



# Imaging African Art

DOCUMENTATION AND TRANSFORMATION

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Daniell Cornell and Cheryl Finley

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut

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Cover: Romare Bearden, *Village of Yo*, ca. 1964, Collage on board  
9 x 12¼ inches, Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., B.A. 1913, Fund  
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## Introduction

Jock Reynolds

*The Henry J. Heinz II Director*

The inspiration for this exhibition arose from a series of visits and conversations with three devoted Yale alumni who continue to strengthen the Gallery's educational mission in wonderful ways. Walter Bareiss, Charles Benenson, and James Ross have all been collecting African art for many years, and each of them invited me early in my directorial tenure to view their collections and borrow freely from their holdings to engage students, faculty, and public visitors to this teaching museum.

This is the first of two focused exhibitions stimulated by some of the photography, African art, and contemporary art held in the Bareiss, Benenson, and Ross collections. It was prompted by a viewing of vintage Charles Sheeler and Walker Evans photographs of African art owned by James Ross. To him and my good friend, Sandra Lane, the generous steward of Charles Sheeler's renowned photographic archive (now residing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), we are indebted for the loan of some remarkable pictures. These images demonstrate some of the first ways American artists documented and transformed African art early in the twentieth century. We are also very grateful to Corrine Jennings, the keeper of her father's creative flame and a champion of many important African American artists, for other crucial loans that importantly broadened the historical scope of this exhibition.

To more fully consider how Sheeler's and Evans's pioneering photographs might be viewed in context with the art of other American creators working years ago and today, Daniell Cornell, the Gallery's present Selden Fellow, and Cheryl Finley, a doctoral candidate in African American Studies and Art History, were invited to co-curate this exhibition. Working with only a modicum of guidance from me and Lisa Hodermarsky, acting curator of the Gallery's department of prints, drawings, and photographs, this talented pair of scholars developed the full content of this project with great vigor. In doing so, they also recommended a substantial number of artworks for museum purchase and acquisition. You will soon realize, as you visit the Gallery and read this catalogue, that the fruits of their labor will long endure through some marvelous new additions to Yale's collections. Ms. Hodermarsky and I want to applaud the thoughtful care and effort that Cornell and Finley have given to their research and writing, and to the installation of this show. They have created something special to behold, a poetic assemblage of artworks resonating with historical content, formal beauty, and human grace. To say that the Gallery is proud of what they have accomplished is to affirm once more, as all of my colleagues frequently do, what a pleasure it is to be continuously involved in the education and training of extraordinary people.



## Acknowledgments

We would like first to thank Jock Reynolds, the Henry J. Heinz II Director, who entrusted us with organizing an exhibition around the role that art has played in perceptions of the African diaspora. His generous commitment of funds for new acquisitions exhibited here made much of what we have accomplished possible. Our colleagues in the printroom deserve special thanks, especially Lisa Hodermarsky, acting curator of prints, drawings, and photographs, who offered crucial help at every stage from writing suggestions to installation advice. Diana Brownell helped us find a clear expression of the exhibition's content as we discussed the best way to mat and frame the works. Megan Doyon took care of the endless details generated by loans and acquisitions. We also benefited from the hands but also as importantly from the ears of our student assistants, Celina Bustamante and Dominique Hara Sherman, both Yale College class of 2000.

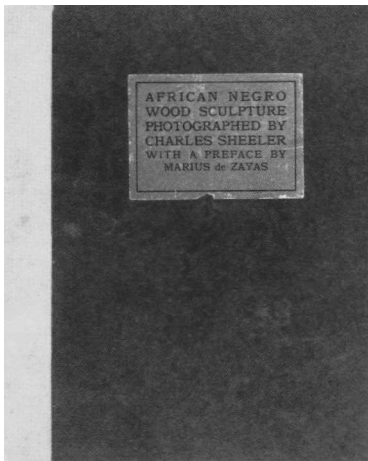
This exhibition truly would have been impossible without the good-natured assistance of our registrar Susan Frankenbach and her staff, L. Lynne Addison and Jennifer Bossman. Mary Kordak and the education department have been integral to the success of this project and have aided us in countless, if unseen, ways. Burrus Harlow and his crew oversaw the installation with their usual attention to perfection. We have been especially privileged to have the knowledge and support of History of Art and African American Studies professors Robert Farris Thompson and Kellie Jones, whose sage advice and enthusiastic involvement with the collection make them the obvious choice as speakers at the opening.

Lesley Baier edited the catalogue with a skill and acumen that not only guaranteed grammatical details but immeasurably sharpened the content and argument of the texts. Catherine Waters produced the sensitive design under constraints that would have driven a less gracious person to despair. Lyneise Williams provided historical information on the depictions of African artifacts. Diana Magaloni-Kerpel and Jennifer Wood-Nangombe were perspicacious readers whose conversations about both the exhibition and catalogue were invaluable. Rudy Rodriguez and Charles Musser have buoyed us in our work as always.

And finally, we would not have an exhibition without the generous loans from Laura and James J. Ross; Sandra Lane, assisted by Karen Haas, The Lane Collection research fellow; and Corrine Jennings of Kenkeleba Gallery. We also want to thank the following individuals and galleries, whose availability, flexibility, and patience have been much appreciated: Barry Le Va, Seth Taffae, Malin Barth at Throckmorton Gallery, Wendy Olsoff at PPOW, Holly Wilson at Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Zelda Cheatle Gallery, Nolan/Eckman Gallery, and Ellen Sragow Gallery.

## Transforming Documents: Charles Sheeler, Walker Evans, and Barry Le Va

Daniell Cornell



1 Charles Sheeler, *African Negro Wood Sculpture Photographed by Charles Sheeler*, 1916–17  
Bound volume: 20 tipped-in gelatin silver prints,  
16¼ x 13¼ inches. Courtesy of Laura and James J.  
Ross. B.A. 1960

The twelve artists in this exhibition all share an interest in documenting the significance of Africa and its diverse heritages within, against, or in the wake of European and American modernism. Taken together, their work offers insights into the changing understanding of the notion of the document as well as the character of documentary evidence itself. In general, documents are meant to provide evidence of tangible experience, a role particularly suited to photographic images because of the widely held belief that they are unmediated depictions of reality. Such documentary photography has its genesis in the writings of late-nineteenth-century progressive reformers, for whom photographs provided compelling, visual evidence of human beings living in deplorable social conditions. These photographs emphasize a descriptive vocabulary of “clarity, precision, and relevance” in the service of verifiable facts and narrative illustration.<sup>1</sup> As Alan Trachtenberg has explained, such an aesthetic is less about stylistic conventions and more about confirming a particular viewpoint—which he identifies as “the cultural work of the camera.”<sup>2</sup> In this brief discussion, I consider the photo-based work by the exhibition’s three American artists of European descent in light of the “cultural work” that their images perform on African artifacts.

As a member of Alfred Stieglitz’s circle, Charles Sheeler was exposed early to the work of European modernists, especially Picasso. He kept a photogravure by Stieglitz of Picasso’s bronze *Head of a Woman* hanging in his studio for many years.<sup>3</sup> In 1917, Sheeler teamed up with another member of the Stieglitz circle, Marius de Zayas, to produce a limited edition book of documentary photographs that was intended to illustrate the affinity between African sculptures and the artistic vocabulary of European modernism (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup>

The collaboration that Sheeler and de Zayas produced in *African Negro Wood Sculpture* proved to be something of a hybrid. Indeed, it could hardly have been anything else given the competing discourses of documentary and artistic photography at the time. The language of the visual document still relied on nineteenth-century notions of scientific positivism—a belief in the objective verifiability of material evidence through the senses.<sup>5</sup> In accordance with this belief, Sheeler and de Zayas intended to provide visual evidence of the compelling similarities between works created within the artistic vocabulary of European modernism and works created for ritualistic and ceremonial use among African peoples. The photographs that resulted, however, dramatically reveal the tension between an objective and a subjective point of view. For it is Sheeler’s photographs themselves—not their subjects—that embody the transcendent language of modernism with its emphasis on stylistic experimentation, purity of vision, and underlying realities over surface appearances.



