



Down Time

On the Art of Retreat

SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Down Time

On the Art of Retreat

SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Finding Down Time

by Leslie M. Wilson

William Sidney Mount
Farmers Nooning, 1836



A black man reclines on a low haystack sleeping in the hot sun while a child tickles his ear with a feather. Three white male figures occupy the immediate foreground in various forms of repose and quiet activity. The tools of their work are at hand, but these laborers are firmly in the world of a mid-day break in William Sidney Mount's *Farmers Nooning* (1836).

Yet, as Elizabeth Johns has persuasively interpreted Mount's famous nineteenth-century painting, the composition's allegorical dimensions suggest a far more charged significance for the black man's sleep and the child's prank.¹ Through an anti-abolitionist lens, Johns posits that the "ear tickling" child who wears a tam-o'-shanter represents those who sought to ill-advisedly stir up black people, to wake them up in 1830s America (as if they did not possess their own ample motivations). If that is the case, rousing the sleeping figure is akin to the act of consciousness raising. Outstretched in resplendent, indulgent sleep—open to accusations of laziness or the even more racially charged designation of "shiftlessness"—the dormant man has the potential to be all at once peaceful and dangerous.

I quietly meditated on Mount's painting as the students of "Exhibition in Practice I" shaped the concept behind this exhibition. It then found its way into class discussion through Cameron Robertson (AB '19), who suggested this as an artwork to consider for our exhibition *Down Time: On the Art of Retreat*. While it fell outside of the timeline that we later established for the show, it still came to the fore as we explored such questions as: How does resting mean different things depending on who

is doing it and who is representing it? How do we draw the line between rest and laziness, dormant and dangerous, waiting and loitering, retreat and running away?

Seeking to assail such dichotomies, the “down time” of the exhibition’s title operates on multiple levels—it aims to signify.² It speaks to key themes of rest and recovery, while invoking “down’s” use in black vernacular to mean cool and assert affinity, and pointing to how time itself can be racialized. It attends to a claim for black people to take time and space—to take *up* time and space—on their own terms.

* * *

In Spring 2019, I asked the 13 undergraduate and graduate students of the Department of Art History’s “Exhibition in Practice I” course to conceptualize, plan, and design an exhibition for the Smart Museum of Art. Forming a curatorial cohort, the students explored the Smart’s permanent collection, met with local collectors, and debated a wide range of ideas to put forward an exhibition. The diverse, ambitious, and provocative proposals included an examination of photography’s relationship to privacy, the many dimensions of Afro-futurism, materials of mourning, and exploring black art in many registers from literal to metaphorical. We discussed the ideas driving these proposals, the artists and artworks inspiring their thinking, the history of the Smart Museum, and how their exhibition could critically engage with those legacies. We found common ground on the theme of retreat at the heart of *Down Time*.

Down Time explores retreat as the idea of taking time and space away from everyday life and extreme events. Acknowledging that “down time” does not look the same for everyone, this project probes the conditions for rest and recovery with emphasis on black subjectivities, while asking all viewers to consider their own relationship to retreat. Students framed the questions of the exhibition as urgent locally and globally, and inflected their selection of artworks, approach to design and layout, interpretative direction, and selection of programming and publication with that impetus. Rather than divide the exhibition into distinct sections, the concept texts of “Here,” “Elsewhere,” and “Beyond” ground key ideas about retreat that evoke both time and space, while inviting visitors to consider the works across those porous categories.

The essays that follow examine how and why African American artists have sought out France as a refuge and beacon for creative development, the significance of craft as retreat, and the many lenses through which we can consider down time.

Each draws out the nuances of this exhibition and its capacity to help audiences reflect on the battles waged, risks taken, and persistent need for time and space to rest and regroup in our homes, in the outdoors, in our communities, and in our own bodies and minds.

The contributions of summer researchers and the students of “Exhibition in Practice II” bring additional voices to the project to ask questions about who has access to down time. Where can down time be found? Who is wanted and unwanted in what kinds of spaces? How are we all implicated in what down time has been and can be? And what new possibilities might we awaken after taking that time and space for ourselves?

¹ See: Elizabeth Johns, *American Genre Painting: The Politics of Everyday Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

² Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

Acknowledgements

This exhibition is the outcome of the thoughtful and enthusiastic collective and collaborative efforts of the students of Exhibition in Practice I and II, a course in the Department of Art History at the University of Chicago.

The students of spring 2019's "Exhibition in Practice I" brought ambitious and thoughtful ideas to every class, museum outing, and visit to collectors to create this project. Well after the course ended, they remained engaged with the exhibition's development continuing to push its ideas forward. They are: Aneesah Ettress, Clare Kemmerer, Caroline Longo, Nina Lubeck, Gabrielle Luu, Rachel Much, Veronica Myers, Aya Nimer, Samantha Perkins, Cameron Robertson, Roko Rumora, Renee Wah, and Amanda Wong.

