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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

GOLDEN TOUCH

In Harlem, Thelma Golden has big plans for contemporary art.

BY IAN PARKER

helma Golden likes art, and knows about art, but the thing she wants to do, on as large a scale as possible, is curate-which is to say influence, edit, or, to use her mother's phrase, "get in other people's business." Golden is the person colleagues ask to help with the seating plan for a black-tie dinner. She shouts at the man at the end of her street who will not stop feeding the pigeons. At an opening, wearing a pink-and-orange Diane von Furstenberg dress, she will scold an overloaded artist, "Be an artist. Check your bag!" Or she can turn you against an imperfect in-flight cookie: "What do you mean, 'It's not bad'? It's not good. It's not great. If it's not a great cookie, why eat it?"

Art curators used to be connoisseurs-second-born sons of privilege, "whose families were trying to keep them off the proverbial streets of Monte Carlo," as a former director of the Whitney Museum, David A. Ross, recently put it. Art curators are now brokers. They are charmers and negotiators and fund-raisers, working in a world where it sometimes seems that there are more art institutions than there are great works of art to fill them. There were certainly curators in the past who moved in the public sphere, and who paid attention to living artists-people like the MOMA curator Dorothy Miller, whom Golden particularly admires. But today the curator looks more and more like a museum director-someone deep in the money scuffle that has long accompanied the production and distribution of art. Curators have to fight for air: eat lunch with billionaire collectors, drag trustees through the Venice Biennale, appear on the "Charlie Rose" show.

Some find this intolerable, and some find it stimulating, but it is unlikely that anyone is quite as cheerful about the way things have turned out as Golden, the deputy director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem. Golden, who likes to use the word "multitask," seems almost eerily stimulated by the coincidence of disposition and job description, and to spend time with her is to follow in her wake like a minion needing a signature from a striding executive in a nineteen-forties office melodrama. Not everyone would have thought, as Golden did, of laying imperial foundations on a fairly neglected corner (the African-American corner) of perhaps the least welcoming of contemporary arts. They might have looked for a place where fewer men wear loafers without socks. But Golden, whose ambition is both extreme and matter-of-fact, knows that curating modern art pulls you into conversations with people who have cash and power, and that the curator with ambitions beyond art-and with natural political skills-is entitled to entertain ideas of world domination. "Other curators just make their shows," an artist told her recently. "But I think you think your mission is to find good artists." Golden laughed. "No," she said. "I'm changing the world."

Golden, who sometimes calls herself a "producer," understands how to have an impact. At the Whitney, where she worked from 1991 to 1998, she was known for her championing of young black conceptual artists, and for including them in the Whitney Biennial in 1993 and in the "Black Male" show of 1994high-profile exhibitions that opened the museum's door to the then modish currents of multiculturalism and identity politics. And now the Studio Museum, which Golden joined two years ago, is shaking off its reputation as an earnest gallery on the edge of the known art world; she has made the museum matter. Her greatest success there has been an exhibition of a new generation of artists whom she calls (with partial irony) "postblack"; these are artists who have muted or rerouted the explicitly racial agenda of their predecessors.

"You know when you're making whipped cream, and it's liquid, and there's that moment just before it becomes the cream?" Golden asked me. "That's the moment I work in. I have to be in motion." She sits on the federal committee that selects the artists who will represent America at international biennials. She speaks at conferences. She poses for fashion shoots in O and Harper's Bazaar. She chats at parties with Spike Lee and Wynton Marsalis and friends who work in publishing and finance. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., the chair of Afro-American studies at Harvard, says, "She's very comfortable with herself, and also with power. I'm sure she will become the first black director of a major white art institution." Greg Tate, the essayist and Village Voice critic, has said that Golden is becoming "one of those pivotal centrist figures in African-American life." Russell Simmons, the rap entrepreneur, calls her "an inspiration." After Golden has introduced you to Simmons and to David Dinkins, hugged them both, and then been pulled away to meet Bill Clinton, you can forgive her for having said, with a smile, "Nobody doesn't know me. Who doesn't know me? Nobody."

