

There Is A Body: Legacy of the Ancestral Arts in the 21st Century

and

Stellar Reverberations: African Masks in Outer Space

At the Katonah Museum of Art, March 17 – June 30, 2024

Dear Educators,

We are excited to welcome you and your students to the thought-provoking exhibition, *There Is A Body: Legacy of the Ancestral Arts in the 21st Century*. Curated by John Edmonds, this exhibition brings together four intergenerational artists from the African diaspora—David O. Alekhuogie, Sanford Biggers, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Matthew Angelo Harrison. Through a range of media and approaches, the artists employ traditional African art within their work, forging personal connections and interrogating its appropriation by the Western art canon. The works on view explore themes including race, authenticity, reclamation, police violence, and cultural heritage. Through guided conversation, tours may address ideas about the role of contemporary artists in reflecting on and challenging historical narratives, discuss how and why artists might turn to their personal and collective cultural heritage for inspiration, and consider the role of the artist as activist, bringing voice to social justice issues. Some artworks in the exhibition contain nudity and others reference gun violence, including sounds of gunshots. Although these works will not be directly addressed on school tours, we wanted you to be aware in advance of your visit. Please reach out if you would like to discuss further.

As part of their visit to the KMA, students will also experience the site-specific installation, *Stellar Reverberations: African Masks in Outer Space* by Damien Davis. This interactive work explores the connection between cultural heritage and the boundless cosmos through an Afrofuturist lens. Using familiar silhouettes and icons, Davis creates an imaginary intergalactic environment inspired by the voyage of Mae Jemison, the first African American woman to visit outer space. In response to the works on view, students will have an opportunity create their own mixed-media artwork that connects to ideas of identity and heritage.

Visits to the Katonah Museum of Art provide a unique learning experience that supports classroom learning goals. Through open-ended inquiry and guided discussion, students will:

- Practice close observation and articulating detailed descriptions
- Use critical and creative thinking to interpret what they see
- Voice their opinions, listen to each other, and make connections between ideas and themes
- Support ideas using evidence and acquired vocabulary
- Foster empathy through guided discussion

The materials found in this packet will help you and your students to become familiar with some of the big ideas and themes this exhibition:

- *Curator's Introduction to the Exhibition and Artist Information*
- Two images from the exhibition with questions for discussion
- Pre-Visit Activities: *Contemporary Art and Symbols*
- Glossary



Look for this light bulb to indicate ideas for older students. This packet is designed with upper elementary school students in mind; please adjust for your grade level. We are eager adapt our tours to best fit your curriculum and learning goals. Please email madasko@katonahmuseum.org or call 914-232-9555, ext. 2969 to discuss the specifics of your tour. Thank you for choosing the KMA for your class visit.

Margaret Adasko
Curator of Education

There Is A Body: Legacy of the Ancestral Arts in the 21st Century

Introduction to the Exhibition

John Edmonds, Curator

In his pioneering essay from 1925 “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” philosopher and art critic Alain Locke proposed what was then a radical idea: that the arts of African civilizations were worthy of the same regard as the arts of classical antiquity, and that recognition of their aesthetic value should be independent of their influence on European modernism. Locke held a steadfast belief that African American artists in particular would “receive from African art a profound and galvanizing influence” not only for its cultural inspiration but also for its lessons of discipline, style, and technical control pushed to the limits of technical mastery.

Nearly a century later, traditional African art finds itself again at the center of much critical discourse from scholars, activists, and artists alike across the globe. Prompting much attention to matters of restitution and ownership, artists across the African diaspora have questioned form, content, style, context, materiality, and spiritual power vis-à-vis the African art subject. These formal experimentations allow the traditional arts of Africa to be both foreground and background in artworks that pose questions about power, status, and agency.

Spanning across the mediums of photography, installation, sculpture, and video, *There Is A Body: Legacy of the Ancestral Arts in the 21st Century* examines Locke’s proclamation of African Art’s “galvanizing influence” in the work of four contemporary artists of the African diaspora: David O. Alekhuogie, Sanford Biggers, Lyle Ashton Harris, and Matthew Angelo Harrison. Through their respective engagements with sound, sculpture, photography, and appropriation, the artists included in this exhibition forge connections to the African continent through innovative strategies while probing some of society’s most pressing issues today: authorship, ownership, and state sanctioned violence.

