BRIDGET R. COOKS

Curating the National Museum of African American History and Culture

A Conversation with Tuliza Fleming and Jacquelyn Serwer

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Fig. 1

Fig. 1
Exterior of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, April 2016. Photo by Alan Karchmer for the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

IN THE SPRING of 1994, I was offered the position of education intern at the National African American Museum Project, an exhibition space housed in the Smithsonian's Arts and Industries Building. A 1991 proposal for a national African American museum had established the project.[1] For decades, museums, libraries, and private collections across the United States had preserved and displayed objects central to African American history.[2] However, a federally funded institution dedicated to the contributions of African American people did not yet exist, despite attempts to establish one that date back to 1915.[3]

That summer I worked with Deborah Willis, who then served as the museum's collections coordinator, and Claudine K. Brown, the Smithsonian's Deputy Assistant Secretary for the Arts and Humanities, to plan public programs that would engage visitors with the inaugural exhibition, *Imagining Families: Images and Voices*. The show presented the work of fifteen contemporary American artists who shared critical narratives about individual, family, and community identities. In the foreword to the exhibition catalogue, Brown explained that the regents of the Smithsonian had offered conditional support for a

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museum focused on the lives of African Americans "because they were not sure that there were sufficient private collections that might be donated to the museum." She continued, "Some assumed that African American material culture was already safely ensconced in American museum collections throughout the nation. There was also the firmly held belief within the museum profession that working[-]class people use their objects until they use them up."[4] Brown identified around 300 collectors with over 20,000 objects relevant to African American history and culture to disprove these assumptions.[5] She and Willis discovered that fine-art and vernacular photographs were key components of these collections, providing documentation of, and coherence for, the histories they preserved. By exhibiting the work of a racially diverse group of artists who engaged photography in different ways, *Imagining Families* modeled the integration of African American people into what Willis called "the larger American cultural experience."[6] It thus argued for building a national museum by demonstrating that African Americans were already part of the national body, even though we were not yet represented by a site on the National Mall.

Disagreements about the location, funding, and ideological function of the museum delayed its progress until 2003, when an act of Congress provided for the foundation of the National Museum of African American History and Culture.[7] Led by director Lonnie G. Bunch III, the new museum now stands between the Washington Monument and the National Museum of American History (NMAH), between Fourteenth and Fifteenth Streets, NW—the heart of the Mall (fig. 1). Its ever-growing permanent collection consists of over 33,000 objects spanning the antebellum period to the present.

Given the centrality of images in the *Imagining Families* exhibition, what role would the visual arts take on in the new museum? How would it build its collection of art made by African Americans and choose to display that art to the public? How, moreover, would archival research inform the presentation of art by African Americans?

In November 2015 I was privileged to have a conversation in Washington, DC, with the two people most qualified to answer these questions: curators Tuliza Fleming and Jacquelyn Serwer. Before joining the museum staff, Fleming was associate curator and department head of American art at the Dayton Art Institute (2001–2006) and a guest curator at the August Wilson Center for African American Culture (2006–2008). Serwer served as chief curator for the Smithsonian American Art Museum (1996–1999) and the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1999–2006). The following pages contain an excerpt from my interview with Fleming and Serwer, in which they shared their perspectives on collecting and curating visual art in the new Smithsonian museum.

BRIDGET R. COOKS [BRC] In this, the first national museum dedicated to the history and culture of African Americans, the platform for exposure and visibility is unprecedented. Who do you imagine is the audience for your exhibitions? How has this influenced your curating?

JACQUELYN SERWER [JS] We assume that our audience will largely not be art museum goers. We'll most likely receive an audience like the one at NMAH, but probably with more people of color. Visitors to the new museum's visual art gallery will have the experience of seeing works of art that relate to history and stories they are familiar with and that matter to them. In some ways the art will help them explicate experiences and narratives they'll encounter in other exhibitions in the museum. We're excited to be able to open up the world of art to people who might otherwise feel uncertain about whether it's something they would understand or enjoy.

