

## ART REVIEW

# Stunning showcase of black artists

MOCA Cleveland's idea of gathering art from area collections is unique, impressive

**By Dorothy Shinn**

Beacon Journal art and architecture critic

**Margo Crutchfield has done a simple but remarkable thing.**

**What she did was so obvious, one wonders why no one thought to do it before. But they didn't, and she did.**

**The senior curator at MOCA Cleveland scoured Northeast Ohio's major art collections for works by black artists and came up with a stunning show.**

**From Then to Now:**

**Masterworks of Contemporary African American Art is a survey of sorts, containing 48 signature works by 27 pioneering black artists, beginning in the 1970s and continuing to the present.**

**"These are all collection pieces from the Cleveland Museum of Art, Oberlin**

**College's Allen Memorial Art Museum, the Progressive Corporation, the Cleveland Clinic, the Akron Art Museum," said Crutchfield, who lives in Akron.**

**"They're all artists who've attained the most outstanding achievements, and taken together and building on the strengths of these artists, it's just an outstanding collection of works."**

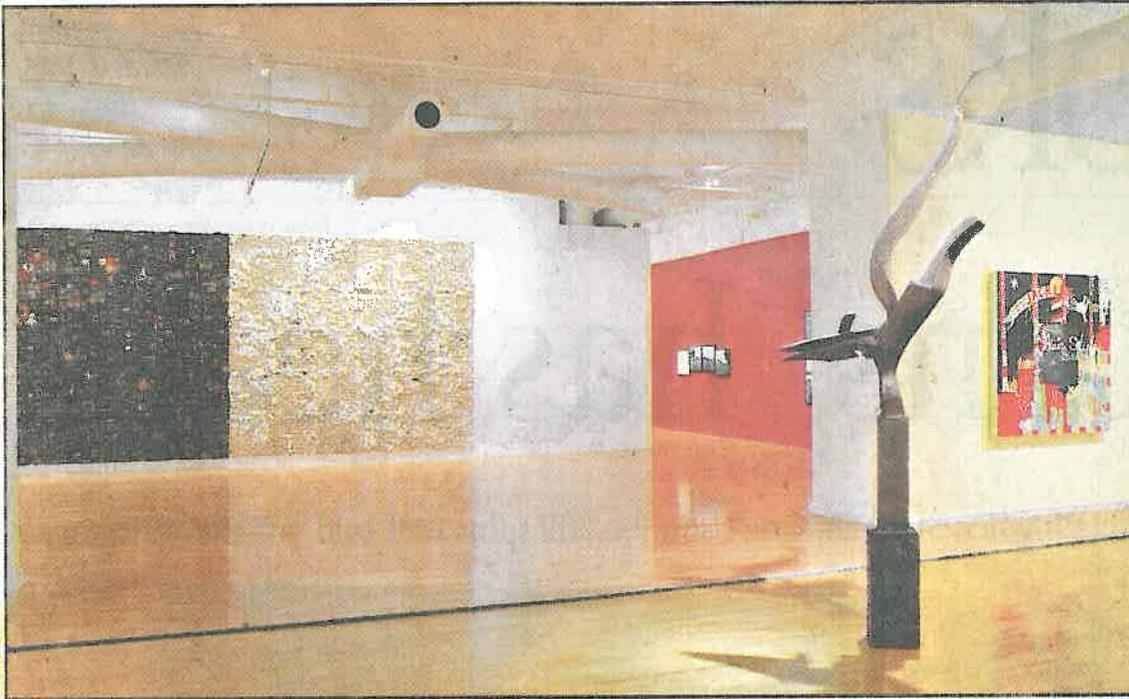
**From the Akron Art Museum comes *Pond-Spring Awakening* (1972) by Alma W. Thomas (1891-1978), the first African-American woman to have a one-person show at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City in 1972. That show was followed the same year by a retrospective at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.**

**Thomas transformed her reverence for nature into luminous abstract paintings that honor the beauty of nature while advancing the nature of**

**Please see Art, E5**



Collection of the Akron Art Museum/Gift of Mr. and Mrs. David Anderson  
***Pond-Spring Awakening* (1972), an acrylic on canvas, is by Alma W. Thomas.**



TIM SAFRANEK PHOTOGRAPHICS

**From Then to Now: Masterworks of Contemporary African American Art** In Cleveland contains 48 works.

### Details

**Show:** *From Then to Now: Masterworks of Contemporary African American Art.*

**When:** Through May 9, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday and until 8 p.m. Wednesday.

**Admission:** \$4 nonmembers; \$3 students and seniors with valid identification; free for members and children under age 12. The Cleveland Play House provides secure parking for MOCA Cleveland visitors at \$7.

