

freestyle

A blue-toned photograph of a person, possibly a woman, in a room with bookshelves. The person is in the foreground, slightly out of focus, with their hand near their face. The background shows a bookshelf filled with books. The overall mood is contemplative and artistic.

THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM



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This publication was prepared on the occasion of the exhibition *Freestyle*
The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York
April 28—June 24, 2001

Freestyle is sponsored by

PHILIP MORRIS
COMPANIES INC.

Additional support has been generously provided by the Peter Norton Family
Foundation and the exhibition fund: Jacqueline Bradley & Clarence Otis, Fifth Floor
Foundation and Joel Shapiro.

The Studio Museum in Harlem gratefully acknowledges its many supporters.
Operation of The Studio Museum in Harlem's facility is supported in part, by public
funds provided by the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs and the New
York State Council on the Arts and by corporations, foundations and individuals.

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Museum in Harlem.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
Freestyle/Thelma Golden with Christine Y. Kim, Hamza Walker...[et al.].

ISBN 0-942949-21-8

The Studio Museum in Harlem
144 West 125th Street
New York, NY 10027

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forward and acknowledgments

At the beginning of every decade a peculiar impulse overcomes the art world: to identify a group of young, exciting artists who will emerge as the next generation of indicators and pacesetters. “Freestyle” manifests that impulse. In organizing this exhibition Thelma Golden, Deputy Director for Exhibitions and Programs at The Studio Museum in Harlem, once again demonstrates her astute and timely sense of current creative trends in the international art world.

The work in this exhibition deals with familiar issues: identity, culture and aesthetics, which have been the focus of art making over the last thirty years. Through them black artists (and other artists of color and women artists) staked their claim, made their mark and transformed critical discourse in the art world. But the artists in Freestyle bring something else to these well-trodden paths in the postmodern world. These artists are as much rural as urban in their perspectives, ‘First’ World as ‘Third.’ Their work is informed as much by western theater as African masquerade, by consumerism as much as metaphysics, by abstraction as much as narrative and storytelling, by fairy tales as much as the reality of social surveillance. Unexpected materials—from digital media to sound, from paint to pomade—enrich our experience of race and gender, as do considerations of sexual orientation, multi-racality and transnational experience, power and dominance, narcissism and surrogacy.

I would like to acknowledge the essential contributions of Christine Y. Kim, Curatorial Assistant at SMH, Thelma’s able collaborator in organizing “Freestyle”, and Hamza Walker of The Renaissance Society who contributed an essay to the catalogue. We also thank the individual authors who prepared entries on individual artists for their insights, Rashida Bumbray, Curatorial Assistant, and our curatorial interns, Justin Christopherson and Demetrios Kapenatanakos for their dedication and hard work.

SMH is also grateful to institutions and individuals who lent works to this exhibition: 303 Gallery, New York, NY; Judith Alexander, New York, NY; Gayle Perkins Atkins and Charles N. Atkins, New York, NY; Rena G. Bransten, San Francisco, CA; The Donald L. Bryant, Jr. Family Trust, St. Louis, MO; James Casebere, New York, NY; China Art Objects Galleries, Los Angeles, CA; Thomas Dane, London, England; Dunn and Brown Contemporary, Dallas, TX; Lauren L. Esposito, Dix Hills, NY; Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York, NY; Francie Bishop Good and David Horvitz, Fort Lauderdale, FL; Joan King and Kevin Salwen, Atlanta, GA; Liz Lapidus and Tony Hernandez, Atlanta, GA; Lester Marks, Houston, TX; Doree and Assefa Mehretu, East Lansing, MI; Miller Block Gallery, Boston, MA; Susan and Richard Minster, Scarsdale, NY; the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, FL; G.R. N’Namdi Gallery, Chicago, IL; Eileen Harris Norton, Santa Monica, CA; The Project, New York, NY; Nicholas and Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn, New York, NY; John Smith and Vicky Hughes, Richmond, Surrey, England; Jim Sokol, Birmingham, AL; Schmidt Contemporary Art, St. Louis, MO; Susan Sosnick, Southfield Hills, MI; Vaknin Schwartz, Atlanta, GA; Dean Valentine, Venice, CA; Christophe van de Weghe, New York, NY; and Kathryn Van Dyke, Mill Valley, CA.