TULIZA FLEMING [TF] This is very important because not all places where people live have art museums, and those that do might not have a single artist of color represented in their collection. Additionally, many people who go to the Smithsonian are not able to visit their local museums regularly because museum visits can be expensive, especially for families.

JS Yes, when people come to DC they find that access to the Smithsonian is free, and for that reason it may be their first real experience at a museum.

TF We expect a lot of international visitors. People overseas often find African American history and culture a quintessential part of the American story.

BRC The mission of the museum is to "stimulate a dialogue about race and help to foster a spirit of reconciliation and healing."[8] How would you describe the role of the visual arts in that mission?

TF The role of the visual arts in our galleries closely mirrors the goals for the museum as a whole. Most notably, we hope to present American history, culture, and art history through the lens of African American artists and to demonstrate how these

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individuals contributed to the development of the American art canon.

JS The museum has three categories of exhibitions: History, Community, and Culture. The visual art gallery is on the same level of the building as the music gallery and the popular culture gallery, the latter of which deals with movies, television, comedy, etc. Other spaces on that floor cover everything from literature and language to foodways and folk art.

TF A few of the inaugural exhibitions, such as *Cultural Expressions* and *A Changing America: 1968 and Beyond*, include visual art in their galleries. Additionally, we've purchased a number of artworks with specific exhibitions in mind. Our hope is that, as we grow and evolve as an institution, these works will eventually be integrated throughout the museum, as well as in future temporary and traveling shows.

JS You can see this kind of integration of the visual arts with other disciplines in the museum's preview exhibition, *Through the African American Lens*, installed in our temporary space at NMAH (fig. 2). On display are Nicolino Calyo's painting *Servants at a Pump* from around 1840, Richard Ansdell's *The Hunted Slaves* of 1862, Elizabeth Catlett's 1973 bust of Phillis Wheatley, and Kesha Bruce's 2011 photo-based series *(Re)calling and (Re)telling*.

BRC Do you have a sense of the expectations the public has for the art program at the museum? Has that been a part of your planning process?

TF I think that many people will be pleasantly surprised to discover that a museum of African American history and culture has a dedicated permanent exhibition for visual art. When visitors approach the visual art gallery, they'll see William T. Williams's painting *Truckin'* from 1969 (fig. 3) and will be drawn into that space.

JS We're also commissioning an ensemble of public art projects by Sam Gilliam, Chakaia Booker, and Richard Hunt. People will engage with these artworks immediately upon entering the museum.

BRC How does your work with the visual arts involve other departments in the museum? How do you involve other Smithsonian collections and archives?

TF We worked closely with the other curators, and asked them to comment on selected artworks related to their areas of expertise. Our goal was to align our historical and cultural interpretation with what was being explored in other areas of the museum. We're exhibiting several paintings that deal with the military, so we consulted our military history curator, Krewasky Salter, about how to link those works to the "Double V" campaign of World War II, aimed at

Fig. 2

Fig. 2
Installation photograph from *Through the African American Lens: Selections from the Permanent Collection*, featuring Nicolino Calyo's *Servants at a Pump* and Richard Ansdell's *The Hunted Slaves*, Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture Gallery, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. Photo by Michael Barnes for the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

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Fig. 3

Fig. 3
William T. Williams, *Truckin*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 84 ½ x 60 ½ in. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. © William T. Williams.

All of the art in our galleries expresses the beauty, struggles, triumphs, and history of American experiences in some shape or form.

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racially integrating the US armed forces. We also feature a 1956 painting by David C. Driskell titled *Behold Thy Son* (fig. 4), which commemorates the death of Emmett Till. We plan to inform our visitors that if they're interested in learning more about Till's story, they should visit the museum's exhibition *Defending Freedom, Defining Freedom: The Era of Segregation, 1876–1968*. We've really worked to make those connections between visual art and history.