2 Charles Sheeler, *African Musical Instrument*,  
*Makonde, Democratic Republic of Congo*,  
ca. 1916–17, Gelatin silver print, 10 x 8 inches  
Courtesy of Laura and James J. Ross, B.A. 1960

*African Musical Instrument* (fig. 2) demonstrates how completely Sheeler reconfigured his African artifacts within this language. The isolation of the instrument from any musical context (including a performer) and its placement on a pedestal encourage viewers to contemplate only the aesthetic play of geometric forms.<sup>6</sup> Sheeler arranged the studio lighting to produce elaborately cast shadows on the blank backdrop, further framing the object within the fragmented planes of cubist surfaces and their shifting facets of nonlinear perspective. The shadows represent the object quite literally from several points of view simultaneously even as they flatten its volume into a single plane and distort it into an image of overlapping geometric designs. Sheeler's modernist photographs are stunningly beautiful documents. Ultimately, however, they serve more as documents of the modernist ambitions of early-twentieth-century European and American artists than as documents of the artistic merit of African artifacts.

Walker Evans's project, on the other hand, was commissioned expressly for educational purposes. The photographs were to be a record of the historic exhibition "African Negro Art" that was organized by James Johnson Sweeney and Alfred H. Barr, Jr. in 1935 at the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>7</sup> The exhibition followed the lead established by Stieglitz, de Zayas, and Sheeler in presenting African ritual, performance, and fetish objects for the aesthetic enjoyment of their formal and abstract qualities. Although the photographs were intended to serve an educational and archival purpose, Evans was secured by the museum because of his status as an artist rather than an ordinary copy photographer.<sup>8</sup>

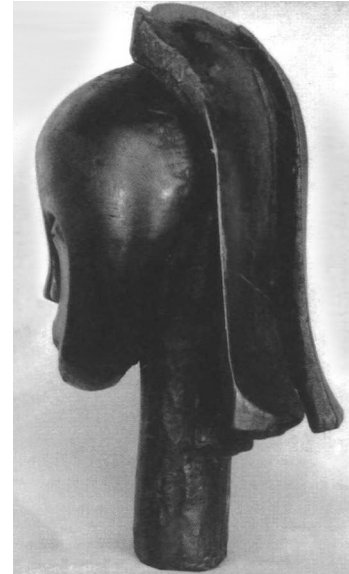
In analyzing these photographs, then, viewers encounter a similar dilemma to the one they experience in Sheeler's photographs: in decontextualizing African artifacts from their understandings as ethnographic objects, is Evans still producing documents? Interestingly, 1935 was the same year that Evans began his now famous documentary work with the Resettlement Administration, and both projects were central to the formulation of what we now recognize as his characteristic style.<sup>9</sup> In *Reliquary Guardian Figure Head* (figs. 3 and 4)<sup>10</sup> we can see Evans developing his documentary vocabulary. The pictorial space is tight, creating a sense of close, almost intrusive confrontation between viewer and subject, and making palpable Evans's own—and by extension the viewer's—objectifying role. Unlike Sheeler, Evans eliminated harsh shadows, creating an all-over diffusion of light that records everything uniformly and appears to give viewers equal access to all aspects of the objects.<sup>11</sup> Yet, in spite of an aesthetic that recalls the documentary photograph's emphasis on reliable transcription, a work like *Reliquary Guardian Figure Head* reminds us even more of Evans's

commitment to formalist conventions through his use of the frame as a device. He crops his images to align and to bound pictorial evidence within a context that can reference only itself. This strategy forces viewers to rely on their own preconceptions to make sense of his subject.<sup>12</sup> In a seemingly paradoxical manner, Evans aligned a documentary and modernist vocabulary through the language of the frame.

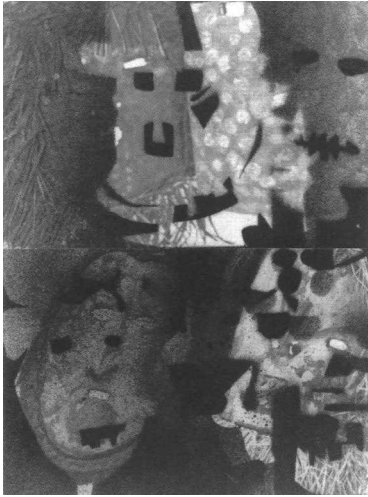
Sixty years separates Evans's *African Negro Art* project from Barry Le Va's *Munich-Africa Photo Project*. During that time our understanding of the document, the photograph, and even the definition of what makes a work of art have evolved significantly. Le Va offers an opportunity to consider how these changes have transformed the relationship between African cultural objects and European art traditions. Since the 1960s, Le Va has been engaged primarily in a conceptual investigation of sculpture and its relation to space and time.<sup>13</sup> While living for a month in his dealer's apartment in Munich, he found himself sharing the space with a large collection of African artifacts. These objects represented not only a foreign culture, but in Le Va's imagination conjured up mysterious rituals that were

3 Walker Evans, *Reliquary Guardian Figure Head*, 1935  
Gelatin silver print, 9 $\frac{3}{16}$  x 6 $\frac{1}{16}$  inches, Courtesy of  
Laura and James J. Ross, B.A. 1960

4 Walker Evans, *Reliquary Guardian Figure Head*,  
*Profile*, 1935, Gelatin silver print, 9 $\frac{1}{2}$  x 6 inches  
Courtesy of Laura and James J. Ross, B.A. 1960







5 Barry Le Va. *Untitled*, from the *Munich-Africa Photo Project*. 1995, Spraypaint over gelatin silver print. 8 x 6 inches. The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund

beyond his power to comprehend: "You have to understand that these objects were all over the place . . . and I had to sleep with that culture, among rituals I didn't understand."<sup>14</sup> Le Va began to take photographs of these objects as "a way to make friends with them." He cut the resulting images into stencils and experimented with layering them by using black and white spraypaint (fig. 5).<sup>15</sup> He was, says Le Va, "staying within the black and white language of the photograph" and in this way "exploring the boundary between drawings and photographs."

Le Va's collage-like images in this exhibition are an exploration of shapes and formal patterns of design. However, a self-conscious emphasis on process sets his work apart from the modernist language of Sheeler and Evans. *Africa-Munich Photo Project* records his experience of both encountering and making sense out of difference through a series of personal, artistic rituals.<sup>16</sup> In coming to terms with emissaries from a world unknown to him, Le Va creates visual documents of his own psychic encounters. He documents the act of thinking and the processes of mutual transformation that artists, objects, and viewers all experience as a result of their interactions.

The photo-based works of Sheeler, Evans, and Le Va in this exhibition illustrate how the document, in spite of its supposed objectivity, actually reflects a point of view that embodies the artist's historical situation. Ultimately, their perceptions and concerns are being documented as much as the objects that are the ostensible focus of their attention. Their works throw into sharper relief those by the artists of African descent represented here, whose art explores the ways in which an experience of diaspora transforms not the objects but the artist's identity itself.

## The Mask of Memory: African Diaspora Artists and the Tradition of Remembrance

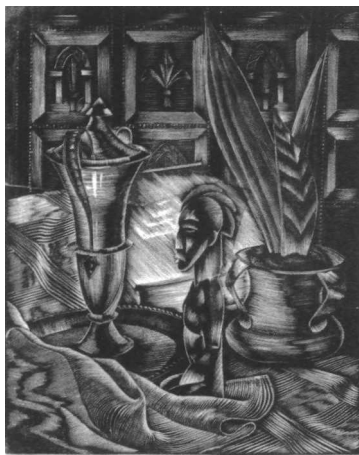
Cheryl Finley

This exhibition provides a unique opportunity to examine some of the different ways artists have visualized Africa and its art in the last century. In particular, it presents the works of African diaspora artists, many of whom embrace the tradition of remembrance. Underlying this tradition is a strong sense of duty: the responsibility to create works that recall the history of the artists' African origins and to ensure that this history's significance is never forgotten. Here, memory is used as an aesthetic tool and organizing principle to emphasize recurrent themes that have shaped the African diaspora: the Middle Passage, plantation slavery, the quest for Africa, and racial violence directed at the black body. In this way, individual works of art make visible and commemorate the stories of pain and suffering, strength and resistance, or triumph and celebration that reconnect these artists to their roots. The following discussion illuminates aspects of this tradition in the work of Carrie Mae Weems, Wilmer Jennings, and Lois Mailou Jones. By focusing on works that picture African ritual objects—specifically small sculptural figures—I wish to suggest the ways in which imaging African art becomes a way of imaging (or imagining) Africa (or the African diaspora).

Carrie Mae Weems's untitled triptych of blue-toned gelatin silver prints from the *Slave Coast Series* (1993) shows a photograph of African ritual objects (statuettes) flanked by two identical images of the surface of the sea (fig. 6). With no reference to the horizon line, the latter draw our attention to the hypnotizing motion of the waves and leave us to

6 Carrie Mae Weems, *Untitled*, 1993, triptych from the *Slave Coast Series*, Toned gelatin silver prints, 20 x 60 inches, The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund





7 Wilmer Angier Jennings, *Still Life with Fetish*, 1937. Wood engraving, 10 x 8 inches. Courtesy of Kenkeleba Gallery

contemplate the center photograph. Cramped into one dark space, the ritual objects remind us of a community of ancestors, their eyes peering out from the crowded hold of a slave ship making its way across the Atlantic. All three photographs, enveloped in blue, seem to be saying, “We of the African diaspora were born from the Atlantic.” This triptych represents the Middle Passage itself and suggests the circulation of bodies and cultural objects within the context of the African diaspora.

