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# The Art of Jesse Howard and the Radical Humanity of Psychological Witnessing

Wadsworth Family Gallery, Lewis University, Romeoville, Illinois  
November 1-22, 2024

by Diane Thodos

*You are growing into consciousness and my wish for you is that you feel no need to constrict yourself to make other people comfortable.*

- Ta-Nahisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

*A self which has become a matter of calculation and management has ceased to be a self. You must participate in the self in order to know what it is.*

-Paul Tillich<sup>1</sup>

*You must let suffering speak if you want to hear the truth.*

-Cornell West, *Race Matters*

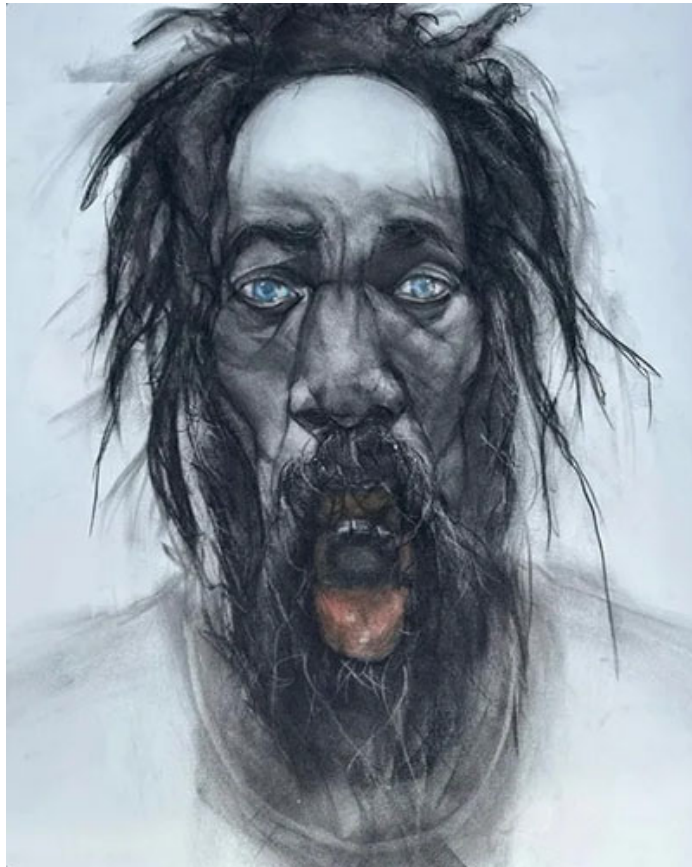
*Hangups, letdowns, bad brakes, setbacks*

*Natural fact is, oh honey, I can't pay my taxes*

*Make me holler and throw up my hands*

-Marvin Gaye, *Inner City Blues*

**T**he black homeless man in Jesse Howard's drawing *Inner City Chaos* (2023) looks directly at me with unnatural pale blue eyes that seem both suffering and hallucinatory at the same time. His forehead is white as though his thoughts have been wiped from existence, contrasting with the delicate ashen layers of charcoal that render every cranny and muscle of his face. His lips hang agape, as though trying to communicate a matter of vital yet inarticulate urgency while his head is framed by finely observed yet disarrayed hair, even exposing wisps of grey and droplets of condensation that cling to the edges of his unkempt mustache. I am magnetically possessed by this larger-than-life portrait, elongated as if to enhance the expression of suffering, speaking from the edge of incoherence with astonishing dignity.



*Inner City Chaos*, 2023. Conte Crayon and acrylic paint, 30 x 44 inches. Photo courtesy Jesse Howard.

Jesse Howard's drawings of African American people in his exhibition "The Emerging of a Black Diaspora" at Lewis University confront the viewer with their often larger than life scale. It feels as though we are encountering them on the street for the first time. Whether they are homeless people, millennials, gangbangers, or everyday citizens, we are often confronted by their direct

forward gaze that forces us to acknowledge their presence. These are often, though not exclusively, depictions of the marginalized, disenfranchised, and forgotten.

