

A Site of Struggle

**American Art
against
Anti-Black
Violence**

VISITOR'S GUIDE

MMFA
Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts

Northwestern | **THE BLOCK**
museum of art



Curator's Introduction

A *Site of Struggle: American Art against Anti-Black Violence* presents a “difficult” art history by engaging with artworks that invoke troubling aspects of US history.

Images of African American suffering and death have constituted an enduring part of the nation's cultural landscape, and the development of creative counterpoints to these images has been an ongoing concern for American artists. *A Site of Struggle* explores how artists have engaged with the reality of anti-Black violence and its accompanying challenges of representation in ways that run from the explicit to the resolutely

abstract. From the horrors of slavery and lynching to the violent suppression of civil rights struggles to contemporary acts of mob violence and police brutality, targeted violence has been an ever-present fact of Black life in the United States.

By investigating the conceptual and aesthetic strategies that American artists have used in works that grapple

A Site of Struggle is grounded in crucial questions:

How has art been used to protest, process,
mourn, and memorialize anti-Black violence
within the United States?

How can an art history help inform our
understanding of the deep roots of racial violence?

with anti-Black violence over a 125-year period—from Elizabeth Catlett’s direct depiction of lynching to Paul Rucker’s abstract memorials for historical incidents of racial violence—*A Site of Struggle* seeks to present a nuanced and complex picture that situates contemporary artistic practice within a longer history of American art. Bracketed by two critical periods of activism, the anti-lynching campaigns of the post-Reconstruction period and the Black Lives Matter movement founded in 2013, the exhibition evokes an unbroken history of violence against African Americans in the United States. It includes a focused selection of artworks and ephemera created between the 1890s and 2013, as well as post-2013 works that predominantly take historical events as their subject matter. *A Site of Struggle* foregrounds African Americans as active shapers of visual discourse—not merely its victims. It asserts that art’s function in relationship to this subject is as much about honoring the dead and metabolizing grief as it is about activism and pedagogy

Art can provide a moment of pause, an opportunity for us to sit with the complex and deep-rooted nature of anti-Black

violence, and the chance to contemplate how it impacts us individually and as a society. In these works, we may find recognition of our own suffering—which is important in and of itself—as well as a provocation to continue, or begin for the first time, striving to eliminate this suffering through concrete actions appropriate to our positionality. By highlighting the ways in which American artists have wrestled with the challenges posed by representation in order to protest, process, mourn, and memorialize anti-Black violence, *A Site of Struggle* is a modest offering in the ongoing struggle for the preservation and flourishing of Black life.

—Janet Dees

Steven and Lisa Munster Tananbaum
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
at The Block Museum of Art at
Northwestern University

Darryl Cowherd, *Stop White Police from Killing Us - St. Louis, MO, c. 1966-67*. Courtesy of the artist and the Museum of Contemporary Photography

Exhibition Themes

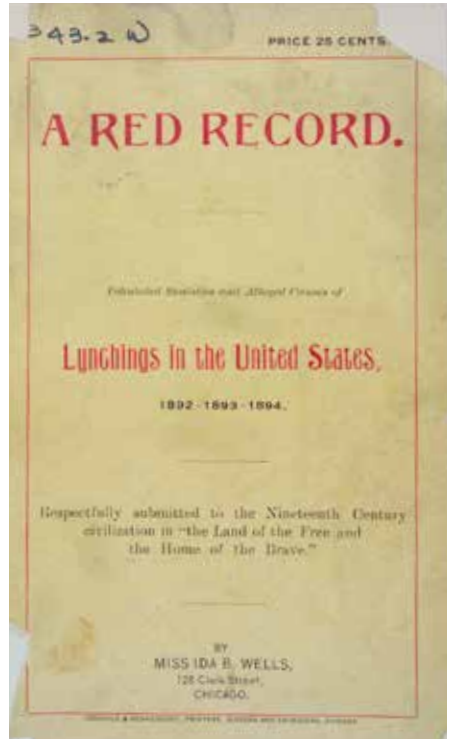
Three thematic sections organize the exhibition, which includes more than 50 objects of art and ephemera created between 1895 and 2013 loaned from a range of national private and public collections.