As the works of Wilmer Jennings and Lois Mailou Jones make clear, this concern with remembrance was already well established in the works of African American artists active before World War II. Jennings’s wood engraving *Still Life with Fetish* (1937) shows a kneeling Fang figure amidst a carved, wood-paneled setting with draped textiles, a large book, an incense burner, and a potted plant (fig. 7).<sup>1</sup> Together, the assortment of objects suggests the home of an African art collector just returned from a touristic gathering trip. Yet although Jennings’s wood engraving may seem straightforward, it is anything but that. The statuette is placed in profile, as if to focus attention on its features—its high forehead and magnificent coiffure. Instead of a still life, Jennings’s image seems to be a portrait of the fetish object as a thinking being, able to pass judgment, to comment on history, to recall the past. Jennings’s emphasis on the male figure’s forehead calls attention to his eyes as if the statue (like Jennings himself) is surveying his surroundings, cognizant and disdainful of their meanings. Certainly the wood-paneled wall, with its fleur-de-lis carvings of French origin, evokes the colonizing past.<sup>2</sup> Rejecting the pristine objects of museum exhibitions, Jennings purposely depicted the statue with a truncated or broken-off left arm, hinting at the brutality of French colonial rule and the exploits that would have been employed to steal such a treasured object from its original West African setting.<sup>3</sup> The statuette, almost subsumed by the weight of the fabric, the carved walls, the heavy book, and the large plant, embodies a sense of loneliness and longing, for home, for family, for Africa.

Lois Mailou Jones’s *Les Fetishes* (1937) presents us with a paradox (fig. 8). An abstract study of African masks and figures, this intimate painting in gouache is executed in a post-cubist, post-primitivist style. Painted when Jones was studying at the Académie Julian in Paris, it at first seems—visually and stylistically—to be part of the modernist canon rather than the African diaspora tradition of remembrance. But three important factors introduce another way of understanding her motivations for making this painting. First, Jones would have been familiar with Alain Locke’s New Negro Arts Movement credo, calling on African American artists to create works that looked to their African heritage as a way of emphasize-

ing their own social and cultural issues.<sup>4</sup> In addition, Jones would have frequented the Musée d'Homme in Paris and seen the substantial collections of African and ethnographic art on display. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she designed masks for Asadata Dafora's African dance troupe in New York in 1934, while studying design at Columbia University. Converging and overlapping at different angles, Jones's masks pop out at us in an almost three-dimensional way. They appear to dance, to move in and out of the picture plane, brought to life as if they were performing in a West African masquerade. Her use of bold accent colors — red and blue — reflects her earlier training in textile design and points to the fact that many ritual objects were colorfully painted in their original form.

Jones's study is a hybrid mixture of styles and influences. It is a pivotal piece in the exhibition that builds a bridge between the African diaspora artistic tradition of remembrance and the European modernist aesthetic. It was painted when she was living in Paris, trying to relate to her heritage and to the world about her. It reflects W.E.B. DuBois's notion of *double-consciousness* — that schizophrenic feeling of being black and living in a white world.<sup>5</sup> Even the title, *Les Fetishes*, references the double meaning of the fetish, a spiritually charged, symbolic object that stands for something else and hints at the possibility of underlying meanings.<sup>6</sup>

These artworks by Jennings and Jones engage the photographic depictions of similar statuettes by American photographers working in the European modernist tradition between the two world wars. Walker Evans's and Charles Sheeler's photographs of African "art" objects try to come to grips with a central trope of European modernism — so-called "primitive art" as a key source of creative inspiration and renewal (figs. 2–4). There is thus a tension between identification with and identifying against the ritual objects of Africa. Their projects choose objects from many African cultures and isolate them from their social and religious context in order to reassign them meaning as artworks, focusing on their aesthetic qualities. These photographs are thus part of a process that resituates and recontextualizes ritual objects within the language of European modernism. While Jones and Jennings, modernists themselves, also take these statues out of their original context, they simultaneously reach out to the past — striving to build a bridge to Africa and their diasporic heritage. Their works refer to Africa, a place they long for spiritually, a place where they look for signs of their origins, a place from which their ancestors came. As Weems's *Slave Coast Series* suggests, this use of masks and statues as a mnemonic device to reference ancestral heritage and identity remains of continuing concern in the present day.



8 Lois Mailou Jones, *Les Fetishes*, 1937. Gouache on paper, 5¼ x 4¼ inches, Courtesy of Kenkeleba Gallery

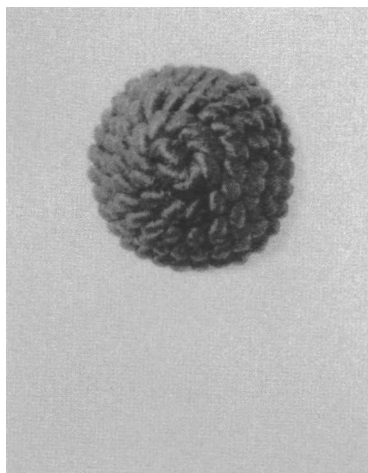


The tradition of remembrance is defined by a need (ritual) to create art that traces a visual genealogy of the African diaspora. Artists working in this tradition take responsibility for their past and reclaim the history that defines who they are. Their projects constantly relate a sense of communal diasporic history to their own personal experience, and continually carry on a conversation between individual and group experience that is part of the process of shaping identity, affirming group belonging, and marking a sense of temporal and geographical place. This process of relating the present/personal to the historic/communal is a validating process, one that reasserts both the presence and existence of the artist and the African diaspora in time and space. The tradition of remembrance is an artistic practice of survival.

## Lorna Simpson

*Wigs*, 1994

21 image panels and 17 text panels  
Waterless lithographs printed on felt,  
72 x 162 inches  
The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund



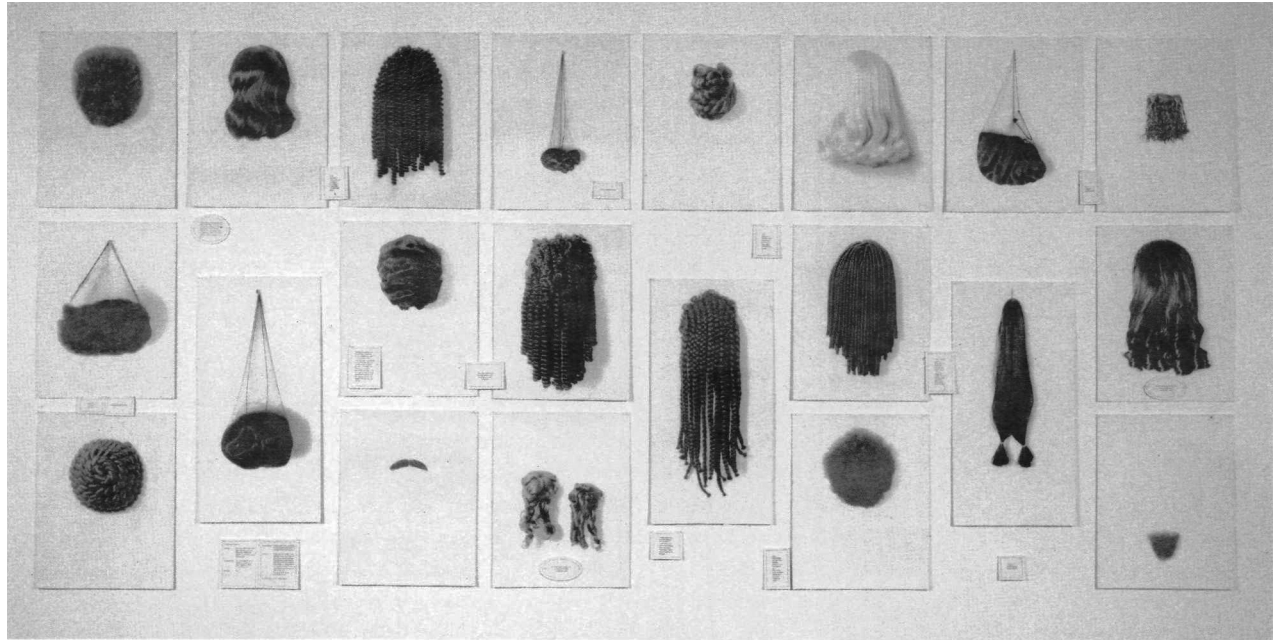
Lorna Simpson's photo-based work challenges conventional connections between image and text.<sup>1</sup> Photographing her subjects (usually African American women) from the back in juxtaposition to deliberately ambiguous textual information has become a trademark of her visual vocabulary. The result is to suggest provocative and ultimately elusive connections between texts and images that emphasize how the bodies of black women are defined through narrative assumptions. Simpson pries apart the documentary conventions usually associated with the social and political functions of photographic images in order to question the interconnections among beauty, visibility, and identity.