This exhibition would not have been possible without the timely and generous funding from the Philip Morris Companies with additional funds from the Peter Norton Family Foundation. We thank Jennifer Goodale, Director of corporate contributions, and Marcia Sullivan, Manager, corporate contributions at Philip Morris Companies; and Susan Cahan, Curator and Director of Arts Programs, of the Peter Norton Family Foundation for their confidence in and support of this endeavor. We also wish to acknowledge Stephanie French for her enthusiasm early on and Lisa Walker who broached the subject of a SMH/Philip Morris project.



introduction

A few years ago, my friend, the artist Glenn Ligon, and I began using the term post-black. Our relationship is grounded in a shared love of absurd uses of language, and our conversations, both serious and silly are always full of made-up and misused words and phrases. “Post-black” was shorthand for post-black art, which was shorthand for a discourse that could fill volumes. For me, to approach a conversation about “black art,” ultimately meant embracing and rejecting the notion of such a thing at the very same time. As a child born in the mid-1960s, I imagine I hold a certain degree of nostalgia for the passion and energy that created the nationalist/aesthetic dogma of the 1970s Black Arts Movement. That point in time, notwithstanding, I was intellectually formed by the artist Raymond Saunders’ polemic “Black Is A Color,” which allowed me to thrive in the words and actions of late 1980s multiculturalism. So, at the end of the 90s, Glenn and I began, more and more, to see evidence of art and ideas that could only be labeled (both ironically and seriously) in this way—post-black. Glenn was better at identifying the traces and instances of it than I was, but the moment he said it, I knew exactly what he meant. It was a clarifying term that had ideological and chronological dimensions and repercussions. It was characterized by artists who were adamant about not being labeled as “black” artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness. In the beginning, there were only a few marked instances of such an outlook, but at the end of the 1990s, it seemed that post-black had fully entered into the art world’s consciousness. Post-black was the new black.

Post...

When I first came to The Studio Museum in Harlem, in 1987, as a curatorial intern, it was at the height of the multicultural moment. African-American art was joined by Hispanic art and Asian-American art, etc., as the new paradigm in the recognition of heretofore often marginalized artistic practices. At that time the museum was involved in the organization of “The Decade Show” (1990) with the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art. Together they brought the multiculturalist discourse to the mainstream. The debates that the exhibition engendered continued in various forms through the next decade, paving the way for the moment we are now in and the economically induced interest in globalism in the latter part of the 90s. In 1988 I left SMH, and began a ten-year tenure at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Although, still not fully characterized or named, the art of the 1990s stands between that multicultural moment and now, a link to that past and this present. One of the great legacies of that period in the early 90s was that many artists emerged empowered. That generation, the beneficiaries of many and the heirs of a few—Robert Colescott, David Hammons and Adrian Piper—includes artists such as Leonardo Drew, Ellen Gallagher, Renée Green, Glenn Ligon, Kerry James Marshall, Alison Saar, Gary Simmons, Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, Nari Ward, Carrie Mae Weems, and Fred Wilson among others. This generation reinvented the debate on culture and identity in contemporary art and informed my practice as a curator concerned with these issues. They set the platform for this new post-black existence in contemporary art. For me, as a curator, the beginning of the new millennium begged the inevitable question: “after all of this, what’s next?”

How would this notion play out in the beginning of the twenty-first Century? How would black artists make work after the vital political activism of the 1960s, the focused, often essentialist, Black Arts Movement of the 1970s, the theory-driven multiculturalism of the 1980s, and the late globalist expansion of the late 90s? “Freestyle” was the answer to those questions. The exhibition, while conscious of the recent past of the institution, brings me back to the museum and the museum back to the mission of its founding—to present innovative contemporary art. “Freestyle” presents twenty-eight emerging black artists working in the United States. They are mostly based on the east and west coasts, but they are joined together by their peers from all points in between. They work in all media: painting, drawing, sculpture, video, photography, sound and digital art. Many of the artists work in multimedia. There are no prevailing themes in the exhibition except perhaps an overwhelming sense of individuality.

The title of this exhibition also comes from a conversation with Glenn. Musical metaphors had always informed the formation of this project. When I thought of some of the cultural markers that defined these practitioners, music culture prevailed. In the parlance of popular music, freestyle is the term which refers to the space where the musician (improvisation) or for the dancer (the break) finds the groove and goes all out in a relentless and unbridled expression of the self.

