

A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO

The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection

Generations

A History of
Black Abstract Art



A Note to Teachers

What do we know about art history? And how do we know what we know—or think we know—about art history? This resource is a companion to *Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art*, an exhibition that highlights Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida’s collection of work by black artists. The presentation challenges us to look critically at the traditional Western art historical narrative and consider the questions of: Who was left out? What were some of the conditions that led to these omissions?

In this resource, you—the reader and educator—will be asked to reflect on your own education in and understanding of art history and the impact that has had on your approach to art history/ studio art/arts-integration classroom activities. Questions, statistics, quotes, and more will offer

a variety of avenues through which to understand a range of factors that have contributed to the exclusion of black American artists from the Western art history canon.

In this publication, you will also explore the art of four black abstract artists of different periods featured in the *Generations* exhibition. What questions were/are they investigating through their work? How do these works connect with things students are investigating in your classroom? How can their work be integrated into the classroom curriculum?

Additional information and images are also available in the free booklet available in the exhibition, as well as the exhibition catalogue available in the BMA Shop.

In this resource you will find:

- An exploration of the Western art historical narrative and its impact on the exclusion of black artists
- Questions and prompts for reflection on our own understandings and educations in art history
- In-depth information on key objects and their artists
- Full-color images of key objects
- Curriculum connections for consideration

This resource is by no means comprehensive in its approach to understanding the complex questions posed above. But I do hope that it offers channels for reflection so that we may all start to be more intentional about inclusion in the ways we understand, talk about, and teach art.

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Introduction

Where do we get our ideas about art history?

Write down the names of the first three important artworks that come to mind below:

1. _____

2. _____

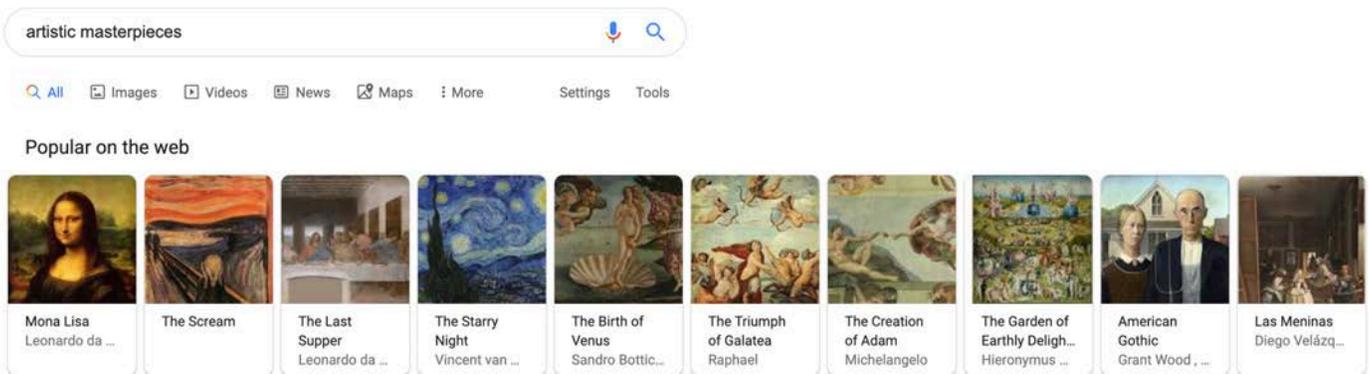
3. _____

Which artworks sprang to mind? How did you know that they were “important”? Chances are, many people will have listed Leonardo da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* as one example. Perhaps works by artists such as Michelangelo, Monet, or Picasso may have come up. In our society, knowledge of art history has traditionally been framed around a particular—and linear—narrative that centers the work of European artists. Artists outside of what are understood to be “Western traditions” may be considered distant

contributors to the greatness that followed (for example, Ancient Egyptian art) or completely unrelated to the peak artistic achievements of art history (for example, American Indigenous art).

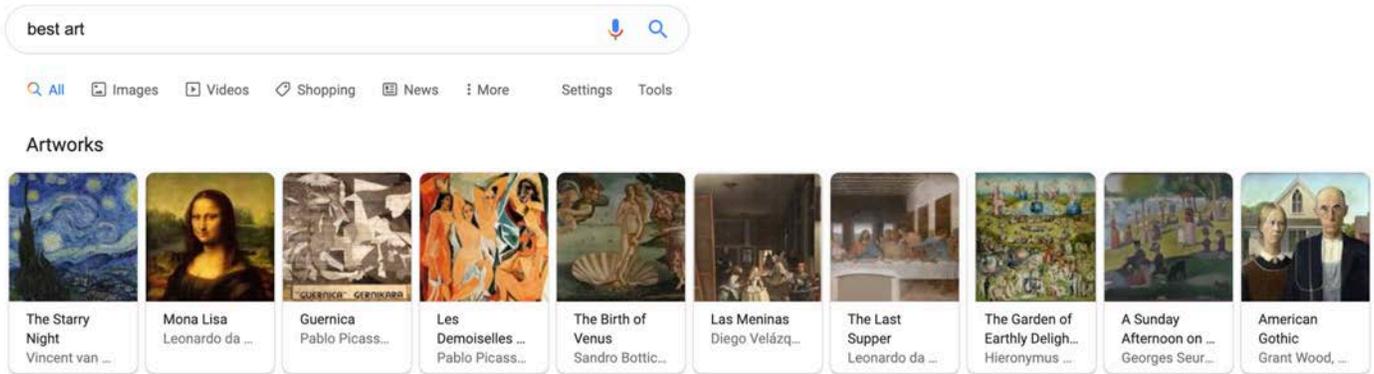
Generally speaking, Western art history—as you may have noticed from the previous paragraph—is often simply abbreviated to “art history,” which suggests that it somehow encompasses the entirety of the history of art. And readily available information on art history reinforces this distortion.