During the summer of 2019, two Summer Undergraduate Research Associates, Jimin Kim and Zakir Jamal, supported the work of the exhibition, delving into research on artworks in the exhibition and beginning to do the vital work of transforming the ideas dreamed up in spring into reality. We are deeply grateful to Nichole Fazio and the College Center for Research and Fellowships for making these positions possible.

Summer interns at the Smart also contributed vital research about permanent collection objects in our exhibition, helped build our playlist over peach pie, and offered critical feedback about our project: Rafaela Brosnan, Aneesah Ettress, Carolyn Hammond, Emily Kang, and Andrea Tabora.

The students of fall 2019's "Exhibition in Practice II" are not inheriting a project, but continuing to make it, rethink it, and push it in new directions. They are doing the work of making a living project thrive. They are: Megan Carnrite, Daisy Coates, Jad Dahshan, Aneesah Ettress, Amelia Frank, Margaret Hart, Emily Kang, Jimin Kim, Alana Koscove, Alexandra Nickolaou, Ben Planer, Jake Planer, and Molly Sun.

We extend our boundless gratitude to the artists who have generously shared their insights and lent their work to this exhibition: Brandon Breaux, Naima Green, Patric McCoy, Mario Moore, Gabrielle Sanson, Ming Smith, Gerald Williams, Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa, and Derrick Woods-Morrow.

We are so grateful to the collectors who graciously welcomed us into their homes to see and talk about their collections: Patric McCoy, Ivan Moskowitz, Janis Kanter and Tom McCormick, Susan O'Connor-Davis and Alison Davis, and Laura Steward. Thank you for sharing so richly and openly what you love about art.

We appreciate the wonderful generosity that has brought incredible artwork from the collections of Suzan F. and Charles W. Anderson, III; Patricia Blanchet and Ed Bradley; Larry and Marilyn Fields; and Denise and Gary Gardner into the exhibition. We are immensely grateful.

We are the beneficiaries of the tremendous support and assistance of Dorian Bergen, Jodi Mikesell, and ACA Galleries; Danielle Damas and David Castillo Gallery; Danielle Cardoso Maia, Temple Shipley, Lucas Chauveheid, and galerie frank elbaz; Kavi Gupta, Chanelle Lacy, Rachel Gonzales, David Mitchell, and Kavi Gupta Gallery; Karen Jenkins-Johnson, Tess Schwab, and Jenkins Johnson Gallery; Christine Schefman and David Klein Gallery; and Ali Giniger, Ruth Phaneuf, and Jack Shainman Gallery. Thank you.

We heartily thank Colleen Keihm, Adam Schachner, and Alex Wieder at Latitude, Chris Milhausen at CMM Framing, Taylor Wallace, Jim Iska, and Chris O'Shea for helping us make key elements of this project. You helped us make smarter decisions and come away with the best outcomes.

As a thoroughly collaborative project, this exhibition benefitted from the collective assistance of Smart Museum staff members. Colleagues across departments worked with student curators to shepherd and execute ideas from nascent form to fruition. In particular, Rudy Bernal, Michael Christiano, Mary Cochran, Gail Ana Gomez, Eliot Hart-Nelson, Sara Hindmarch, Ray Klemchuk, Issa Lampe, C.J. Lind, and Dorian Nash have helped take this project across the finish line. We send a special thanks to our preparators Jeff Austin, Derek Ernster, Madeline Gallucci, Emma Kellman, Stephen Lieto, Kevin McGrath, and Teddy Smith who have drilled, lifted, and calibrated this show into existence. Miracles were worked, and we are so grateful.

Our sincerest thanks for the eyes and ears of Brandon Breaux and Lillien Waller for capturing the look and sound of this exhibition.

This publication is supported by funds from the College Center for Research and Fellowships and the Feitler Center for Academic Inquiry at the Smart Museum.

We are immensely privileged to be the sounding boards, conduits, and rudders for this project.

Leslie + Berit

Leslie M. Wilson, Curatorial Fellow for Diversity in the Arts

Berit Ness, Assistant Curator of Academic Initiatives

**In and Out of Doors:
Interpreting Spaces
of Black Leisure**
by Roko Rumora

Rosalind Fox Solomon
Mother and Daughter.
Brighton Beach, New York 1985,
2002



*“Almost anything short-lived
can be good.”* –Faith Ringgold¹

In Rosalind Fox Solomon’s *Mother and Daughter, Brighton Beach, New York, 1985* (2002), a black family lounges on the beach in the summer sun—in many ways, the epitome of restful retreat. A mother reclines across the beach towel, her skin approximating the polish of Greek bronzes. Like a sunflower, she turns her head towards the sun, allowing her cheek to graze that of her daughter. The young girl, by contrast, leans in toward the camera. Her alert yet bemused gaze penetrates: locking eyes with her, we become aware of the push and pull of our bodies and our own craning necks, straining to make out the photograph’s finer details.

