

A TIMELY CALL FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE

ROCKWELL, WILLIAMS & CLARK SHOWS CELEBRATE IDENTITY

Charles Lilly, *Malcolm X*, 1973, oil on canvas, 27" x 34", at the Norman Rockwell Museum.



COVER STORY

IMPRINTED: ILLUSTRATING RACE IN OUR LIFETIME: PAINTINGS FROM THE PANDEMIC BY KADIR NELSON THROUGH OCTOBER 30

NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM
9 GLENDALE ROAD (9 ROUTE 183)
STOCKBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

WORKING IN DESIRE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF BLACK FEMININE LABOR

SEARCHING FOR STICKY VOIDS THROUGH AUGUST 21

FRANTZ ZÉPHIRIN: SELECTED WORKS

THROUGH DECEMBER 4

WILLIAMS COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART

15 LAWRENCE HILL DRIVE
WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS

RODIN IN THE UNITED STATES: CONFRONTING THE MODERN

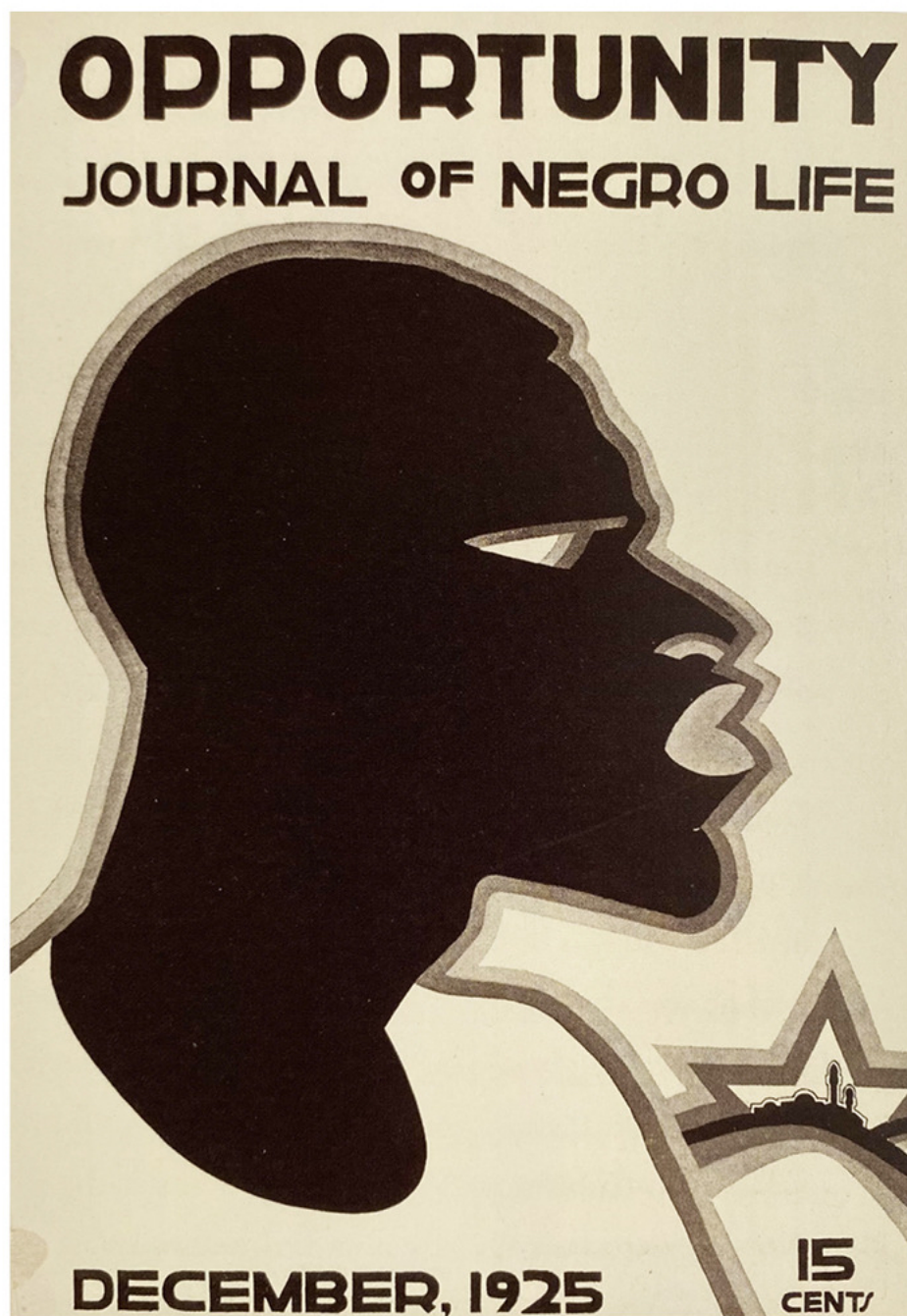
THE CLARK ART INSTITUTE
225 SOUTH STREET
WILLIAMSTOWN, MASSACHUSETTS

THROUGH SEPTEMBER 18



There has always been a strong thread connecting the arts and social justice. From satire via the political cartoon to the enigmatic works that expose the human condition, the tradition of awareness through visual means has always been a strong branch of art history. It is no surprise, then, in these extremely volatile times, that volumes of current exhibitions are focused on the experience of racial injustice in this country. Several Berkshire museums are a vortex of visual information this summer.