There Is A Body: Legacy of the Ancestral Arts in the 21st Century is curated by John Edmonds.

There Is A Body: Legacy of the Ancestral Arts in the 21st Century is supported by The Katherine C. and David E. Moore Exhibition Fund, and the Director’s Circle of the Katonah Museum of Art: Mike Davies, Isabelle Harnoncourt Feigen, Vida Foubister, Nisa Geller, Virginia L. Gold, Linda Nordberg, Amy Parsons, Yvonne S. Pollack, Rochelle C. Rosenberg, Rebecca Samberg, and Richard and Audrey Zinman.

The Katonah Museum of Art is proud to be a grantee of ArtsWestchester with funding made possible by Westchester County government with the support of County Executive George Latimer. The Katonah Museum of Art’s programs are made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

About the Artists

David Alekhuogie



Portrait of David Alekhuogie in front of *panafricana*, 2019, archival print and UV varnish on canvas, 73 by 65 inches; at Baby Company. Photo Francesca Aton.

David O. Alekhuogie works with photography, collage, and sculpture to produce a visual meditation on his artistic and cultural lineage. His work investigates and questions the relationships among politics, race, gender, media, and power from different perspectives. For *A Reprise*, his series shown in *There Is A Body*, Alekhuogie sources materials including cotton jersey fabric, wax print fabric, and the 1935 exhibition catalogue of Walker Evans's photographs of African sculptures, and approaches them with a tendency towards abstraction.

David Alekhuogie (b. 1986) is based in Los Angeles, CA. His work was included in *Companion Pieces*, the 2020 iteration of MoMA's biannual *New Photography* exhibition, and *Men of Change: Power. Triumph. Truth.* at the California African American Art Museum in Los Angeles. He was a recent recipient of the Rema Hort Mann Foundation Emerging Artist Grant.

Learn more:

<https://aperture.org/editorial/how-david-alekhuogie-navigates-the-colonial-past/>

<https://vimeo.com/525646004>

<https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/443>



Sanford Biggers
Courtesy of the New York Times

Sanford Biggers

Sanford Biggers's work is an interplay of narrative, perspective, and history that speaks to current social, political, and economic happenings while also examining the contexts that bore them. His diverse practice positions him as a collaborator with the past through explorations of often-overlooked cultural and political narratives from American history.

In his *BAM* series, Biggers seeks to memorialize and honor victims of police violence in the U.S., pointing towards recent transgressions and elevating the stories of specific individuals to combat historical amnesia. This series is composed of fragments of wooden African statues that are dipped and veiled with thick wax and then ballistically 'resculpted.' Biggers then cast the remnants into bronze, a historically noble and weighty medium. Each sculpture is named and dedicated after unarmed victims who have died at the hands of law enforcement.

Following a residency as a 2017 American Academy Fellow in Rome, the artist began working in marble. Drawing on and playing with the tradition of working in this medium, Biggers's series entitled *Chimeras* creates hybridized forms that transpose, combine, and juxtapose classical and historical subjects to create alternative meanings and produce what he calls "future ethnographies."

Sanford Biggers (b. 1970) was raised in Los Angeles and currently lives and works in New York City. He is the recipient of numerous awards. Most recently, he was appointed the 2021-2022 Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Visiting Professor and Scholar in the MIT Department of Architecture. He has had museum solo at The Bronx Museum of the Arts (2021), the Contemporary Art Museum St. Louis (2018), the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (2016), the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2012), and the Brooklyn Museum (2011), among others.

Learn more:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KmtqPO7K28o>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/14/arts/design/sanford-biggers-quilt-bronx-museum.html>

<https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/the-many-faces-of-sanford-biggers/>

<https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/interview-meet-me-on-equinox/5966>

Ted Talk: An artist's unflinching look at racial violence | Sanford Biggers:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MOOL_LY2hRA



Lyle Ashton Harris

Photograph by Lloyd Foster

Lyle Ashton Harris

Lyle Ashton Harris has cultivated a diverse artistic practice ranging from photography and collage to installation and performance art. His work explores intersections between the personal and the political, examining the impact of ethnicity, gender, and desire on the contemporary social and cultural dynamic.

Harris has been widely exhibited internationally, including most recently in “Photography’s Last Century” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; in “Basquiat’s ‘Defacement’: The Untold Story” and “Implicit Tensions: Mapplethorpe Now” at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Harris was born in the Bronx, New York, raised in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, and New York.