The camera’s low angle positions us squarely alongside the two women. Situated on the same beach towel, we form a tight unit, separated from the bodies of other bathers by mounds of white-hot sand. The structured composition of Fox Solomon’s photograph suggests that we should not necessarily take it at face value, as her photographs often encourage precisely the opposite, pointing to the images’ historical contexts.

For black Americans, the urban beach has historically been a site of retreat as well as violence, even in the North. In 1919, Chicago’s deadliest race riot in history occurred when Eugene

Williams, a black youth, drifted onto the white side of 29th Street Beach, where he was stoned and drowned by white Chicagoans.² In later decades, beach privatization allowed unofficial segregation to continue with little obstruction in many coastal communities, even as civil rights activists fought to reclaim access to public beaches through “wade-ins” and other organized actions.³

Rasul A. Mowatt argues that leisure itself is a form of racecraft, articulating power, erecting places of demarcation, and, ultimately, reifying the racial order.⁴ Fox Solomon’s photograph can help us understand the practical implications of this theory. Despite the anonymity of the two women, the photograph’s terse title allows us to glean more information about their world and the role that leisure played in it. Although Brighton Beach was, and still is, one of New York City’s most popular public beaches, by 1985 the area’s residents were overwhelmingly white, middle-class immigrants from the Soviet Union, lending the neighborhood the nickname “Little Russia.” Even today, only about one percent of Brighton Beach residents are black. In all likelihood the mother and daughter in the photograph are among the thousands of outer borough New Yorkers who would travel to Brighton Beach for a day trip before taking the subway back home. Consequently, a day at the public beach also had a financial value, even if it was only the \$4 required for two 1985 subway tokens. For these black New Yorkers, then, retreat came at a literal cost.

With that in mind, the bliss emanating from *Mother and Daughter, Brighton Beach, New York, 1985* seems all the more deserved. Will it last forever? Certainly not. But at the moment captured in Fox Solomon’s photograph, this is beside the point. The short shadows indicate that the sun is almost at its peak. With hours of sunshine still ahead of them, this mother and daughter have likely only begun to unwind.

* * *

The public beach is not the only part of the urban landscape associated with retreat. Within large cities, for example, forested parklands have long been cherished as spaces of recreation and relaxation, where city dwellers can reconnect with the natural world. At the same time, the realities of racial segregation in American cities have made it so that black individuals are not often connected to these spaces in the public imagination.

Remedying this imbalance is at the heart of Naima Green’s project *Jewels from the Hinterland*. Since 2013, Green has photographed black and brown subjects isolated in lush green spaces, thus bringing to the fore the invaluable role that nature plays as



Naima Green
Shani, Garfield Park Conservatory, 2019

a locus of intimate and quiet leisure.⁵ In Green's subtle yet nuanced portraits, verdant leaves, branches, and flowers envelop her sitters. "From my experience," Green says, "people have a hard time with the quietude of blackness and this tension is what I'm exploring."⁶

Meditative relaxation is not the only form of retreat made possible by forests and parkland. For queer individuals—men in particular—such spaces have long been associated with a special kind of silent community. Parks became cruising grounds where one can find momentary reprieve from the incessant need to hide one's sexual orientation in public. Derrick Woods-Morrow's work celebrates this history by monumentalizing the spaces where men would meet for (typically anonymous) sex, from the groves of Fire Island to the thickets of Chicago's very own Jackson Park. In particular, Woods-Morrow explores the experience of black and brown individuals in these spaces: for all their liberatory potential, cruising grounds—also often segregated—are subject to the same racial inequality that marks urban spaces and are thus compounding the stress of living in a black queer body.



Derrick Woods-Morrow

Honey Racks

*(Untitled from the Bags series and
the Fire Island Archives, 2016),*

2018

Showcasing very different sites for queer retreat, Patric McCoy's photographs document spaces in Chicago where black gay men came to unwind and bond with one another. Such spaces, now vanishing at a rapid rate, used to be dotted throughout the city. The Rialto Tap, for example, was a gay bar tucked away between commercial buildings in the Loop. This space, like so many others, does not survive today, having fallen victim to the ceaseless commercial development of area. The Rialto's building, on the corner of Van Buren and State, was razed in the 1990s during the construction of the Harold Washington Library. Today, a depressing urban plaza and a rack of Divvy bikes occupy the spot.