At the Norman Rockwell Museum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, there is a monumental and comprehensive exhibition entitled "Imprinted: Illustrating Race" co-curated by Robyn Phillips-Pendleton, Professor of Visual Communications



Aaron Douglas, *Untitled*, 1925, at Norman Rockwell Museum.

at the University of Delaware, whose extensive research motivated this collection, and Stephanie Haboush Plunkett, Deputy Director and Chief Curator at the Norman Rockwell Museum.

The exhibition traces illustration, art and design in its role in shaping attitudes and messages embedded in advertisements, periodicals and other means of communication from the Civil War to the present day; it also winds through the Harlem Renaissance and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Enormous in scope, the exhibition also reflects the research of the "Imprinted: Illustrating Race" Advisory Council, the work of several contemporary artists and lenders who have made it all possible.

Racial stereotypes are created from the building blocks of fear and greed. When early settlers were confronted with the plentiful tribes of Native Americans, they immediately set to describing the differences between the two races in numerous illustrations. For the most part, they are depicted as strong and courageous, or devious and murderous. This distortion of reality also applied to depictions of slaves, and later, freed



Emory Douglas, *Portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.*, 1993, print on paper, at Norman Rockwell Museum.

people. After the emancipation, free labor was no longer available, and the rights given to the Black population were short-lived. Minstrel shows reflected the ignorant ideals of the time, providing a platform to cater to white interests, as many were in fear of losing their "privileges." A lithograph from the Original Minstrel Show Posters (on loan from Leonard Davis, who has an extensive collection of artifacts from this time and beyond), shows a smiling man in blackface from "Hilson's Famous Minstrels": he is depicted as happy in his condition in life, with a big, beautiful moon shining behind him. The truth is stifled, blanketed and shoved under the rug, as people reject reality in place of self-soothing delusion.

In the early 20th century, the Jim Crow laws incited such violence in the South that Black people migrated north for better conditions. World War I's production demands provided many factory jobs, but when Black soldiers returned from Europe, they were not acknowledged, and there was competition for existing jobs. In spite of the emergence of Black artists and musicians such as Romare Bearden and Louis Armstrong, racism was



still rampant. However, Harlem became the epicenter of creativity and intellectual pursuits, which led to a plethora of Black illustrators and a change in identity. In the 1925 untitled illustration for "Opportunity" by Aaron Douglas, an Art Deco strong profile of a man is situated in front of a landscape with a star rising, symbolizing the emerging shift in Black experience.

Fast forward to 1939, Joseph Christian Leyendecker, illustrator for the "Saturday Evening Post," depicts stereotypes of the hard-working Black woman and the lackadaisical Black man in "Scrubbing the Floor." By the time Norman Rockwell had finished "The Problem We All Live With," depicting Black schoolgirl Ruby Bridges surrounded by police on her way to an all-white school, published in the "Saturday Evening Post" in 1964, racism was becoming more polarized: the Civil Rights Movement was gaining momentum.

Charles Lilly's "Malcolm X" illustrates the cover of "The Autobiography of Malcolm X (As Told to Alex Haley)" and is painted as to capture the activist looking forward out of the literal clouds and into the light. His stare is contemplative and determined. He is at once boiling over with destiny and sublimely introspective.

Emory Douglas was a Revolutionary Artist and Minister of

Joseph Christian Leyendecker, *Scrubbing the Floor*, 1938, oil on canvas, at Norman Rockwell Museum.



Rudy Gutierrez, *John Coltrane Spirit Flight*, 2012, acrylic on board, 40" x 60", at Norman Rockwell Museum.

Culture for the Black Panther Party. His "Portrait of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr." is done in a striking palette, Dr. King standing fast with beams of light emanating from his presence. The Black Panther Party and the Civil Rights Movement in general spawned some of the most influential Black Americans in our history. Contemporary generations of Black illustrators and artists have branched out into countless avenues of expression.

Alexander Bostic's painting, "Lando as a Boy," was done by invitation for George Lucas for "Star Wars: Visions," an exhibition and book by 100 artists inspired by "Star Wars." In this painting, Lando is standing over a futuristic vehicle, determining action to be taken. The color and light in the painting reveal an uncommon vision associated with the "Star Wars" series, Lando represented in a humorous fashion, yet infused with focus.