Learn more:

[BOMB Magazine | Diasporic Notions: Lyle Ashton Harris Interviewed](#)

<https://www.artforum.com/events/lyle-ashton-harris-4-243555/>



Matthew Angelo Harrison

Courtesy the artist and Jessica Silverman, San Francisco.

Photo: Naaman Rosen

Matthew Angelo Harrison

Matthew Angelo Harrison (b. 1989, Detroit, MI) creates otherworldly sculptures that are in conversation with anthropology, science fiction and industrial design. His work combines found objects made from organic materials such as wooden sculptures from West Africa with synthetic materials like acrylic resin, which he then molds and sculpts with state-of-the-art machinery. The resulting forms investigate the subtle politics of mass production, authenticity, metamorphosis, and what the artist calls "abstract ancestries."

Harrison has exhibited widely in solo shows in the following public institutions: Broad Art Museum (East Lansing, MI); Atlanta Contemporary; and Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). Harrison has been awarded grants and fellowships by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), United States Artists, and Kresge Arts.

Learn more:

*<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixkFnMPo8Nc>

<https://www.frieze.com/article/matthew-angelo-harrisons-prototypes-new-life>

<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/artificial-families-matthew-angelo-harrison-interviewed/>



In The Pollack Family Learning Center
**Stellar Reverberations: African Masks in
Outer Space**
An Installation by Damien Davis
March 17 – June 30, 2024

Stellar Reverberations: African Masks in Outer Space is a site-specific installation created for the Katonah Museum of Art by Damien Davis. Building upon Davis’s interest in challenging historical portrayals of Black identity, the exhibition uses visual symbols to create a dialogue between African heritage and the cosmic wonder of outer space. Through an Afrofuturist lens, Davis employs familiar silhouettes and icons to celebrate cultural narratives and scientific thinking.

For The Pollack Family Learning Center, Davis found inspiration in NASA astronaut Mae Jemison, who in 1992 became the first African American woman to visit outer space. On her voyage, Jemison brought with her a West African Bundu statue. Davis plays out Jemison’s story, creating an imaginary intergalactic environment populated with freeform symbolic African masks. Young learners can engage with parts of the kinetic installation by turning, twisting, and rearranging larger-than-life moving parts that represent cultural artifacts floating in “zero gravity.” The Pollack Family Learning Center also offers related drop-in artmaking activities that invite young visitors to reflect on themselves, their heritage, and imagined futures.

Damien Davis (b. 1984) is a New York-based artist whose work has been showcased at prominent institutions including the Museum of Arts and Design, the Museum of Modern Art, and the Whitney Museum of American Art. Davis was formerly Curator of the Sugar Hill Children’s Museum of Art & Storytelling in Harlem and is currently the Residency + Programs Manager at Project for Empty Space and a Visiting Assistant Professor of Sculpture at Purchase College (SUNY). His work has been profiled in the New York Times, Frieze Magazine, The Guardian, Hyperallergic, and Vulture.

MEET THE ARTIST:

Tuesday, March 26, 4:00-6:00 PM: Educators Preview and Workshop with Damien Davis

Educators are invited to a tour of KMA’s spring exhibition followed by a workshop with artist Damien Davis. Davis will discuss his current installation and lead teachers in an exploration of kinetic sculpture techniques that they can take back to their learning environments. This program is free for educators. Registration required.

Saturday, May 4, 12:00-3:00 PM: Family Day: Symbols, Stories, and Self

Construct, create, and reflect alongside artist Damien Davis as we explore ideas of self, community, and art! Davis will collaborate with young visitors on a kinetic sculpture project in the KMA garden. Other projects throughout the Museum include unexpected portraits, multimedia sculptures, and imagined collages. Visit www.katonahmuseum.org to register.



Artist's Process

Start by taking a close look at this artwork.

Look:

- What do you see?
- What colors, shapes, lines and patterns do you notice?
- What do you notice in the foreground or background of the work?
- Look again for details that you didn't notice at first glance.
- Look for things that are unexpected or surprise you.

Think:

- What materials do you think the artist might have used to create this?
- Are there any unique materials or techniques that you can discover as you look further?
- Imagine the steps the artist took when creating this image.
- Describe what you think their process might have been.

Connect:

- What does this artwork remind you of?
- What connections come to mind when you view this artwork?
 - o Personal connections in your own life?
 - o Connections to the world around you?
 - o Connections to other art and ideas you are learning about.