Consider the following Google searches. Looking for artistic masterpieces?



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What about the best art?

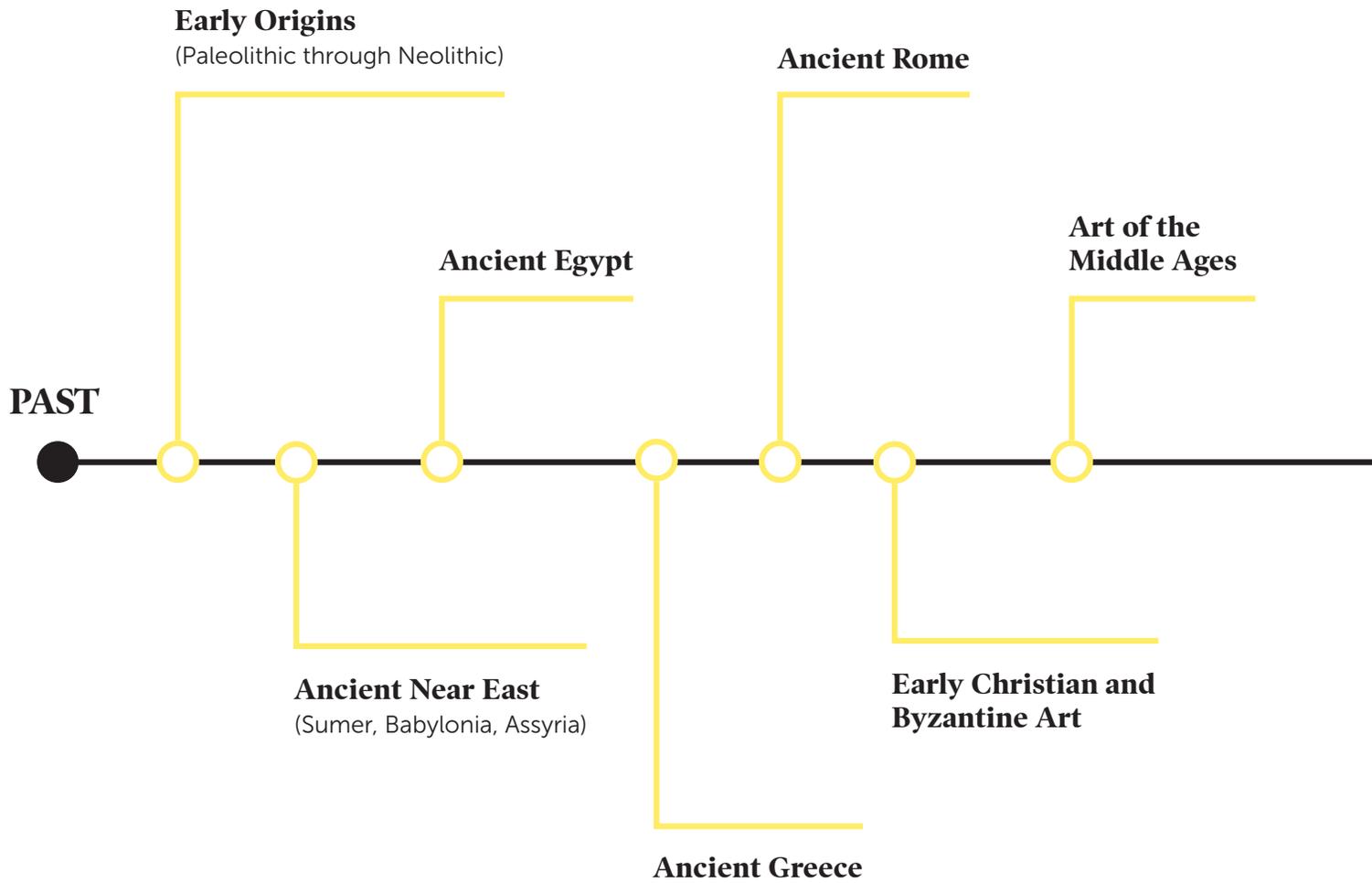


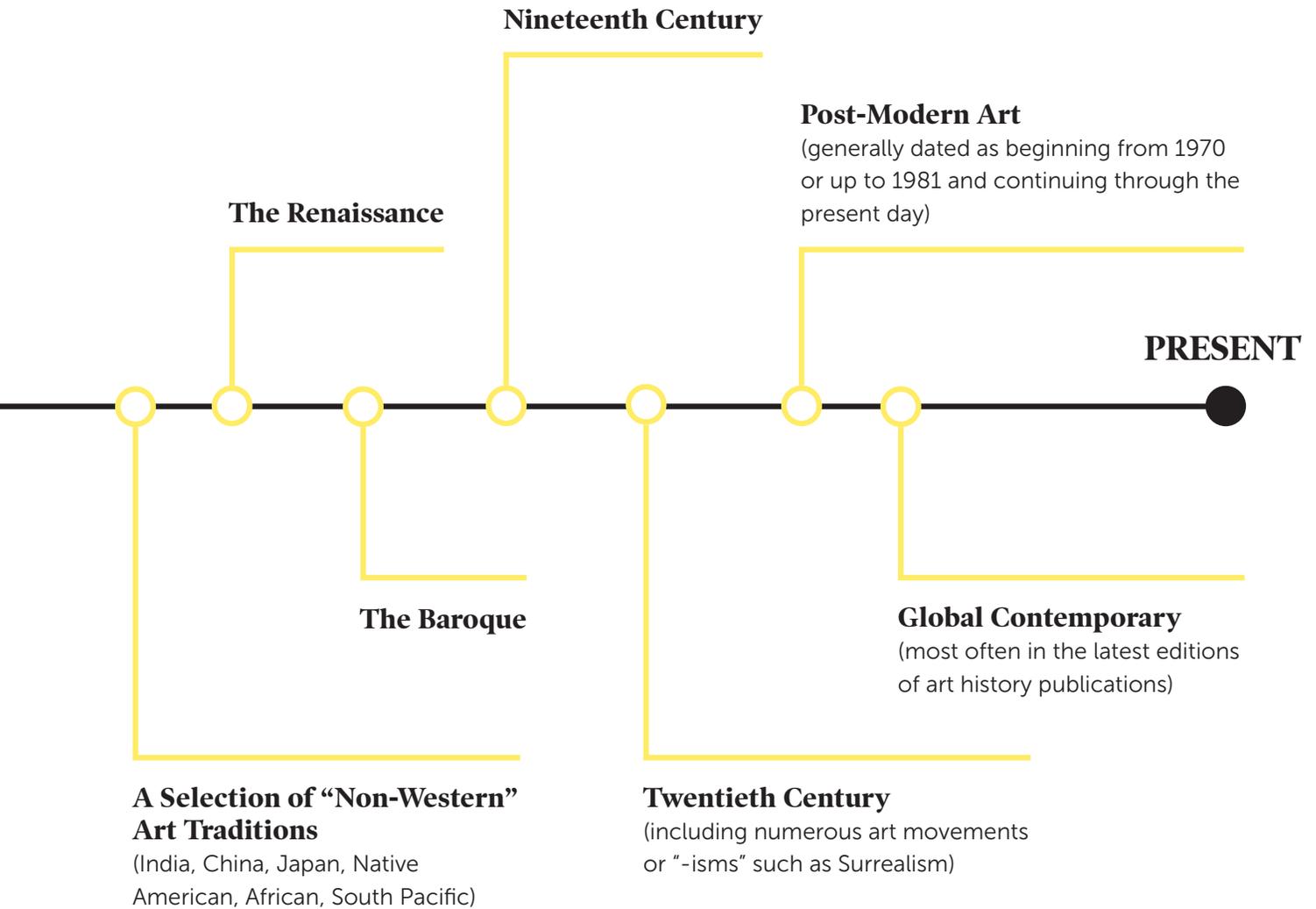
As you can see, many of the same artists—da Vinci, Picasso, Van Gogh—rise immediately to the top. Works by non-European, non-male artists are nowhere to be found in this initial burst of information.

Yes, this is perhaps the most superficial of ways to assess artist inclusion in readily available sources of information. But these days, our first attempt to find out more about a topic is simply to type key words into Google. We know that our students are already accustomed to doing that. So, let's look at what might prove to be a richer source of information on art history. Perhaps if we dig a bit deeper into art history books, we might find ways in which a wider range of art is included and valued.

Notes

The history of art as it's typically taught—and represented in art history books—goes something like this:





Already, we can see that by the time of the Middle Ages, most art history surveys do not name the cultural context of any European art, assuming that the reader will already know this. A few quotes to the right illustrate the way assumptions about the linear progression of, and European supremacy in, art history can be found in books on art history. The following show how even the earliest art featured is framed around the idea that the highest achievements in art are European, even if Europeans drew from the knowledge of other civilizations.