Patric McCoy
Rialto in Drag, 1985

In McCoy's photographs from the Rialto's heyday, however, this history lives on. Elegant and attractive, the patrons of the Rialto appear fully at ease. Whether grinning at the camera or turning away from it, the photographs capture an intimacy not often associated with loud, downtown nightlife. In her essay "The Joy of Queer Parties," Jenna Wortham encapsulates the paradoxical intimacy of a crowded gay bar: "The party itself is a breath, an essential timeout from the hyper-vigilance and chaos of being black and brown queer bodies who exist beyond the scope of majoritarian and normative expectations."⁷ One should keep in mind, however, that a place like the Rialto allowed its patrons to briefly drop their guard by adopting anonymity and discretion as an informal code. The very existence of photographs taken inside such a space, therefore, is a testament to the delicate trust that permeated its community.

These histories of black retreat, various as they are, are united in *Down Time* with a shared timeliness. The year 2019 marks the 50th anniversary of the Stonewall uprising, as well as the 100th anniversary of the murder of Eugene Williams and the riots that followed the crime. The works of art exhibited in

Down Time: On the Art of Retreat



Patric McCoy
Dear Mama, 1985,
Youngblood, 1985, and
Alley Joint, 1985



Down Time are not making a singular claim about the supposed progress in the intervening period. They are, however, marking the wide range of emotional outlets black Americans have carved out within a system that never prioritized their right to rest and relaxation. Whether social or solitary, these excursions turned physical environments into temporary spaces of nurture, revealing nature and culture as two sides of the same coin.

¹ Quote taken from Ringgold's written narrative on the quilt of her artwork *On the Beach at St. Tropez* (1991).

² William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919*, Illini Books ed., *Blacks in the New World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996). For a recent, poetic exploration of these events, see Eve L. Ewing, *1919* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019).

³ Gilbert R. Mason and James Patterson Smith, *Beaches, Blood, and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle* (University Press of Mississippi, 2000), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt2tvfrh>.

⁴ Rasul A. Mowatt, "A People's History of Leisure Studies: Leisure, the Tool of Racecraft," *Leisure Sciences* 40, no. 7 (December 27, 2018): 663–74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2018.1534622>.

⁵ <http://www.naimagreen.com/jewels-from-the-hinterland-2013> present.

⁶ Naima Green, "These Are the Faces of Tranquility," *The New York Times*, June 15, 2019, sec. SR, p.6, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/15/opinion/photography-nature-green.html>.

⁷ Jenna Wortham, "The Joy of Queer Parties: 'We Breathe, We Dip, We Flex,'" *The New York Times*, June 26, 2019, sec. Style, p. 1, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/26/style/queer-party-safe-space.html>.

Faith Ringgold
On the Beach at St. Tropez, 1991



*“The French said I was beautiful,
Pierrot. They called me Mademoiselle
Précieuse. In America I would be just
another black bitch with a broom and a
house full of nappy headed kids.”*

—Willia Marie Simone from Faith Ringgold’s
*The French Collection*¹

The radically soft, tactile world of Faith Ringgold’s *The French Collection* quilt series pulls us into the narrative of Willia Marie Simone. A character imagined by Ringgold, Willia Marie is a young black dancer during the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, who moves to Paris at the age of 16 to pursue an artistic career. In *The French Collection* we follow her story as she traverses the French landscape, and, in so doing, we are privy to Ringgold’s own journey to France in the 1990s. Ringgold created the series after several trips to France where she studied the lives of African American expatriates and reflected on her own time in Paris as a young artist in the 1960s. The outcome of her research was the semi-autobiographical *The French Collection*: quilts focusing on the archetype of the African American artist in France. For Ringgold and others, France functions as a pilgrimage destination with and for African American artists.²

On the Beach at St. Tropez (1991) dreamily depicts a site of retreat. Here, Willia Marie reclines with her son, Pierrot, at the center of the quilt. Both black and white bodies, in various states of active and inactive relaxation, surround her. This work lacks any semblance of racial tension between the figures. Instead, the bodies converge harmoniously suggesting an imaginatively permissive context in the 1920s, allowing a diverse group of figures to peacefully coexist. This marks a stark difference with the African American experience of racial violence in their “home” country compared to finding more acceptance in France.

In the 1970s, James Baldwin observed that America is “better from a distance and you can make comparisons, from another place, from another country, which you can’t make from America because there is nothing to compare America to.”³ Many artists, from Josephine Baker to Baldwin, chose France because they were accepted and celebrated. African American artists in France found their social status to be privileged because of their cultural contributions, filling the esteemed role of the artist in French society, thereby supporting French values.