Wonder:

- What questions do you have about this artwork?
- What do you wish to know more about?
- What would you ask the artist if you could talk with them?

David O. Alekhuogie uses photography to investigate and question the relationships between politics, race, gender, media, and power from different perspectives. For his piece, *Mask 99/2*, Alekhuogie cut up and reconstructed archival photographs into a three-dimensional form, which was then placed in front of West African patterned textiles and other materials and then photographed. The original images were sourced from the Walker Evans catalogue, *Perfect Documents* which included photographs of a 1935 MoMA exhibition of African Art. The elements of this work, and the ways they have been transformed, hold both personal and cultural meaning to Alekhuogie.

David Alekhuogie, *Mask 99/2*, 2021. Archival pigment print. 47 1/4 × 36 in. (120.1 × 91.4 cm). Collection of Lisa and Stephen Eisenstein. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Yancey Richardson, New York. © David O. Alekhuogie



Reading an Artwork – Making Connections

Start by looking closely at this artwork.

Look:

- What do you see?
- Describe all the elements with as much detail as you can.

Connect:

- What does this artwork remind you of?
- What connections come to mind when you view this artwork?
- Can you make connections to other art and ideas you are learning about?

Think:

- What might be unexpected or surprising to you about this artwork?
- What materials do you think the artist used to make this work of art? Why might the artist have made these choices?
- What do you think the artist is hoping we, the viewer, will think about and consider as we view this artwork?

Wonder:

- What do you think it will be like to see this artwork on your visit to the Museum?
- What might you see when you walk around it?
- What questions do you have about this artwork?
- What would you ask the artist if you could talk with them?

Sanford Biggers is an artist whose practice draws from his engagement with the world, ancient and modern, East and West; his commitment to historical justice; and his spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities. *Soothsayer* is part of a series titled *Chimera* which combines African masks with classical statues. Chimera generally refers to imaginary creatures made up of different animals. Biggers states that he got the inspiration for this series when he spent time studying in Italy and “got to thinking about living on top of history, living with the ruins of history, the relics of history.”



What Hybrid sculpture might you make that merges different cultures, time periods, or ideas?

Sanford Biggers, *The Soothsayer*, 2019-23. White marble on custom cedar plinth. 49 3/4 x 38 1/2 x 33 in. Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen. Photo: Lance Brewer. © Sanford Biggers

Pre-Visit: Symbols All Around Us

A symbol is a shape or design that represents an idea, concept, or object. Often symbols are shown as simple outlines or as *silhouettes* or cut-out shapes.

Look around your classroom to find many different symbols. What might they mean? When and where do you see them out in the world?

On your visit to the Katonah Museum of Art, you will see an installation titled *Stellar Reverberations: African Masks in Outer Space*, by artist Damien Davis. Davis uses many different symbols and silhouettes to tell stories that look to the past and imagine fantastical futures. These are some symbols you will see in Davis's installation. What might they represent?



Symbols that represent YOU!

1. Think of some symbols or shapes that represent you. These shapes might include:
 - An object that is important to you such as a pair of fluffy socks, a special object from your room, or a gift that has special significance to you.
 - A picture of something related to your family, your cultural heritage, or your traditions.
 - An object that represents your interests and hobbies.
 - A favorite food.
 - An animal that you relate to or that represents your personality or characteristics.
2. Create simple drawings of 3 or more symbols that represent you. Cut them out.
3. Rearrange the shapes on a piece of paper in various ways. How does the meaning of your symbols change when you place them in different arrangements and orders?
4. Can you create a narrative without words, rearranging the shapes to tell us a story about you?



Art and Ideas

Engaging with Contemporary Art

Contemporary Art refers to the art of today, produced by artists who are living in the twenty-first century. Working in a wide range of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects, contemporary artists often challenge traditional boundaries and definitions. Contemporary art provides an opportunity to reflect on present-day society and the issues relevant to us and the world in which we live. When engaging with contemporary art, viewers are invited into a dialogue with the art to consider these ideas and think about the questions raised by the artwork as much as the visual aesthetics of the work.