[Chapter Title] Strange Beginnings: Prehistoric and primitive peoples; Ancient America¹

Message: Peoples distant in culture and time from today's societies are "strange" and "primitive."

Considering Egyptian society's obsession with immortality, it's not surprising that Egyptian art remained unchanged for 3,000 years.²

Message: The cultural production of Egyptian society (on the continent of Africa) was unchanged for three millennia—it was the Greeks that followed who innovated in the cultural/artistic arena.

... the Greek masters went to school with the Egyptians, and we are all the pupils of the Greeks. Thus, the art of Egypt has a tremendous importance for us.³

Message: The value of Egyptian art to "us" (undefined) is that it provided inspiration and knowledge for the Greeks, and the Greeks are those to whom "we" (undefined) look for inspiration and knowledge.

Romans put their own spin on Greek art and philosophy. Having founded the greatest empire the world had ever known, they added managerial talents: organization and efficiency . . . Wherever their generals marched, they brought the civilizing influence of law and the practical benefits of roads, bridges, sewers, and aqueducts.⁴

Message: Rome was a "civilizing" influence on their empire, which extended from Europe to North Africa.

The Renaissance must have been an uncomfortable, though intensely exciting, time to live in. Yet these very tensions, it seems, called forth an outpouring of creative energy such as the world had never experienced. It is a fundamental paradox that the desire to return to the classics, based on a rejection of the Middle Ages, brought to the new era not the rebirth of antiquity but the birth of modern civilization.⁵

Message: The European Renaissance produced the greatest burst of human creativity in the history of the entire world. Renaissance artists only looked to classical civilizations (Greek and Roman) for inspiration. The Renaissance is solely responsible for modernity.

Modern art is the consequence of a successful and continuing revolution led by an avant garde of arts and critics who overthrew the tradition that began in the Renaissance and exhausted itself in the nineteenth century.⁶

Message: Modern art is a direct rejection of the Renaissance and its legacy; thus, modern art could not have existed without the Renaissance.

1 E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (New York: Phaidon Press, Inc., 1995), 39.

2 Carol Strickland, *The Annotated Mona Lisa: A Crash Course in Art History from Prehistoric to Post-Modern* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, LLC, 2007), 8.

3 E.H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art* (New York: Phaidon Press, Inc., 1995), 55.

4 Carol Strickland, *The Annotated Mona Lisa: A Crash Course in Art History from Prehistoric to Post-Modern* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, LLC, 2007), 16.

5 H.W. Janson and Anthony F. Janson, *History of Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995), 409.

6 Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 956.

7 Jacoba Urist, "Rewriting Art History," *The Atlantic*, February 1, 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/02/rewriting-art-history/435426/>.

What about museums? According to a recent study, “An analysis of more than 40,000 works of art detailed in 18 major museums’ online catalogues found that 85 percent of artists featured are white, and 87 percent are male . . . Overall, the researchers report that white men dominated the sample, making up a staggering 75.7 percent of the final data pool. Trailing behind were white women (10.8 percent), Asian men (7.5 percent), and Hispanic men (2.6 percent). All other groups represented in terms of both gender and ethnicity were recorded in proportions of less than one percent.”⁸ Consistently celebrating European art in museums has some serious implications. Curator Alexander Kauffman has argued that:

Because the centering of Europe is baked into the architecture of these institutions [museums], some may not see the connection to white supremacy today. But white supremacists do. Europe’s cultural prestige is their evidence for the racial superiority of white America.⁹

The above examples are by no means a full survey of how knowledge about black artists continues to be omitted in the conventional means by which most people find information about the history of art. But they do offer a glimpse into the way that knowledge can be obscured and distorted and, in some cases, needs interventions and course corrections to continue to build a fuller, more accurate picture.

So, let us revisit the first question, but with a twist. What are three recent artworks you’ve seen—in person or in an image—that you absolutely loved?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Now compare the two lists. It’s certainly not a problem if any of them overlap, but I would ask you to reflect on why you love the works in the second list. What do you love about the works? How did those works make you feel? What are the visual qualities you find most compelling?

Now think about why you felt the works in the first list were important. Where did you get that idea from? Do you remember the source(s) of the information? Had

you seen any of those artworks in person? Who do you imagine made the decision that those were important? What was their criteria?

Essentially, we’re looking at different value systems. Your personal preference and what you’ve learned—somewhere prior to encountering this resource—is “important” in art history. We should always be reflecting on our knowledge of art and art history with a critical eye.

⁸ Meilan Solly, “Survey Finds White Men Dominate Collections of Major Art Museums,” Smithsonian.com, March 21, 2019, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/survey-finds-majority-artists-represented-major-museums-are-white-men-180971771/>.
⁹ Alexander Kauffman, “Committing to Anti-Racism in Galleries of European Art,” Hyperallergic.com, December 25, 2018, <https://hyperallergic.com/476685/committing-to-anti-racism-in-galleries-of-european-art/>.