Written on the Body

The horrific nature of certain forms of anti-Black violence, including lynching, the physical assault of non-violent protesters, police brutality, and police action killings, has made them broadly visible and obvious focal points for artistic engagement. However, artists also have engaged with subtler forms of everyday violence against Black people. This section explores artworks that engage with the body to take on topics such as the psychological impacts of racism.

Abstraction and Affect

Works in this section employ conceptual strategies and varying degrees of abstraction to avoid literal representations of violence. The section looks at works by artists who find effective stand-ins and symbols to portray the victimized Black body. The works in this section convey anti-Black violence without including overt images of the suffering Black body.



A Red Record

This section takes its title from the 1895 anti-lynching pamphlet written by Ida B. Wells (1862–1931), who became one of the founders in 1909 of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Wells is widely considered to be the first to appropriate and redeploy lynching photographs in the service of activism. This section explores how graphic depictions of violence were enlisted by artists and activists to protest horrors like lynchings.

Exhibition Programming

A Site of Struggle takes place in a climate in which images of racial violence proliferate in contemporary visual culture and questions about its representation are part of critical discourse. **Who gets to tell their story? Who owns history? Who shapes the future?** These questions go to the heart of current cultural debates about the teaching of American history and shaping of current events.

We invite you to take part in these conversations during programs throughout the run of the exhibition—in which the challenges, histories, and themes of the exhibition are discussed with scholars, artists, and community leaders.

Explore upcoming programs:
mmfa.org/calendar



Artists & Activists Include:

Laylah Ali (b.1968)
George Biddle (1885-1973)
Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012)
Darryl Cowherd (b. 1940)
Bob Crawford (1938-2015)
Ernest Crichlow (1914-2005)
David Antonio Cruz (b. 1974)
Emory Douglas (b. 1943)
Melvin Edwards (b. 1937)
Theaster Gates (b. 1973)
Ken Gonzales-Day (b. 1964)
Wilmer Jennings (1910-1990)
Norman Lewis (1909-1979)
Christian Marclay (b. 1955)
Reginald Marsh (1898-1954)
Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955)

Isamu Noguchi (1904-1988)
Howardena Pindell (b. 1943)
Carl and Karen Pope (b. 1961)
Walter Quirt (1902-1968)
Paul Rucker (b. 1968)
Alison Saar (b. 1956)
Lorna Simpson (b. 1960)
Dox Thrash (1893-1965)
Molly Jae Vaughan (b. 1977)
Lynd Ward (1905-1985)
Pat Ward Williams (b. 1948)
Carrie Mae Weems (b. 1953)
Ida B. Wells (1862-1931)
Walter White (1893-1955)
Hale Woodruff (1900-1980)

Reflection Questions

Below are questions intended to foster independent reflection and dialogue on the exhibition and the issues it presents:

- Which artworks made the greatest impression on you and why?
- How did this exhibition make you feel?
- What does this exhibition mean to you?
- What did you learn? What are some of the key ideas you will take away from this exhibition?
- How do you relate to the histories this exhibition presents? How do these histories connect to us today?



Elizabeth Catlett, *Target Practice*, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, Louisiana. Purchased by the Amistad Research Center. Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Emory Douglas *November 16, 1972, 1972.* © 2021 Emory Douglas / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Selected Resources and Sites

Resources

Alabama Appleseed Center for Law & Justice

A non-profit, non-partisan organization working to achieve justice and equity for all Alabamians.

Alabama Institute for Social Justice

A non-profit organization advocating for social justice and racial reconciliation across Alabama.