In *On the Beach at St. Tropez*, Willia Marie rests out in the open. She stands out as a beautiful figure at the center of the beach’s mélange of bodies. Strikingly, she is in the position to observe all of the beachgoers, but she solely focuses on her son, Pierrot. Under the umbrella, the two operate as if in a world of their own. Ringgold’s ability to make mythic comparisons between life in France and America shows us—in the character of Willia Marie—that a fuller expression of life could be envisioned for an African American artist in France, regardless if it was actualized.

Throughout her *French Collection* series, Ringgold continues to explore the semi-imagined world of Willia Marie in *The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles* (1996).⁴ The *Quilting Bee* shows ancestral connectivity and growth among eight notable black women in American history. The women gathered for the quilting bee are Madame C.J. Walker, Sojourner Truth, Ida B. Wells, Fannie Lou Hamer, Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Ella Baker, who are joined by Willia Marie. Standing in a verdant field, each woman grasps a piece of the sunflower quilt. Vincent Van Gogh lingers to the right of the quilt bearers, offering his iconic sunflowers, much to the groups disinterest. Here, African American women join together to form an unbroken line of courage “with enough energy to transform a nation piece by piece.”⁵ The quilt binds the women together, creating a constellation of figures rooted and connected to one another across time and space; suturing together their stories

and work. Although the relationship between the women in the quilting bee is mythical, Ringgold's *The French Collection* positions France as a place that can support African American creativity and foster their ability to live intellectual, romantic, and socially full lives. Even still, it is important to recognize that the series positions France as a promising site for such imaginings, if not a reality.

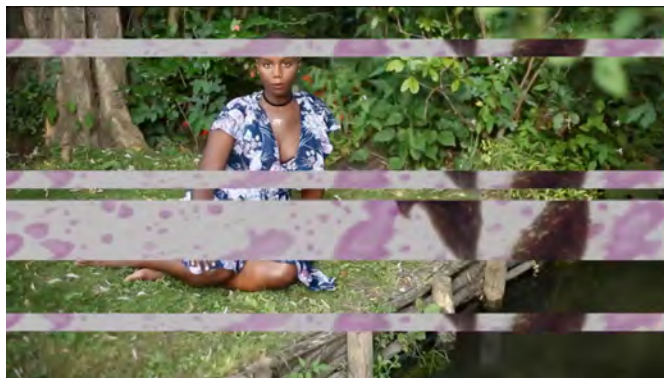


Faith Ringgold
*The Sunflower Quilting Bee
at Arles, 1996*

Yet, the economic realities for African American artists in France from the 1920s to the present remains complicated. Famed 1920s sculptor Nancy Elizabeth Prophet came to understand her creative time in Paris as “beauty conceived in paradise but found in the depths of hell.”⁶ “Hell,” in this case, refers to her dire financial circumstances, while “paradise” describes the inspiration she experienced and work she was able to produce while living there.⁷ While some African American artists received awards and patronage from wealthy benefactors in the States, others made use of work-travel opportunities. Photographer Ming Smith’s early travel to Paris in the 1970s for modeling work enabled her to seize the opportunity to photograph. Along the way, she connected with the likes Grace Jones and, later James Baldwin. Notably, she embarked on her first series of nude photographs after visiting the Rodin Museum in Paris.⁸

Despite the complexities of being a working African American artist, France continues to be a site of artistic production and is host to opportunities for African American artists through government and privately funded artist residencies. Ja’Tovia Gary’s recent video, *Giverny I (Négresse Impériale)* (2017), delves into the realm of the artists’ residency in one of France’s most iconic gardens. With the dulcet tones of the French classic “La Vie en Rose,” the Terra Summer Residency at Giverny is opened

up to us, and Gary fades in and out of space-time as she walks in Monet's garden. Cutting through Gary's body is footage of Fred Hampton articulating the necessity of education for urban black communities in order to dismantle systemic oppression. We are then interrupted and jolted by the pleas of Diamond Reynolds, the girlfriend of Philando Castile, who was murdered by Falcon Heights police on July 6, 2016. Using a collage-like approach, Gary's video meditates on the chasm felt between the opportunity to rest in Monet's gardens while others in the past and present battle for racial justice and equality, simultaneously experiencing the brutality of systems primed to treat black subjects as threats.⁹ Ja'Tovia's time at Giverny was particularly fraught and *Négresse Impériale* gives us a taste of retreat in France as bittersweet.