Visibility matters.

For several years at the BMA, audience members visiting the Museum around Valentine's Day have been given paper hearts and asked to place them on the floor near their favorite artwork (Hearts for Art). In 2015, the artwork that received the most votes was Auguste Rodin's *The Thinker*. Of the 10 top artworks, only one was by a black male artist and one was by a male Latinx artist. No female-identifying artists were included in the list. By 2019, the artwork that received the most votes was Kenyan-American Wangechi Mutu's *Water Woman*. Seven out of 10 of the top artworks were by artists of color (Kenyan-American, black American, and Chinese) and three were by female-identifying artists. By making available more works by a greater range of artists, the Museum was able to appeal to new audiences and offer returning audiences new works to see and appreciate. The presentation of Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Giuffrida's collection is a key example of dedicated collectors who, by sharing their collections with the public, offer fresh works for viewers to integrate into their knowledge of art and its history.

Wangechi Mutu (Kenyan-American, born 1972). *Water Woman* (Detail). 2017; this cast 2018. Bronze. 36 x 65 x 70 in (91.4 x 165.1 x 177.8 cm). The Baltimore Museum of Art: Purchase with exchange funds from the Pearlstone Family Fund and partial gift of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.; and additional funds from Fanny B. Thalheimer Memorial Fund, Katherine M. Hardiman, Frederick R. Weisman Contemporary Acquisitions Endowment, The Rothschild Foundation, and Dr. Max Stern Trust Fund, BMA 2017.148. © Wangechi Mutu, Courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels

Notes

A Note about Abstract Art

Abstract art can be difficult for many people. "What is it supposed to be?" "What am I looking at?" "Couldn't a child have made this artwork?" Often the questions that viewers have about abstract art reveal confusion and disdain. Even the general definition of the term "abstract" tends to have somewhat negative connotations:

Abstract

 adjective

ab·stract | \ab-'strakt, 'ab-strakt\

Definition of *abstract* (Entry 1 of 3)

- 1 **a** : disassociated from any specific instance
// an *abstract* entity
- b** : difficult to understand : ABSTRUSE
// *abstract* problems
- c** : insufficiently factual : FORMAL
// possessed only an *abstract* right
- 2 : expressing a quality apart from an object
// the word *poem* is concrete, *poetry* is *abstract*
- 3 **a** : dealing with a subject in its abstract aspects : THEORETICAL
// *abstract* science
- b** : IMPERSONAL, DETACHED
// the *abstract* compassion of a surgeon
– *Time*
- 4 **a** : having only intrinsic form with little or no attempt at pictorial representation or narrative content
// *abstract* painting



For the purposes of art, the Tate (located in Britain), offers a more helpful definition of the art term: "Abstract art is art that does not attempt to represent an accurate depiction of a visual reality but instead uses shapes, colours, forms and gestural marks to achieve its effect."¹⁰ Many artists choose to make abstract art in order to put aside familiar and received ideas to try and make something newer and truer.

Perhaps one of the reasons why abstract art can be so challenging is that humans love to categorize the things we perceive so that we can make accurate predictions about how to respond. Another may be that so many of the works considered masterpieces in the history of Western art are considered "realistic" even if,

upon closer examination, they are not actually realistic (should the *Mona Lisa* step out of her frame, she would hardly be mistaken for a person) but rather recognizable.

Abstract art opens up a myriad of opportunities if given the chance. It pushes us to look more deeply, make associations, and tap into and value our own emotional responses. As well, abstract art is always asking questions—and these questions are directly relevant to our lives today. As artist Mark Bradford has stated:

'Abstraction,' to me means that you're interrogating—it's interrogating. It's dismantling. It's moving things around a little bit.

Abstract. (n.d.) In Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abstract>
 11 "Art Term: Abstract Art," Tate UK, accessed September 19, 2019, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/abstract-art>.

Above: Installation view of Charles Gaines' *Numbers and Trees: Central Park Series I: Tree #9, Henry* (2016), on view in *Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art*.

Black Abstract Artists



Leonardo Drew (American, born 1961). Number 52S. 2015. Wood and paint. 96 x 96 x 14 in. (243.8 x 243.8 x 35.6 cm). The Joyner / Giuffrida Collection. © Leonardo Drew. Photo by John Berens

Black American artists have historically faced the challenge of racist, rigid external expectations. Consider the following assumptions.

Black American artists were not involved in the inception of modernist abstraction.

Black American artists should make art only about “blackness,” but the art will be less successful aesthetically, having focused on the social and political at the expense of the artistic.

