

FRANK BOWLING

Alicia Eler, 'In 'Black Identities,' Minneapolis Institute of Art draws a map to a better world', StarTribune, 28 February 2019



Frank Bowling, *False Start*, 1970, (detail)

The world has been re-envisioned at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. To prove it, Mia has hung a painting of a world map in which all the continents and oceans are bathed in a hazy peach-orange. Africa and Australia are highlighted in white, and South America is outlined in black. Europe and North America are hardly visible.

This is “*False Start*,” a hulking, luscious 7- by 17½-foot painting by British-Guyanese artist Frank Bowling that grounds “*Mapping Black Identities*,” a new show aimed at starting a conversation about the complexities of black identity in a museum setting.

The show, which includes work by more than 30 artists, pushes back on the historically flat depictions of blackness often found at encyclopedic museums such as Mia, focused largely on oppression and struggle. Occupying two galleries on the third floor, it offers a healthy mix of abstract and figurative painting, sculptures and photography, with a film/video screening coming this summer in a neighboring gallery.

“This exhibit is a way to honor black artists, black history — a simple action towards creating inclusion and belonging here at Mia,” said curatorial fellow Esther Callahan, part of a team that put together this show after gathering input from across the entire 440-employee institution.

“Everyone works here for the same reason — a love of art,” said curatorial assistant Keisha Williams. “I think it is really a painful thing to not see yourself represented and not have a voice in the curatorial process. As a biracial black woman, I rarely see myself represented, especially in an encyclopedic museum.”

Williams and Callahan, who joined Mia last August, decided to change things. They organized a Curatorial Advisory Committee that embraced all departments in Mia, including facilities, accounting and visitor information.

Museumgoers will notice that the labels on artworks in this exhibition look different. In addition to the usual curatorial note, they include quotes from the artists to humanize the work.

In this way, the show also challenges people who say they “don’t get” contemporary art. The artists’ quotes are a way to start a dialogue with anyone who wants to engage.

A dialogue with all

The first room sets up a fascinating conversation between black male abstract painters and female painters who happen to depict black masculinity.

H A L E S

Along with the Frank Bowling map, there's a Sam Gilliam "drape painting" — a canvas covered in color and hanging loosely, rather than stretched flat like a traditional canvas — across from a triptych painting of a black male character by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and Emma Amos' "Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray's Photograph — 1926)," a back and side angle view of the titular character, nude.

The second gallery is a mix of sculpture, photography and mixed media. A Nick Cave "Soundsuit" decks out a human character in colorful patterned fabric, with circus ornaments and toys jutting out from its body on metal rods. There's a selection of Charles Gaines trees painted in acrylic, and several other representational works focused on hair.

Deana Lawson's lush photograph "Eternity," a stylized, glamorous portrait of a black woman awash in a room of purple, is a collaboration between the artist and her subject, rather than a photographer's solo creation. As a symbol of femininity and motherhood, the photo references the so-called "Mitochondrial Eve," the "mother of all humans" whom geneticists have established as living 200,000 years ago.

On the accompanying label, Lawson is pictured with her own old-school camera and this quote: "With a history of certain voices not being included in the history of art, I think it is time to claim that space, to have bodies who might not have been celebrated within the institution." It speaks not only to the exhibit's goal of rewriting art history, but of giving artists a voice rather than just having an institutional white box of black text explain their work.

Much of the art was acquired in the past three years, as part of an initiative led by Gabriel Ritter, head of Mia's contemporary art department. One of his goals is to expand the museum's collection of works by women, people of color and LGBTQ+-identifying artists.

The selection of works in the show is also strategic: 60 percent are from the collection, 30 percent are promised gifts and the rest are on loan, including the Gilliam piece, which was borrowed from the Walker. Ritter hopes to add the two other pieces on loan — Kevin Beasley's "Queen of Night," a hybrid assemblage artwork of found objects, and Kwame Brathwaite's 1970 "Black Is Beautiful" poster — to Mia's ever-growing contemporary collection.

Contemporary art is the museum's youngest department with just under 400 objects, amid a permanent collection that holds 90,000 artworks.

Williams hopes that visitors "will start to see these

depictions of black artists and art, and think of it as 'art' and not exclusively 'black artists.' We really wanted to represent an intersectional exhibition that talks about race, age, sexuality. I think people can find connecting points, and it doesn't matter if you are black."