Rudy Gutierrez's "John Coltrane Spirit Flight" is from his book "Spirit Seeker: John Coltrane's Musical Journey" which defines and celebrates Coltrane's capturing of spirit in the form of his music's ever-changing form and motion. The painting combines ancient energetic mark making with the contemporary smooth use of contrast and color. The multi-faceted spiritual and ethereal revelations of the music are

carefully transmitted. One can hear the sound of color in Gutierrez' work.

Robyn Phillips-Pendleton, one of the curators of this exhibition is also an illustrator, and her "Homework for Breakfast" is a loving biography of her son when he was nine years old, struggling to get homework done. When a child's imagination runs away with him, he ends up staring at the homework at the breakfast table. "Classic" shows him victorious, engrossed in his reading.

"Imprinted: Illustrating Race" transmits the long road of struggle, giving proof to the narrative. History without documentation is only a story.

Also at the Norman Rockwell Museum is "In Our Lifetime: Paintings from the Pandemic" by Kadir Nelson. The artist beautifully depicts many facets of experience during the lockdown. Included is a magnificent piece examining the George Floyd tragedy, as well as "After the Storm," a painting of all Americans gazing together at the light after a deep time of fear and uncertainty. His painting style is lush; warm colors and contrasts are evident throughout. Nelson's painting "The Homecoming" shows a young couple reunited in a loving and beautiful embrace under the Brooklyn Bridge. This exhibition is a collective sigh of relief, of emerging from a time of planet-wide, universal loss of control.

A small but powerful exhibition, "Working in Desire: The Political Economy of Black Feminine Labor," is at the Williams College Museum of Art. Organized by Kailyn Gibson '22 as part of her Independent Art History thesis, "Working in Silence: Forbidden Desire and Desirable Work in Blake and Stothard," this exhibition is like a neutrino, dense with not suggestion, but

TOP LEFT: Alexander Bostic, *Lando as a Boy*, 2010, oil on board, at Norman Rockwell Museum.

BOTTOM: Kara Walker, *Cotton Tail*, 2003, watercolor, at Williams College Museum of Art.



acute observation. The curator focuses on what she refers to as "the laboring Black Venus icon," sexualized through their bodies in labor.

An untitled silver gelatin print by Clara E. Sipprell from 1930 depicts a beautiful young woman whose eyes reflect not only the experiences of her lifetime, but of an entire ancestral lineage. Within her gaze are triumphs and struggles, and the expectation of the miraculous. The miracle is herself, being reborn a thousand times in strength.

"Cotton Tail," a 2003 watercolor by Kara Walker (from "Negress Notes – Slavery Reparations Act"), shows a Black woman in the act of spirited communication with a distracted and unengaged rabbit. The rabbit acts as a personification of disinterest and entitlement. The woman, the fire of sexuality and emotion contrasts with the haughty and unresponsive rabbit, as it seeks to dehumanize her unsuccessfully.

"Burning Desire" by Willie Cole, a lithograph from 2010, depicts a blissful woman in a bed on fire. On one hand, she is enticing the viewer into the dangerous fire of her beckoning; however, one finds



oneself wondering if she is the victim of her own desire, whether the flames will engulf her in the end, or if she is the recipient of the transformative nature of the fire itself.

"Frantz Zéphirin: Selected Works" is another small exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art, full of exuberant paintings reflecting the spiritual traditions of Haitian life. The artist crosses the boundaries into the metaphysical, paintings rapt with human/animal manifestations of the psychological and mystical, forming a confluence of experience. We discover the origins of our own consciousness and discover traits of humanity's many incarnations, the animals within. Upon the welcoming and acceptance of our animalistic selves, we are able to observe the nature of being human.

"7th Dimension" is a convocation of every conceivable god and goddess from every tradition, waiting and welcoming. In this depiction of the six-pointed star, As Above So Below is rendered in detail; Mermaids, Hindu gods, Egyptian deities, Sea Horse People, Disco Dancers — EVERYONE is there. It is a huge celebration of Mind. In the 7th dimension, we cannot conceive of the nature of reality. Time comes together in one big celebration of being.

In "Offering to the Ocean Spirits (Agwé)," we are called upon to bring our possessions, kingdoms, nightclubs, restaurants, fine foods and drink to the Spirit of the Ocean. The deities look on. We can interpret them as approving or disapproving, but in the end, we must let it go into the ocean of consciousness.

Zéphirin brings us this deeply rooted mystical experience of joy in these paintings. They find their way into our collective consciousness in a subtle manner, leaving a trace and reflection of the inherent goodness in the human soul.

The college's Senior Student Seminar exhibition, "Searching for Sticky Voids," is also deserving of a mention. Much of the work is coming directly from the experience of a young person in this country's current climate, and laced with irony; it reads as a catalyst for a call to action.