In 1990, Simpson took up the subject of black women's hair as a potent site to intervene in the imagery of cultural stereotypes.<sup>2</sup> Her multi-paneled *Wigs* is an uncanny representation of hair using photographs produced through the newly developed process of waterless lithography. In this technique, silicone replaces water as the agent that repels the ink from areas on the stone or plate. It allowed Simpson to print her hairpieces on felt, which water would have ruined. The resulting works are arrestingly beautiful and startlingly seductive. As a material, felt resonates with the soft, yielding, yet substantial texture and weight of hair itself. In no

small measure the use of felt accounts for the chiaroscuro quality of these images. As one critic wrote in 1994 when Simpson first displayed this work, "The photos seem to suck in light and ink and become a pillow for our thoughts."<sup>3</sup> Felt maps the linking of visual and tactile sensuality that has long made hair one of the most powerful signs of desire. It transforms animal hair, a material from the natural world, into fabric, a cultural product.<sup>4</sup>

Simpson's portfolio of hairpieces also references the bodies of African American women even as it displays their absence. Simpson depicts these wigs from the back, masking the distinguishing facial features on which we usually rely for clues to racial and gendered meaning. Moreover, in this work she goes further, also removing clothing and gesture from the viewer's consideration. Yet, even though we are left with completely disembodied images, the body becomes the subject of this wall of hairpieces. Simpson accomplishes this by turning these images of perfect coiffures into coded references to the cultural ideals of feminine beauty.

Accompanying the images of hairpieces are seventeen text panels that ask questions or propose expository statements that (like the wigs themselves) are both ancillary to and an integral part of the whole. Simpson uses the ambiguous relationship between these narrative texts and



images to examine the validity of documentary evidence. Ellen Steinberg has grouped these texts into three modes of writing: 1) Simpson's autobiographical voice, as in "choosing which wig to wear always took a moment or two to decide"; 2) the shared vernacular of proverbs, as in "the clothes make the man"; and 3) social and historical references, as in "Truth was asked that she display her breasts to confirm her sex during a meeting."<sup>5</sup> I would add as a fourth category linguistic reference, as in "strong desire to decipher" and "strong desire to blur." Simpson seems to be asking how it is that explanatory texts become attached to images. However, the relation to objective truth is made problematic by the texts' varying relations to observable description. It is impossible to verify the accuracy of any of these statements in relation to the images. Thus, viewers are reduced quite self-consciously to their own preconceptions and familiar stereotypes in order to generate the contexts that produce meaning out of these hairpieces.

Even more potently, as viewers attempting to link texts, we come to realize that nearly any of these verbal fragments can be linked to any of the others through narrative associations. Further, the texts that reference linguistics situate these narratives within the context of desire, specifically the "strong desire" both to obscure

("blur") and to uncover ("decipher") meaning. That wigs function in these textual fragments simultaneously to construct and to confirm racial and sexual perceptions only heightens for us their impact as visual signs of the culturally constructed condition of identity. Moreover, as visual signs, they also introduce the context of beauty, linking aesthetic and social issues.

By creating juxtapositions that reveal the contradictions in conventional associations, Simpson introduces gaps in our understanding and thereby reveals the way that meaning is produced rather than simply described. Most significantly, she explodes racial and gender stereotypes that have been constructed, perpetuated, and thus authenticated by traditional documentary photography. The language of the document assumes a visual vocabulary that is objective, transparent, and verifiable. Simpson intervenes in these assumptions to expose the subjective, mediating, and ambiguous character of documentary images, especially with regard to the construction of cultural stereotypes.





**Romare Bearden**

*Village of Yo*, ca. 1964

Collage on board, 9 x 12¼ inches

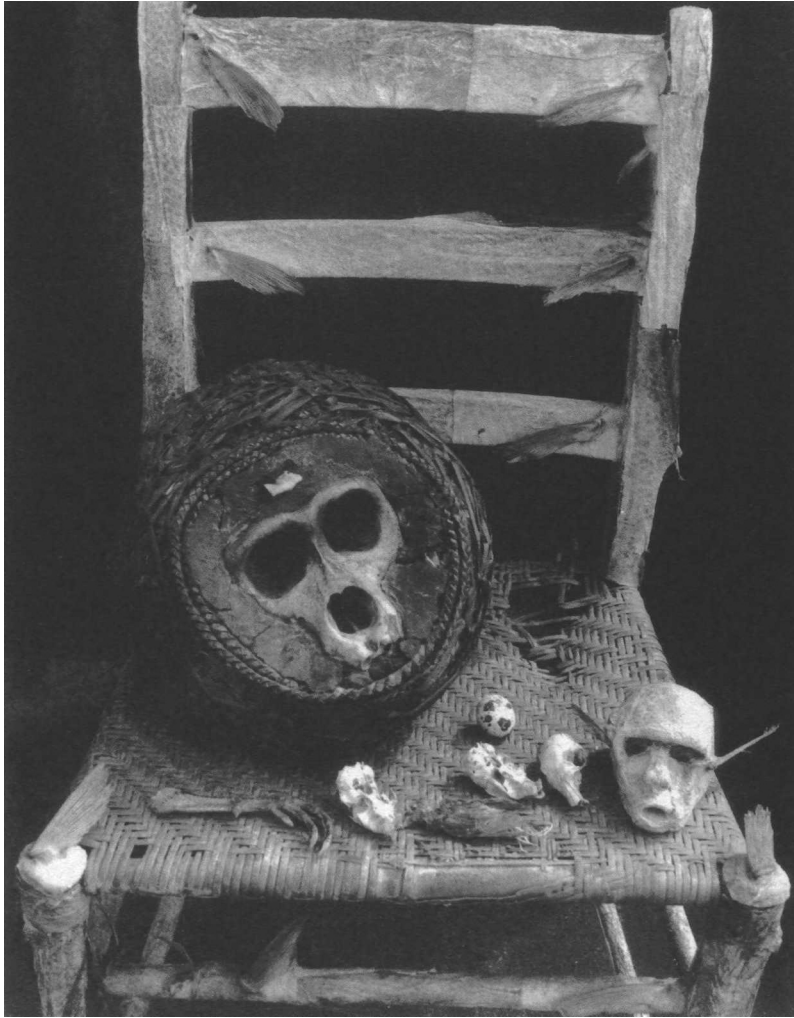
Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., B.A. 1913, Fund

Already an accomplished and recognized abstract artist, Romare Bearden was propelled by the Civil Rights movement to a return to figuration.<sup>1</sup> His goals are summarized in his statement: "I can't divorce myself from the inequities that are around me."<sup>2</sup> In *Village of Yo*, a work that quintessentially exhibits Bearden's social and political concerns of the 1960s, he alludes to the dual role of European and African heritages that form the basis of African American experiences. At the center of the collage Bearden has constructed a tableau of European references: the image of a fallen classical pillar supports a more crudely fashioned post and lintel, which frames a modernist, abstract figure. Its cubist-inspired head emphasizes the eye, drawing on the dual perspective of profile and frontal viewpoint common to Egyptian images. Bearden then repeats this motif throughout the collage in numerous surrounding heads that he constructs out of photographs of African masks, ritual sculptures, and contemporary faces. As viewers trace the relays among these distorted heads on the surface of this collage, they perceive Bearden's literal and symbolic reframing of the vocabulary that European modernism appropriated from Africa within the cultural context of his African heritage.