These may not be surprising but are distressing all the same. Black Americans have been left out of common sources of information on art history. Dr. Kellie Jones, an art historian and professor at Columbia University, commented on her own experience as a black student of art history:

I do remember being struck by the fact that the only people of color in textbooks at that time—which was in the 1970s, but maybe it’s still pretty much the same—were very ancient. They were Egyptians, they were Mayans. They were not living people now. No Latinos, African-Americans, etc.¹¹

Black artists have also been judged according to how faithful they have been to notions about the essential “blackness” of their work. In discussing two exhibitions

of black artists’ works in the early 1970s—*Los Angeles 1972: A Panorama of Black Artists and Three Graphic Artists*—historian Bridget R. Cooks describes this phenomenon.

The critical reception of Three Graphic Artists and Panorama clarified the obstacles ahead for the even larger group exhibition of work by Black artists in the museum’s main exhibition galleries. Critics were looking for an essential Black difference in the work of Black artists. Art that did not depict this difference was perceived as unsuccessful. However, inclusion of figurative race-related social commentary or the visual assertion of pro-Black politics was to be ignored so that the work could be evaluated on its aesthetic merit.¹²

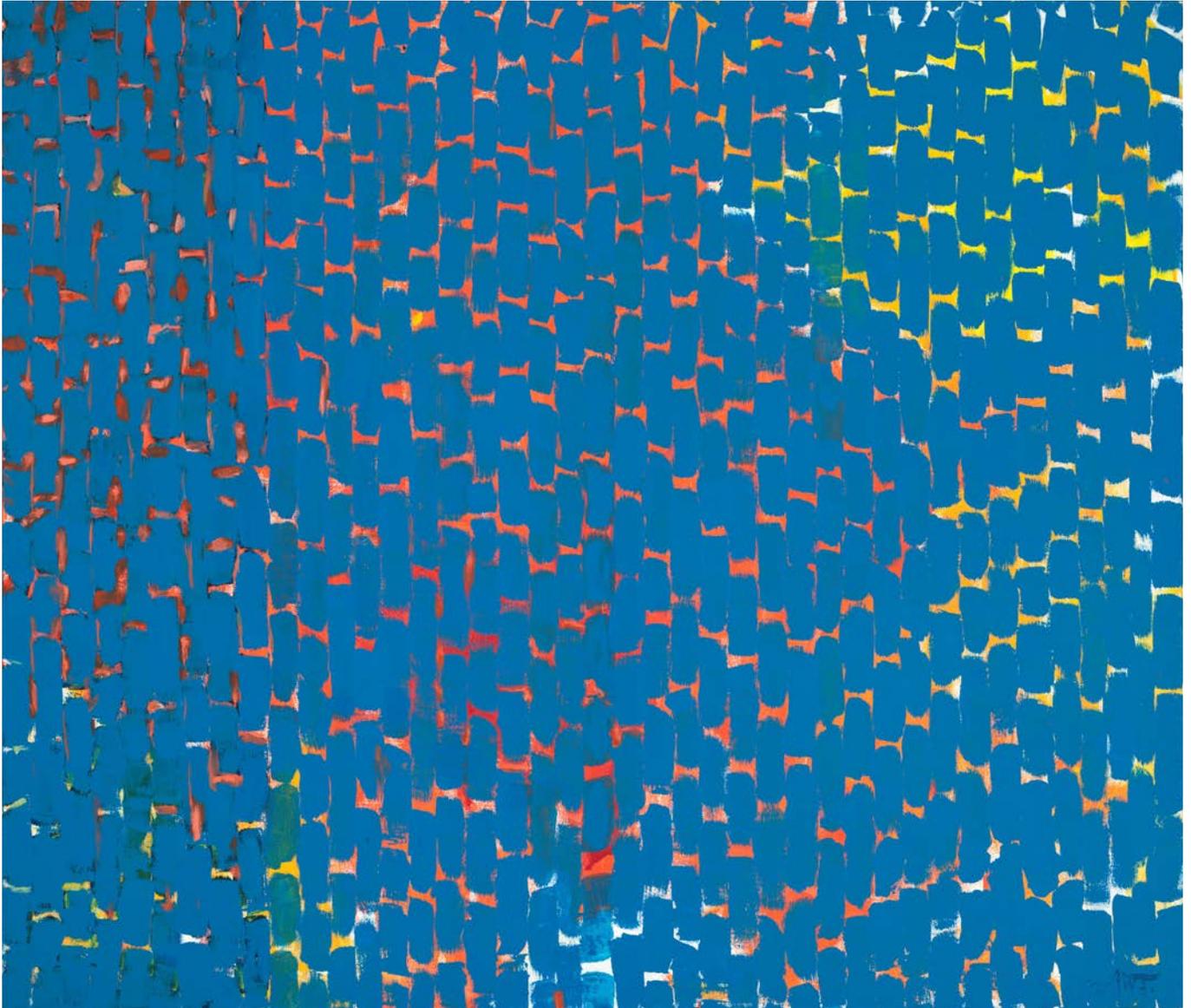
In *Generations*, we see corrections to the limiting assumptions about black American artists. These artists have been creating outstanding abstract art within the modernist tradition since its inception; they were simply excluded from the official history. In addition, they have expanded and enriched the concept of abstraction by introducing social and biographical elements to abstract works.