n a clear, warm morning some months ago, Golden was on a hill above Aspen, Colorado, watching her friend the artist Glenn Ligon put on a crash helmet and prepare to paraglide. "They say black men are not supposed to die a natural death," he said. "But I don't think we're meant to jump off mountains." Two other friends of Golden's were there: one was Byron Kim, a Korean-American artist from New York; the other, the man who had invited them all to Aspen, for a short vacation with some art-world duties, was Fred Henry, a wealthy white man in his mid-fifties. Once a Whitney trustee, Henry now supports contemporary artists through a family fund called the Bohen Foundation. As the others got ready to leap, Golden sat on the grass looking uneasy, wearing jeans and sneakers rather than the usual designer clothes that she orders at the beginning of each season. "I think this is the first time I've ever seen Thelma perplexed," Henry said. Golden said, "If I'd known my cell phone wasn't going to work up

here, I would have stayed in the house."

To the surprise of some people who invite her to lecture but know only her name, Thelma Golden is not sixty years old and Jewish. She is thirty-five and black, with cropped hair and a small face. At five feet tall, she is very slight, which means that some people find it hard not to pick her up and carry her around. her concentrated attention can be transfixing—the children of her friends divulge all their secrets to her. "She'd make a wonderful stage mother," says her friend David Alan Grier, the comedian and former star of "In Living Color.""If you were her daughter, you would be *in* that play."

Golden never stops curating, and



Golden is a curator who calls herself a "producer." Photograph by Matthias Clamer.

"Stanley Crouch always lifts me off the ground. But he weighs... more than two hundred pounds and I'm about ninety on a good day, so what am I going to do?" Her manner is not lordly, but it has a teasing, camp brusqueness that does not quite disguise a genuine sense of entitlement. When she's not speaking, Golden becomes a little disengaged, and there are points in a dinner-table conversation when others laugh but she simply says, "Exactly, exactly," as if laughing took up too much time. But during the summer Aspen is full of vacationing art people, so there were lunches and gallery visits, and, on a short hike up the valley, Golden and Henry analyzed the politics of an attempt by the Bohen Foundation to fund a major New York installation by a British artist. She visited the apartment of a local gallery owner and real-estate mogul, noting a top-grade Jean-Michel Basquiat, a Cy Twombly, Lucian Freud etchings and Robert Mapplethorpe prints, and a dazzling early Peter Halley



over the bed. (On the mantelpiece was a framed newspaper clipping: "You will earn thousands of dollars every day doing nothing.") At a party thrown by Henry during her visit, Golden accepted the gift of a work by the young African-American artist Adler Guerrier. "Thelma being in the museum makes me want to have this artist there," the donor told me.

Golden inspires confidence in a world where it is easy to feel you have been duped. People are reassured when she takes charge. One evening in Aspen, as she and Ligon lay side by side on the floor, waiting for a Bikram yoga class to begin, Ligon reminded her of the opening of his 1998 show "Unbecoming," in which he had juxtaposed family photographs with images from gay pornography. Ligon had invited his stepmother, who was not familiar with the work, and with whom he had never discussed his sexual orientation. "It was weird," Ligon said. "It's an opening, there are five hundred people, and I was, like, I really don't have time to come out right now." Ligon introduced his stepmother to Golden, and then moved away. Golden took control, showed the stepmother around, and fell into an intense discussion of Ligon and his work. As Golden remembers it, "She was saying to me, I hope Glenn knows I respect his life and his choices."

In the yoga studio, Golden looked at Ligon and laughed. "We had a moment, honey. We had major sister bonding. I had your coming-out talk for you. I came out for you."

"Now, that's a full-service curator," Ligon said.