Ja'Tovia Gary
Giverny I (Négresse Impériale),
2017

The allure of France remains present in the consciousness of African American artists today. Note the resonances that Ringgold's *Dancing at the Louvre* (1991)—another work from the *French Collection* series—has with The Carters takeover of the Louvre for their music video “APESHIT.” Beyoncé, Jay-Z, and Kanye West continue to demonstrate their attachment and the cultural significance of Paris for Black people. Think to Jay-Z and Kanye's “Ni**as in Paris,” where Paris is positioned as a place of commercial wealth and artistic power that African Americans can access, or Beyoncé's song “Partition,” in which a Parisian journalist eagerly inquires, “Beyoncé, are you happy to be in Paris?” There is a distinct magic to the African American experience in France. It is a magic bound up in the long tradition of African American artists and intellectuals taking up residence, finding space to flee the violence of the United States, and discovering ways to reflect this retreat in their own work. But it is unsettling in that it remains rather exclusive to African Americans, with blacks from elsewhere around the globe finding France altogether less welcoming despite its egalitarian promises. France is then a rather exclusive retreat—a mythic promise with strong aesthetic appeal, a dream of sorts.

¹Faith Ringgold, *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts* (University of California Press, 1998), 138.

²Dewey F. Mosby, *Across continents and cultures: The Art and Life of Henry Ossawa Tanner* (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 1995), 7–8. At the age of 32 in 1891, Henry Ossawa Tanner moved to France. “He spent over half his life there and found an expansive and more accepting environment, free from the racial strife found in much of the United States. He wrote in 1908: “There is a breadth, a generosity, an obsolete cosmopolitanism about her recognition of the fine arts, which bars no nationality, no race, no school, or variation of artistic method. All she asks is that the art shall be true, in other words that it shall set forth life.”

³James Baldwin: *From Another Place*, directed by Sedat Pakay, New York: Hudson Film Works II, 1970.

⁴The Smart Museum of Art currently holds the 47th of the 100 lithographs that comprise this print run. Ringgold created the series in collaboration with the College Art Association to fund the CAA Professional Development Fellowship Program. Each print was sold for \$1500 and all proceeds went to fund the program, which focused on providing opportunities for underrepresented groups in the arts.

⁵Faith Ringgold. *Dancing at the Louvre: Faith Ringgold's French Collection and Other Story Quilts*. (University of California Press, 1998), 133.

⁶Tracy Denean Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop's Paris: African American Women in Paris Between the Two World Wars*. (State University of New York Press, 2015), 129.

⁷Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop's Paris: African American Women in Paris Between the Two World Wars*, 129.

⁸Ming Smith, interview by Leslie M. Wilson, Berit Ness, and Aneesah Ettress, July 31, 2019.

⁹Ja'Tovia Gary, “A Care Ethic” (Artist talk, AD&A Museum, UC Santa Barbara, July 26, 2018).

Material Retreats: Craft as Connection

by Clare Kemmerer



Nick Cave

Arm Peace, 2018

A blown-glass cup, a braided rag rug, a glazed clay jug. “Craft” often serves as a catchall term for objects that are both beautiful and useful. Craftspeople work intimately with material using ancient skills, both as artisans and domestic workers, to create pieces that both serve and decorate households. Contemporary artists reimagine craft as a utilization of traditional skills and materials for a broader purpose, foregrounding decoration, narrative, and concept over use. Craft traditionally encouraged private, intimate contact with material—a woman might sit tucked away from her family in a darkened corner, knitting needles clicking, or retire from the public eye to embroider. The products of craft were indicators of relationships: bread broken over hand-carved wooden tables, handkerchiefs passed between lovers, a mother’s hand guiding a daughter’s through her first needlework stitches. Conceptually driven crafted artworks broaden the invitation of relation: viewers are, through their

gaze, able to engage with the material and artist by proxy. The retreat once offered by craft—beauty to ease labor—blends into the creative process of the artist; the relationship facilitated by craft develops between visitor, artist and object. Selections from *Down Time: On the Art of Retreat* use crafted elements to memorialize and subvert the lives and work of domestic laborers and to invoke reflection on the role of material in constructing community, comfort, and memory.

From quilting bees to private stitch sessions, from providing winter warmth to personalized decor, quilting both decorated spaces of comfort and provided opportunities for intimacy and artistry amongst domestic craftspeople in the early American home. While quilts and blankets appear in all varieties, quilting was made particularly significant by black women, who, facing scarcities of material, made innovative and colorful patterns from fragments and off-cuts with the effect of brightening homes. Contemporary artist Xenobia Bailey describes the textile projects of early American Black women as having an “aesthetic of funk,”¹ demonstrative of the process of creating vibrant, functional patterned blankets from small scraps of cloth was a “rhythmic recycling” that empowered makers to create beauty from scant surroundings.