American Civil Liberties Union of Alabama

The ACLU works in the courts, legislatures, and communities to defend the individual rights and personal freedoms guaranteed to us by the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

The Equal Justice Initiative

The EJI is committed to ending mass incarceration and excessive punishment in the United States, to challenging racial and economic injustice, and to protecting basic human rights for the most vulnerable people in American society.

Global Project Against Hate and Extremism

Strengthening a diverse global community committed to exposing and countering racism, bigotry, and hatred.

NAACP Montgomery Branch

Working to secure the equality of rights, eliminate race-based discrimination, ensure health and well-being, and collaborate with partners who also strive for the civil rights of all.

National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African-American Culture

Located at Alabama State University this organization is a research institute and repository for the collection of civil rights and African-American cultural documents and artifacts and other memorabilia.

That's My Child

This youth mentoring organization uses arts, education, and workforce development in an effort to end hopelessness and generational poverty within our community.

The Southern Poverty Law Center

The SPLC is a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements, and advance the human rights of all people.

Civil Rights Sites

The Civil Rights Memorial

A project of the Southern Poverty Law Center, it serves as the interpretive center for the Civil Rights Memorial, which honors the martyrs of the movement and inspires visitors to continue the march for racial equity and social justice.

Freedom Riders Museum

Trace the Freedom Riders' tumultuous journey through the South, along with historic images of the protest and voices of those who supported and opposed the Freedom Rides.

The Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice

This pair of sites is dedicated to telling the history of racial injustice in this country. The Legacy Museum is a narrative museum that uses interactive media, sculpture, videography, and exhibitions to immerse visitors in the sights and sounds of the slave trade, racial terrorism, the Jim Crow South, and the world's largest prison system. The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, situated on a six-acre site atop a rise overlooking Montgomery, is a sacred space for truth-telling and reflection about racial terror in America and its legacy.

Montgomery Interpretive Center at Alabama State University

Located on ASU's campus, this site honors the 1965 Selma to Montgomery March and the heroes, martyrs, and foot-soldiers who made voting rights history happen.

The Rosa Parks Museum

The Rosa Parks Museum is a living memorial for Mrs. Parks and elevates her legacy by serving as a platform for scholarly dialogue, civic engagement, and positive social change. The Museum includes a permanent exhibit, "The Cleveland Avenue Time Machine," as well as temporary art exhibitions and educational programs throughout the year.

Access links to
all these resources:
mmfa.org/ASOS



Frequently Asked Questions

Is this exhibition a response to current events?

Yes and no. This exhibition was conceived in 2016 and was developed from the perspective that anti-Black violence is not a new subject within American art. While the exhibition does not directly address acts of anti-Black violence of the last eight years and the impactful art made in response, the current climate informs the exhibition's presentation and the resources provided to visitors. Through the examination of different artistic strategies and visual choices artists and activists have used to grapple with this violence over a 100+ year period of American art, the project provides deeper context for contemporary debates and current movements for justice.

Does the exhibition include images of violence? Can children visit the exhibition?

The exhibition honors the purposeful choices that artists have made to use the subject of anti-Black violence as a way to subvert the narratives and actors of these forms of oppression. As a result, the exhibition does contain images of violence as one of the methods that artists have used to protest, process, mourn, and memorialize anti-Black violence. The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts is free and open to all and will not regulate visitation; however, it should be noted that the subject matter and content are mature.

How is this exhibition different from other projects in this topic?

The exhibition is among the first to take on this subject with a long view of American art history, demonstrating that anti-Black violence is not a new subject for American artists. Unlike some recent exhibitions, *A Site of Struggle* was not developed in response to a specific incident of violence and doesn't focus solely on contemporary art.

Who is this exhibition for? Why does it matter now?

We believe that this exhibition can have resonance for anyone who is interested in understanding and connecting America's past and our current moment of racial reckoning. Artists have long offered us tools of repair. This exhibition showcases artworks that offer possibilities to protest, process, mourn, and memorialize anti-Black violence.

Who is behind this exhibition?