Thelma Golden knew she wanted to L be a curator when she was ten years old, and was given a board game called Masterpiece, which included reproductions of paintings from the Art Institute of Chicago. The game was dull, and Golden began sticking the cards on the wall with Fun-Tak. From this moment, she says, she was certain that her future career would involve art and Fun-Tak. She was living in St. Albans, Queens, a quiet, mostly black middle-class neighborhood, in the house where her parents still live. She grew up wearing denim pants suits and lime-green clogs, and for a couple of years she was a child model: she once appeared in an advertisement for a bank dressed as a flower girl. Her father and mother, whose parents were Caribbean immigrants, were active in black civic and social organizations. They created what Golden calls a "weird kind of radicalism" in the house, weaving liberal instincts into a strand of social conservatism. Golden never saw her father without a tie. (He is an insurance broker.) She and her brother, who is one year younger, were encouraged to watch their language and their manners. Golden went to a private school in nearby Roslyn, where she was the first African-American girl to graduate. After class, Golden would sometimes help her father in his

brokerage, answering the phone in her best Mary Tyler Moore voice: "Golden and Golden, how may I help you?"

Golden was happy enough at school and at home. But Queens did not suit her. There was too much talk of aluminum siding, bulk buying, and impatiens, "which are the most pitiful flowers I've ever seen-the most dinky, pissy little flowers." She dreamed of Manhattanor Brooklyn would do, where an aunt lived an alluring bohemian life. She began studying art history in sixth grade, and, around the age when another youth might have taken comfort in rock and roll, she found contemporary art. In the Times and in New York, she discovered Jean-Michel Basquiat and the East Village and Mary Boone, the gallery owner, photographed at Odeon next to David Salle. "I read the New York Mary Boone article ten times. I studied that photograph of her at Odeon. I knew I was going to be in the art world. I knew I was going to know Mary Boone. I knew I was going to go to Odeon."

Golden began to take the train into Manhattan to visit galleries and museums. She copied MOMA labels into her notebook ("This Monet represents . . ."). In her last two years of high school, when she was commuting to the New Lincoln School, on the Upper East Side, she worked as an intern at the Metropolitan Museum three evenings a week. The other evenings, she could often be found at Bloomingdale's with her friend Alexandra Llewellyn (who is now married to Tom Clancy), buying Willi Smith and Fiorucci, not to wear but to preserve in tissue paper, as works of art.

In 1983, she started Smith College. In a class of six hundred, there were twenty or so black women. "I was in heaven. I'd never been with so many black people who were not my family." She majored in art history and African-American studies, and soon became frustrated by the failure of both faculties to recognize black American artists at a time when the academy was overrun with dissertations about Toni Morrison. By Golden's own measure, her Smith grades were unremarkable; she was most engaged when working in the Smith College Museum of Art, whose collection included "an amazing, amazing Sol LeWitt. I could rebuild that Sol LeWitt from memory, I spent so long looking at it." Golden says today, "You know people who get into going to action films? That's what looking at art is for me, a complete intellectual, emotional, physical experience."

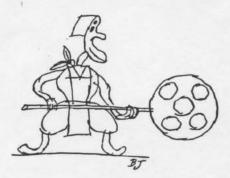
After Smith, Golden returned to New York, where she worked as a curatorial assistant at the Whitney and as an intern at the Studio Museum. In 1991, David Ross, who had just become the director of the Whitney, offered her a full-time curatorial job. Many were delighted by the appointment of a young black woman at the Whitney. But some thought she was underqualified: she had no experience in another major museum, no record of scholarly publication, no advanced degrees. These kinds of complaints can still be heard. One critic recently told me that Golden is "savvy at keeping up with intellectual fashion, but not an intellectual powerhouse." On the other hand, Henry Louis Gates calls her "extraordinarily well educated," and Richard Powell, an art historian at Duke, says that she is a "curator's curator. She knows what's going to work in a particular space." Golden herself describes the process of arranging art works as quasi-musical-she walks through a space humming dahdah-DAH, for small-small-large.

Ross put her in charge of the Whitney's Philip Morris branch, on Park Avenue, where she curated successful small shows and gathered around her a group of young African-American conceptual artists. Although Golden thought of herself as the Whitney's black curator, not its curator of black art, one role was sure to pull the other behind it. "One of the books that were so important to me at Smith was Paula Gidding's 'When and Where I Enter,' and the title comes from the great quote from Anna Julia Cooper, 'When and where I enter . . . the whole Negro race enters with me.' And I certainly felt that way at the Whitney. I was walking in there every day with hundreds of people." She did not want to restrict herself to working only with black artists, but she also wanted to avoid the "weird legacy of racial self-hatred and doubt" that could have led her away from them. Besides, the work of the new generation-Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Gary Simmons, Fred Wilson, Carrie Mae Weems-seemed particularly strong. "I felt I had an amazing opportunity to work with black artists who were just better-they were fierce."