With regard to institutional connections, we've borrowed two works of art from the Smithsonian American Art Museum: Edmonia Lewis's 1875 sculpture *Hagar* and William H. Johnson's 1942–44 painting *Off to War*. We hope to work with the Archives of American Art to compile audio clips from interviews in their collection for future use in the galleries. We've also made a concerted effort to borrow art from African American institutions, such as Howard University, Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University, and the National Afro-American Museum and Cultural Center. We feel it's especially important to highlight the historic efforts these

Fig. 4

Fig. 4
David C. Driskell, *Behold Thy Son*, 1956. Oil on canvas, 40 x 30 in. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. © David C. Driskell.

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institutions have made, and continue to make, in supporting black artists and exhibiting their work when the majority of historically white museums would not.

BRC Would you tell me about some of the most powerful and engaging artworks you've acquired for the collection? How do these objects embody the history and culture of African American people? What stories will they tell in the context of the museum?

JS I love the Pauline Powell Burns still life *Violets*, from about 1890 (fig. 5), because Burns was from a prosperous black family in Oakland, California, and she was a genius as a musician as well as a visual artist. She has a great story that many viewers might not anticipate, because it's an American story in which race is not the focal point. Another work that comes to mind is Robert S. Duncanson's *The Garden of Eden,* from 1852, because it's not only wonderfully representative of his painting practice, but has a metaphorical quality. One could say that there was no Garden of Eden for Duncanson in America. He had to go to Europe to get a taste of that. Ultimately, he managed to make his way despite the challenges facing people of color in the United States.

TF One painting that deeply resonates with me is Earle Wilton Richardson's *Self-Portrait*, from the early 1930s (fig. 6). Richardson was a Harmon Foundation award-winning artist working in New York during the 1920s and '30s. He was romantically involved with fellow painter Malvin Gray Johnson. They were so close that in 1934 they jointly received a commission from the Works Progress Administration (WPA) to paint a series of murals for the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library (now the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture). Unfortunately, Johnson died suddenly of an illness that year. Richardson tried to soldier on, but apparently he was so depressed over his loss that he committed suicide. As a result of this tragedy, Aaron Douglas was hired to paint the mural series he titled *Aspects of Negro Life*.

Richardson's niece, Dr. Bobbye Booker Coleman, donated the painting. It was important to her that we tell his complete story, including his relationship to Johnson—a relationship he had to conceal during his lifetime. We are hanging his portrait next to a painting by Johnson titled *Over the Harlem Rooftops* (1928), on loan to us from the Melvin Holmes Collection.