One of Howard's major influences is Charles White, a Chicago-based artist who became well known for murals created in the 1930s and afterwards depicting African American historical figures and communal life. White's powerful use of expressive distortion, influenced by the work of the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, was achieved by rendering the heads of his figures small in proportion to their massive bodies and hands, giving the effect of monumentality to his subjects. Jacob Lawrence is also a major influence on Howard, using the same monumental graphic expressiveness to powerful effect in his work. On a local level, Howard was mentored by the Chicago-based artist Judith Roth, known for her expressive figure drawing and portraiture using charcoal and pastel. Other influences include Jim Dine's late 70s figure drawings in charcoal and pastel as well as his experimental tearing and collaging of the paper surface. The stark frontal encounters in New York artist Alfred Leslie's portraits also had their impact. Howard mentioned "I love the way he used shadows across the face and across the body itself."<sup>2</sup>

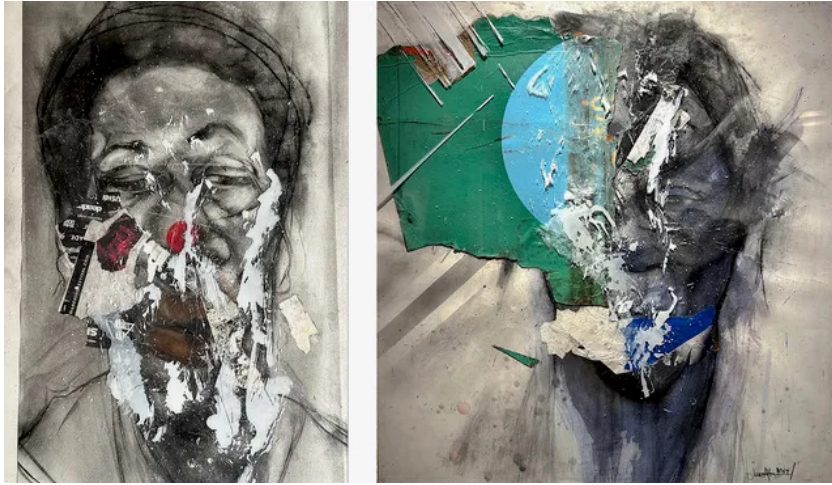
Howard's work reflects a deeply personal consciousness of the African American community in Chicago and the vitality of its street life and unique individuals. This has a relationship to the deep history of his upbringing on the West Side of Chicago in the 1960s and 1970s. "I had a good deep sense of what was going on... to understanding the deepness about myself... I am an urban Chicago Boy. I need to embrace where I come from."<sup>3</sup> While this included a background consciousness of the major struggles and tragedies surrounding Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, the Kennedy Brothers, Medgar Evers, and Fred Hampton, it also had to do with how the West Side, unlike Chicago's South Side, did not have a lot of African Americans assimilated into the communities. The racist bigotry by the white community was palpable in the schools and neighborhood. "We didn't know them; they didn't know us. How does this affect my art? Eventually, it becomes a part of you because you see it all... absorbing what's around you unconsciously... If you are really honest about yourself all that plays a part on a subliminal level."<sup>4</sup>



(Left) *Urban Metamorphosis*, 2018. Charcoal and acrylic, 50 x 38 inches. (Right) *Urban Warrior Walking into Abyss*, 2019. Charcoal & acrylic paint, 42 x 38 inches. Photos courtesy Jesse Howard.

Howard's drawings of homeless people are particularly arresting for how he expresses their humanity overlaid with the psychological sense of disconnection and trauma they have experienced in life. "These people were not born into the state they arrived at."<sup>5</sup> Howard's proficiency lies in how he rehumanizes them, making psychologically visible what the most invisible people in our society experience. "My figures are often solitary and distorted. They speak of being disenfranchised, homeless, and barely visible."<sup>6</sup> *Walking into the Abyss* (2019) portrays a black homeless man wrapped in a blanket and jacket with a bundle on his back, rendered in carefully observed detail using black charcoal and highlighted by a few selected areas of color which move the eye around the composition. The closed eyes of the man's sharply delineated profile seem to be trying to shut out the world's troubles as he strides towards the right edge of the drawing as though attempting to escape its frame. Many of the same elements are present in *Urban Metamorphosis* (2018) which depicts the figure of a homeless man with his small face protruding from the top of a large quilted blanket that enfolds him. He becomes a kind of monumental sculpture defined by the folds and bulges in the blanket that embrace him, with a subtlety of detail that is marvelously fantastic and concrete at the same time. Howard's work is not interested in illustrating the hardship of poverty, but expressing the deep psychological effect it has had on his subjects, uplifting their dignity while expressing empathy for them as human beings. His expressive use of distortion emphasizes how the disintegrative anguish of social and racial injustice has had a deep impact upon them.



