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SORROWS OF BLACK AMERICA

A show of leading Black artists at the New Museum powerfully channels emotional tenors that are true to the history—and the future—of race in this country.

By Peter Schjeldahl

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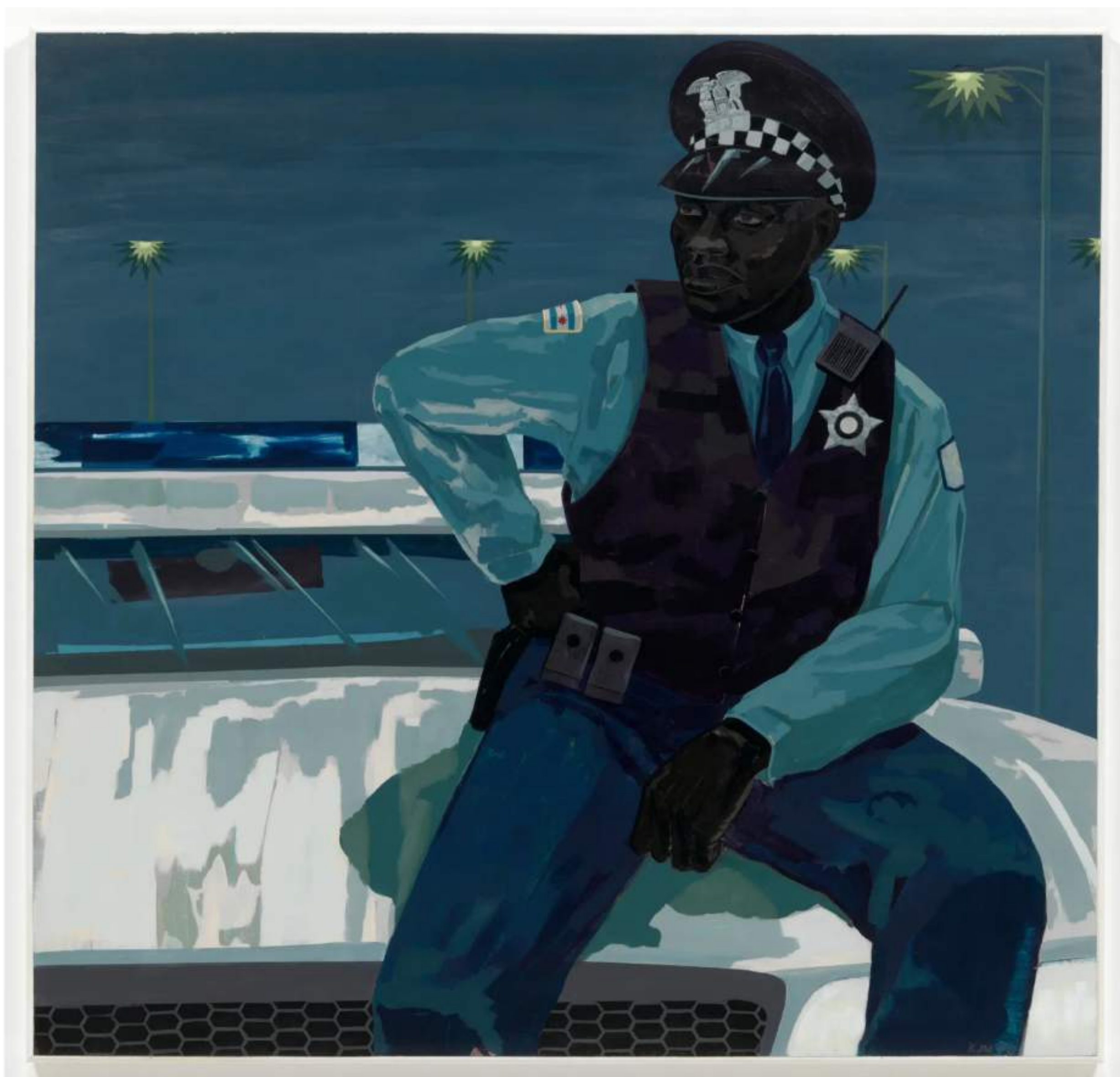
Carrie Mae Weems's "The Assassination of Medgar, Malcolm, and Martin," part of the series "Constructing History," from 2008. Photograph courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery

"Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America," which recently opened at the New Museum, is a terrific art show. I might have expected that, given a starry roster that includes Kerry James Marshall, Glenn Ligon, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, and Theaster Gates among its total of thirty-seven contemporary Black artists. But theme exhibitions normally repel me, shoehorning independent talents into curatorial agendas. What a difference in this case! "Grief and Grievance" is a brainchild of the Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor, who, notably with his curation of the German mega-show Documenta, in 2002, and the Venice Biennale, in 2015, pried the international art world open for new art from Africa and Asia. He died of

cancer in March, 2019, at the age of fifty-five, while planning the present show. The New Museum's artistic director, Massimiliano Gioni, aided by Ligon and the curators Naomi Beckwith and Mark Nash, completed the task, faithful to Enwezor's conception, emphasizing interiority and the patterns of feeling that attend Black experience in America. There's grief, which is constant; grievance, which appeals, however futilely, to some or another authority able and willing to right wrongs; and mourning, the fate and recourse of the irreparably wounded. From this description, you might expect a litany of remonstrance. On the contrary, the show celebrates what artists are good at: telling personal truths through aesthetic form. The predominant result is poetic—deeply so—rather than argumentative.

It's worth noting immediately that there's little explicit address to white racism, white guilt, or, really, white anything, except by way of inescapable implication. Ta-Nehisi Coates, in a devastating essay in the show's catalogue, fills in the lacuna with his well-known, scorching pessimism about white mind-sets. What Coates would like from whites, though he does not expect it, is "a resistance intolerant of self-exoneration." The show was originally intended to open in October, amid the furors leading up to the Presidential election. The pandemic scotched that. But "Grief and Grievance" doesn't have a use-by date. It channels emotional tenors, from personal points of view, that are true to the history, and the future, of race in this country.



"Untitled (policeman)," by Kerry James Marshall, from 2015. Art work courtesy the Museum of Modern Art

Begin with two of the exhibition's few jokes, "Presumption of Guilt" (2020) and "7.5' " (2015), by Cameron Rowland. For the first, the front door of the museum has been rigged to set off a *ding* when opened, like that of a convenience store. The second flanks one side of the door with a vertical strip of height measurements—meant to aid in the identification of departing thieves by surveillance cameras. The ruler tops out at seven feet six inches, suggesting an absolutely colossal brigand. Rowland counts on stereotypical associations of Black men with convenience-store robbery, and of large Black men with menace. You admit to recognizing that if you laugh, as I did. Standup comedians push such buttons all the time, but the trope is beyond rare in serious museums. Now proceed to a darkened room nearby and behold "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death" (2016), Arthur Jafa's much praised video montage with a rhythmic soundtrack of music and voices. It's a masterpiece. Rapid clips from Black history and daily life, ranging from violent scenes of the civil-rights movement to children dancing, possess specific, incantatory powers. Their quantity overloads comprehension—so many summoned memories and reconnected associations, cascading. The experience is like a psychoanalytic unpacking, at warp speed, of a national unconscious regarding race. Irresistibly exciting and profoundly moving, the work will make you gasp, I guarantee, and will induce a heightened state of mind and heart to accompany you throughout the exhibition.