Fig. 5

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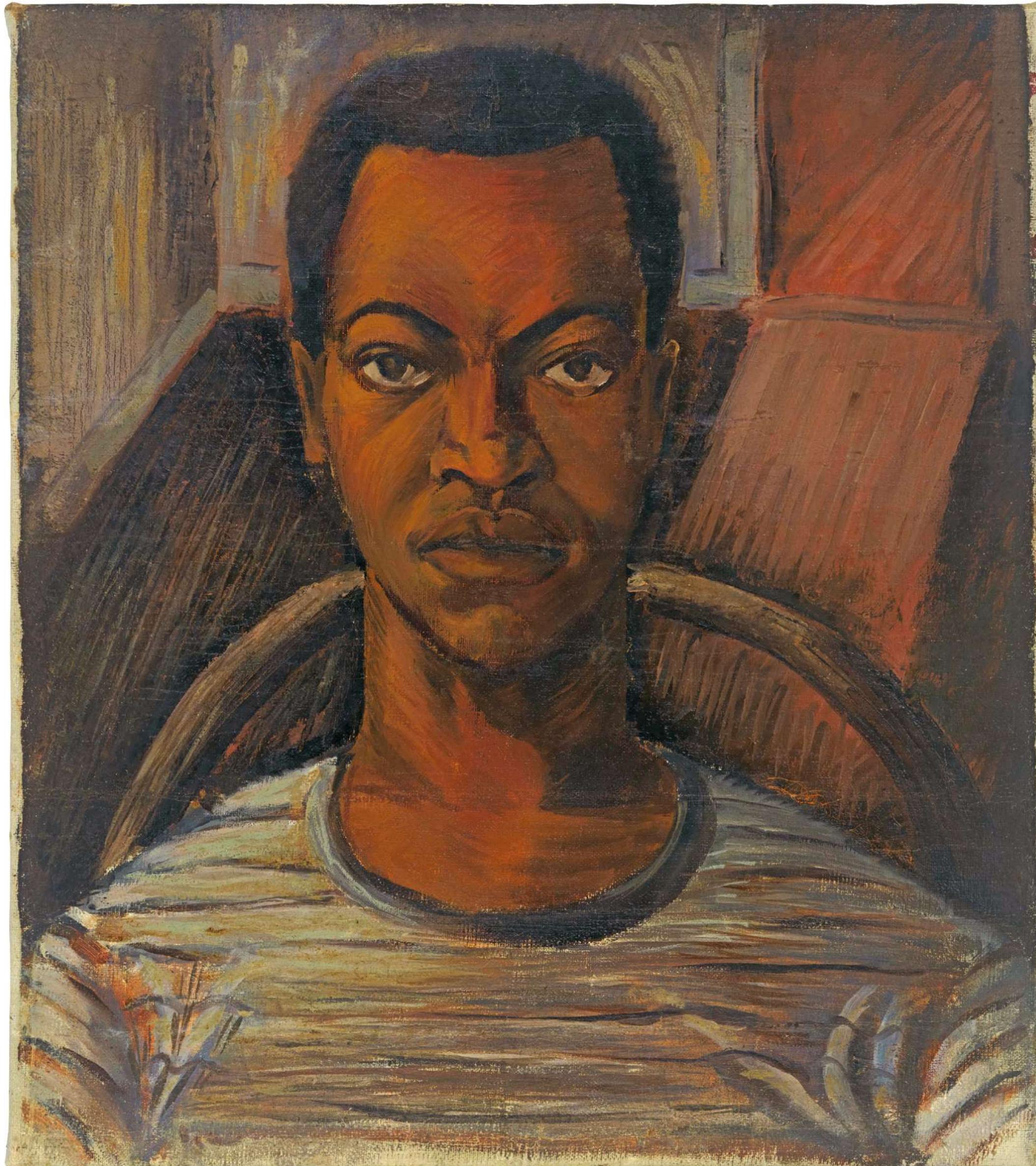

Fig. 6

Fig. 5
Pauline Powell Burns, *Violets*, ca. 1890. Oil paint on cardboard, 8 ½ x 12 ½ in. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture.

Fig. 6
Earle Wilton Richardson, *Self Portrait*, 1930–35. Oil on canvas, 22 ½ x 19 ½ in. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Dr. Bobbye Booker Coleman and Mr. Jackie Coleman. © Earle Richardson.

BRC How important is building an African American artistic canon to your curatorial practice? Or will your work somehow challenge the very notion of a canon?

JS Our goal is to provide a collection that demonstrates the quality and the relevance of art created by African Americans. If we do our job well, black artists will find their proper place in American art history. In the realm of contemporary art, especially, African Americans have demonstrated their creativity and, most of all, their daring. If you think of artists like Lorna Simpson, Kara Walker, Chakaia Booker, and Sam Gilliam, they have put themselves out there, willing to risk it all. There was a long time when no matter what black artists did, they wouldn't get the recognition and attention they deserved. These artists' work is now sought after because of its relevance to contemporary issues such as racism, gender inequality, and social justice. I think we've come to a wonderful moment when these individuals will no longer be relegated to a special category as black artists have been for generations.

TF It's important to note that Jackie and I have trained and worked as curators of American art. As African Americans we have the added benefit of being able to see African American artists as simply *American* artists, and by that I mean that we don't have the burden of overcoming the tendency of

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seeing black people through the lens of "the other." That's why we aren't trying to establish an "African American art canon." Think about it this way: Would anyone ever use the terms "white American art," or "white American art canon"? That's why we're actively working to erase that type of illogical racial categorization. Although we address blackness, racism, and the unique struggles endured by American artists of African descent, these topics are only broached when they're pertinent to specific works of art.