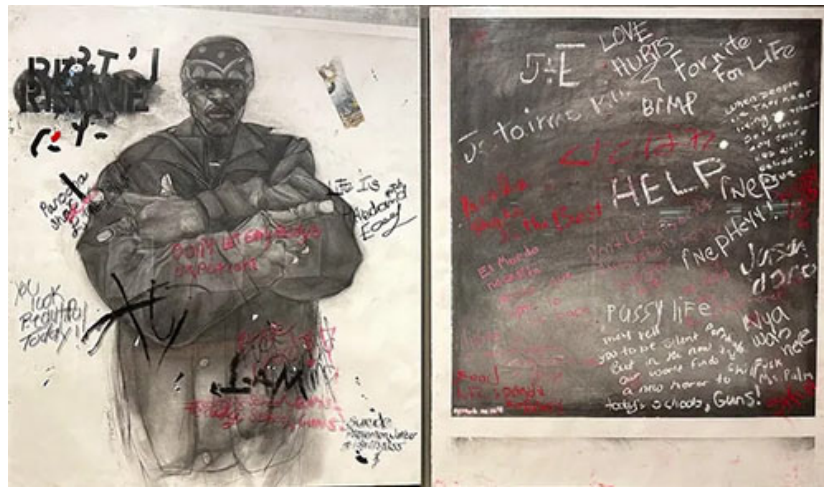


(Left) *Evening News Entertainment*, 2024. Charcoal and collage, 38 x 24 inches. (Right) *Sundown in Blue*, 2024. Mixed media, 30x30 inches. Photos by the author.

Several of Howard's portraits such as *Evening News Entertainment* (2024) and *Sundown in Blue* (2024) use collage and paint elements that are brushed, pasted, and spattered on plexiglass sheets. These are overlaid onto charcoal portraits of men with weary and pensive faces, as if to express the chaotic impact of urban life and media on the mind. One of the most powerful drawings in the exhibition, *A Cry for Justice Throughout the Ages* (2019) portrays a woman on her knees, sprawled upon the ground in a state of hysteria with one hand grasping her cell phone as the other flails with an upturned palm as if to ask the question "Why?" The scream coming from her distorted mouth echoes the emotional scars of urban suffering and neglect, as the shadows of erased versions of her hair and face create a futurist-like reverberation of shapes that amplify the intensity of her scream. Her barely controlled outrage is Howard at his most expressively provocative as witness to the effects of oppression that is racially designed to operate the way it does, unmitigated into the present day.

*A Cry for Justice Throughout the Ages*, 2019. Charcoal and acrylic paint, 38 x42 inches. Photo courtesy Jesse Howard.

*The-Street-Warrior-In-Hieroglyphics-1* and 2 (2018) depict a young man (perhaps a gangbanger?) looking us square in the face with eyes that penetrate with disarming frankness. He expressively gestures with his large hands that protrude from his oversized jacket. The plexiglass panel covering the drawing is scrawled with writing (as is the accompanying panel next to him) by urban high school students who were asked to contribute their authentic thoughts and feelings about life. Messages about love and struggle, gunss and suicide prevention are summed up by the largest word HELP—saying volumes about the communities and schools in Chicago with often traumatic results imprinted on children’s lives. There are also other drawings of African American citizenry wearing COVID masks with long distinctive braids and elaborate hairstyles. A policewoman points her finger in warning to a pair of street performers in a drawing to her right. Another shows a group of three millennials dynamically suspended at the moment of taking a selfie, filled with a compelling sense of action in the moment.



*The-Street-Warrior-In-Hieroglyphics-1*, 2018. Charcoal, pastel, and mixed media 42 x 75 inches. Photo courtesy Jesse Howard.

Much of Howard’s curiosity and intimacy with his subjects is aided by his skill as a photographer who stops people on the street and strikes up relationships with them. The pictures are used as reference material when creating a drawing, chosen because of how his subject’s faces resonate with mental images he has been intuitively seeking, to “find and engage the human subject and how they relate to themselves... I like to think of myself as a reporter to some degree.”<sup>7</sup> Howard explains “I am not trying to get a likeness of the person. I am trying to use it as a guide to help me portray whatever I have in my head that I’m trying to put out there. I don’t know what it is until I see it.”<sup>8</sup> Howard’s sympathetic portrait of *Blues for Naima* (2021) depicts a homeless young man created using a photo reference that emphasized his youthful vulnerability and anxiety. His remarkably drawn head has multiple eyes, graphically expressing the phenomenon of a hyperactive blur of motion caught on camera. Similar to the African American photojournalist Gordon

Parks, Howard creates a special bond with his subjects, holding a space of intimacy and trust that reveals the soul of the person in the artwork.



