biracial heritage further places her at intersecting cultural borders.

—Kasey Ulery (OC '16)

STERN GALLERY

**Zeng Fánzhi** (Chinese, b. 1964)

***Mask Series #7***, 2000

Oil on canvas

Ruth C. Roush Contemporary Art Fund,  
2002.24



“**N**o one appears in society without a mask,” says Zeng Fánzhi. Born in the city of Wuhan, China, and raised at the end of the Cultural Revolution, Zeng experienced firsthand some of the major shifts in Chinese culture, politics, and economy. In 1993, he moved to Beijing to establish his art career. Along with cosmopolitan life and a newly modernized, Westernized Chinese culture, the artist experienced the isolation and loneliness of so-called modernity in urban anonymity.

Who is the man in the painting? Masks are iconic symbols of both concealment and dishonesty, individuality and anonymity. The subject’s grey suit masks his identity just as much as the grey mask hides his face. While the man appears to be a productive, working member of society, his

Western-style suit and the mask obscure his racial identity to leave the viewer pondering just who he is beyond his function in his society.

Is anyone ever the person they appear to be in society? In the exaggeration of the man’s hands, feet, ears, and eyes, Zeng paints not just the solitude of man, concealed behind his own mask, but the contrast between innateness and socialization through the juxtaposition of seemingly proportional to disproportional body parts. The hands as a sign of work, the feet as a fixture of migration, and the ears and eyes as senses of perception—all constitute the dichotomy of an individualized being in a globalized world.

—*Arcadia Rom-Frank (OC '17)*

STERN GALLERY

**Hung Liu** (American, born in China, 1948)

*Yoke*, 1997

Oil on canvas

Gift of the Estate of Esther S. Weissman,  
2006.23



**I**nspired by a historical photograph, Hung Liu's painting urges us to engage with relationships of power by making a connection with a marginalized person who is physically and emotionally suffering. The artist was inspired by a 1920s photograph of Tibetan convicts surviving punishment with downcast eyes and postures bent by the burden of yokes. What is it like to crouch under the weight of a yoke underground, forgotten and out of sight? Are poor Tibetans, brown people, or convicts deserving of this violent punishment? The convict's stare in the larger-than-life painting interrupts our gaze to interrogate our privilege as witnesses who can break contact and walk away.

How will we engage with this convict's suffering to end this human rights abuse? Both the red yoke engulfing the background and the layers of dripping red paint indicate

the Tibetan's immediate suffering. Is our reaction pity, sympathy, dismissal, or irritation? Can we engage in a moment of human connection beyond simply looking and walking by? What would happen if we let ourselves feel responsible, as viewers, for maintaining this violence? Can we recognize how our fate is intertwined with the disenfranchised and work against their marginalization?

Hung's painting brings a convict's humanity to our attention. Her work pushes us to educate ourselves about the suffering of marginalized people and to support those in pain. We must understand our roles as participants: both in far-away Tibet and in our home communities.

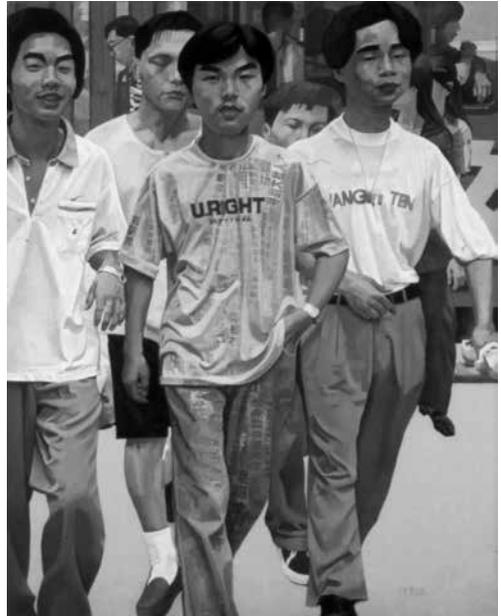
—*Claire Appelmans (OC '16)*

STERN GALLERY

**Huáng Hanchéng** (Chinese,  
b. 1965)

*Boys on the Town*, from the series  
*Suffused with the News*, 1997  
Oil on canvas with newspaper  
collage