One source of collage as a technique grows out of nineteenth-century uses of papier collé—a French term meaning

"glued paper" that refers to the Chinese invention of creating trompe-l'oeil effects and patterned designs by incorporating cut pieces of paper into a work of art. In the twentieth century, collage is associated with European modernism, especially in the works of Braque and Picasso beginning in 1912. However, while it is this European tradition that made Bearden's use of collage accessible to his contemporaries, his work resonates even more strongly with the assemblage techniques common within cultures of African heritage.<sup>3</sup> This direct connection to African traditions gives Bearden's work an unmistakable political charge that is often overlooked.<sup>4</sup>

As in most of his collages, *Village of Yo* creates a space where Bearden can combine images of his rural and urban experiences, the portrayal of mythic heroes within an African context, and the broken, all-over compositional structure of jazz. In these personal yet communal images, Bearden demonstrates a more inclusive vision than the one offered by narratives and images rooted solely in European traditions.<sup>5</sup> The universal implications of Bearden's project connect him to a modernist aesthetic, but its strong emphasis on social imagery and personal experiences anticipates the aesthetics of contemporary diaspora artists.



**Albert Chong**

*Throne for the Ancestors*, 1987;

printed 1996–98

Gelatin silver print, 23¾ x 19¾ inches

The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund

*Seated Presence*, 1992

Gelatin silver print, 23¾ x 19¾ inches

The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund



Albert Chong's photographs embody the African and Chinese traditions that reflect his mixed ancestry growing up in Kingston, Jamaica.<sup>1</sup> They suggest the range of cultural encounters that often underlie the experiences of individuals whose ancestry has been determined by the conditions of diaspora. Employing the languages of poetry, ritual, and myth, Chong creates tableaux of photographic memory. He suggests narratives that make visible the relationship between personal identity and the oral traditions of his ancestors. Chong is especially interested in the magical and mysterious traditions of voodoo, santeria, revival Zionism, and candomblé that informed his childhood.<sup>2</sup> In his album of photographs entitled *Ancestral Dialogues*, Chong writes: "These powerful counterparts to Christianity and Catholicism provide a strong alternative for those that trace their ancestry to Africa, alternatives that are very much part of our heritage."

Chong is an Obeahman himself—a shaman who practices ancestor worship by connecting the spiritual and material worlds. For the photographs in this exhibition, he uses chairs as the ceremonial vessels for his assemblages of natural objects. These chairs draw on the African Yoruba tradition in which thrones are seats for ancestral spirits and altars for offerings rather than on the European tradition in which thrones serve as imperial furniture.<sup>3</sup>

Chong creates these thrones out of commonplace objects, which are transformed into powerful symbols connecting him to the spiritual realm of his ancestors through the double mediation of ritual and photography.<sup>4</sup>

Such a use of photography stands in contrast to its use by European modernists to objectify native cultures. In *Throne for the Ancestors*, feathers, bits of bone, eggs, condor claws, a basket, a ritual performance mask, and a skull with enormous eye sockets are arranged on the throne as an indication of the spiritual power available to the artist-shaman. The pairing of an animal skull with a ritual mask links contemporary life to ancient memories. Most of these found objects suggest meaning through associations rather than through specific references.

His thrones allow Chong to make his own body the link to a past that he shares with others of African Asian descent. Chong's is not a sentimentally simplistic nostalgia for an Africa before the Middle Passage. Rather, his photographs are evidence of a profound cultural hybridity that incorporates diverse influences from European and African Asian traditions, from his past and present histories. As Thelma Golden explains, Chong's photographs are "documents of ritual."<sup>5</sup> In these works, he invokes the return of his ancestors through both a literal and a visual practice.





**Hale Aspacio Woodruff**

*African Headdress*, ca. 1937

From the Atlanta period portfolio

Linocut, 19 x 14 $\frac{1}{8}$  inches

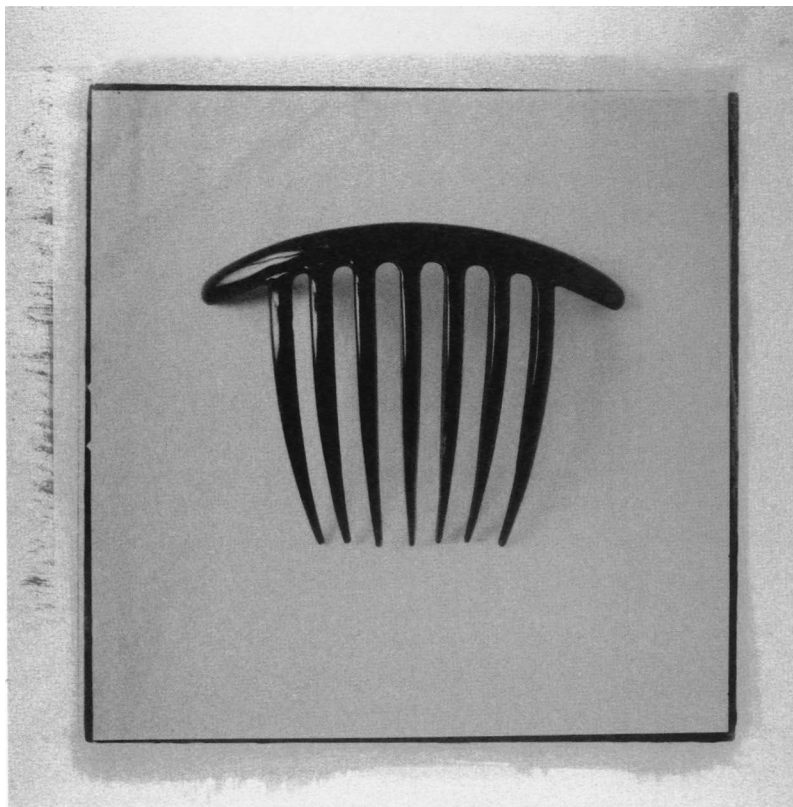
Everett V. Meeks, B.A. 1901, Fund

Active as a painter and printmaker throughout the 1920s and '30s and having spent the years 1929 to 1931 studying in Paris, Hale Woodruff offers an instructive parallel to Walker Evans.<sup>1</sup> Both men clearly felt the impact of European modernism. Whereas more formalist concerns drew artists like Evans and Picasso to African ritual objects as an inspiration for stylistic innovations, Woodruff's position as an African American led him to stress the social and political implications of modernism's visual language. In 1934 he went to Mexico on a work-study grant to assist the artist Diego Rivera, a member of a group of muralists who were adapting the modernist vocabulary to an idiom of social protest.<sup>2</sup> Woodruff, like the Mexican muralists, rejected the use of non-Western civilizations as foils for European culture and, in particular, the use of African objects for explorations of European artistic traditions. In such works as the *Amistad Mutiny* murals, commissioned in 1938 for the library at Talladega College in Alabama, Woodruff looked to the history of Africa in order to examine its fundamental role in shaping his own heritage. His work shifts from the stylistic self-referentiality he learned in Paris to an historical and social self-referentiality based in his experience as an African American.

*African Headdress* is part of a portfolio of linocuts that date to Woodruff's tenure

as a professor at Atlanta University from 1931 to 1945. He most likely adopted the linocut—a twentieth-century relief process in linoleum that is similar to woodcutting—as a result of seeing its use by European modernists in Paris. He exploited the expressive potential of its light and dark tones and gestural lines in order to reflect the often harsh social realities historically faced by African Americans.

In *African Headdress*, Woodruff creates a feeling of immediacy through the ability of the linocut to flatten space and to suggest design more than perspective. This language draws on modernist approaches that emphasize emotional and spiritual authenticity over surface appearances and realistic depiction. Yet, Woodruff's investment in his own African heritage led him—as it did Lois Mailou Jones, another Atlanta-based artist in the exhibition—to resist the appropriations in the work of European modernists, who saw ritual artifacts as the products of an ahistorical culture bound to a timeless and more vigorous past.<sup>3</sup> This work, by contrast, celebrates African traditions of adornment, linking it to spirituality and ideal female beauty in the lives of diaspora women. Woodruff shapes the modernist interest in Africa into an idiom of patterned figuration and structure that references the connection between the everyday life of African Americans and their ancestral past.



## Joy Gregory

*Hair Comb*, 1995–96

From the series *Objects of Beauty*

Van Dyke brown print, 20 x 15½ inches

Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., B.A. 1913, Fund

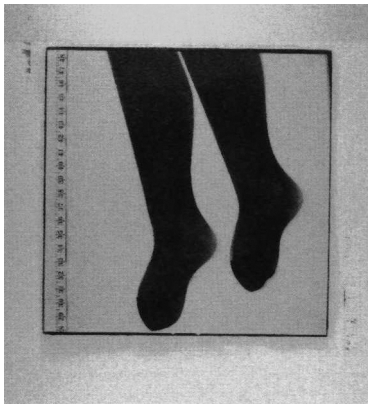
*Nylon Stockings and Tape Measure*,

1995–96

From the series *Objects of Beauty*

Van Dyke brown print, 20 x 15½ inches

Courtesy of Zeldia Cheattle Gallery



Since the mid-1980s, Joy Gregory has been using photography to create uncommonly beautiful and radiant works of art.<sup>1</sup> Her subjects—still lifes, cultural landscapes, and portraits—reflect an astute interest in the issues of race, class, gender, sexuality, identity, beauty, and remembrance. Several of Gregory's projects have been concerned with documenting cultural artifacts and the history of their use and circulation within the overlapping contexts of diaspora and empire.