*Blues for Naima*, 2021. Charcoal and acrylic paint, 45 x 34 inches. Photo courtesy Jesse Howard.

On a moral level, deep looking comes with deep feeling, especially in how the psychological power of Howard's subjects mirrors the intensity of his own search for self-discovery. "Through art, I can capture some of those subliminal emotions that a person has... It's really about me trying to understand myself at this moment in time."<sup>9</sup> Authenticity and embracing one's emotional truth matters a great deal to Howard, using the power of self-truth to express radical humanism in a critically atomized and racialized American society. These works stand as a heroic challenge against the forces of alienation, trusting the power of his intuition and skill to communicate existential truths about our social and human state through the witnessing of his community. "This is my time and my period to show in my own way what is happening to African Americans... whether it's a lack of funding in the community, lack of education, all of those things!"<sup>10</sup> By relentlessly pursuing his authentic self-truth, Howard's art stands as a rare example of psychologically expressive humanism that reconnects us to our authentic selves and our relationships to others, succeeding on its deepest level as a powerful expressive conscience against dehumanization and injustice.

*A selection of portraits by Jesse Howard. Photo compiled by the author.*

#### Footnotes

1. *The Courage to Be* Paul Tillich, 1952, Yale University Press, p. 124
2. Interview with Jesse Howard by Diane Thodos, December 3, 2024
3. *Ibid*
4. *Ibid*
5. *Ibid*
6. *Ibid*
7. *Ibid*
8. *Ibid*
9. *Ibid*
10. *Ibid*

**Diane Thodos is an artist and art critic who lives in Evanston, IL. She is a Pollack Krasner Grant Recipient who exhibits internationally. Her work is in the collections of the Milwaukee Art Museum, the National Hellenic Museum, the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, the Block Museum at Northwestern University, and the Illinois Holocaust Museum among many others. For more information visit**



Diane Thodos Nov 16, 2022 6 min read

# Chicago Art Expo 2022: Getting to the Story

New Art Examiner Spring quarter issue 2022

Whenever writing about the gobsmacking variety of art that Expo Chicago dishes up, there is no way around being forced to choose what story you are going to follow. It can be exhausting to cope with the mind-numbing horde of images, serving up large amounts of kitsch and glitter mixed in with quieter works that call for private concentration.

I cannot help feeling weary of the predictable production of endless novelty tailored to feed overheated market appetites. Truly we no longer have art movements, but art markets—which are inimical to contemplation, critical interpretation, analysis, skill, and a sense of history. Still, every year I am tempted to sort through Expo's offerings to find the thread of a story that is able to glean something about our current cultural situation. It is worth the challenge to try and peel away the spectacle and institutional framing of Expo to give an alternative view.



Kerry James Marshall (Left), *Untitled (Man)* (2017) detail. woodcut 24 x 18 inches Photo: Lusenhop Fine Art Cleveland (Right) *Portrait of a Black Man in a World of Trouble* (1990). Acrylic on burned flag 10 x 8 1/2 inches. Photo: artsy.net

For the last few years there has been an explosion of young Black artists who are heavily promoted by high-level galleries. To what degree does it reflect an actual cultural shift of awareness about Black consciousness in the larger culture? I decided to start with the work of older artists as a means of understanding the present. Elizabeth Catlett's *Negro Es Bello* (1970) reflects a monumental solidity expressed through the graphic tradition of Mexican muralist art. The faces in Kerry James Marshall's *Untitled (Man)* (2017) and *Portrait of a Black Man in a World of Trouble* (1990) make bold eye contact with the viewer, directly expressing critical self-consciousness about Black identity and self-empowerment. These themes bring to mind aspects of Marshall's mentor and former teacher, the social realist artist Charles White. Both Catlett and Marshall are grounded in traditions of social realism dating back to the 1930s, which is significant to how they use the figure to express a deep awareness of cultural politics and Black identity.





Elizabeth Catlett, *Negro Es Bello* (1970). Color lithograph on paper, 27.75× 21.5 inches. Photo: Lusenhop Fine Art.