**Where:** MOCA Cleveland, 8501 Carnegie Ave., Cleveland.

**Information:** 216-421-8671 or <http://www.mocacleveland.org/>



JERRY TEMPFLEI

Radcliffe Bailey's *Jack Leg*, mixed media on wood.

## Art

### Akron Art Museum loans paintings, photos

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abstraction to a level that's at once forward-looking and rooted firmly in the history of art.

There are six other works in the show from the Akron museum in addition to the Thomas: five images from two photographic series by Carrie Mae Weems; and an *Untitled* 1973 acrylic on canvas by Al Loving.

The Progressive Corp. loaned 20 works by 12 artists to the show; the Allen Memorial Art Museum loaned 17 works by nine artists; the Cleveland Museum of Art loaned three works by as many artists; and the Cleveland Clinic, two works by one artist.

This powerful show reflects a broad range of interests and styles, from post-war abstractions to installation art, conceptual art and the recently renewed interest in the figure.

There are three artists - Willie Cole, Kehinde Wiley and Iona Rozeal Brown - whose works can also be seen in the Akron Art Museum's current show, *Pattern ID*.

However, MOCA also has gone the Akron museum one better by giving Brown her own one-person show in its In Focus Gallery.

There's Sam Gilliam and Al Loving, whose formalistic works focus on the materials, traditions and techniques of painting, who abandon the frame, pour paint onto or stain canvas, and drape the canvas or cut it into strips to reconfigure it in ways that seem both new and ancient.

There's Chakaia Booker, whose *Blue Bell* (1998) doesn't just echo the work of John Chamberlain, but takes it to a new level by using rubber, cut, twisted, mangled and shredded to create works that seem totemic, commanding the space in which they are placed with a seething, writhing, exuberant energy.

Wonderfully mottled with a variety of tread patterns and cumulative histories of use, abuse and abandonment, the works are metaphorical not only in color, but in resilience, referencing the black body and spirit, the power to overcome adversity, as well as the strength not only to endure but to rebound.

Laid out chronologically, the exhibit nonetheless lends itself to thematic groupings: abstraction, installation art, the resurgence of figuration, Conceptualism and the rise of photography.

"Their works sort of parallel what's happened over the last 40 years," Crutchfield acknowledged.

"The power of African-American artists is striking. A lot of these artists came of age during the civil rights movement and the feminist movement," she added.

"There are also three artists from the Cleveland area: John Moore, Dexter Davis and Mark Howard."

Moore creates watery spaces with no up or down punctuated by bubble-like ellipses in acrylic on canvas. Davis' narrative mixed-media work and Howard's silkscreen on mirror are steeped in allegory and overtones of anxiety, celebrating black life and culture while exploring psychological and social issues.

Faith Ringgold's merry lithograph, *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* (1996), depicts leg-



Chakaia Booker's *Blue Bell* (1998) uses rubber tires and steel on a wood frame.

endary African-American women - Harriet Tubman and Rosa Parks, among others - in a sunflower field. They're sewing a story quilt, which according to the artist spreads the cause of freedom.

"Look at what these women have done, despite their oppression," Ringgold said. "They are a fortress of African-American courage, with enough energy to transform a nation, piece by piece."

Another theme is a fascination with the history and culture of Africa.