In the thinking about artworks on view in the exhibition *There Is A Body: Legacy of the Ancestral Arts in the 21st Century*, some of these powerful questions might be raised:

- How can works of art help us understand our world and ourselves more fully?
- Why might an artist look to their heritage for inspiration?
- In what ways might artists choose to reclaim traditional objects to change the way we look at history / art history?
- How do artists explore the connection between themselves, history, and current social justice issues?

Pick one of these questions and create an artwork that responds to or engages with that question in some way. Use any art material or technique of your choice.

- How can your choice of a particular medium or technique be used to communicate the question or ideas you are investigating?

GLOSSARY

Your Museum Visit:

Museum: An institution or building where works of art or other objects of value are cared for, studied, and displayed so the public can experience them and learn from them.

Curator: A person who selects, organizes, and presents objects for display.

Docent: A person who is a knowledgeable guide, especially one who leads visitors through a museum and facilitates a discussion about the exhibitions.

Art and Ideas:

2-Dimensional vs. 3-Dimensional: Two-dimensional art is flat, such as a drawing or painting. Three-dimensional art has volume as well as height and length, such as a sculpture, and can usually be walked around or seen from many sides.

African American: An American of African and especially of Black African descent. The phrase generally refers to descendants of enslaved Black people who are from the United States.

Afrofuturism: An artistic genre that centers Black history and culture and incorporates science-fiction, technology, and futuristic elements into literature, music, and the visual arts.

Ancestry: One's family, ethnic, or cultural descent, the origin or background of something.

Ancestral Arts: refers to art that connects to a person's or a community's heritage, family, or cultural descent.

Black (or African) Diaspora: Refers to the many communities of people of African descent dispersed throughout the world as a result of historic movements such as slavery and Colonialism.

Chimera: A mythological creature that combines two or more animals.

Collage: The creative practice of making an artwork from a collection of fragments or small parts.

Contemporary Art: The art of today, produced by artists who are living in the twenty-first century. Contemporary art provides an opportunity to reflect on present-day society and the issues relevant to us and the world around us.

Culture: The behaviors and beliefs characteristic of a particular social, ethnic, or age group.

Cultural Heritage: An expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions, and values.

Elements of Art: The basic components used by the artist when producing works of art, including:

- **Color:** The hue produced when light reflects off a surface. Color is an important element of art that can affect mood, feeling, balance, energy, and memory.
- **Line:** A continuous mark between points. Lines can be straight, jagged, curvy, horizontal, vertical, diagonal, thick, thin, etc.
- **Shape:** A flat, two-dimensional area. Shapes are spaces that are created when a line reconnects with itself.

- **Texture:** The way the surface of an object feels to the touch or looks as if it might feel if one were to touch it.

Expression: The look on someone's face that conveys a particular emotion. Also, the process of making known one's thoughts or feelings.

Historical Context: Refers to the social, religious, economic, and political conditions that existed during a certain time and place. Historical context can help us understand what motivated people to behave the way they did and give us further insight into why events may have occurred in specific ways.

Kinetic Art: Art that moves.

Identity: Characteristics that highlight the uniqueness of an object or person.

Installation Art: A genre of art characterized by immersive, large-scale, three-dimensional, mixed-media constructions, often designed for a specific place or for a temporary period of time.

Mixed-Media: The integrated use of different media or materials, especially within the arts

Narrative: A story; a spoken, written, or visual account of connected events.

Photograph: A picture made using a camera, in which an image is captured and then made visible and permanent by chemical treatment or stored digitally.

Portrait: A work of art that represents a specific person, a group of people, or an animal. Portraits usually show what a person looks like as well as revealing something about the subject's personality.

Expression: The look on someone's face that conveys a particular emotion. Also, the process of making known one's thoughts or feelings.

Gaze: A steady or intent look in one's eyes. The gaze in a portrait can show feeling or emotion.

Gesture: An expressive movement of the body or part of the body.

Pose: A particular way of standing or sitting, usually adopted in order to be photographed, painted, or drawn.

Scale: The size of an object relative to something else, or the relative size of an object in a work of art in relation to the whole work of art.

Self-Portrait: A portrait of oneself.

Silhouette: a simple outline of a shape, usually filled in with black or other solid color, showing no detail.

Social Commentary: Social commentary is the act of expressing an opinion on the nature of society. It is most often done with the idea of implementing or promoting change.

Symbol: A design or an object that represents something else.

Symbolism: The use of symbols to represent ideas or qualities; symbolic meaning attributed to visual images.

Tradition: The handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice.