Diane Thodos Nov 16, 2022 6 min read

Chicago Art Expo 2022: Getting to the Story

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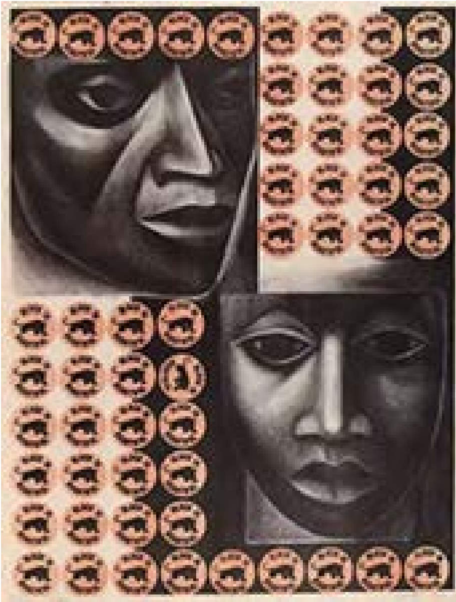
Whenever writing about the gobsmacking variety of art that Expo Chicago dishes up, there is no way around being forced to choose what story you are going to follow. It can be exhausting to cope with the mind-numbing horde of images, serving up large amounts of kitsch and glitter mixed in with quieter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

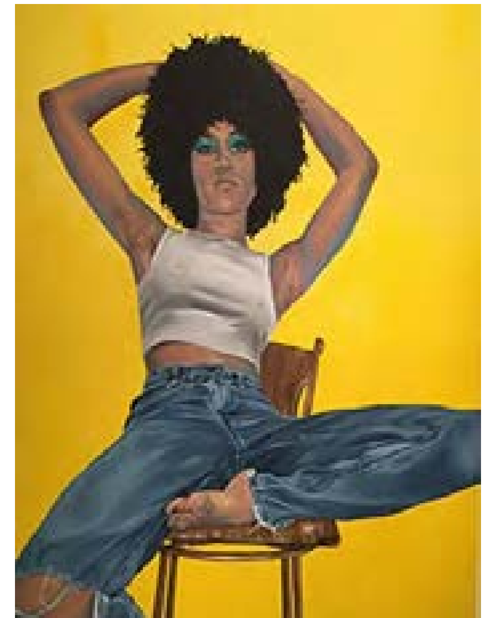


Elizabeth Catlett, Negro Es Bello (1970). Color lithograph on paper, 27.75× 21.5 inches. Photo: Lusenhop Fine Art.

(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.



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

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

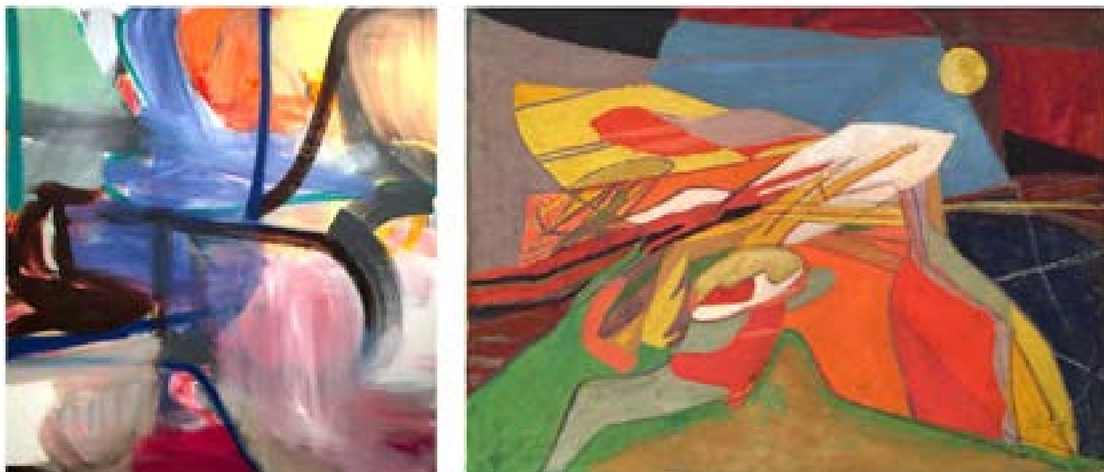
Lynthia Edwards's *Ten Little Black Girls* (2022) shows the artist's heavy stylistic reliance on Romare Bearden's expressive collage method, which she repeats in her large canvases. The same Bearden-inspired collage technique is apparent in Adams's *Interior Life (Woman)* (2019). Mickalane Thomas's print *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.1

(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 x34 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.

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 Liliane 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 Maxwel 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)."*2

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.

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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-deana-lawsons-photographs/.
2. The Art Market Is a Scam and Rich People Run It https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZZ3F3zWiEmc.

VAS 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 Grynsztein 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.

Jesse Howard, “The Bewitching Hour,” 2015, mixed media, 30 × 29 1/2”. Courtesy of the artist

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

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.

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

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 frankenstein-ed 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.

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 cain’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**