

# From the Editor

Largely unattended dimensions of African American art history include the ways in which its related practices have existed, more broadly, in the international arena. Examining such histories offers important and nuanced understandings of the perennial tensions that exist between “African American” art and “American” art. There are important histories, going back two centuries or more, of Black artists in America fleeing the racism evidently endemic in the country of their birth for locales and environments seemingly less racially constrained and, consequently, more conducive to artistic freedom. Bluntly put, Black artists were in some ways more likely to be just “artists” when they traveled beyond the United States. During the nineteenth century, artists such as Robert S. Duncanson sought both racial and artistic freedoms by traveling to other parts of the world such as Italy and Britain, though Henry Ossawa Tanner is probably the most well-known Black American artist to take up long-term residence in another country—France. In the mid-twentieth century, artists such as Elizabeth Catlett, Lois Mailou Jones, and Benjamin Patterson gravitated to countries such as Mexico, Haiti, and Germany, respectively, again, in search of artistic (and on occasion, racial) freedoms. Looking at the individual life histories and art histories of African American artists who ventured abroad or crossed the southern border into Mexico offers us compelling mechanisms for greater understanding of African American art histories *within* the United States.

International considerations of African American artists’ practices are further complicated by the at times significant, though partial, upswing in the profile of African American art vis-à-vis group exhibitions and solo exhibitions outside the United States in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Blockbuster exhibitions such as *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, which originated at Tate Modern, London, in 2017, represented important, though arguably problematic, manifestations of African American art outside of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Such large group exhibitions in Britain contrast with recent major solo exhibitions (again, in the United Kingdom) by the likes of Faith Ringgold at the Serpentine, London, and Nick Cave at Tramway, Glasgow.<sup>2</sup> Away from the United Kingdom, we might also consider the significance of African American artists such as Robert Colescott, Martin Puryear, and Simone Leigh representing the United States in iterations of the Venice Biennale in 1997, 2019, and 2022, respectively.<sup>3</sup>

What are the critical ways in which we can read, understand, and mine such histories? What explicit messages are being advanced by the state when it elects to have an African American artist represent the country in a national biennale pavilion? There are, of course, no easy or stock answers to these questions. Indeed, answers will vary markedly from example to example. For instance, the United States’ gathering of Barbara Chase, Emilio Cruz, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Jacob Lawrence, William Majors, Norma Morgan, Robert Reid, Charles White, and Todd Williams for *Dix Artistes Nègres Des États-Unis (Ten Negro Artists from the United States)* at the 1966 First World Festival of Negro Arts, in Dakar, Senegal, might very likely need to be read through a different range of lenses than Martin Puryear at Venice.

Louie Robinson, the writer of a 1967 *Ebony* magazine feature on Charles White, introduced his text with, “The publication of [White’s] *Images of Dignity* alone is a singular achievement. No other living Negro artist has ever had a book of his works published (a collection of the art of the late Horace Pippin appeared in print after his death).”<sup>4</sup> What Robinson possibly was not aware of was that more than a decade before the publication of *Images of Dignity*, White had had a substantial German language monograph published in 1955 as *Charles White: Ein Künstler Amerikas (An American Artist)*. In similar regard, decades before Tritobia Hayes Benjamin’s monograph *The Life and Art of Lois Mailou Jones* (Pomegranate 1994) there appeared the now pretty-much-forgotten major French

language publication on Jones, *Peintures 1937–1951* (*Paintings 1937–1951*; Presses Georges Frere, 1952). Time and again we have seen a number of African American artists achieve considerable success and profile in the international arena with “foreign” monographs and catalogues published in languages such as French and German. This issue of *Nka* will hopefully stimulate further research into these frequently forgotten, overlooked, or disregarded artist histories.

The genesis of this issue of *Nka* dedicated to African American artists in the international arena lies in two occurrences. The second of these was a panel at the 2021 College Art Association (CAA) conference, organized by Richard Hylton and me, titled *African American Art in the International Arena: Critical Perspectives*, which emerged out of our shared interests and the ways in which we worked together on the first occurrence, the *Routledge Companion to African American Art History*, published at the end of 2019. On that occasion, I commissioned Hylton to contribute a text to the *Companion’s* third section, “Curatorial Histories and Strategies.” Surprisingly, Hylton’s “Status and Presence: African American Art in the International Arena” was, to the best of my knowledge, the first time a scholar had more broadly attended to the topic by way of a penetrating critical analysis.<sup>5</sup> That article, more than any other single factor, represents the genesis of this issue of *Nka*.

Three of the panelists at our 2021 CAA conference session have reworked and embellished their presentations and are now represented in this issue of *Nka*. The reader might well be struck, not only by the diversity of the texts gathered here but also by overlaps and cross-referencing that is at times very much self-evident. Several texts (Lindsay Twa and Rebecca Wolff) make mention of, or focus on, American artists at FESTAC ’77. Other texts (Richard Hylton and Will Rea) focus attention on acclaimed artists John Biggers and Jacob Lawrence and their respective travels and work in the West African countries of Ghana and Nigeria in the

early 1960s. Two texts (John Murphy and Antonia Pocock) move in and out of Germany as a country that played host, under very contrasting circumstances, to Charles White and Benjamin Patterson at different parts of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The more we uncover about these histories, the more we realize there is much to learn of the travels, sojourns, and accomplishments of African American artists outside of the United States. As Phoebe Wolfskill demonstrates, it is, for example, through Emma Amos’s time in London that we can learn about and gain insights into her little-known embracing of abstraction. And, in an altogether different part of the globe and a mid-twentieth century moment in time, Claire Ittner affords us enhanced understandings of Eldzier Cortor’s multifaceted practices by considering his time in Haiti and its influence on his practice. Ittner’s article examines the ways in which Cortor’s *Abattoire* prints departed from dominant visualizations of Haiti—whether the sanitized version of Haitian folklore presented for tourists or the structural order within Haitian culture that ethnographic insight promised to reveal.