Like the generation preceding them, the artists in “Freestyle” have created work that engages issues and ideas such as culture, sexuality, religion, gender, feminism, the body, popular culture, political, social and economic history, transcultural expression, and abstraction. Identity politics subtly infuses their work. They are influenced by hip hop, alt rock, new media, suburban angst, urban blight, globalism, and the Internet—the felicitous device of international communication and new optimism in the wake of the initial postmodernist urge to define the avant-garde as dead. They live in a world where their particular cultural specificity is marketed to the planet and sold back to them. As a group, they exemplify the presence of art school training in that they create work that refers to multiple histories of contemporary art and culture—both non-Western and that of the Western Modernist tradition. Their influences are rich and varied. They are both post-Basquiat and post-Biggie. They embrace the dichotomies of high and low, inside and outside, tradition and innovation with a great ease and facility. Like the generations before then, they resist narrow definition. Most importantly, their work, in all of its various forms, speaks to an individual freedom that is a result of this transitional moment in the quest to define ongoing changes in the evolution of African-American art and ultimately to ongoing redefinition of blackness in contemporary culture.

I believe that this exhibition will not only be notable for its wide range of artworks by this generation of visual artists, but also for the catalogue’s inclusion of the incredibly responsive writings of the curators, scholars and writers who wrote inspirationally on the artists. Their courageous words facilitate the continued reading and reception of the artists’ work while also offering a taste of today’s talented critical voices discussing contemporary art and its relationship to a range of other modes of production.

I am indebted to several colleagues and friends for their input into this volume and the intellectual energy that formed this exhibition. Hamza Walker’s highly personal essay chronologically traces a personal response to the seismic shifts in the understanding of African-American culture that is at once both autobiographical and theoretical. This essay, as with his curatorial and intellectual practice, are invaluable in provoking truths with unrelenting honesty. Christine Y. Kim has functioned truly as a curatorial collaborator, adding shape, depth, insight and diligent research to the formation of this publication and exhibition. I have been fortunate to know and find in Franklin Sirmans an editorial impresario, whose grasp of contemporary art writing and “post-black” art is as strong as our commitment to present it. Sirmans, as guest editor, has shaped the wide-ranging essays with conceptual rigor into a coherent whole never forgetting the modus operandi of “freestyle.”

This exhibition is neither a definitive survey nor a comprehensive exhibition, in the scope of its subject, but rather an attempt to look at this exciting moment with eyes wide open for what is to come. “Freestyle” is a part of the long-term strategy at The Studio Museum in Harlem, to seek out, support, and present the work of emerging artists in the African Diaspora and beyond. “Freestyle” allows this generation of artists to add their voices to the prevailing dialogues and debates while expanding the platform of contemporary art. I am sure this will not be the last time we hear from these artists. The Studio Museum in Harlem is pleased to offer the public an opportunity to examine, through this exhibition and accompanying catalogue, the issues explored by young black artists in an amazingly creative moment.

I became black around 1987, when I suddenly had a choice in the matter. I mean, I could've become African-American. Until that point, I never realized how much I liked being simply black. I was surprised to learn that my grandfather shared similar sentiments, in fact even more vehemently than I. That year, during college springbreak, I came home to find him angry about our new hyphenated designation. I had no idea Henry Brown was so down with "black." Here was a man from the era of "highballs" and Pall Mall's, an easy going retired gent of 70 years, nary a pomaded hair out of place, visibly upset. Having been Colored, Negro and Black, he felt entitled to protest because the rather broad line between self-determination and just being plain fickle had been crossed. Against the backdrop of a crack-cocaine epidemic, and alarming figures on the Moynihan barometer of black "well-being," "uplift of the race" through a shell-game/name-change more than ruffled the crease in this man's jeans. Initially, he suspected that the desire to be called African-American, like the transition from Negro to Black, represented yet another generational schism and that I, as a younger man than he, might be in on it, much the way my mother and father were previously adamant about being called black. I assured him that I too shared his concern about denial through pride.

In high school, I could not fail to perceive hyphenated American identities as the basis for exclusion and irresponsible behavior rather than as a genuine expression of pride. All the ballyhoo whites made about being part this, that, or the other ever really amounted to was an excuse to get drunk and offend someone, namely me, with half-baked ideas about race relations they inherited from God knows where, their parents or some Norman Lear concotion. The term African-American, did not conjure its corollary, Euro-American, as readily as the more specific categories Irish-, Italian-, Greek- or German-American, strands of that monolithic narrative known as the immigrant success story. I was intuitively wary of combining a hyphenated identity with the desire for a black cultural patrimony because it blurred the incommensurability of the immigrant success story and black American history. What paved the way for this semantic merger was a reading of black history precisely as a narrative, one with a beginning, middle and successful conclusion, i.e., The Civil Rights Movement. This reading masked the profound ambivalence of the Movement's legacy and implied a sense of closure making the term African American unconsciously complicit in announcing the death knell of an era. As if the television show *Happy Days* (appearing in the middle of the 1970s) was not offensive enough, by the mid 1980s it seemed that on every front, politically, socially and economically, the 1960s were being declared dead, making way for a wave of nostalgia that persists to this very moment. History was fast becoming an endless Motown Special launched by the Big Chill, a film whose title was more ironic than anyone could've guessed. The new hyphenated designation failed to capture my own existential free fall which went well beyond any sense of tokenism. To state it more accurately, it was not that I became black, nor wanted to be black in an essentialist way, as much as I preferred at that time remaining in the black.