Notes

11 Priscilla Frank, “When Kellie Jones Wanted to Study Black Art History, The Field Didn’t Exist. So She Created It Herself.” *Huffingtonpost.com*, October 4, 2016, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kellie-jones-macarthur-curator-black-art-history_n_57e527e2e4b0e80b1ba172b8.

12 Bridget R. Cooks, *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), 98.

Four Artists



Alma Thomas (American, 1891-1978). *Evening Glow*. 1972. Acrylic on canvas. 35 3/16 x 41 in. (89.4 x 104.1 cm.) The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Ruth and Jacob Kainen, Chevy Chase, Maryland, BMA 1991.98. © Estate of Alma W. Thomas

Alma Thomas

1891–1978

About

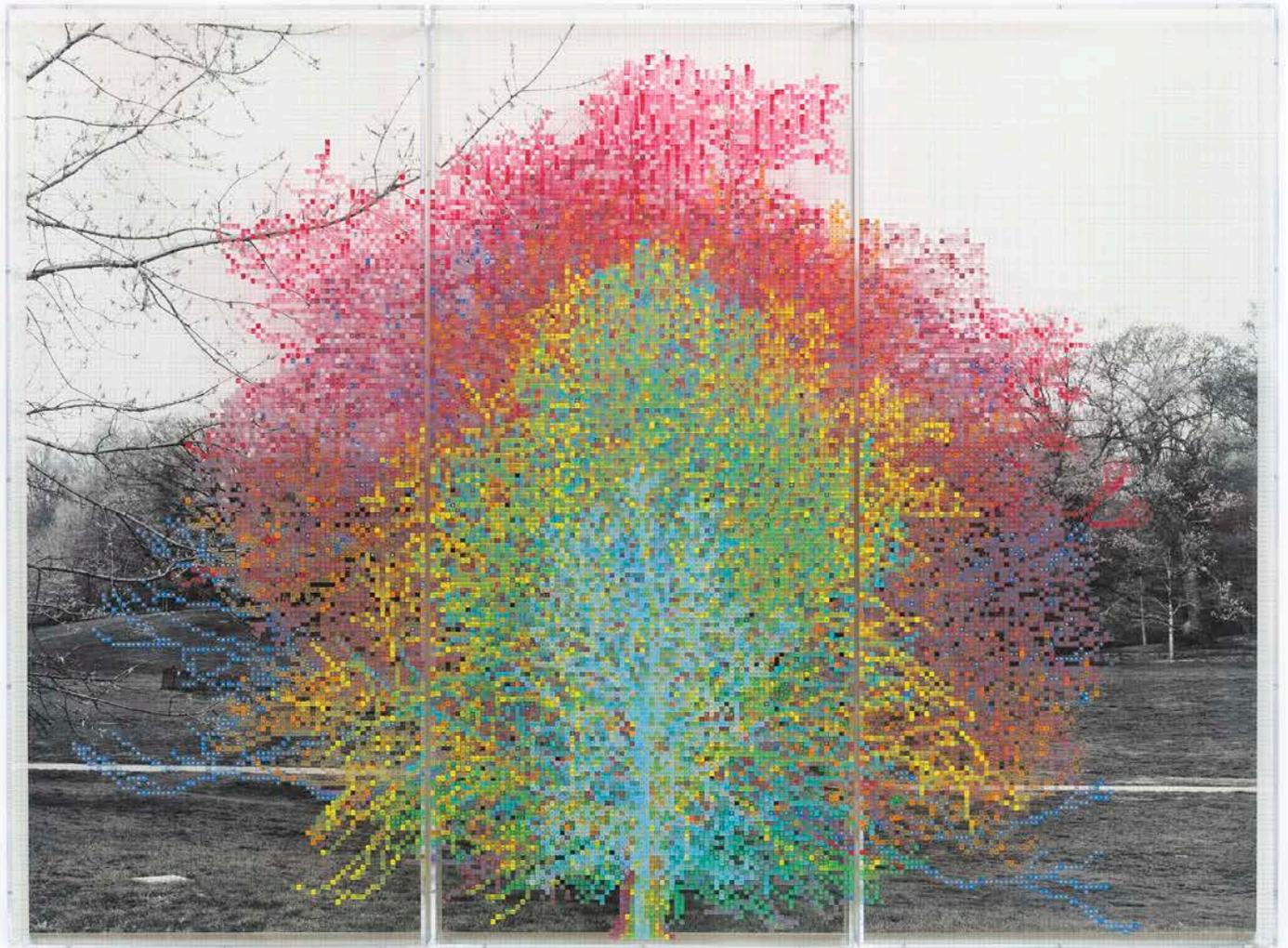
Blue tiles of paint strokes clustered in vertical lines cover this composition like a loosely woven fabric. Orange, yellow, and white hues appear between the gaps, giving the impression of the evening sun's warm, rich light.