In "The Death of Thanatos," Phillip J. Pyle depicts a group of cows standing in an ominous forest. The silver gelatin print is the perfect medium, creating a gothic black-and-white scenario, the cows seemingly in isolation, each staring ahead into a void. Jenn Lee's ink drawing "Bugs and Old Phones" is apocalyptic — old phones not serving any usefulness end up in an electronic graveyard,



Frantz Zéphirin, *Offering to the Ocean Spirits*, 2016, acrylic on canvas, at Williams College Museum of Art.

yet give no nourishment in their decay. Gina Al-Karablieh's compelling installation documenting checkpoints in the West Bank exposes the turmoil present in the logistical life of Palestinians as they go about their business. The artist successfully relays the struggles and frustrations of what should be the simplicity of the every day.

In "Cabinet of Curiosities," Javier Robelo searches for country and a tethered state of mind. In "Nowhere, Land of Nothing," linocuts mimic pre-Renaissance maps, complete with sea monsters. The artist approaches the installation with a sense of humor, carving a cell phone that doesn't work, distorted weaponry, and maps to nowhere.

Another very noteworthy exhibition in the Berkshires this summer is at The Clark Museum – "Rodin in the United States: Confronting the Modern." Antoinette Le Normand-Romain, Rodin scholar and guest curator, follows the introduction of the work of Rodin from its debut at the Metropolitan Museum in New York in 1893 to the present day. Collectors, who became friends and confidants of Rodin, acquired some of his early work and successfully suggested the acquisition of many of his works by leading institutions of art in this country.



The 1920s and '30s saw an enormous influx of Rodin's works and many acquisitions; however, as the rise of further abstraction in the form of expressionism exploded, Rodin's work, however expressive with abstract elements it was, was removed from the floor of the museums it occupied and placed in storage. It was Rodin, and the work of the Impressionists that gave rise and authenticity to the further abstraction that was a tremendous mile marker of the 1940s and '50s, however, by then, Rodin had fallen out of favor.

Irony is the fact that Rodin had emerged from formalist training to abandon realism, or rather utilize and distort it to allow the deep and emotional prism of human experience to come to the surface. One would not associate expressiveness with his mediums of marble and bronze, but it was through incompleteness that we are exposed to the contrast between the stark, rough qualities of raw materials and the rendering of the body and facial characteristics of Rodin's subjects. This contrast suggests an almost religious surrender of humanity becoming aware of him/herself in God's image out of the rough matter of the universe. "Hand of God", in its many incarnations, is a depiction of Adam and Eve emerging directly from God's hands. The fact that the base is unfinished suggests that even this Hand of God is emerging from the miasma of formlessness.

The delicate "Thought" is a portrait of sculptor Camille Claudel, who was also Rodin's assistant and romantic partner; but by the time the work was well underway, the pair had parted ways. Her face emerges from a base of pure, textural unworked marble. As Rodin employed many carvers to work on his pieces, he happened to visit this particular work in its unfinished state and asked that it remain so. The woman's being becomes trapped in time, where memory is accessible, yet remote.

"The Burghers of Calais" is one of Rodin's most well-known monuments, and this exhibition includes a close-up portrait of one of these six men, "Heroic Head of Pierre de Wissant." The bust is enormous, enlarged to convey the dense emotional landscape of the unfortunate experience of the subject. During the Hundred Years War, a dispute between France and England from 1337-1453, Philip VI of France had ordered Calais, a French port, to hold out at all costs. The people were facing starvation, and surrendered. Six leaders were ordered to appear in town for execution. In the face of Pierre de Wissant is both horror and resolve, as he faces his death. However, the six were ultimately spared at the request of the Queen.



Auguste Rodin (French, 1840-1917), *Thought*, original marble 1895. Marble, carved by Camille Raynaud, 1900-1901. Philadelphia Museum of Art. John G. Johnson Collection. At The Clark Institute.

The work of Rodin is akin to witnessing the pure elements of mythology as witnessed in Etruscan or early Greek art. There was still grittiness, an emerging, from that of a reacting, visceral being to one harnessing thought and reason. In "Rodin in the United States: Confronting the Modern," this reasoning is no longer at odds with spirituality, as Rodin's work accepts the depths of human emotion as an integral part of the whole.

In the exposing of social injustice and humanity's ultimate triumph in the Rockwell's "Imprinted: Illustrating Race" and the truth to the core of human emotion in "Rodin in the United States: Confronting the Modern" at the Clark, and the myriad of shows at the Williams College of Art, the spectrum of experience is readily available to us. Styles come and go, but all make an imprint on art's evolution. We live in a time where we can witness both contemporary and timeless works of art as equally relevant. These exhibitions are seeds of endless insight.