In 1989, an article appeared in *Newsweek Magazine* proclaiming an end to the era of integration. Given the overall socio-political climate, after eight years of Ronald Reagan as President, a renegeing on the "ordeal of integration" should hardly have come as a surprise. It would certainly sound impressive to my grandchildren to say my life began with the "end of an era." Yet, it felt more as if a football referee, in his all too symbolic black and white striped jersey, had thrown a yellow flag and blown his whistle, declaring that my adolescence and early adult life were simply a "false start." So we had gone from post-segregation to post-integration. What happened to integration proper? I had negotiated an inferiority complex reinforced by demeaning experiences great and small not the least of which were the daily

slings and arrows of being called "Uncle Tom," "white boy" and "oreo" by my black classmates, in particular Roosevelt Drummond, a.k.a. Beau. And for what? Hardly something as intellectually romantic as DuBoisian double consciousness. A double dose of alienation was more like it. How was it that, through my parents effort, I managed to drag my ass from the northwest side of Baltimore to a school downtown? Yet, few if any of the white peers I had toward the end of college exhibited, on an interpersonal level, so little grace when it came to race?

I arrived at the doorstep of diversity very angry. I experienced multiculturalism as the sound of a door closing rather than opening. In fact, it felt as if debates about affirmative action were slamming the door shut behind me. All I really had to do to get an answer to the question that bothered me was to ask white friends how many black people they knew, really knew. Yet, by and large, I held my peace. Integration, thus far, had been a one way street. That fact, I was willing to accept. But, I couldn't accept movies, television shows, literature (no matter how great), not to mention the ubiquitous commodifiable representations of blackness—ass whoopin' rapper #1, the soulful, no non-sense talk show host, the athlete, the sociologist, you name it—as a substitute for an exchange with someone other than the door man. I was down with cultural studies as far as diversity was concerned—the sharing of values, stories, etc.—not to mention cultural studies as a form of social critique. But, diversity as a lived reality was another matter altogether. As I entered the work force, I quickly learned any institution could be diverse, all they had to do was count the "greater support staff." Black and white weren't talking to one another. We were talking at one another through representations—good, bad and just plain ugly. My life circa 1990, as subject to the lens of history was undergoing a reverse zoom shot. The lens zoomed forward while the camera moved backward. The scope expanded to reveal the subject in greater context but the overall camera movement was backward nonetheless. As for the 1970s ideal of racial utopia, which I had been fed as a lower middle class to poor black child, the only thing missing was a unicorn.

Just as representations of blackness mediated black-white relations they also mediated black-black relations and ultimately the relationship I had to myself. Each and every image of someone black was speaking to me, at me and for me. A "we" was assumed, imposing itself on whatever meager sense of self I could muster. "I" could start the morning off as Michael Jordan or Michael Jackson (or Michael Jordan Jesse Jackson) and end the day a crime statistic. Likewise, whenever whites in any discussion concerning race addressed me as "you," was it in the singular or plural? Were "they" talking to "me"? Or, if it was plural, as in "you people," which narrative were "we" being weighed against? Was it comedy or tragedy? Was it the Huxtables or the homeless? A sense of self, as it was constituted in language, was irrevocably shattered. I found discussions about race incredibly difficult to maintain because I had no idea for whom I was speaking, if anyone. The only voice I had was negational, one, I certainly could not imagine useful for constructively answering questions about an artist's relationship to his or her audience. Racially, it appeared as though I had flat-lined. But, in essence, I had repressed a great deal of anger which provided something of a pulse. And that is when I found myself "renigged", a term that I use strictly in a personal sense as I ask myself questions about change and historical agency—questions that each generation will have to come to terms with, at some point. Given that history would appear to repeat itself in the most uncanny fashion, as the 1992 L.A. riots would attest, perhaps the voices which spoke the first time around are adequate for speaking the second time around. But, what happens when history does not repeat itself? Surely, new voices will emerge, ones that will grapple with questions of historical change, perhaps implicitly as opposed to explicitly, fashioning a style capable of capturing a free-fall. Can I get a witness?