(Left) Frank Morrison, *Respect the Process*, (2022). Oil and spray on canvas 60 x 30" Photo: Richard Beavers Gallery. (Right) Jesse Howard, *The Emergent of A Black Man*, 2022. Charcoal, pastel, graphite, 30 x 30" Photo: Bert Green Fine Art.



Frank Morrison's *Respect The Process* (2022) and Jesse Howard's *The Emergent of a Black Man* (2022) partake of this same sense of cultural politics and Black identity. Though neither John Ahearn nor the artist known as Swoon is African American, Ahearn's South Bronx relief portraits and Swoon's etchings of women in such works as *Cairo* (2022) make strong eye contact and express a proud sense of minority identity. Subjects are carefully observed holding their bodies and gazes with confidence, which gives us a sense of who they are as real people and often reflect the attitudes and cultures of the communities and neighborhoods where they live.

Robert Peterson's impressive hyperrealistic portrait *Sunshine* (2022) is rendered in high detail yet also reflects how fashion can construct identity in a way that camouflages the self. Derrick Adams's print series *How I Spent My Summer* (2021) shows swimmers with polka dotted swim caps. The cheerful blue water and colorful inflatables belie a sense of uncertainty and loneliness in the subjects, who show a moody lack of fulfillment from the empty promises that consumerism and "the good life" bring. Jonni Cheatwood's *I Can't Because of Reasons* (2022) goes a step further with alienation, covering the faces of two Black women in incomprehensible colorful abstract blotches that ooze with Dadaist depersonalization.



Derrick Adams, *How I Spent My Summer*, 2021, Detail. Screen print and collage, 18 x 18 inches each. Photo: Rhona Hoffman Gallery.



Robert Peterson, *Sunshine*, 2022. Oil and Glitter on Panel. Photo: Claire Oliver Gallery



Jonni Cheatwood, *I Can't Because of Reasons*, 2022. Oil and acrylic on primed and sewn Textiles, 72 x 50 inches. Photo: Makasiini Contemporary.

Lynthia Edwards's *Ten Little Black Girls* (2022) shows the artist's heavy stylistic reliance on Romare Bearden's expressive collage method, which she repeats in her large canvases. The same Bearden-inspired collage technique is apparent in Adams's *Interior Life (Woman)* (2019). Mickalane Thomas's print *July 1977* (2019) combines Bearden's and Jacob Lawrence's collage techniques with a 1970s blaxploitation-style female nude. Assessing the work of Edwards, Adams, and Thomas, I cannot help feeling that such an homage gets too close to appropriating a certain collage approach into a branded context. The strategy seems to require the treatment of the figure as an alienated postmodern self appropriated and reassembled from the fragments of the modernist past. What does it mean to have "Black identity" signified by so many artists using the same strategy of graphic stylization? Scholar Kobena Mercer talks about this problem. Mercer, notes art historian Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw, gave a brilliant cautionary talk at the annual James A. Porter Colloquium (last spring), cosponsored by Howard University and the National Gallery of Art, about the speed with which Black images by African-born and African American artists were entering the market, moving into collections as financial investments that doubled as symbols of wokeness, but were not publicly visible long enough to be engaged critically by art historians. Mercer openly questioned whether the plethora of easily consumable images of blackness and Black people on the market is a good thing.<sup>1</sup>



(Left) Lynthia Edwards, *Ten Little Girls* (2022) detail. Acrylic & Mixed Media, Richard Beavers Gallery. (Center) Derrick Adams, *Interior Life (Woman)*, 2019. Pigment print Printed by Andre Ribuoli; 24 x 18" Photo: Michael Steinberg Fine Arts. (Right) Mickalane Thomas, *July 1977*, 2019. Print 41 x 34 inches. Photo: Tandem Press.