BRC What are the current strengths of the museum's art collection and how would you like to develop it?

TF Our aim for the inaugural exhibition was to expose our visitors to a wide array of artistic themes, eras, styles, and media. Therefore, we haven't concentrated on a particular collecting area.

JS There are still holes in the collection. For example, we don't have a signature painting by Norman Lewis, who was the subject of a major exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in 2015–16. We do not yet own a sculpture by Edmonia Lewis. Also, at some point, we will have to increase our collection of contemporary art by adding works by artists such as Mark Bradford and Carrie Mae Weems.

TF One of our strengths is that we don't feel pressure to only acquire work by individuals who've been anointed by the mainstream art world. We can show artists who were important to and recognized by African Americans but may have been forgotten or ignored, or have yet to be "discovered" by the larger art community.

JS Take, for example, early twentieth-century sculptor Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller. She managed to study in Paris, even coming into contact with Rodin, but as a woman, had a difficult time making a career in the United States. Contemporary painter Amy Sherald (see front cover) has succeeded in the art world by openly embracing and celebrating complex questions about identity. These are two women artists who had to work at their self-presentation, to show more fully what they represent as African Americans.

BRC One of the central tenets of the museum's mission is to "help all Americans see just how central African American history is for all of us" and to "use African American history and culture as a lens into what it means to be an American."[9] Would you speak about one or two works of art in the museum's collection that articulate "what it means to be an American"?

JS Jefferson Pinder's *Capsule (Mothership)* of 2009 (fig. 7), because it's a mixture of everything—science, music, politics, etc. Another example is *April 4* by Sam Gilliam, from 1969. The painting is abstract but, by titling it *April 4*, Gilliam connects himself and his art to Martin Luther King Jr., who was assassinated on that date the previous year. We have great examples of work by these artists that we hope visitors will feel lucky to see because so little is on public view elsewhere. We're filling gaps by providing a presentation of African American art across time periods, styles, and geography.

TF The concept of "being an American" is an extremely complex idea that's intricately tied to our unique history as a nation. For example, what does it mean to live in the "land of the free," when you're enslaved? How does it feel to be part of a democracy when you can't vote? What does it mean to come to this country as an immigrant and become a citizen? What does it mean to struggle to attain your American dream and succeed? We all have stories to tell about "what it means to be an American," and I believe that all of the art in our galleries expresses the beauty, struggles, triumphs, and history of American experiences in some shape or form.

Being an African American artist now means so many things. It's not only about being an American, but also about being relevant to an international audience.

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Fig. 7

Fig. 7
Jefferson Pinder, *Capsule (Mothership)*, 2009. Tin, wood, chrome, loudspeakers, audiovisual equipment, and mixed media, 92 ½ x 75 x 86 in. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Gift of Henry Thaggert III in memory of Burnell P. Thaggert. © Jefferson Pinder.

BRC Another aspect of the museum's mission is to "help all Americans see how their stories, their histories, and their cultures are shaped and informed by international considerations and how the struggle of African Americans has impacted freedom struggles around the world."[10] Are there works in the collection that speak to the international reach of art by African Americans?

JS We have some works that make connections to Africa, such as Adger W. Cowans's *SOWETO*, from 1983 (fig. 8), and some of the Black Arts Movement pieces. Being an African American artist now means so many things. It's not only about being an American, but also about being relevant to an international audience. In terms of how the work is laid out these days in museums, black artists are in the mix with people from other backgrounds.

TF A lot of the artists represented in our museum worked in other countries. Herbert Gentry and Henry Ossawa Tanner (fig. 9) spent the major part of their careers abroad. Beauford Delaney, Loïs Mailou Jones, Robert S. Duncanson, and others studied and worked abroad as well. International travel was part of the process of becoming an artist. Contemporary art and artists are no longer defined by their country of origin. Moving forward, I believe that our conception of American art will have to evolve. We live in a global world.

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Fig. 8
Adger W. Cowans, *SOWETO*, 1983. Printing ink on rag paper, 44 ¼ × 29 ⅞ in. (sheet). Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture. © Adger Cowans.