A Site of Struggle is curated by **Janet Dees**, an African American scholar, who has served as The Block's Steven and Lisa Munster Tananbaum curator of modern and contemporary art since 2015. Trained as a historian of American art, Dees has organized numerous exhibitions and produced new commissions with a wide range of contemporary artists. **Alisa Swindell**, associate curator of photography, Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College (formerly curatorial research associate at The Block), assisted Dees on the project. The themes and content of the exhibition and companion publication were developed with the input of a group of scholarly advisors including Sampada Aranke, La Tanya Autry, Courtney R. Baker, Leslie M. Harris, LaCharles Ward, and Mlonzi Zondi.

Are all the artists in the exhibition African American?

Most, but not all. By looking at the 100-year history of artist engagement with this subject, the exhibition offers compelling art histories of interracial collaboration. The exhibition includes works by non-Black artists that were enlisted by Black activists or who have conscientiously engaged with the subject matter.

Why did the Block Museum organize this exhibition?

Northwestern University's Block Museum of Art has become renowned for exhibitions that focus on crucial but understudied art histories, asking audiences to rethink assumptions about whose and what stories are told. *A Site of Struggle* will build on this legacy and on The Block's commitment to developing new scholarship in the field of American art.

In light of this exhibition, what are the MMFA's greater commitments to Diversity, Equity, Access, and Inclusion?

In May 2018, the Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts leadership established a strategic plan with priorities to address engagement and sustainability, with a strong crosscutting of DEAI themes calling for, among other actions—recruiting and developing staff with the intention of more inclusive representation and collecting and exhibiting objects more reflective of diverse lived experiences. The MMFA staff is also aware of the changes taking place within our social climate, both locally and nationally, and are surveying the wider museum field to understand what role we might play in ushering in a new era of museum work; one that puts equity and inclusion at the forefront. With these goals and ideals in mind, the MMFA Board and staff pledge to make each day more inclusive than the last, to remain steadfast in this work, and to be committed to the equitable treatment of all.

If you have additional questions & would like to begin a conversation with us, contact us at curatorial@mmfa.org



Why does this exhibition belong in Montgomery?

Montgomery, Alabama is a city with a deep civil rights history that currently acts as a national and international forum on racial injustice. Since the 1980s, the MMFA has offered exhibitions and programs meant to push in the direction of diversity and inclusion. More recently, we have aligned our priorities to address engagement and sustainability along with our new DEAI initiatives. Partnerships with various community groups and leaders along with planned actions allow us to engage with the community at its heart and to have them engage more fully in the life of the Museum. Our projects, including *A Site of Struggle*, reflect the core values of the MMFA: generating partnerships, lifting up voices expressing multiple points of view, and uncovering different stories through new interpretations of American art.

For Our Visitors

The Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts recognizes the challenging nature of the material in this exhibition, the range of responses it may elicit, and the impact it carries for visitors whose identities and lived experiences intersect with the histories presented.

Please join us in creating a space of mutual respect and mindful presence as we share this exhibition together:

- Respect fellow visitors by refraining from interacting with individuals not in your party, even if your intention is to offer comfort or support
- Give personal space to others
- Keep photography to a minimum
- Process the exhibition at your own pace
- We welcome you to return as often as you would like

We have provided resources to support your experience, including:

- Signage indicating when graphic content is on view and controlled sightlines to this material
- Seating areas away from works on view and other visitors
- Space for quiet contemplation in the John and Joyce Caddell Sculpture Garden
- A Resource Room for continued learning, conversation, self-care, museum feedback, and action
- Free public programs to explore and engage in dialogue about issues raised in the exhibition

Organizer

A Site of Struggle is organized by the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University, and is curated by Janet Dees, Steven and Lisa Munster Tananbaum curator of modern and contemporary art at

The Block Museum of Art, with the assistance of Alisa Swindell, associate curator of photography at the Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, and former curatorial research associate at The Block.

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Andy Warhol

The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts

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