Faith Ringgold’s *On the Beach at St. Tropez* (1991), from *The French Collection* series of quilts, nods to this long tradition of American quilt making but foregrounds story over tactile comfort and figure over conventional pattern. The quilts are destined for “use” as art objects, seen and not touched, layers of paint obscuring the cloth. Ringgold’s quilting originates from traditional skills passed mother-to-daughter, but transcends the “pattern language” of the conventional American quilt—the squares, bear claws, and stars used by generations of quilters. The artist instead uses the paint-on-cloth technique of Buddhist thangara cloths, combining textile forms towards the craft of storytelling; her complex figural scenes nod to the early radical quilting work of artists including Harriet Powers. By “retreating” into narrative, the viewer is invited to step away from expectations of comfort associated with quilting and with the work of women. Ringgold’s clear presentation of her own voice subverts the communal and personal retreats offered by traditional quilting.

Nick Cave’s works invoke elements of craft and sculptural traditions—from tole flowerwork to bronze casting—to facilitate reflection on community, grief, and memory. His *Arm Peace* (2018), shows a sturdy bronze arm draped in blossoms, half bent and muscles clenched, bearing them forward in some

unknown parade. Presented as a funeral wreath, the flowers indicate that the arm belongs to a member of a mourning procession in movement; Cave sculpts the arm in response to deaths by gun violence in Chicago. The anonymous arm acts as a monument for both the numerous dead and the many mourners. The stark contrast between the delicate blossoms and powerful arm speaks to the contradictions of mourning: the spring-like newness and terrible, unending weight, the deep sorrow and the shocking moments of joy found while recounting the life of the deceased.

The material of *Arm Peace* invites the viewer to reflect on grief while offering an example of the spaces of community built in the wake of tragedy. In American tradition, female relations of the deceased often weave funeral wreaths from fresh flowers. Responding to pervasive gun violence, wreaths have moved from traditional funerals and processions and onto such pop-up memorials as ghost bikes, teddy-bear collections, and framed photographs on street corners. The simultaneous colorful delicacy and metallic heft of Cave's sculpture perhaps refer to the complex grief exemplified in the jazz funerals of New Orleans, where caskets are followed to burial by waves of blossom-bedecked mourners, brass musicians, and passers-by. The space of the weaving, the bearing of the bouquets, and the continued space of the memorial offers retreat to the wounded community with material. Here, flowers offer a sign and permission of where and when to grieve.

Material aids memory and invokes nostalgia, but many crafted works are shrouded in anonymity. Simone Leigh's sculptural works use craft traditions to explore and question the relation between craft, home, and black womanhood. Working in fiber weaving, wood, and homespun ceramics, she creates domestic vessels—including round houses and face jugs—that incorporate female bodies. In *No Face (House)* (2017), the head of a woman, anonymously sculpted—and with no discernable face—blends with the form of a round house, an architectural form made of woven grasses with variations throughout Africa, such as the boukarou in Cameroon and Chad. The female figure dominates the house, but she is also bound to it in her being, inseparable from her own domestic space. The material of her body is unified with the materials of the home she provides for and presides over; retreat is available to her only in the space and material of the home. The retreating void where her face should be—a seemingly endless cavern of textured porcelain—hints at her interiority, fragments of clay glinting in the depth of the cavity. Her body blends seamlessly with the substance of the walls, the structure of the building; the material of the home providing both power and shelter.



Simone Leigh
No Face (House), 2017

The techniques Leigh uses show a deep loyalty to material and traditional craft, centering the textural qualities of salt-glazed clay and dried grasses. Her practice of craft invites viewers to see material critically, to imagine the tactility of woven and fired surfaces, to observe the presence of matter first and figure second. Absent of facial features, the woman of *No Face (House)* is both unidentifiable and undeniably present: she is both home and figure, but the home cannot be entered nor can the woman be separated from the home. In Leigh's work, the facelessness of figures forces the eye onto material surfaces and away from the blankness where features should be. In directing the gaze onto the material itself, Leigh draws attention to the history of craft and underscores the anonymity of many craftswomen. The sculpture's ostensible face, made of dark porcelain and obscured by a shell wreath, presents material and craft ahead of individual identity.

In art—especially in museums—“use” is typically limited to the object’s ability to be subject to the gaze; tactile engagement is not encouraged. Social uses, too, are limited. Cave’s flower wreaths represent a mourning style, but are not themselves a product of the unique coming together, the weeping and weaving that regularly bears these pieces out into the world. Ringgold’s quilts are the product of relationship—mother-to-daughter teaching—but the comfort they offer is found in the magic of narrative and in the fierce joy of visual beauty, not in their ability to cradle and to warm. Leigh intentionally forbids the “life” of her objects, both the narrative life of her women figures and the utility of her roundhouses, jugs and vessels. The respite provided to the artist by their crafting process is obscured in gallery, but spaces of retreat are found for viewers through visual pleasure, moments of memory, unusual invocations of material, and the offering of the gallery as a space of community and connection.