I think of Julie Mehretu and Mark Bradford as neo-Abstract Expressionists, what with her storms of kinetic squiggles in clouded atmospheres and his layered impastos of glowering color, both at majestically large scale. In the case of Mehretu's "See Gold, Cry Black" (2019), the title befits a canvas on which orange-ish strokes seem to struggle for traction amid enveloping welters of black. In Bradford's "Untitled" (2020), a brushy zone of red punches in among raddled expanses of less bold hues. This resurgence of American art's modern breakthrough, after six decades in abeyance, was already apparent in the at once witty and volcanic neo-expressionism of Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose achievement looms ever larger in art of the late twentieth century. He is represented here by "Procession," a painting from 1986, two years before his death, at twenty-seven. That was a period, for him, of illness and faltering confidence, but his originality still blazed. On a ground of boards painted yellow, four loosey-goosey black figures reel and stumble toward a tall man of undetermined race, dressed in red and blue, who brandishes a skull aloft with a gesture of withholding. The work might be a doom-laden allegory of addiction: junkies drawn to a dealer of, ultimately, death. But you rarely know with Basquiat. His teasing mastery of painterly form—he could seem incapable of making a dull mark—speaks, and sings, for itself.

"Fred Stewart II and Tyler Collins," from the series "The Birmingham Project," by Dawoud Bey, from 2012. Photograph courtesy the Rennie Collection

The Chicagoan Kerry James Marshall has become justly famous as a painter who deploys Blackness as a theme and black as a plangent color—hard to do if you're not a Zurbarán, say, or a Goya. A Black cop seated on the hood of a police car radiates watchfulness. Interiors of middle-class homes feature banal furniture and images of civil-rights-era heroes that either hang on walls, like a portrait of Martin Luther King, Jr., bracketed by John F. Kennedy and his brother Robert, or hover as ghosts. Standing Black matrons include a woman who is equipped with angel wings. Another picture incorporates a list of departed Black luminaries spelled out in glitter. Who told Marshall that you can get away with using glitter in an elegiac painting? It's one of many audacities that ignite his style. One interior is overlaid with vertical gray stripes and more glitter. Everything works. Marshall brings genres of domestic and history painting spankingly up to date, achieving an aesthetic and sociological sublime. His art both stirs and mocks nostalgia, subjecting sincerity to irony in ways that intensify both.

There's a piquant backstory to Ligon's "A Small Band" (2015), which consists of the words "blues blood bruise" displayed in white neon letters high on the front of the museum. In 1964, New York police officers beat two Black teen-agers and then refused them medical attention because they weren't bleeding. One of the boys, Daniel Hamm, squeezed a bruise that he had incurred, forcing blood out. He explained later, with a slip of the tongue, that he'd "let some of the blues blood come out." Thus Ligon's beautiful short poem. "Blues" as a stand-in for "bruise" links Hamm's ordeal to a classically African-American way of processing sorrow. Your mind spirals down from an anecdote of police brutality to a sense of the inner life, the subjectivity, and the acculturated sensibility of a victim who is not reducible to victimhood. Ligon's work previews a psychosocial dynamic that abounds in "Grief and Grievance," which takes consequences of oppression and misfortune—grinding poverty, in the case of photographs by LaToya Ruby Frazier—as occasions for tours de force.

"Birmingham," by Jack Whitten, from 1964. Art work courtesy collection of Joel Wachs

The closest the show comes to protest art is Dawoud Bey's "The Birmingham Project" (2012), large black-and-white photographic diptychs recalling the bomb deaths, in 1963, of four Black girls at a church in the Southern city. Each pair portrays a child, male or female, at the age that one of the girls was on the day she was killed—three were fourteen, one was eleven—and an adult at the age that, had the girl survived, she would have been at the time of Bey's work. My first reaction was bemusement at the pictures' excellence as portraiture, sensitively framed and lighted and vibrant with the personalities of the sitters. How could such elegance serve as a memorial of murder? But gradually my reluctant aesthetic pleasure melted into the work's content, registering the distance between present high artistry and the thought, clawing at my mind, of once and forever destroyed young lives. As tranquil as the images are, the burning pain of the reference persists. I've tried to shake the spell that they cast but haven't yet.

Coming after a year of death and mourning as universal spectres, the show's lessons in strategies and tactics of emotional resilience, necessities for Black lives, resonate broadly. The art touches on shared human needs and capacities. It's a start. ♦

An earlier version of this article misidentified a painting by Mark Bradford and incorrectly capitalized a phrase in Glenn Ligon's work.

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