

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Culture Type

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Victoria L. Valentine

28 September 2018



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FOR A YEAR, THE WHITNEY MUSEUM of American Art displayed “Hate Is a Sin Flag” a 2007 work by Faith Ringgold. It is a relatively small print, about 19 inches square, that makes a profound statement. On view recently in the collection exhibition “An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney’s Collection, 1940–2017,” the work directly criticizes the institution and recounts the artist’s experience protesting in front of the Whitney in 1968.

The Whitney announced the acquisition of 417 works of art over the past year. The museum added three works by Ringgold, including “Hate Is a Sin Flag.” More than two dozen African American artists are represented among the new acquisitions, made between September 2017 and September 2018, including Derrick Adams, Dawoud Bey, Melvin Edwards, Julie Mehretu, and Kara Walker. The additions to the collection by black artists—about three dozen works—represent approximately nine percent of the recent acquisitions.

The museum has acquired three drawings by Toyin Ojih Odutola that were featured in “To Wander Determined,” her first solo museum exhibition in New York. The works include “Industry (Husband and Wife),” a double portrait executed in 2017 with charcoal, pastel and pencil.

The acquisitions also include 62 artists whose work is entering the museum’s collection for the first time. African American artists Ja’Tovia Gary, Marlon Riggs, Ming Smith, Samuel Levi Jones, Sable Elyse Smith, Saya Woolfalk, Adams, and a few others, are among them.

“The Whitney’s recent acquisitions—especially by those artists new to the collection—will allow future curators to present our current moment in all of its complexity, subtlety, and frequent beauty. We thank all of the patrons who have helped make these acquisitions possible and the artists for entrusting us with the future lives of their work,” David Breslin, the director of the museum’s collection said in a statement.

The museum deepened its holdings of several artists already represented in its collection, adding works by Bey, Mehretu, Walker, and Rashid Johnson, among others. The Whitney already owned two photographs and two prints by Johnson and acquired “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” (2008), a steel sculpture that stands more than 11 feet high.

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Fifteen works by Mehretu were in the collection (the first acquired in 2004) before the museum added “Epigraph, Damascus” (2016). The six-panel editioned etching debuted in “Julie Mehretu: Hoodnyx, Voodoo and Stelae,” the artist’s 2016 exhibition at Marianne Goodman Gallery in New York.

In its description, the gallery said the work “presented, infusing elements from architectural renderings of buildings in Damascus, Syria—columns, porticos, and arches—drawn upside-down. The magnitude of Epigraph casts a hanging shadow summoning autumn clouds, but from its multitude of stratum, also comes the sense of a possible emergent other.” (In April, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art announced it had acquired an edition of the same work by Mehretu.)

A number of video works by African American artists were acquired by the Whitney. Maya Stovall’s video “Liquor Store Theatre vol. 2, no. 2” (2015) was featured in the 2017 Whitney Biennial. In the work, the Detroit artist turned the sidewalks and parking lots of local liquor stores into sites of dance performance.

Works by Riggs (“Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien,” 1992), Steffani Jemison (“The Meaning of Various Photographs to Tyrand Needham,” 2009), and Frances Bodomo (“Afronauts,” 2014) were also among the acquisitions purchased by the Whitney’s Film, Video and New Media Committee.

Other highlights include “Toxicity” (2017), a “painting” by Samuel Levi Jones composed of deconstructed medical books; “Martina & Rhonda” (1993), a six-part photographic work by Bey; and three paintings by Purvis Young. The museum has also acquired works by Leslie Hewitt, Walter Price, and Stanley Whitney.

A selection of highly political works is also being brought into the collection. Among them, Dread Scott’s nylon flag “A Man Was Lynched by Police Yesterday” (2015) and the three works by Ringgold, which address mass incarceration, racism, and lack of diversity in museums.

An acrylic, graphite, and pen on paper work, the focus of “Hate Is a Sin Flag” is a blue and white “X” on a red ground (which reflects the design of the Confederate flag) where Ringgold has inserted the phrase “Hate Is a Sin.” Around the perimeter of the work, which is signed and dated June 22, 2007, she has written: “The first time I was called NIGGER was at the Whitney Museum in New York City. I was passing out flyers about the Whitney’s discrimination against Black artists when a white man told his daughter: “Don’t go near that NIGGER; that was 39 years ago in 1968. Slavery is Hate. Hate is a Sin.”

The work documents an incident Ringgold actually experienced. In Daily Mail interview in February, Ringgold said, “I made that print to express the moment. I cannot cease to be amazed that the Whitney would tell that story. That’s good though. It’s art.”

The museum’s collection includes more than 25,000 20th- and 21st-century works made by about 3,500 artists in the United States.