Ruth C. Roush Contemporary Art Fund,  
2002.14

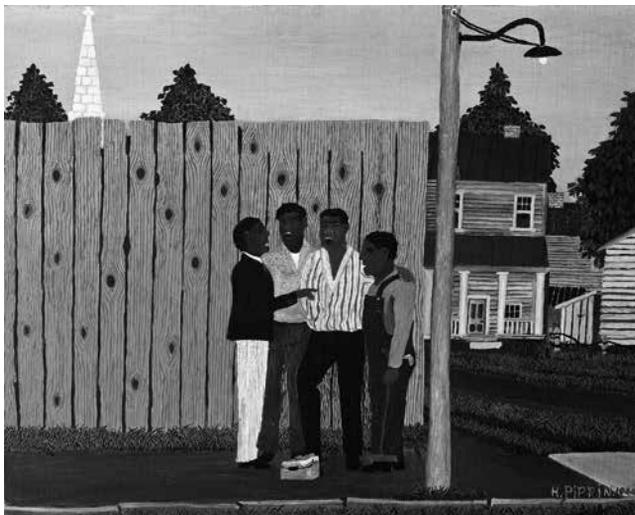


**T**he bold expressions and sense of unified movement of the young men of *Boys on the Town* feel as real as if one encountered them on the street. This sensation reflects the artist's quest to paint realistic snapshots of people's daily lives in his native city of Wuhan, China. Yet, there is an unsettling quality to the image: the bright yellows of the paint clash, the young men's poise feels contrived. They appear unified in horizontal stripes of similar color and trendy in brand name T-shirts, but how much can the viewer perceive about their racial identities and what still remains unknown?

The push for Chinese modernity that Huáng portrays may reveal contested ideas of race, particularly among the young generation. As these boys walk with confidence, they also saunter toward

a transnational youth culture of Western clothing brands and decisive consumerist choices. Curator and critic Feng Boyi notes the significance of consumer choices after the opening of China's planned economy, which marked a significant turn away from citizens' passivity in an economy with limited choices. Does this move toward transnational and consumerist culture obscure Chinese identities rooted in racial and ethnic differences? Critics praise Huáng for the universal quality of his subjects, though he cites his decision to stay in Wuhan rather than move to the more globalized Beijing as his effort to portray the specificity of the Chinese experience. What ideas of race do American viewers recognize in the young men from Wuhan?

—Zoe Martens (OC '16)



RIPIN GALLERY

**Horace Pippin** (American,  
1888–1946)

*Harmonizing*, 1944

Oil on canvas

Gift of Joseph and Enid Bissett, 1964.26

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Horace Pippin was not formally trained. He spent most of his life working blue-collar jobs in the coal, iron, and hotel industries, as well as serving time in the U.S. Army. After suffering a gunshot wound in World War I and losing mobility in his dominant arm, he pursued drawing and painting as a form of therapy. Pippin's paintings quickly gained recognition and he became one of the most prominent African American painters of his era. The fine art world, however, classified his work as Naïve or Primitive Art, suggesting that it was less advanced. The notion that self-taught artists,

often artists of color, are more “primitive” has historically reflected a sense of white superiority that pervades the fine arts and the rest of American society.

*Harmonizing*, like much of Pippin's work, seeks to represent the lives of ordinary African Americans. Four men congregate and sing on a street corner in his neighborhood in West Chester, Pennsylvania. The bright colors of their outfits are juxtaposed with the muted, wooden fence towering over them. Together, they stand tall and dignified with solemn facial expressions. Not a single cloud hovers above them.

Perhaps, similar to the way that Pippin found therapy through painting, he sees these men as healing through song. Despite barriers placed upon African Americans during the Jim Crow era, these singers manage to connect, express themselves, and build unity. In harmony, they create a complex and layered sound.

—*Jacob Firman (OC '16)*

RIPIN GALLERY

**Romare Bearden** (American,  
1911–1988)

*Conjur Woman*, 1975

Collage with spray paint on  
paper

R. T. Miller Jr. Fund, 2001.3

**P**owerful, disjointed, and smiling, Romare Bearden's *Conjur Woman* looks straight at the viewer. She is unafraid, controlling the nature around her as she moves through the verdant landscape.