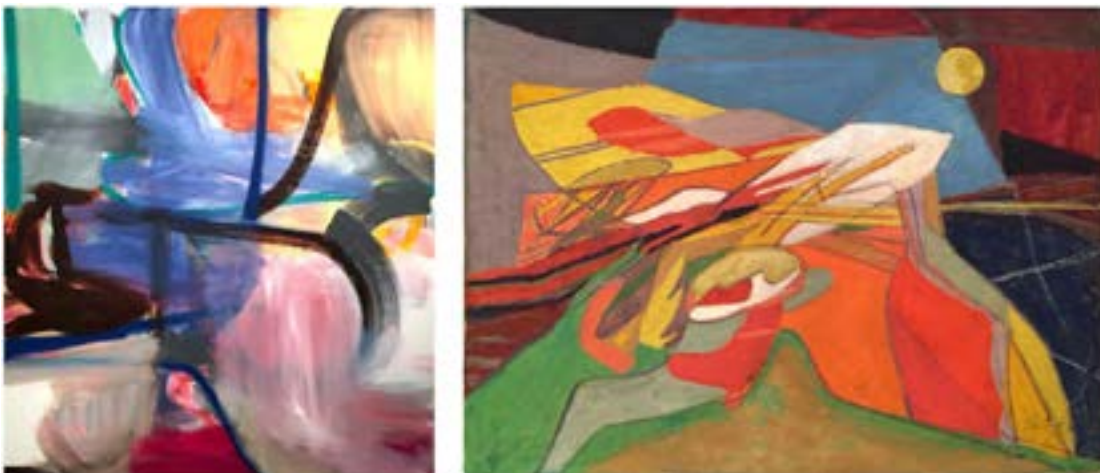
In a similar fashion, the production of abstract art at Expo reveals disturbingly intense market imperatives at its core. An endless train of *Zombie Formalism* continues to dominate contemporary abstraction, with no sign of relief in sight. There is some difference between the attitude of postmodern abstraction from the 1980s and 90s and abstraction now. Abstract art today has conveniently dispensed with the baggage of postmodern deconstructive rhetoric—all that talk about the "death of the author" and "the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." There is no longer any need to crack open *October* magazine, read Arthur Danto, or dig into Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation*. Any number of ready-made decorative designs in minimalist, color field, op art, and abstract expressionist stylization—or amalgams thereof—will suffice, thank you. The market is waiting!





(Left) Joan Mitchell "The Poems: Lithograph 1960. Photo: F.S Braswell (Right) David Salle, *Syrie, Turquoise*, 2014. Lithograph, 55 x 42.25 inches. Photo: [artspace.com/david\\_salle/syrie-turquoise](https://artspace.com/david_salle/syrie-turquoise).

Looking at the abstraction from different periods on display at Expo is instructive. Joan Mitchell's 1960 abstract expressionist graphic prints at the F. L. Braswell booth become a cynically appropriated "textual" fragment in David Salle's print *Syrie* (2014). All pretense of even nominal historical self-consciousness is lost in Liliame Tomasko's slapdash regurgitation of Willem de Kooning's brushwork in *all that we want* (2021). Stanley William Hayter's 1936 *Untitled* shows painstaking attention to the emergence of surrealist automatism embedded within a Kandinsky-inspired abstract landscape. Chelsia Culprit's large charcoal sketches on unprimed canvas at the Revolver Galeria booth turn surrealist automatism into a quickly executed graffiti-style cartoon.





(Left) Liliane Tomasko, *all that we want*, 2021. Acrylic and acrylic spray on linen 68 x 62 inches. Photo: Natalie Karg Gallery. (Right) Stanley William Hayter, *untitled*, 1936. Oil on paper 11 x16 inches. Photo: Dolan Maxwell Inc.

All this is a sign of entropy and cultural stagnation as much as it demonstrates the degree to which abstraction from modernist times (before 1960) has failed to establish any culturally meaningful legacy in the present. Today modernist abstraction—and African American art of the modernist era—have become reified as symbols of styles that can be easily codified and branded to fulfill market needs. In addition, it is noteworthy that Expo had less representation of mid-career artist than in the past, showing a gap of continuity between older blue-chip art and the youth culture generated styles of the present.

The alienating and impersonal effect of so much of the “branded” art on display is a symptom of exactly what Karl Marx and György Lukács had predicted. Art creation that has abandoned the human life world of social relationships and meanings has become reified as a commodity object within a totalizing market system. It can be confusing to try and comprehend how a Rembrandt, a banana taped to a wall, an invisible sculpture, and a cookie jar owned by Andy Warhol all operate on the same level as pure market commodities divorced from any basis of shared human cultural values or experience. That is why the “art object” has become excruciatingly arbitrary.