Fig. 9
Henry Ossawa Tanner with fellow students at the Académie Julian, Paris, ca. 1890. Black-and-white photographic print, 5 x 7 in. Tanner is in the back row, fourth from the left. Henry Ossawa Tanner Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Fig. 8

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JS The great thing about being an American artist is that to some extent you have the power to be whoever you choose to be. You may not be successful or accepted by everybody, but you don't have to settle for being put in a box. That's really over.

TF Some of the artists in our galleries, such as Donald Locke and Frank Bowling, spent most of their careers in the United States, but never became American citizens.

BRC How will the museum present art specifically to stimulate a constructive dialogue about issues of race *today*?

JS Two of the thematic sections in the visual art gallery, titled "The Politics of Identity" and "The Struggle for Freedom," are spaces that encourage dialogue about racial inequality and provide an opportunity to build trust among people of different racial backgrounds. They speak to many social and political struggles in the United States and around the world, including in the Ukraine and Sri Lanka.

TF In other sections, the lack of explicit dialogue about race may encourage visitors to discuss it on their own. Race and racism have a specific manifestation in this country that's different from other places due to the history and legacy of slavery, segregation, and discrimination.

JS I think many visitors will walk through the galleries and think, "Wow! How come I've never seen most of these artists before? I don't know anything about them. How could that be?" If you're a young person interested in justice and equality, we can explain that it hasn't been possible for many of these artists to bring their work to a larger public before now. Given all of the obstacles they've faced in American society, look what they've done! There are many things at the museum that will be new to visitors because they haven't had the opportunity to see the artwork in the context of American history and culture.

BRC Are there particular archives that are motivating your work on the visual arts? How important has the

Fig. 9

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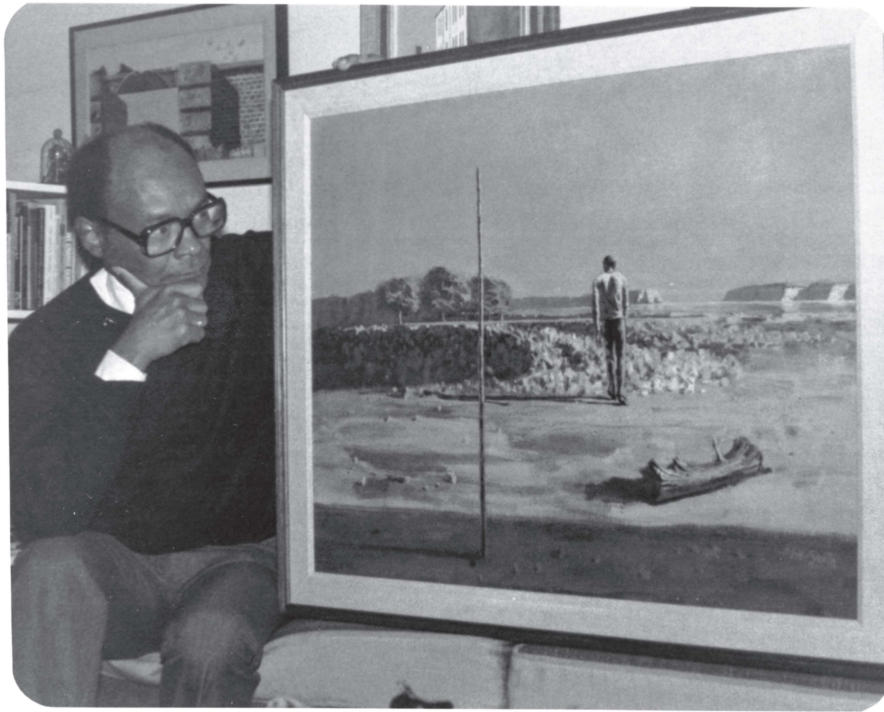

Fig. 10

Fig. 10
Hughie Lee-Smith with an untitled 1959–60 painting, New York City, October 1981. Black-and-white photographic print, 3 x 5 in. Hughie Lee-Smith Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Art © Estate of Hughie Lee-Smith/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY.

Archives of American Art been to your research on African American artists?

JS The Archives of American Art has been critical to a lot of the research we've conducted in connection with these artists and these works of art. As a research institution, it's done such a good job of preserving this material and, as a resource, the Archives has been indispensable to our work. Most useful were oral history interviews with Charles Henry Alston, Romare Bearden, Herbert Gentry, Sam Gilliam, Barkley L. Hendricks, Sargent Johnson, Hughie Lee-Smith, Archibald Motley Jr., Charles White, and Hale Woodruff. We also gathered important information from the papers of Lee-Smith, Motley, White, Elizabeth Catlett, Allan Rohan Crite, Aaron Douglas, Alvin C. Hollingsworth, and Ellis Wilson and the scrapbooks of Loïs Mailou Jones. These primary resources helped us learn more about the cultural context for the art, and the artists' perspectives on their work. Museum visitors will benefit from this research when they read our object labels.

TF In addition to using excerpts from existing oral histories, we hope to partner with the Archives to conduct a series of interviews with artists in our collection whose oral histories are not represented in their holdings.

JS We already have a large collection of audio interviews, mainly related to the civil rights movement, created under the direction of supervisory curator Elaine Nichols. So we now have the capacity to conduct oral histories and share them with the public online.

BRC Did you make any particularly notable or surprising discoveries when using the Archives of American Art?

TF We have an untitled painting by Hughie Lee-Smith from 1959–60 that needed conservation. During the conservation process, we discovered that the bottom section of the painting had been folded over, and the right side had been cut. We weren't sure

Moving forward, I believe that our conception of American art will have to evolve.

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whether the artist altered the work or if it was done by a subsequent owner. Through our research at the Archives, we discovered a photograph of Smith with this painting (fig. 10). We were thus able to make the correct decision to unfold the bottom of the painting, and to confirm that the artist himself cut the side.

BRC Is there anything else you'd like to share with the readers of the *Journal* about the new museum, its art collection, or its engagement with archives?

TF As exemplified in the title of our inaugural exhibition, *Visual Art and the American Experience*, the art and artists represented in our museum are essential to understanding and appreciating the history and legacy of art in the United States.

JS The Smithsonian is a place where serious scholarship is encouraged and appreciated, and where it can be put to great use by sharing it with both the public and the world of academia. We recognize how fortunate we are to have had the resources of the Archives of American Art at our disposal. Hopefully, our very positive experience will motivate other students and scholars to take advantage of this treasure trove in researching their own projects. A

Bridget R. Cooks is an associate professor of art history and African American studies at the University of California, Irvine. Her scholarship addresses museum criticism and representations of African Americans in visual culture. She is the author of *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (2011).

NOTES

This essay and interview are dedicated to Claudine K. Brown, who passed away on March 17, 2016. Brown directed the National African American Museum Project and was appointed Assistant Secretary for Education and Access at the Smithsonian in 2010.

1 Claudine [K.] Brown, *Final Report of the African American Institutional Study* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1991).

2 Faith Davis Ruffins, "Culture Wars Won and Lost, Part II: National African American Museum Project," *Radical History Review* 70 (1998): 78–101.

3 Mabel O. Wilson, *Negro Building: Black Americans in the World of Fairs and Museums* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 313n1.

4 Claudine [K.] Brown, "Foreword," in *Imagining Families: Images and Voices* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1994), 3.

5 Ibid.

6 Deborah Willis, "Visual Memories," in *Imagining Families,* 6.

7 See Wilson, *Negro Building*, 1–3; and National Museum of African American History and Culture Act, H.R. 3491, 108th Cong. (2003–2004), accessed March 19, 2016, http://www.congress.gov/bill/108th-congress/house-bill/3491. The act was signed into law on December 16, 2003, as Pub. Law No. 108-184, 117 Stat. 2676.

8 "The Vision for the National Museum of African American History and Culture," accessed March 19, 2016, http://nmaahc.si.edu/mission-vision.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

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