The fragmented appearance of the conjure woman's body—head seemingly off center with piercing eyes—speaks to Bearden's choice of collage to capture the fractured reality of black American life in the 1960s. He began using collage in 1963 through his involvement with a group of African American artists called Spiral. These artists came together to address race issues within the art world and to bring the black experience to mainstream modern art.

Conjure women were monumental figures in southern black communities, known for their mythical powers, feared for their traditional African knowledge, and consulted by women about personal and familial matters. Bearden intentionally portrays the conjure woman to show the



power of African American women as community leaders.

This collage was created near the end of Bearden's career, when he was living on the Caribbean island of St. Martin. The influence of the Caribbean can be seen in the use of bright greens, pinks, and blues and in his choice of subject matter: Obeah is the name for the African conjure woman's Caribbean counterpart, a spiritual healer respected and feared for her traditional knowledge from Africa.

—Zia Kandler (oc '16)

RIPIN GALLERY

**Object Orange** (American)  
*Auburndale Site #3, Highland Park, Michigan*, from the project *Detroit. Demolition. Disneyland.*, 2006, printed in 2010

Chromogenic print

Gift of Douglas Baxter (OC 1972) in honor of Maxine and Stuart Frankel, 2012.35

In this image, the run-down house encased in orange paint immediately captures the eye. This abandoned building, along with dozens of others across Detroit, has been painted as the rallying cry of activist group Object Orange. An anonymous collective intent on spurring Detroit to demolish dilapidated buildings by making them visually unavoidable, Object Orange hails from the nearby predominantly white suburb of Bloomfield Hills.

Just as this house demands our attention, Detroit's decline has long fascinated and repulsed us as a nation, and yet its decay, born of legacies of racism and white flight, has not saved it. In turn, the house's gaping, empty windows and sharply splintered floorboards question the nature of our interest. Are our eyes drawn to this dying structure out of concern for its brokenness, or out of sick pleasure in its coming demise? Does the paint exploit the house's decay or



serve as a cry for help from a poor, black, and ignored city in need?

The whimsical color adorning this building holds the viewer's gaze, orange often being used to warn of danger. The lifeless house demands to know who has the power to label Detroit's buildings as uninhabitable. It asks who has the ability to shock the city into action, and to alter the city's landscape. What does it mean for Detroit, the majority of whose residents are black and impoverished, and whose government has been run by an emergency financial manager since 2013, to be asked by a band of privileged outsiders to tear down its buildings?

—*Leah Awkward-Rich (OC '17)*

RIPIN GALLERY

**Rashid Johnson** (American,  
b. 1977)

*Jonathan With Eyes Closed,*

1998–99

Van Dyke brownprint

Ruth C. Roush Contemporary Art Fund,  
2001.15



**T**he sheer size of Rashid Johnson's portrait *Jonathan with Eyes Closed* brings the viewer face to face with someone who is invisible to most people in American society. This work is part of a larger portrait project that centers on the lives of homeless black men in Chicago, with whom Johnson developed a relationship over the course of three years. For the series the artist used the laborious, time-consuming 19th-century Van Dyke printing process, which produces an unrivaled array of shades of black and brown.

Johnson intends for “an ironic confrontation between the viewer and the subject” to occur, which compels people with privilege to re-examine their place in society. This photograph works to combat and transform the rampant negative representation of black people in the media by emphasizing the humanity already present in subjects of the series. By removing the surrounding environment and displaying a large close-up of the individual, Johnson is able to focus

solely on Jonathan and his characteristics. This empathetic focus is a privilege often withheld from black men and people of color in American society.

This portrait may reflect the artist's interest in Afrofuturism, an aesthetic that explores processes of navigating and interacting with time, as well as subversively reshaping dominant society's perception of people of the African Diaspora. The expression on Jonathan's face suggests deep thought, conveying the possibility of him navigating the past, present, and future simultaneously.

—*David Zager (OC '17)*



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