As with Expo, this market orientation also reflects the economic systems we live under on a larger scale. Consolidated power among elite monopoly corporations get to dictate what our economic system is like, in much the same way that a tiny number of dealers and their ultra-rich clients get to determine what is significant. *The Art Market Is a Scam (and Rich People Run It)*, a Wendover Productions video available on *YouTube*, has a lot to say about this extraordinary consolidation of power:

*“Forty-three percent of art dealers, nearly half, had fewer than 20 unique buyers in 2020. ... Thirty percent of solo exhibits at museums in the US, considered the hallmark of success, featured artists represented by just one of five galleries (Pace, Marian Goodman, Hauser & Wirth, Gagosian, and David Zwirner).”<sup>2</sup>*

In spite of these well-worn realities, I came away from Expo remembering the works of figurative artists who remain grounded in their sense of self and dedicated to using their skill to communicate human feeling and genuine social experience hidden away from the distracting bright lights of market sensationalism and the effects of concentrated wealth. Here’s to hoping we see more of their work next time.

***Diane Thodos*** is an artist and art critic who lives in Evanston, IL. She is a Pollack Krasner Grant Recipient who exhibits internationally. Her work is in the collections of the Milwaukee Art Museum, the National Hellenic Museum, the Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago, the Block Museum at Northwestern University, and the Illinois Holocaust Museum among many others. For more information visit [dianethodos.com](http://dianethodos.com).

#### Footnotes

1. The Many Problems with Deanna Lawson’s Photographs Gwendolyn D. Bois Shaw *Hyperallergic* Sept. 23, 2021. <https://hyperallergic.com/679220/the-many-problems-with-deanna-lawsons-photographs/>.
2. The Art Market Is a Scam and Rich People Run It <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZ3F3zWiEmc>.

# WAS WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

March 27, 2021

## The MCA Blows It by Robin Dluzen



Diane Christensen and Jeanne Dunning with Steve Dawson, "Birth Death Breath," 2016, inflatable opera. Installation view, Elmhurst Art Museum, Elmhurst, Illinois

### "The Long Dream" Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, Illinois, continuing through May 2, 2021

Wrapping the corner walls of the entrance to "The Long Dream" at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago are the names of the more than 70 local artists exhibiting work in the exhibition. Some of these names belong to my friends and colleagues, and there are others I don't personally know but greatly admire. Rather than feeling vicariously buoyed by reading these names, and appreciating the institutional recognition of a segment of Chicago's arts community, I instinctively flinched. It should be noted that I did not come to the MCA on this day in possession of the optimistic curiosity with which I typically approach an exhibition. The MCA and "The Long Dream" are at the center of a labor crisis, as extensively reported by Kerry Cardoza in *The Chicago Reader* (March 3, 2021). With my facemask and timed-entry ticket, I came to find out what happens to a show, stockpiled with excellent and timely work, when site-specific ethical turmoil takes over as context.

My flinch at the threshold of the exhibition was the result of knowing that the artists whose names are on the wall must feel involuntarily complicit in the controversy. The curatorial statement of "The Long Dream" explains that the show, which borrows its title from the Richard Wright novel, highlights artists whose work "offers us ways to imagine a more equitable and interconnected world" — an institutional attempt to acknowledge the revolutionary zeitgeist. That would be all well and good were it not for the fact that MCA staff (organized under the moniker MCAccountable) has been calling on the museum to address its own racism, ableism and poor labor practices, especially in the midst of operating during COVID, only to face layoffs twice — the latest round in January, coinciding with a sickly hypocritical article by MCA Director Madeleine Grynsztejn in *Art in America* (January 22, 2021) bragging about diversity practices at the MCA and how "[w]hen most institutions were furloughing their front-facing employees, we went in the opposite direction." Cardoza pointed out, however, that "[t]he day prior, the MCA laid off 41 employees." MCAccountable's open letters from **July 16** and **August 21**, and one from the artists in "The Long Dream" presented to the Director on **March 11** outline the museum's offenses, and the demands made by the artists and staff.

Some of the artists slated to exhibit in "The Long Dream" — Maria Gaspar, Aram Han Sifuentes, Folayemi Wilson and the For the People Artists Collective — withdrew in protest before the show even opened. Initially, I worried for the artists in "The Long Dream": that the show's



Jesse Howard, "The Bewitching Hour," 2015, mixed media, 30 x 29 1/2". Courtesy of the artist

for the artists in “The Long Dream”: that the show’s context had been proven a sham, and subsequently, that powerful work about racial justice, disability activism and LGBTQ+ equity would be grievously undermined. Indeed, the pretense that the museum was in solidarity with these causes was shattered, and an atmosphere of irony, sadness and outrage over the current situation envelops the show. But the convictions within the works reverberate.

