

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

US THEM WE | RACE ETHNICITY IDENTITY AT THE WORCESTER ART MUSEUM,
EXAMINES AMERICAN IDENTITY THROUGH CONTEMPORARY ART,
OPENING FEBRUARY 19, 2022

Worcester, MA—February 11, 2022— On February 19 2022, the [Worcester Art Museum](#) (WAM) will present its new exhibition [Us Them We | Race Ethnicity Identity](#), an in-depth look at how contemporary artists since the mid-1970s have used formal artistic devices in their work —such as text, juxtaposition, pattern, and seriality—to explore socio-political concepts. *Us Them We* will include works from 47 artists drawn from the Museum’s collection along with several significant loans. The exhibition features photography, prints, painting, and sculpture, including major works by Byron Kim, Roberto Lugo, Shirin Neshat, and Lorna Simpson, among many others. *Us Them We* is co-curated by Nancy Kathryn Burns, Stoddard Associate Curator of Prints, Drawings and Photographs at WAM, and Toby Sisson, Associate Professor and Program Director of Studio Art at Clark University. The exhibition opens February 19 and runs through Juneteenth (June 19, 2022).

“With this exhibition we hope to generate a new conversation about how identity can be revealed through form itself. An artist’s decision to use certain visual motifs like repetition, movement, language, and contrast can serve to emphasize larger concepts about race and ethnicity,” said Burns. “There’s truth to the idea that ‘The medium is the message’. Art allows us to receive certain messages. However, too often, big ideas like those of political protest allow viewers to bypass a rigorous critique of a work’s individual elements.” Added Sisson, “As an artist and a professor, a thorough and thoughtful approach to media is essential. Teaching studio art is an opportunity to reveal the importance of formal concepts, which are important to artists, and ultimately to audiences, as is self-expression around issues of identity.”

In tandem with *Us Them We* WAM will also present a second exhibition featuring eleven Clark University students whose work addresses themes of identity, often in very personal ways. Comprised of drawings, photographs, paintings, and collages, the students created responses to objects in *Us Them We*. These works are the outcome of Clark’s studio course “Contemporary Directions,” which was co-taught by Sisson and Burns in spring 2021, and provided opportunities for students to speak with artists about their practice, use of different media, and their approach to creating visual expressions of complex ideas.

Exhibition Section: Text

In the first section of the exhibition, the focus is on artists’ use of text that has been incorporated into—or is at the center of—the work, as both the medium and the message. For example Dread Scott’s diptych *#WhileBlack* (2018) makes use of text as its central element within two screenprints, each featuring white text on a black background. The left side of Scott’s work recalls events that involved a white person contacting law enforcement on Black men and women who were engaging in everyday activities. The

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other side of *#WhileBlack* includes a second list of hashtags that blends the desires of African Americans with the assumed fears of white people. Scott works within a broad tradition of artists who use text as a means to address the illogical framework of racism. Borrowing the contemporary soapbox of public dialogue through social media, Scott uses hashtags to call out the ongoing oppression of Black Americans.

Us Them We also features a screenprint by Josefina Jacquín, *The California Lottery*. Jacquín's screenprint was made in response to California's anti-immigrant Proposition 187 in 1994. Inspired by her work as an educator she incorporates the hybridized language "Spanglish," as an example of Latin America's influence on California's cultural landscape.

Exhibition Section: Juxtaposition

This section brings together an array of artists working in both abstraction and representation, who employ duality, contrast, and metaphor to engage with identity. Lorraine O'Grady's paired Cibachrome prints, titled *L: Devonia, age 36; R: Nefertiti, age 36* (1980/1994), draws a connection between historical and contemporary ideals of Black beauty—via an image of the Egyptian Queen Nefertiti, whose likeness is an exemplar of beauty alongside an image of the artist's deceased sister. The series, *Progress of Queens*, encourages the viewer to see both likenesses on an equal footing.

Artist Kara Walker juxtaposes the colors black and white and also layers an archival image with a screenprinted silhouette. In *Scene of McPherson's Death* (2005), Walker places one of her famous silhouettes on top of a lithograph from *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)*, originally published in 1866. Walker's partially dismembered figure, whose lower leg is being carried by an even smaller figure in the lower left-hand corner, raises immediate questions for audiences about the human costs of the Civil War. This contrasts with traditional North vs. South narratives that may address the end of slavery but overlook the war's impact on formerly enslaved people.

Exhibition Section: Pattern

Pattern uses repeating forms and design as a tool of emphasis and continuity. When used in the service of identity, it can deconstruct racial stereotypes or amplify cultural touchstones of beauty. Too often, viewers overlook the significance of pattern as a communicative device seeing it solely as a decorative element. Mary Lee Bendolph's softground etching *To Honor Mr. Dial* (2005) is a tribute to the artist Thornton Dial (also represented in the exhibition), which recognizes their shared backgrounds as self-taught Black artists from Alabama. With its patterned strips of color, Bendolph's print was created using a small quilt, itself a reflection of and intimately intertwined with Gee's Bend's cultural history.

Nafis M. White draws on her heritage and patterned sculptures as a means to connect across difference. Evoking practices as disparate as Victorian hair weaving and African American hair braiding, *Oculus* honors women's craftwork as well as cultural traditions that value ornate hairstyling as a mark of beauty and pride. Her richly embellished wall-

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engaged sculptures use woven patterns as a metaphor for linking the familiar with the flamboyant, a celebration of history and transformation. Noting the inclusion of “embodied knowledge” and “ancestral recall” among her materials, the artist pays homage to a dual legacy.

Exhibition Section: Seriality

The section on seriality engages with artists for whom multiplicity, movement, or transformation serve as an expression of similarity or difference. Byron Kim’s wax-and-oil paintings series—titled *Synecdoche: Danielle Brunner, Dominic Shamy, Ella Kim, George Gountas, Glenn Ligon, Jay Patrikios, Johannes Gachnang, Joanna Bossart, Joseph Benjamin, Konrad Tobler, Kyle Wilton, Louis Barney, Lourdes Mercado, Luciano Berti, Marc Pia, Marvin Siegel, Miguel Maldonado, Niki Hosig, Remy Pia, Roland Fellmann, Rosa Duran, Ruth Libermann, Sean Casey, Susann Bossart, Vijay Kapoor* (1992-1998)—could be a Pantone color selection in shades of off-white, tan, and brown. But by naming each component after a person familiar to the artist, it becomes clear that the rectangles represent and reflect the skin tones of each individual.

A direct engagement with race is similarly present in Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons’ photo-based series *Identity Could be a Tragedy* (1995). These self-portraits show the artist’s progressive erasure until she has nearly disappeared, leaving a trace image of what was once a clear and distinct individual. Anders Bergstrom’s *Brown Bag Test August 02, 2016* (2016), with its progressively darker shades of hand-made brown paper bags, relies on a readily identifiable object to refer to a colorist practice: the use of a brown paper bag as a comparative test of complexion to determine one’s eligibility to participate in different spaces within society.

“This exhibition challenges all of us to examine carefully how we think about identity and the assumptions that we make about where we belong,” said Matthias Waschek, the Museum’s Jean and Myles McDonough Director. “An especially compelling component here is the literal diversity of artistic approaches, from figurative works to abstraction, and with objects that sometimes convey meaning through written language and other times solely through the power of imagery.”

Us Them We | Race Ethnicity Identity is organized by the Worcester Art Museum in partnership with, and with support from, Clark University. Additional support has been provided by Marlene and David Persky, Michael and Kristy Beauvais, Eve Griliches, Sara Shields and Bruce Fishbein, and Kristin B. Waters. This project is also funded in part by the John M. Nelson Fund and Hall and Kate Peterson Fund. Related programming is supported by the Amelia and Robert H. Haley Memorial Lecture Fund, Spear Fund for Public Programs, and the Worcester Arts Council, a local agency, which is supported by the Mass Cultural Council, a state agency.

The exhibition is sponsored by Cornerstone Bank and Imperial Distributors, Inc. Media partners are Artscope and WBUR.

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Arts 274: Contemporary Directions

The course taught by co-curators Sisson and Burns at Clark University centered on artists from historically underrepresented groups and the impact their work has had on the canon of American visual art and culture. Among the outcomes for the course, students were asked to select a contemporary artist to research and then to create their own art works in response to that artist's style or approach—but drawing on their own lives and experiences. They also wrote the accompanying descriptive labels. Eleven students who participated in the course will have a selection of their works presented as a companion installation to *Us Them We*.

“The course pushed my boundaries in the work that I created. I’ve always been a portrait photographer, but this course helped me experiment and push the limits to what I thought I could make, said Sam Damon, who participated in the course as a Clark senior. “LaToya Ruby Frazier’s *Notion of Family* resonated with me strongly for a multitude of reasons. I’ve always used photography as my medium of choice, more specifically documentary photography, and her ability to tell a story over a long period of time with her images I found inspiring. Frazier had a focus on family and her hometown, all of which you see differently as you grow up, which hit quite close to home. As long as I’ve been a photographer, I’ve documented the life of my autistic brother, Eric, who I see drastically differently as I’ve gotten older, and specifically during the start of the pandemic. In short, Frazier’s work resonated with me strongly with her ability to document those closest to her, in a way which to others may not be flattering, but tells a tale of family struggle and bonding.”

Related Program

As part of its monthly Master Series Third Thursday program, on **Thursday, March 17, 2022 at 6:00 p.m.** the Museum will present a talk on selected works in the exhibition, *Us Them We | Race Ethnicity Identity*, by Kimberly Juanita Brown, Ph.D., Associate Professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth College and specialist in visual culture studies. Registration information for the event can be found on the Museum’s website, worchesterart.org.

Master Series Third Thursday programs are hosted by the WAM Members' Council and sponsored by AbbVie. Additional support is provided by the Michie Family Curatorial Fund, the Amelia and Robert H. Haley Memorial Lecture Fund, the Bernard and Louise Palitz Fund, and the Spear Fund for Public Programs.

About the Worcester Art Museum

The Worcester Art Museum creates transformative programs and exhibitions, drawing on its exceptional collection of art. Dating from 3,000 BC to the present, these works provide the foundation for a focus on audience engagement, connecting visitors of all ages and abilities with inspiring art and demonstrating its enduring relevance to daily life. Creative initiatives—including pioneering collaborative programs with local schools, fresh approaches to exhibition design and in-gallery teaching, and a long history of studio class instruction—offer opportunities for diverse audiences to experience art and learn both

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from and with artists.

Since its founding in 1896, the Worcester Art Museum has assembled a collection of 38,000 objects: from the ancient Near East and Asia, to European and American paintings and sculptures, and continuing with works by contemporary artists from around the world. WAM has a history of making large scale acquisitions, such as its Medieval Chapter House, the Worcester Hunt Mosaic, its 15th-century Spanish ceiling, and the Flemish Last Judgment tapestry. In 2013, the Museum acquired the John Woodman Higgins Armory Collection, comprising two thousand arms and armor objects. It continues to commission and present new works, such as 2019's exhibition, *With Child: Otto Dix/Carmen Winant*. For more information about the Worcester Art Museum, visit worchesterart.org.

The Worcester Art Museum, located at 55 Salisbury Street in Worcester, MA, is open Wednesday through Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$18 for adults, \$14 for seniors 65+ and for college students with ID. Admission is free for Museum Members and children ages 0-17. On the first Sunday of each month, admission is free for everyone. Museum parking is free. Tickets may be purchased in advance at worchesterart.org.

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