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These artists had an interest in racial themes, stereotypes, and gender. They liked to use texts in their work: passages from James Baldwin, newspaper stories, or the overheard comments of people looking at Mapplethorpe's black nudes. Their installations incorporated a boxer's punching bag, or gold-plated sneakers set against a police lineup. Gary Simmons's "The Garden of Hate" was, to quote Golden's own catalogue description, "a round flower bed filled with red and white azaleas in the shape of the Ku Klux Klan's cross. Rising from the center is a flagless flagpole." (Some of the azaleas were later replanted in Golden's parents' garden in St. Albans.) This was art inspired by the multicultural arguments of the nineteeneighties, by the attention given to cultural products not made by white men. And it was art made in the wake of Rodney King's beating, in 1991. Those videotaped images deeply informed Golden's own political sensibility, and reminded her of "how much had not happened" to change attitudes about race in America. She says her form of protest was simply to be what she was-a black woman at the Whitney. "My personal politics are so submerged in my existence. I feel I've never had to protest, because I am the protest."

For decades, from the Harlem Renaissance, in the nineteen-twenties, to the Black Arts Movement, of the nineteensixties and beyond, there had been an implicit question in much African-American art: whether its first duty was to raise race consciousness or to engage fully in the white-dominated cultural aesthetic of the day-whether the struggle should be over politics or paint. Or, as Richard Powell puts it, whether black art should value "artistic singularity over racial unity." There now seemed to be an opportunity to short-circuit that discussion. Golden's presence at the Whitney, and the energy with which she lobbied for her favorites, gave the new generation of



artists an opportunity to find their way in the mainstream art world of Chelsea and SoHo while still making race their subject.

But not everyone agreed about the achievement of these artists. When some of them were included in the controversial, youthful, gender- and race-oriented Whitney Biennial of 1993, which Golden helped curate, the art critic Michael Kimmelman wrote, in the Times, "I hate the show." (Visitors were handed a button designed by a California artist which read, "I can't imagine ever wanting to be white.") A year later, more of this work was seen in a show whose concept was entirely Golden's, "Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art." It, too, caused a sensation, and was knocked around by reviewers. But this time the real to-do came from within the black establishment, which, like any other establishment, was likely to resist a new generation's rebelliousness. Some felt that if a major institution had found room for an exhibition of black images it was a pity that so many of them should include guns, racism, and Rodney King. Lowery Stokes Sims, the trailblazing black curator of an earlier generation, who was then at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said, "Older people, the forty-pluses, were desirous of an exhibition of positive images." Instead, they got sex and violence. Some of the older black artists who had long felt starved of mainstream recognition also complained. They had seen in Golden's appointment an opportunity to plug alleged historical gaps in the Whitney's collection, but "Black Male" made it clear that Golden's central project was to support the new. She was forced to defend herself on radio and television. Golden's philanthropist friend Peter Norton, whose foundation helped pay for the show, watched aggrieved guests shouting at her in his house. "She was blown away by the anger," David Ross says.

There was a wildly oversubscribed opening party in a midtown night club—the line ran around the block with Funkmaster Flex d.j.'ing. The next morning, Golden took off for a Miami hotel, exhausted, and lay in bed for twenty-four hours eating tuna burgers and watching pay-per-view movies. At the age of twenty-eight, she had curated a cultural moment: there had never been such public turmoil at the Whitney. "I don't have to do another 'Black Male' ever," Golden says now. "And that's a fabulous feeling. I think one can have a career where you're always walking around with this ideal show in your head, and working toward it, and God forbid you should never get to it. By mistake, I did that show first."

In 1998, David Ross left the Whitney to become the director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (a post he has since left). A new director, Maxwell Anderson, was appointed. Soon after his arrival at the Whitney, when Golden says she had already begun working on the 2000 Biennial, they had a meeting during which he offered her what she describes as "some little half a job with half a role with half a contract." She resigned a few days later. "You've spent your whole life wearing Manolo Blahniks and somebody's taking you to Payless, you know what I'm saying? And unless you're really desperate and your feet are bare, you're not going to do it."

At the time, her sudden departure was widely understood to be a dismissal. Anderson denies any such intention. "I felt then and I feel now that she's an extraordinarily talented curator," Anderson says. "In times of change, feelings run high." In any case, art-world colleagues were quick to show support. Golden lunched tirelessly at the Mercer Kitchen, and accepted a stopgap job as a curator for the Peter Norton Family Foundation. Then, a year later, Lowery Stokes Sims left the Met to become director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, and Golden was asked to join her.

The Studio Museum, which is about L the same age as Golden, had been drifting for a decade. Today, under the new regime, the drift has stopped, and annual attendance figures have risen from sixty thousand to more than a hundred thousand. In part, the change has to do with the international reputations of some of the African-American artists now in the middle of their careers-Glenn Ligon and Gary Simmons, for example, and a younger artist, Kara Walker, who recently won a MacArthur "genius" grant. It also has something to do with New York's changing relationship to Harlem: the museum's opening parties used to be on Sunday afternoons, because of anxieties about 125th Street

SUMMER'S FULLNESS

In summer, above a mountain stream scented with willows where purple butterflies, red admirals, and swallowtails, heavy with beauty, perform their final flight above the glittering world, where the air is so drenched in essential oils that you could pour it into glasses and feel its convex lens beneath your fingers; in August, when resin burns above the boughs of pines, and pinecones crackle as if licked by tongues of everlasting flame, and a sea authentically blue sways peacefully below like a victor, a king who's conquered the Persians, and all his yachts bow gently with every passing wave, and swimmers submerged in translucent bedding move with infinite slowness along invisible lines, along the white threads binding every substance, and you hear the vast whisper of creatures finally content, when it seems that even insects must have their own Dionysus; in August, when Europe's bustle suddenly ceases and factories stop short, and tourists laugh loudly on the beaches of the Ligurian Sea, just take two steps behind the scenes—and there a dense grove's semidarkness may conceal the shadows of those who lived briefly, in fear, without hope, the shadows of our brothers, our sisters, the shadows of Ravensbrück and Kolyma, poor angels of a black salvation, watching us greedily.

> -Adam Zagajewski (Translated, from the Polish, by Clare Cavanagh.)

after dark; today they are more often on weekday evenings, like any other art party. But the change is due mainly to the taste and the downtown influence of Sims and Golden, and to Golden's first group exhibition, "Freestyle," at the Studio Museum last spring. Golden showed the work of twenty-eight emerging black artists, and described them in the catalogue as "adamant about not being labeled as 'black' artists." Their workwhich ranged from cartoon figures to minimalist grids and phone records of calls made to Africa-for the most part did not put race and racial identity in the foreground. Instead, Golden suggested, it was "post-black."

The show was well received in the press. In *Newsweek*, Peter Plagens called "Freestyle" "essential" and said that it "puts the museum on the map." But there was some private grumbling about intellectual capriciousness: in which world did Golden live, black or post-black? Golden's problem, in part, is that "Black Male" had created such a stir—a stir connected to Golden's powers of persuasion as well as to the relative rarity of black group shows at major institutions—that it risked seeming like a manifesto: this was how every black artist worked, or should; no other African-American view of the world was authentic, no other art made sense. "Freestyle" ran the same risk. When I asked her about this, Golden said, "It's not that every black artist works in the same way at the same time. God forbid you were an abstract painter during multiculturalism"—a statement that some artists might hear as condolence from an executioner.

Today, Golden reserves the right to curate post-black artists and any other artists, while continuing to show and vacation with her pre-post-black friends. In fact, many of the artists Golden once worked with have also moved on, and the line between the Biennial/"Black Male" artists (mad-eyed revolutionaries) and the "Freestyle" artists (selfconsciously detached ironists) is as misleading as that between any two cultural generations. But it is not a complete fiction. Glenn Ligon, who coined the phrase "post-black" in conversation with Golden, meaning it ironically, recently said, "You try getting your post-black ass into a taxi in Harlem." He added, "It was artists of my generation positioning themselves around multiculturalism that allowed these children to be post-black. But they don't acknowledge that. In some ways, it's just, 'Why would you be bothering to deal with x, y, and z issues?"