For *Objects of Beauty*, Gregory selected twenty items that symbolically refer to Western ideals of feminine beauty: a pair of lace panties, a hairbrush, a girdle, a bustier, a false eyelash, a hair comb, a pair of high-heeled pumps. She photographed them individually or in pairs, as if she were taking their portraits. Square black lines, inscribed by the photographic negative, frame the objects, which seem to float in space against the warm white backgrounds. The texture of the paper and delicate nature of the printing process combine with radiant illumination to further embellish the sensuous appearance of each object.

Gregory's instruments of adornment, extricated from the context of their ritual, everyday use, appear at once as clinical specimens, documents, and fetish objects. We are compelled to inspect them closely, to consider the culturally constructed

meanings they convey about sexuality, self-awareness, and conformity.<sup>2</sup> Within the context of the exhibition, Gregory's manner of objectifying these Western-style fetish objects is not unlike Charles Sheeler's and Walker Evans's approaches to photographing African ritual objects.

The black nylon stockings in *Nylon Stockings and Tape Measure* are draped across the picture frame so as to imply a pair of slightly bent, shapely legs. Suggesting another layer of skin, perhaps black skin, the stockings hint at the trappings of this irremovable social and cultural marker. As Sunil Gupta has commented about Gregory's work, "For all of its rounded contours and feminine gaze, her works are calling attention to an urgent need to redefine the cultural significance of the colour of skin."<sup>3</sup> The measuring tape, a literal reference to the calculations of beauty—of the size of a woman's waist, hips, buttocks, thighs, or bosom—also points to the larger social and cultural pressures to conform to a standard ideal.<sup>4</sup> According to Gregory, "The ideal physical form is . . . a form of social and psychological policing."<sup>5</sup> Her objects of beauty are in fact objects of physical and psychic control. By literally disembodimenting these objects, Gregory exposes the fallacy of the ideal feminine body and gives us the space to imagine our own notions of beauty.



**Moira Pernambuco**

*From One World to Another I (And This Shall Be My Legacy)*, 1998

From the series *Remembrance and Ritual: A Tribute to the Ancestors of the Middle Passage*, 1995–98

Gelatin silver print, 29 x 23 inches

Leonard C. Hanna, Jr., B.A. 1913, Fund

Ever since she began taking pictures of her aging grandmother in the mid-1980s, Moira Pernambuco's photographs have been concerned with telling stories about people, documenting family history, and remembering the lived experiences of her ancestors.<sup>1</sup> Her sumptuously printed black and white images boast her love affair with black people—their richly hued skin, soft curling locks, warm expressions of pride, confident, soulful bodies—and an understanding of the emotional depth of their strivings. As Pernambuco has confessed, "There is something about my black people that makes me want to carry them, cradle them, take care of them."<sup>2</sup>

From 1995 to 1998, Pernambuco participated in and documented the Coney Island Tribute to the Ancestors, an annual celebration honoring survivors of the Middle Passage—the transatlantic journey that brought untold millions of Africans to the Americas in slave ships.<sup>3</sup> Selections from the resulting series of photographs, *Remembrance and Ritual: A Tribute to the Ancestors of the Middle Passage*, are included in this exhibition. Pernambuco shows participants in this New World ritual on the shores of the Atlantic Ocean at Coney Island, Brooklyn. They are of all ages and come wearing white to symbolize the spirit of their ancestors. Many bring offerings of flowers, which they release in the water as they enter the crashing waves to

cleanse and replenish their spirits.<sup>4</sup> Others dance, drum, meditate, sing, or join in prayer. The titles of her photographs—*Father to Daughter, Cousins, The Inheritance*—show that this is a family affair, a communal gathering, a shared act of remembrance.

*From One World to Another I (And This Shall Be My Legacy)* provides a visual, metaphorical, and historical beginning to the series. In this photograph, a narrowing column of rectangular wood pylons supporting an overhead pier reveals what appears to be an open doorway onto the Atlantic Ocean. This doorway is the mirror image of the infamous "door of no return" at Goree Island depicted in Carrie Mae Weems's *Slave Coast Series* (see p. 27). Instead of leading out from the darkened dungeons to a seemingly unknown, boundless ocean (as in the Weems photograph), waves rush from Pernambuco's open doorway and crash triumphantly onto a sandy shore. This image of renewal transforms the way we look at the door of no return. The combination of rushing water and undulating pylons hints at the layered and fragmented transatlantic crossings that created the African diaspora and at the connectedness of oceans that continue to link the diaspora today. Finally, the photograph's title suggests that the open doorway leads beyond this world to a spiritual one where generations of ancestors are waiting.

**Carrie Mae Weems**

*Grabbing, Snatching, Blink and You Be Gone*, 1993

Triptych from the *Slave Coast Series*

Two gelatin silver prints, one text panel, each 20 x 20 inches

The Janet and Simeon Braguin Fund

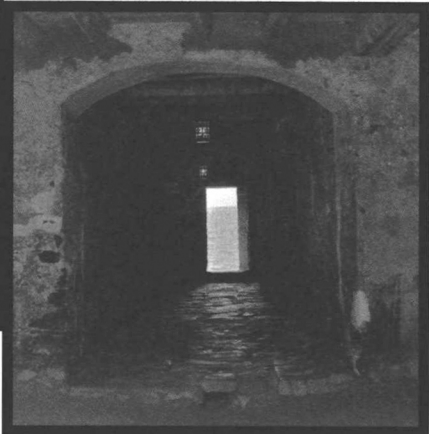
Throughout her twenty-year career, Carrie Mae Weems has created photographically based works of art that challenge and critique the social and cultural constructions of identity, race, class, and gender.<sup>1</sup> In 1993, Weems embarked upon the *Slave Coast Series*, using photographs and text to reinterpret the historical sites of memory that gave the West African coast that moniker during the period of the transatlantic slave trade from the late sixteenth century to the late nineteenth century. The photographs, presented as diptychs or triptychs, record the desolate slave forts and dungeons, absent of any sign of life, from which millions of Africans were chained in slave ships and forcibly sent to the other side of the Atlantic. The mood is silent, solemn, chilling, empty. Text panels written by the artist speak for those who are no longer present to speak for themselves and tell their stories of origin, capture, rape, deceit, torture, and servitude.<sup>2</sup> *Congo, Ibo, Mandingo, Togo* recites ethnic and regional origins of enslaved Africans, while *Elmina, Cape Coast, Ile de Goree* names the three most notorious forts and dungeons where they were held captive. Her journey to these places of unimaginable atrocity displaces the loss of the Middle Passage and stands as an act of reclamation. Together, Weems's photographs and text panels from the *Slave Coast Series* perform a transformative and recuperative

function, recasting meaning, embracing remembrance.

*Grabbing, Snatching, Blink and You Be Gone*, a triptych from the *Slave Coast Series*, consists of two gelatin silver prints flanking one text panel. In the photograph on the left, overhead incandescent light bulbs shine through stylized wrought iron shades and cast a shimmering light against the dark, stone and brick walls of the nearly windowless dungeons. The lighting fixtures are a recent addition to this last surviving example of a slave factory on Goree Island, installed when the building was renovated as a world historic monument and tourist site in the 1980s. They serve two primary functions: as a safety measure, to illuminate the dark spaces now heavily trafficked by tourists, and as a decorative element, to lend a certain charm and authenticity to the setting staged and created for the visitor. Weems's documentary-style photographs participate in the need to present seemingly historically authentic images of the dungeons — sanitized, architecturally seductive, free of any traces of human life. But today the dungeons are anything but empty. In fact, places like Elmina, Cape Coast and Ile de Goree are teeming with life, visited annually by thousands of pilgrims from the diaspora and tourists from around the globe. As bell hooks points out, "The Africa Weems visually represented in the *Goree Island* series is both a site for



GRABBING  
SNATCHING  
BLINK  
AND YOU  
BE GONE





insurgent commemorative remembrance and a contemporary location that must be engaged on its own terms, in the present.”<sup>3</sup>

The photograph on the right is a now-familiar view of the “door of no return” at Goree Island, but its relatively recent frequency in the visual vocabulary of many diaspora blacks makes it no less haunting. Indeed the door of no return pictured here has come to stand as a visual symbol for the initial passageway through which millions of Africans forcibly left the shores of their homeland for points unknown across the Atlantic. As the Weems photograph makes clear, the door of no return is always shown open, revealing the expanse of the undulating Atlantic Ocean topped by the blazing, sun-scorched horizon. The blinding light let in by the open door is framed in black by the darkness of the dungeons and outlined by an arched opening.