Although Alma Thomas began her career making representational works, she later turned to abstract art that nevertheless referenced the natural world she cherished. She used color masterfully to capture powerful yet subtle aspects of the world around her. "I looked at the tree in the window, and that became my inspiration . . . every morning since then, the wind has given me new colors through the windowpanes."

Classroom Challenge

Ask students to view and discuss *Evening Glow*. Students will then create an abstract painting that draws inspiration from nature. What natural phenomena would they choose? Which elements from those phenomena would they focus on? What are they trying to express about nature through this work and the choices they've made?

Notes



Charles Gaines (American, born 1944). *Numbers and Trees: Central Park Series I: Tree #9, Henry*. 2016. Mounted inkjet prints and acrylic paint on printed Plexiglas. Each Panel: 96 x 42 in. (243.8 x 106.7 cm.) The Joyner / Giuffrida Collection. © Charles Gaines. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

Charles Gaines

b. 1944

About

An enormous tree of mostly light blue, green, and red occupy the foreground of what appears to be a black and white photograph of a park setting. The brilliance of the colors and the scale of the work feel immersive. However, upon closer inspection, the viewer detects a gridwork of numbers and tones, used as a kind of pixilation, to create a hybrid photographic/mathematical tree.

As a young artist, Charles Gaines was in New York during a time when gestural abstract painting was at its height. However, he felt disconnected from this approach and began to create grids based on mathematical equations. He has often mapped trees through grids, using numbers to indicate shape and color, and then combined those grids with outline drawings, acrylic paint, and photographs. He is deeply interested in how images are made and seen.

Classroom Challenge

Ask students to view and discuss *Central Park Series I: Tree #9*. Students will then select a pre-made or original black and white photograph with a dominant compositional element in it—similar to the tree in Gaines' work. They will then create a grid system for mapping color onto the key element. Ask them to reflect on the relationship between the image and the way they will create the grid system. How large are the squares? How much will the color vary from square to square? How are the squares sequenced? Are they stacked vertically or horizontally? Are they indicated by numbers, letters, or another sequencing system? Is the grid faithful to its logic? How does this approach differ from how students might have hand-colored a black and white photograph? What questions does it provoke?

Notes



Jennie C. Jones (American, born 1968). *Composition for Sharps #4*. 2010. Piano keys on treated linen. 20 x 16 in. (50.8 x 40.6 cm.) The Joyner / Giuffrida Collection. © Jennie C. Jones

Jennie C. Jones

b. 1960

About

Resembling a brief soundwave made physical, this dramatic piece uses the sharp keys from a piano and a support of treated linen to evoke sound not heard.

Jennie Jones uses musical technology—including headphones and acoustic panels—as well as music and sound samples to create experiences in paintings and installations with a modernist sensibility. Even as she extends modernism, the artist questions that framework and those who have been excluded from it. “Learning about avant garde music that was produced by African Americans, there was my precedent. So that was another reason why I started paying more attention to sound and music history and folding that in, because it was the precedent that I was sort of looking for, the permission if you will that I was looking for to pull in and feel comfortable with the aesthetic that was mine.”

Classroom Challenge

Ask students to view and discuss *Sharps #4*. Students will then select a piece of music from which they will choose a short phrase. Using found objects, students will create a material interpretation of that phrase. What were the qualities of the music? Which objects were chosen to create the material interpretation and why? How does the piece capture the music?

Notes



Kevin Beasley (American, born 1985). *Bronx Fitted*. 2015. New Era® Yankee fitted hats, bandanas, polyurethane resin, and television mount. 70 x 70 x 16 in. (177.8 x 177.8 x 40.6 cm.) The Joyner / Giuffrida Collection. © Courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York; photo by Jean Vong

Kevin Beasley

b. 1985

About

Like an enormous flower or bouquet, this work—bursting with color—does not immediately reveal its materials. In fact, the individual “flowers” are New York Yankees caps, the kind often worn by young men inspired by hip-hop culture. Each hat is carefully cut apart at the seams and covered with resin.

Kevin Beasley is deeply interested in everyday materials—how they carry meaning, and how to use them in unexpected ways. Exploring materials as disparate as personal ephemera, studio debris, and music samples, Beasley creates sculptural works that unfold history, memory, and human relationships to objects

Classroom Challenge

Ask students to view and discuss *Bronx Fitted*. Provide magazines (and/or ask students to bring some they no longer need) and have them cut out several pictures of fashion that they feel connects strongly to their identity. They will then examine the images closely and find ways to alter them (cutting, tearing, crumpling, etc.) so that they create something new—either representational or abstract. Students will then create a paper collage by gluing these pieces on to a piece of heavyweight paper. What qualities did they notice about the fashion items they selected? What was the process they used to determine what new image would come from the fashion? What did the final collage end up depicting?

Notes
