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## Impeach Art History

"My goal is to carve out a space for the black experience in art." Alanna Airitam

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**Alanna Airitam**  
*Saint Sugar Hill*, 2017  
CuratorLove

“The History of White People,” by Nell Irvin Painter serves to expand on when and how exactly Black Americans became other in their own culture. It also articulates where the ideals of beauty are born, how race-politics affect Black Americans, and furthermore when and how systematic racism gained power throughout the history of the United States. Thus explaining why from Greek mythology to today Black Americans have been deemed other.

If we are to acknowledge this very complicated logic and apply it to aesthetic progress, we encounter a western-idealized-driven art canon that lacks accurate representation of Blackness for centuries (basically since the Renaissance), because art history was controlled by wealthy Europeans since the 1400s.

In the past few decades, however, a large conversation has emerged placing Black American artists at the forefront of contemporary aesthetics (even if the market just recently caught up to this). More or less driven by an assortment of non-Black-American curators (I too began on that camp) stating that Black American artists are catching up to their contemporary counterparts by borrowing from western art history.

Observations which places artist Kehinde Wiley as the master champion of inserting Black Americans into Baroque-inspired larger than life paintings.



Mickalene Thomas  
*Le déjeuner sur l'herbe: Les Trois Femmes Noires*, 2010  
Seattle Art Museum

However, that said, this conversation is born outside of Black American culture. All things considered, couldn't we also hypothesize that Black American culture is part of the art canon, and always has been. That the canon just so happens to be intrinsically racist, and driven by economic wealth at levels in which Black Americans before the last few decades were not allowed to partake in large part due to systematic racism?

As Jonell Logan, founder of the 300 Arts Project states, “Black artists are not borrowing from western art traditions. Positioning them as such is false and continues to place these artists on the outside looking in. African-American artists are an integral part of the western tradition in spite of their exclusion from it.” Yes, this inspired further research in an effort to understand Black-American aesthetic representations or the lack thereof for the past six hundred years. Also, it served alongside a few other sources as the introduction to a Person-of-Color-centric notion of art history.



**Kehinde Wiley**  
*Judith and Holofernes*, 2012  
Seattle Art Museum



**Knowledge Bennett**  
*Obama Cowboy (Double Up)*, 2017  
The Know Contemporary

Kehinde Wiley’s practice challenges the Baroque period in art history with works like *Napoleon*, or *Judith and Holofernes*. In a similar fashion and testing the same time period Alana Airitam created her *Golden Age Series*. Whereas Dr. Fahamu Pecou’s series *Art History neXt* focuses on Modern Art History. With *Le Déjeuner sur l’herbe* Mickalene Thomas observes Impressionism, yet her *Tree Graces* provoke Renaissance and Greek Mythology simultaneously. *Obama Cowboy* by Knowledge Bennett interrogates Pop-Art, and *Untitled* by Alex Anderson defies Japanese ink paintings, amongst many others Black American artist working today. But what do all of these works have in common? What do they signal exactly? Why do they challenge Art History?

We can't say they are borrowing iconography from the western traditions, this is their art history too. They are thus inserting contemporary Black Americans into a very complicated place that has lacked a space for this part of our very culture for the past few hundred years. Not in an effort to learn from, but in an effort to empower and take space. Not to reclaim, but to include an entire community of individuals that for an assortment of horrid reasons have been excluded from a six-hundred-year-old conversation, but for the first time in their own terms.



Rock Well: Radiant Pop Champ by Fahamu Pecou, PhD.



Untitled by Alex Anderson

Fahamu Pecou's series Art History neXt specifically created to "question the notions of inclusion and exclusion within the historical canon of fine art. The works consider who gets chronicled in the annals of art history." In a recent interview, Fahamu stated that it is an "integral part of the Black-American experience; remixing things, to make things work for our reality, our experience, for our purpose."

Contemporary Black American artists are thus using the art history canon and making it work, for their current reality by making a space for themselves in the past, such as the case of Alex Anderson, and Fahamu Pecou's self-portraiture, or prominent Black Americans such as former President Barack Obama in the cases of Knowledge Bennett and Kehinde Wiley, or even just everyday people such as the case of Mickalene Thomas and Alanna Airitam.



Kerry James Marshall  
*Past Times*, 1997, 1997  
 "Kerry James Marshall: Mastry" at MCA Chicago, Chicago



Vogue Cover by Tyler Mitchell

What all of this signals is a conscious move by contemporary Black American artists to transcend the negative stereotypes placed on their community, and to generate empowering ways to use art history to redefine Black American identity. In this regard, even Beyoncé's current cover of *Vogue* by photographer Tyler Mitchell serves a similar purpose. What we are witnessing is how Black Americans are using their agency, be it Sean "Diddy" Combs' groundbreaking auction record purchasing power, or Beyoncé's influence to select a Black American photographer for the first time ever to do the cover of *Vogue* and redefine standards of beauty.

To envision a world in which Black Americans have an aesthetically driven voice, and the right to belong in the art history canon, and to impeach art history, even if they have to work backward while the rest of us play catch up.

By Erika Hirugami, MAAB. Founder & CEO at CuratorLove



Alanna Airitam  
*Saint Monroe*, 2017  
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Alanna Airitam  
*Saint Lenox*, 2017  
 CuratorLove



Alanna Airitam  
*Dapper Dan*, 2017  
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Alanna Airitam  
*The Queen*, 2017  
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