The articles in this issue are arranged broadly chronologically. The first text by Emily Burns focuses on the representation of African Americans, in visual form, in which the Exhibit of American Negroes displayed a massive quantity of material in a compact twelve-foot-square space in the Palace of Social Economy during the Paris Universal Exposition of 1900. The final text relates to Sonya Clark’s time at Kehinde Wiley’s Black Rock residency in Dakar, Senegal, founded in 2019, which, as we read in Sophie Sanders’s text, was established with “the goal of creating for [Wiley] and other artists of many disciplines, as well as writers and filmmakers, a place for ‘the freedom to play in a safe space.’”<sup>6</sup>

I am grateful to my dear colleagues, Salah Hassan and Chika Okeke-Agulu, for giving me the opportunity to edit this issue of *Nka*. It has been another pleasure and privilege to work with *Nka* managing editor, Clare Ulrich. I will forever be in her debt for her ceaseless professionalism, warm support, and

reassuring eye for detail, on all aspects of the editorial and production process.

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## Notes

1 *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* took place at Tate Modern, July 12–October 22, 2017. I sought to articulate my criticisms of the exhibition in “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, September 27, 2017, <https://tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14702029.2017.1380916>, published in print in *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 17, nos. 2–3 (2018): 225–27.

2 For a review of Faith Ringgold at the Serpentine Gallery, London, see, for example, Richard Hylton, “In Retrospect: The Significance of Faith Ringgold at the Serpentine Gallery, London,” *International Review of African American Art* 29, no. 4 (2020): 34–39. For a review of Nick Cave, *Until*, see, for example, Catherine Spencer, “Nick Cave, *Until*, Glasgow Tramway,” *International Review of African American Art* 29, no. 4 (2020): 40–55.

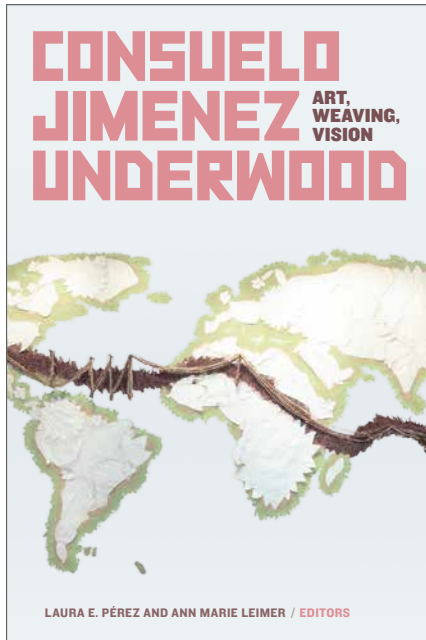
3 In 1997, Colescott was the first African American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale. Puryear’s presence in the international arena goes back at least to his 1989 participation in Bienal de São Paulo, where he was awarded the festival’s grand prize. Reporting on the choice of Puryear to represent the United States at Bienal de São Paulo, the *New York Times* wrote in 1988, “Martin Puryear, a widely praised abstract sculptor, has been selected to represent the United States at the Sao Paulo Biennale in Brazil, the most prestigious international art exhibition after the one in Venice. He is believed to be the first black artist to be the sole representative of the United States at an international exhibition.” Michael Brenson, “A Sculptor to Represent U.S. at Sao Paulo Biennale,” *New York Times*, November 22, 1988, [nytimes.com/1988/11/22/arts/a-sculptor-to-represent-us-at-sao-paulo-biennale.html](https://www.nytimes.com/1988/11/22/arts/a-sculptor-to-represent-us-at-sao-paulo-biennale.html). We can look forward to the United States being represented at the 2022 Venice Biennale by Simone Leigh, who will become the first African American woman artist to be so recognized.

4 Louie Robinson, “Charles White: Portrayer of Black Dignity. Artist Achieves Fame with Works on Negro Themes,” *Ebony* 22, no. 9 (1967): 25–36.

5 Mention must be made here of hugely important pioneering scholarship on particular dimensions of African American artists in international locales such as Theresa Leininger-Miller, *New Negro Artists in Paris: African American Painters and Sculptors in the City of Light, 1922–1934* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001), and Melanie Anne Herzog, *Elizabeth Catlett: An American Artist in Mexico* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005).

6 See Dionne Searcey, “Kehinde Wiley (and His Infinity Pool) Are Ready to Spoil Artists,” *New York Times*, June 4, 2019, [nytimes.com/2019/06/04/arts/design/kehinde-wiley-senegal.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/04/arts/design/kehinde-wiley-senegal.html).

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