Artworks that hinge upon elements of vulnerability thrive in the exhibition’s shifted context. “Birth, Death, Breath,” an installation by Diane Christiansen and Jeanne Dunning with Steve Dawson, features a collection of seasonal, inflatable lawn ornaments: snowmen, ducks dressed in hunting gear, and parts of various animals frankensteined together. All rise and fall as their air supply fluctuates in cadence with original songs. The artists take advantage of how these colorful, smiling forms bob, almost lifelike when filled with air; and the ominous way that they collapse when their supply is cut. Lyrics like “I will not survive / Where am I going / Where will I be” underscore threads of fear and uncertainty — feelings that have become all too familiar, especially during the pandemic when crucial lifelines and livelihoods suddenly became tenuous.

While Christiansen and Dunning keep us at a conceptual arms length as we watch a narrative play out, Derrick Woods-Morrow closes the distance between the audience and the work. In “How much does this moment weigh for you?”, the mangled mass of a compressed police car is suspended from a steel frame by chains. The rusted heap no longer bears any resemblance to a Crown Victoria, but the police spotlight, aimed head-height, is unmistakable. In the darkened room, the sudden, blinding light stuns and disarms. Stepping away from the spotlight, it’s easier to focus on the disembodied voices in the room: two men tentatively discussing race, queerness, law enforcement and their shared memories of childhood. Woods-Morrow doesn’t simply tell a story here, he puts us right in the middle of it, both physically and emotionally. The sensation of being in someone else’s shoes takes us one step beyond mere awareness, and closer to understanding.



Edra Soto, “Tropicalamerican,” 2014, inkjet print on silk 5 pieces, each: 67 x 43”. Photo: James Prinz. Courtesy of the artist



Amanda Williams, “What black is this you say?—You thought getting Obama elected meant you could take a break from blackness—black (study for 08.09.20),” 2020, watercolor on paper, 7 x 10”

But the piece in “The Long Dream” that resonates the most, in light of the collapse of the exhibition’s original intention, is Amanda Williams’ “What black is this you say?” series of watercolors on paper. Her series began in response to “Blackout Tuesday,” the social media event of June 2, 2020, in which Instagram feeds were flooded with blank, black squares by individuals, institutions and corporations alike, in what everyone thought was solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Quickly, it was realized that these posts stifled the crucial communication that was taking place online with the #blm hashtag, and people everywhere seethed at the superficiality of the gesture. Williams, known for her mastery of color in form and concept, began her own Instagram project that day, coupling abstractions of varying tones and palettes of black with captions that added humanity and individuality to a trend that was otherwise populated with flatness and sameness. The artist translated her posts into the small, intimate paintings seen here. And, with the addition of handwritten inscriptions, such as “I can’t go swimming today, I just got my hair done black”; “Obama break from blackness black,” they capture the best aspect of social media — the window into someone else’s everyday — while infusing it with the slow-paced contemplation of abstract painting.

A portion of what Williams so adeptly addresses in this work is in close parallel to what is playing out at the MCA and beyond: jumping on the chance to show public solidarity in theory, while continuing to actively harm individuals and disregard their experiences. There have been other major exhibitions in recent years in which artists have withdrawn work in protest of morality issues at the institution. The 2019 Whitney Biennial is one example. But the hypocrisy of “The Long Dream” is particularly explicit. The museum fails on the precise grounds by which the exhibition was conceived. In bringing together 70 artists with the most concrete of

bringing together 70 artists with the most concrete of convictions, how could this NOT have happened? In hindsight, it seems inevitable that the museum would try, and fail.

I checked my Twitter feed on my walk back to the El on the Friday afternoon of my MCA visit. The algorithm brought me Kerry Cardoza's Tweet from several hours prior: a link to the open letter from the artists, with the announcement that 57 of them would be withdrawing their work from the exhibition. This story is not yet complete. But hopefully what started as an exhibition will be remembered as a sea change, with artists and workers serving as the catalyst.

**Robin Dluzen** is a Chicago-based artist and writer. Her writing has appeared in Visual Art Source, Art Ltd., Chicago Art Magazine, Art F City and others. Her artwork has been featured in venues throughout the country including the Dorchester Art Project in Boston, MA; Indiana University Northwest in Gary, IN; Bert Green Fine Art in Chicago; Tiger Strikes Asteroid in Chicago; the Union League Club of Chicago; Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art in Chicago; and the Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago. For more information, [robindluzen.com](http://robindluzen.com)