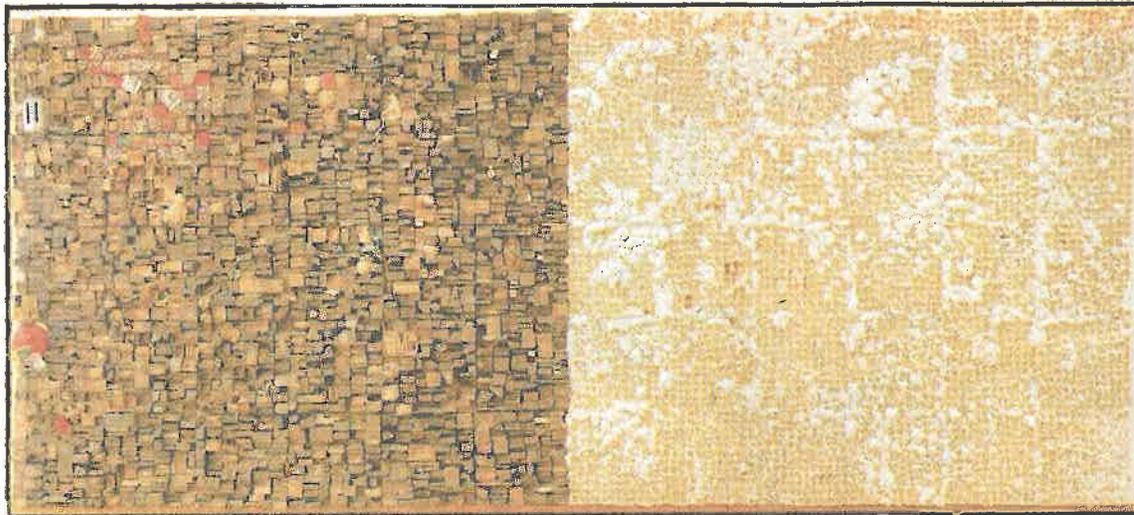
Cole's canvases, singed in gridlike patterns by a hot iron, often resemble tribal masks or the hulls of slave ships. Meanwhile, his sculptural components continue the hot-iron metaphor while simultaneously attaining a ritualistic and totemic conviction.

Allison Saar is another artist who uses materials that become containers of meaning and memory. She clads her sculptures in worn tin, a material used to line the ceilings of shacks and safe houses along the Underground Railroad and today still used as

roofing material in the South.

*Lave Tete* (2001), Saar's work in this show, is a mixed-media piece depicting a nude woman bending over washing her hair, while upon her back are stacked white enamel domestic vessels, from pots to bedpans, pitchers and bowls.

The implication is apparent and huge. By composing the female figure in this vulnerable attitude, then piling a white tower of vessels on her back, Saar's work can lay claim to an almost endless number of metaphors, from domestic abuse to madon-



Leonardo Drew's untitled work from 1999 uses mixed media, cotton, rust and wood.



GARY KIRCHENBAUER

Richard Hunt's welded steel *Firebird* (1975) is 8 feet tall.



Kerry James Marshall's *Bang* (1994), acrylic and collage.

na of the kitchen pots to a model of female strength.

Perhaps the most scathing indictment of racism and sexism in

the show is Renee Green's *Sa Main Charmante* (1989), an installation piece consisting of a wood-slat soapbox, a peep box,

speakers and stage lights.

The work is an indictment of colonialism and the horrifying treatment by the West of African women.

Sarah Bartmann (1790-1815), a South African woman called the "Hottentot Venus," was put on public display in early 19th-century Europe as a sideshow attraction to demonstrate the supposed anatomical aberrations of the black female.

Similar issues were recently raised in the case of Mokgadi Caster Semenya the South African middle-distance runner who won gold in the women's 800 meters at the 2009 World Championships in Athletics. Following her victory, questions were raised about her gender, a sad demonstration of just how small a distance we have actually come in our racial attitudes.

Bradley McCallum and Jacqueline Tarry created *Evidence of Things Not Seen* (2008-2009), an installation of eight components, in oil on canvas and toner on silk scrims of eight civil rights figures (Ralph Abernathy, L.R.

Bennett, Rosa Parks, Willie James Kemp, Audrey Belle Langford, Martin Luther King Jr., J.W. Bonner and Jo Ann Robinson) holding their police mugshot booking numbers after they were arrested at various demonstrations.

*Tea For Two (The Collector)* (1980), an acrylic on canvas by Robert Colescott, on the other hand, is a lighthearted, perhaps satirical and irreverent critique of American society.

This is an exhibit replete with impressive, complex and provocative works that could have been put together at almost any time during the last decade, but somehow was not.

That it has at last been done now is a tribute to Crutchfield's vision, insight and powers of persuasion. More power to her.

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