Golden, disagreeing, reminded Ligon that if you visit the studio of any postblack artist you find a shelf of pre-postblack catalogues. "Your work is so known, and so out there," she said. "That's certainly what I've felt talking to them. There wasn't room. There isn't a *need* to do it or redo it."

ne recent evening, Golden met me at a bar in SoHo, where a friend of hers was having a birthday party. The guests were mostly young and successful African-Americans: corporate lawyers, financiers, record-company executives. (She identified one as an ex-boyfriend, but chose not to talk about any presentday replacement.) She stood at the bar while an old friend, a flirtatious investment banker, described losing his nerve at an auction. A Basquiat drawing had come up, but he did not act, and now he regretted it. "I didn't want to be impulsive. But I thought I should have gone for it. I wish you'd been there."

It is sometimes hard to distinguish between people's faith in Golden herself and their faith in her visual judgment: she is like the classmate whose experimental pop records you forced yourself to like—and then did like—because her enthusiasm was so compelling. The room was full of people who had been tugged into contemporary art by Golden: they had become friends of the Studio Museum; their fortunes were perhaps starting to evolve into foundations. Henry Louis Gates points out Golden's capacity to "call on people who have comparable positions in other areas of the society, such as Wall Street, or the academy, and to bring them in, to make the connections." It is not a revolutionary way of working; rather, Golden is following an old-fashioned model of engagement and advancement, one that her radical-conservative parents might recognize. "Thelma's working in a traditional form, working in a traditional institution-the museum-bringing in high-end individuals to participate and fund projects," Kellie Jones, a friend of Golden's who teaches art history and African-American studies at Yale, says. "But what's radical is that she's trying to develop an African-American coterie of people who will support art. It's a very difficult job; there's not a tradition."

As the party began to break up, the investment banker cried to a friend, "I didn't want the Basquiat anyway!" Then he picked Golden up off the ground. Golden shrugged. She said, "You see what I mean?"

Golden met Bill Clinton at a reception in Sylvia's restaurant in Harlem. He had just taken possession of his new offices on West 125th Street, for which Golden had been choosing art from the museum's collection: she had recommended, among other works, Romare Bearden's great 1979 print series "The Return of Odysseus." People were pressing forward to shake Clinton's hand, but Golden stood to one side. "I'm not a crowd person," she said. "I don't do crowds. We can do lunch." Then she was pulled toward Clinton by a member of his staff; they shook hands, and for a while Clinton would not let go.

In her office, a block or two away, Golden said, "The art world in general, it's slightly sleepy. There are so many other worlds I'm so much more interested in." Golden likes to quote a passage from Toni Morrison's "Jazz": "I'm crazy about this city. ... A city like this one makes me dream tall and feel in on things." Golden has reached a place of precocious influence; the art world looks different because of her. At the moment, she is planning a show on black architecture, a Gary Simmons retrospective, and an exhibition of what she calls "black romantic" art: hyperfigurative, street-poster images of sports stars and underdressed women. But Golden wants an empire in her own image, built somewhere in the space between her heroes Oprah Winfrey and Henry Louis Gates. It is time to edit magazines and make movies and television programs. She already has a name: T.H.G. Inc. "Pronounced 'Think'-trust me, that'll make sense," she said. Then she showed me around the museum-with something of the air of a cultural grande dame revisiting a former place of work for the benefit of a documentary crew.

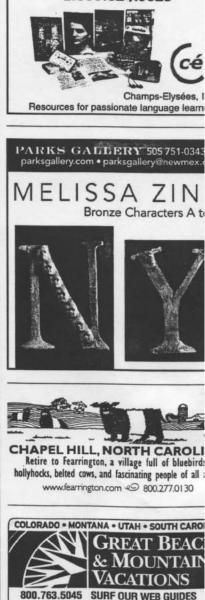
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