The center text panel reads, “Grabbing, snatching, blink and you be gone,” in blood red letters. In Weems’s characteristic witty and sarcastic way, the phrase has multiple meanings and nuanced references. “Grabbing” and “snatching” allude to the methods by which innocent African victims were taken as slaves. “Blink and you be gone” puts the viewer in the place of the victim, deep within the shadows of the dungeons, and emphasizes the eerie emptiness of the space, once filled with hundreds of captives.

There is a call-and-response quality to the Weems and Pernambuco projects, wherein one provides a nearly perfect complement to the other. Weems’s photographs and text panels emphasize the emptiness of the cultural landscape of the slave coast, and become a metaphor for death. Whereas Pernambuco’s photographs, taken on the other side of the Atlantic of people paying tribute to the survivors of the Middle Passage, stand as an affirmation of life. Both projects serve a commemorative function, the Weems in reclaiming these sites as memorials, the Pernambuco in documenting the perseverance of the African diaspora.

## Notes

### Daniell Cornell

- 1 Diana Emery Hulick, *Photography: 1900 to the Present* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1998), 14.
- 2 Alan Trachtenberg, "Camera Work/Social Work," *Reading American Photographs: Images as History, Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1989), 168. The brief history of progressive reform and documentary photography outlined here is explored in detail in Trachtenberg's essay. See Trachtenberg, 164-228.
- 3 Sheeler first visited Stieglitz at home in 1916 to view his photographs. Stieglitz's photograph of Picasso's *Head of a Woman* is published in Theodore E. Stebbins, Jr. and Norman Keyes, Jr., *Charles Sheeler: The Photographs* (Boston, Mass.: Little, Brown and Company, 1987), 3.
- 4 In 1914 at Stieglitz's Gallery "291," de Zayas had been the first to exhibit ritual and fetish artifacts from the African continent within the frame of European modernist art. In 1916 de Zayas produced one of the foundational texts in the appropriation of African objects for a modernist agenda, *African Art: Its Influence on Modern Art*. Sheeler's documentary photography began in 1910 with architectural sites. By 1915 he had attained a level of recognition as a documentarist sufficient to earn the commission for the photographic records of classical and Asian sculpture in the John T. Morris Collection at what is now the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The sculptures that Sheeler photographed for his collaborative volume with de Zayas were from various private collections in and around Philadelphia and New York. See Stebbins and Keyes, 2-5.
- 5 Scientists' belief in a hierarchy of the senses that prized sight as the most reliable served to link the visual record of photography to the claims of material evidence.
- 6 In this, of course, Sheeler is participating in the institutional conventions of display in the fine art museum, which emphasizes the aesthetic dimensions of all objects by tearing them from their cultural contexts and placing them within the organizing syntax of an exhibition.
- 7 Virginia-Lee Webb, *Perfect Documents: Walker Evans and African Art, 1935* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), 29. Webb writes: "The Western canon of African art is said to have been created from this exhibition" (13). Her catalogue provides a thorough compendium of all the known information about the exhibition, its catalogue, its traveling venues, and the role of Evans's photographs in disseminating an understanding of African artifacts within the context of European fine art sculpture.
- 8 This point is underscored in the museum's *Bulletin*, where Evans is identified as a photographer whose work is represented in the permanent collection. The works referenced were his photographs of nineteenth-century American houses. See Webb, 30.
- 9 Evans produced two of the best known books of twentieth-century, social documentary photographs: *American Photographs* (1938), the catalogue for his exhibition of the same name organized at the Museum of Modern Art by Lincoln Kirstein, and, in collaboration with author James Agee, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941).
- 10 Titles for the photographs by Evans and Sheeler are descriptive and based on current understandings of African cultures. Original titles by the photographers are listed in the accompanying checklist and indicated by brackets. I would like to thank Lynese Williams for her expertise in identifying the African artifacts.
- 11 Webb explains that he achieved this effect by rotating the light during the exposure. See Webb, 33.
- 12 For a discussion of artists, including Evans, who were important in linking documentary photography to their personal philosophies, see Graham Clarke, *The Photograph* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), esp. 147-57.
- 13 Klaus Kertess and Michael Semff, *Barry Le Va: Munich Diary—African Sketchbook* (Munich: Museum Morsbroich Leverkusen, 1993), 9.
- 14 Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Barry Le Va are taken from a phone conversation with the author on March 8, 2000.
- 15 The process that Le Va describes here is an extension of his life-long conceptual interest in using "different materials to construct systems that straddle order and disorder," which is the thesis regarding Le Va's oeuvre in the catalogue essay for his retrospective exhibition. See Elaine A. King, *Barry Le Va, 1966–1988* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: Carnegie Mellon Art Gallery, 1988), 6.
- 16 I am indebted to Lisa Hodermarsky for pointing out that Le Va's use of his photographs of African art objects may be understood as ritualistic.

### Cheryl Finley

- 1 Jennings was a student of Hale Woodruff at Morehouse College in Atlanta. Woodruff had by then amassed a collection of African ritual objects from flea markets and art dealers (sometimes frequented with Alain Locke). Woodruff's wood engraving *African Headdress* (see pp. 20–21) was made around the same year as Jennings's *Still Life with Fetish*.
- 2 Art historian and gallery owner Corrine Jennings found a pamphlet on French heraldic symbols that used to belong to her father, and suggests that he may have been commenting on the French colonial theft of these African objects. Conversation with Corrine Jennings. Kenkeleba Gallery, New York City, 1 April 2000.
- 3 Corrine Jennings has suggested that this still life is a political critique of French colonialism and the circulation of African ritual objects as art objects in the Western art economy.
- 4 Alain Leroy Locke, guest ed., "Harlem: Mecca of the Negro," *The Survey Graphic* (March 1925): 621-724. According to Mary Schmidt Campbell and David Driskell, Locke noted that if the African American artist "were to lay claim to the rich African sculptural tradition which, he noted, was already a potent force in the evolution of European modernism, he would have the power to create an art that would add a new dimension to Black America's cultural identity." See Mary Schmidt Campbell and David Driskell, *Harlem Renaissance, Art of Black America* (New York: Studio Museum, 1987).
- 5 See W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, first published 1903 (New York: Avon Books, 1965), 209-389.
- 6 The same could be said of the use of the word "fetish" in Jennings's *Still Life with Fetish* discussed earlier.

### Lorna Simpson

- 1 Born in Brooklyn in 1960, Simpson achieved renown remarkably early. By 1990, at only thirty years of age, she was the first African American woman to exhibit at the Venice Biennale. That same year the Museum of Modern Art in New York gave her a solo exhibition in its "Projects" room. In 1992 she was honored as one of the youngest artists to have a nationally traveling retrospective, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. And adding to her list of firsts, in 1994 Simpson was the youngest artist to receive the Artist Award for Distinguished Body of Work from the College Art Association. Her work reflects the emphasis on conceptual issues that characterizes her studies for a BFA (1982) at the School for Visual Arts in New York and an MFA (1985) at the University of California at San Diego.
- 2 See Deborah Willis, *Lorna Simpson* (San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1992), 12.
- 3 Margaret Hawkins, "Wig Show Cuts to the Heart of Obsession," *Chicago Sun-Times* (April 22, 1994): 23.
- 4 Kristen Brooke Schleiter, "Taking a Fall: Lorna Simpson's new do," *The Print Collector's Newsletter* 25 (July/August 1994): 92-93.
- 5 Ellen Steinberg, "Lorna Simpson, Adam Brooks," *The New Art Examiner* (Summer 1994): 52.

### Romare Bearden

- 1 Born in Charlotte, North Carolina, Bearden studied at New York University. In 1943 he went to Columbia University to study with George Grosz, whose commitment to developing a modern idiom for social critique was a potent influence. In 1950 Bearden went to the Sorbonne, Paris, to study and was exposed to the abstract vocabulary of Matisse, Braque, and Miró. After returning to the United States, he took a position in New York City's Department of Social Services, a job he held until 1971 and which allowed him to observe first-hand the urban experiences of African Americans during the explosive decade of the 1960s. Joining with other African American artists in 1963 in response to the March on Washington, he formed the Spiral group at his studio on Canal Street in Manhattan. In that year

he began using collage as a way to reintroduce the political possibilities of figuration into his abstract vocabulary. In 1974 an exhibition of Bearden's work became the first traveling museum retrospective by an African American artist.