¹ “#WOMENARTISTS: XENOBIA BAILEY,” Alabama Chanin Journal, Feb. 16, 2018, <https://journal.alabamachanin.com/2018/02/womenartists-xenobia-bailey/>.

Images in Order of Appearance

1. William Sidney Mount
American, 1807–1868
Farmers Nooning, 1836
Oil on canvas
20 1/5 x 24 1/2 in. (51.3 x 62.2 cm)
The Long Island Museum of American Art,
History & Carriages
Gift of Frederick Sturges, Jr., 1954
2. Rosalind Fox Solomon
American, born 1930
Mother and Daughter. Brighton Beach,
New York, 1985
From the portfolio, *Women: Matter and Spirit*, 2002
Gelatin silver print
17 1/4 x 17 5/8 in. (43.8 x 44.8 cm)
Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago
Gift of Alan and Lois Fern
2006.117g
© Rosalind Fox Solomon
3. Naima Green
American, born 1990
Shani, Garfield Park Conservatory, 2019
From the series, *Jewels from the Hinterland*
Archival inkjet print
24 x 20 in. (60.9 x 50.8 cm)
Courtesy of the artist
4. Derrick Woods-Morrow
American, born 1990
Honey Racks (Untitled from the Bags series and the
Fire Island Archives, 2016), 2018
Archival pigment print
40 x 30 in. (101.6 x 72.6 cm)
Courtesy of the artist

5. Patric McCoy
American, born 1946
Rialto in Drag, 1985, printed 2019
Digital print from original negative
8 x 12 in. (20.3 x 30.5 cm)
Courtesy of Patric McCoy

6. Patric McCoy
American, born 1946
Youngblood, 1985, printed 2016
Digital print from original negative
12 x 8 in. (20.3 x 30.5 cm)
Courtesy of Patric McCoy

7. Patric McCoy
American, born 1946
Alley Joint, 1985, printed 2019
Digital print from original negative
12 x 8 in. (20.3 x 30.5 cm)
Courtesy of Patric McCoy

8. Patric McCoy
American, born 1946
Dear Mama, 1985, printed 2019
Digital print from original negative
8 x 12 in. (20.3 x 30.5 cm)
Courtesy of Patric McCoy

9. Faith Ringgold
American, born 1930
On the Beach at St. Tropez, 1991
From the series, *The French Collection*
Acrylic on canvas, printed, and tie-dyed fabric
74 x 92 in. (188.9 x 233.7 cm)
Collection of Patricia Blanchet and Ed Bradley
© 2019 Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York
Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York

10. Ja'Tovia Gary
American, born 1984
Giverny I (Négresse Impériale), 2017
Video, 06:18
Courtesy of the artist and galerie frank elbaz
11. Faith Ringgold
American, born 1930
The Sunflower Quilting Bee at Arles, 1996
Color lithograph
22 1/4 x 30 in. (56.5 x 76.2 cm)
Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago
Purchase, Unrestricted Acquisitions Fund
1996.55
© 2019 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society
(ARS), New York
Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York
12. Nick Cave
American, born 1959
Arm Peace, 2018
Cast bronze and vintage tole flowers
58 1/2 x 21 5/8 x 13 1/2 in. (148.6 x 54.9 x 34.3 cm)
© Nick Cave. Courtesy of the artist and
Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
13. Simone Leigh
American, born 1968
No Face (House), 2017
Terracotta, porcelain, ink, and raffia
24 x 22 x 22 in. (60.9 x 55.9 cm)
Collection of Marilyn and Larry Fields
© Simone Leigh; Courtesy of the artist and
Luhring Augustine, New York.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition *Down Time: On the Art of Retreat*, organized by the Smart Museum of Art, the University of Chicago, presented October 25–December 15, 2019.

Support for this exhibition has been provided by the Smart Museum's Feitler Center for Academic Inquiry, the College Center for Research and Fellowships at the University of Chicago, and the Museum's SmartPartners.

SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Smart Museum of Art
5550 S. Greenwood Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
smartmuseum.uchicago.edu

Editors: Leslie Wilson and Lillien Waller
Graphic Design: Brandon Breaux
Exhibition and Publication Coordinator: Gail Ana Gomez
Printed by Lowitz & Sons, Chicago, IL



*Down
Time*
On the Art of Retreat