- 2 Quoted in Gail Gelburd and Alex Rosenberg, *A Graphic Odyssey: Romare Bearden as Printmaker* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 11.
- 3 The connection to African techniques is discussed by Floyd Coleman in Richard J. Powell and Jock Reynolds, *To Conserve a Legacy: American Art from Historically Black Colleges and Universities* (Andover, Mass.: Addison Gallery of American Art and New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1999), 175-76. Coleman astutely points not only to African ritual traditions, but also to the newspapered interior decorations from Bearden's childhood among the rural southern African Americans of his native North Carolina. (See also Myron Schwartzman, *Romare Bearden: His Life and Art* (New York: Abrams, 1990). Other African American artists recognized for their skillful use of collage include Betye Saar and Howardena Pindell.
- 4 Bearden's politically progressive vision of art grew out of his encounter with the teachings of André Malraux while a student at the Sorbonne in the 1950s. Drawing on Malraux's notion of art as an evolving semiotic system, Bearden used collage to visualize identity as a changeable concept – an intertextual construction within a fluid network of visual signs. See the discussion in Lee Stephens Glazer, "Signifying Identity: Art and Race in Romare Bearden's Projections," *The Art Bulletin* 76 (September 1994): 411-26.
- 5 For a more detailed discussion of the meaning of Bearden's intervention into the cultural myths of a racially stratified society, see Paul Rogers, "Ralph Ellison, the collage of Romare Bearden and race: some speculations," *International Review of African American Art* 11 (1994): 7-10.

### Albert Chong

- 1 Born and raised in Kingston, Chong eventually moved to New York to attend college. He graduated with honors from the School for Visual Arts there in 1981 and went on to earn an MFA from the University of California at San Diego in 1991. Presently, he is associate professor of art and photography at the University of Colorado at Boulder.
- 2 These are the four main religious traditions of the African diaspora centered in Haiti, Cuba, Jamaica, and Brazil respectively. In his study of these traditions, Joseph M. Murphy writes: "The theology of the religious traditions of the African diaspora grows out of the encounters between human being and spirit in ceremonies" (*Working the Spirit: Ceremonies of the African Diaspora* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1994], 180).
- 3 For a more complete discussion of Chong's chairs and their relation to African ritual traditions, see Kellie Jones, *Interrogating Identity* (New York: Grey Art Gallery and Study Center, New York University, 1991).
- 4 Of this work, the poet Quincy Troupe writes: "Because these religious practices come out of an African and West Indian oral tradition, Chong's photographic renditions can be viewed as an adaptation or transference of these belief systems into a visual iconography that is tailored for contemporary society" (*Ancestral Dialogues: The Photographs of Albert Chong* [San Francisco: The Friends of Photography, 1994], 2).
- 5 Thelma Golden, "Albert Chong: Eye & I," in *ibid.*, 3.

### Hale Aspacio Woodruff

- 1 Born in Cairo, Illinois, in 1900, Woodruff was one of the earliest champions of work by African American artists through a series of annual art exhibitions at Atlanta University beginning in 1941. His own artistic practice was shaped by study at Harvard University, the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, the John Herron Art Institute in Indianapolis, and at the Académie Scandinave and the Académie Moderne in Paris. There he met and studied with the most acclaimed African American painter of the nineteenth century, Henry O. Tanner.

- 2 The influence of the Mexican Muralist School on Woodruff's African American modernism is detailed in Lizzetta Lefalle Collins, "The Mexican Connection," *American Visions* 11 (December 1996/January 1997): 20-27.
- 3 Lois Mailou Jones not only studied in Paris in 1937, the year of the painting in this exhibition, but in 1934 attended Columbia University and took up the study of masks in non-Western cultures. Her interest in masks and their relation to performance was reinforced when her husband, African dancer Asadata DaFora, commissioned her to create the masks for his dance company. See the exhibition catalogue by Tritobia H. Benjamin, *The World of Lois M. Jones* (Washington, D.C.: Meridian House International, 1990), 2-4.

#### Joy Gregory

- 1 An artist, photographer, and educator, Joy Gregory earned a BA in Communication, Art, and Design from Manchester Polytechnic in 1984 and an MA in Photography from the Royal College of Art in 1986. Part of her artistic process involves the diasporic journeying to search for the people and artifacts she photographs. She is the recipient of several important artist residencies and awards, both in England and abroad. Gregory boasts a far-reaching international reputation, especially in Europe, Africa, Australia, South America, and the Caribbean, where her work has been exhibited widely. She is particularly well-versed in nineteenth-century photographic printing processes and is known for her masterfully executed prints. Gregory lives in South London and teaches photography at the London College of Printing.
- 2 Similarly, Lorna Simpson's *Wigs* seem to float luminously in textured space with no reference to the head (the female body) to which they might be attached. See pp.13-15.
- 3 Sunil Gupta, "Beauty and the Beast: The Work of Joy Gregory," in *Joy Gregory: Monograph* (London: Autograph, 1995), 9. Gregory's acclaimed 1998 traveling installation, *Memory and Skin*, addressed the social and cultural meanings of skin color within the historical context of diaspora and empire in the Caribbean.

- 4 This work also alludes to the story of the Venus Hottentot, the South African woman Saartjie (Sarah) Baartman, who was exhibited naked in Paris and London in the early nineteenth century because of a European fascination with the size of her protruding buttocks. Her physical measurements became public record, and the public display and increasing public appearance of other women like her in part influenced the Western fashion novelty of the bustle. See Sander S. Gillman, "Black Bodies, White Bodies: Towards an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth Century Art, Medicine and Literature," *Critical Inquiry* 12:1 (Autumn 1985): 204-42.
- 5 Joy Gregory quoted in biographical materials. Here Gregory is also commenting on how the dictates of fashion and advertising feed the constant struggle and suffering of many women to be a certain size and shape.

#### Moira Pernambuco

- 1 Moira Pernambuco was born in Georgetown, Guyana in 1969. She earned a BA in Photography and Women's Studies from the State University of New York, Purchase in 1995. Her senior thesis, *Vignettes of a Family-Once Removed*, an original book of photographs, narrative, and poems, won the SUNY Purchase Divisional Award for Outstanding Contribution in the Field of Race Relations/Multiculturalism. Pernambuco's photographs have been shown widely in group exhibitions, including *Black New York Photographers of the 20th Century* at the Schomburg Center and *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* at the Smithsonian Institution. The Caribbean Cultural Center in New York mounted Pernambuco's first solo exhibition, *Remembrance and Ritual: A Tribute to the Ancestors of the Middle Passage*, in 1999.
- 2 *Remembrance and Ritual: A Tribute to the Ancestors of the Middle Passage* (New York: Caribbean Cultural Center, 1999), 6.
- 3 Held annually since 1995, the Tribute to the Ancestors begins at dusk with a candlelight vigil, followed by a sunrise service led by the Rev. Johnny Ray Youngblood of St. Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn, organizer of the tribute. See Jayson Blair, "Rite Helps Slaves' Descendants Purge Anger," *The New York Times*, September 26, 1999, 45.

- 4 This celebration brings to mind the yearly homage to Yemayá, the Yoruba goddess of the sea, which is celebrated along the shores of Yoruba-influenced African diaspora communities, especially in Cuba and Brazil. Participants present offerings to Yemayá, which are thrown into the crashing surf or released into the sea in miniature boats or floating vessels lighted by candles. See Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage Books, 1984), 72-79.

#### Carrie Mae Weems

- 1 Best known as a photographer, Weems is also a performance, installation, and conceptual artist. She traditionally works in narrative series that mostly utilize photography but have incorporated text, sculpture, ceramic plates, fabric banners, and sound. Weems is among a group of African American women artists, including Lorna Simpson, who came of age in the post-modernist climate of the 1980s and who often employ photographs and text to interrogate and debunk racist stereotypes and retake control of the imaging of blackness. Trained as a photographer (California Institute of the Arts BFA 1981, MFA 1984) and as a folklorist (University of California, Berkeley, 1984-87), Weems has been influenced by the work of the photographer Roy DeCarava and the folklorist and writer Zora Neale Hurston. She was born in Portland, Oregon in 1953.
- 2 Weems's use of rhythmic narrative text introduces the subjectivity of the viewer, transforming the viewer from a passionate observer of the image to an active participant in the narrative. See Okwui Enwezor, "Writing Inside the Hyphen," *Index on Censorship* 3 (1996): 162.
- 3 bell hooks, "Diasporic Landscapes of Longing," in *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 73.

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