FOREWORD

By Leslie King-Hammond

Rising like the mythic phoenix from the dusty ashes of the Middle Passage, the African American artist finally emerges from the peripheral edge of oblivion. American art history has been all but deaf, dumb, and blind to what Toni Morrison in Playing in the Dark (1992) describes as ‘American Africanism’, which she identifies as “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings and misreading that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people.” Art historical literature suffers from gross voids in the contextualization and documentation of black artists as well as their relationship to, and contributions within, the larger construct of an American identity, culture and, in particular, aesthetic sensibility.

The legacy of American Africanism is more openly recognized in music, dance, theatre, and the literary voice. Defining a visual aesthetic has been a more difficult process for the artist, historian, and critic, complicated by geographic and regional biases. The exhibition YET STILL WE RISE: African American Art in Cleveland, 1920-1970 challenges these biases and establishes the presence of Cleveland’s creative African American community as an important factor in the development of regional American artistic traditions of the twentieth century. This unique blossoming of art occurs in a period of traumatic change and demographic shifts in the lives of African American people.

The subject matter, prolific production, and technical excellence of the works under discussion shatter the populist assumptions that if there were any artistic centers of black visual creativity, they were insignificant rather than crucial to the development of a midwestern American character or aesthetic ideal. Cleveland is in fact another important center in the growing legion of black communities who helped to create a continued regional legacy by expressively documenting and representing the American Africanist experience.

During the mid-1800s, approximately two hundred miles south of Cleveland, the city of Cincinnati, Ohio had become the “gateway to the West.” Through the pioneering images and activities of James Prestly Ball, the first recognized black photographer, and the highly revered landscapist Robert S. Duncanson, these two artists formed a partnership which inspired not only the black community, but the entire city and region of Cincinnati. In the northeast New England corridor, Boston’s African American community was distinguished by the award-winning works of landscape artist Edward M. Bannister and sculptress Edmonia Lewis. The cultural energy of Philadelphia is affirmed by the diligent research found in W. E. B. Du Bois’ The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study (1899) and the more recent efforts of Steven L. Jones on African American material culture in the International Review of African American Art (Vol. 12, No. 2, 1995). These texts identify the active presence of over seven hundred black artists and artisans in the nineteenth century. Some of the more notable individuals from that period include silhouette maker Moses Williams, painters Sarah Mapps Douglas, Robert Douglas Sr., David Bustill Bowser, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and sculptress Meta Warrick Fuller.

Again, contrary to popular beliefs held by a racially blind-sided society, these artists’ extraordinary endeavors gave clear evidence of an intensely productive artistic energy that was well known throughout all of these black communities in America. These centers were distinguished by self-educated individuals who had a strong sense of self-esteem, self-determination, and a collective commitment to uplift the race through anti-slavery and abolitionist activities. Art proved to be a viable mechanism to address the issues of black survival in a society resistant to the presence and participation of black people within the democratic ideals of the American Constitution and Bill of Rights.

In 1943, art historian and artist James A. Porter published his seminal study Modern Negro Art which made some of the earliest profound observations about the potential development of – and future challenges for – the African American artist. The impact of the Depression of the 1930s gave rise to the Federal Art Project under Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal administration. This was a boon for the artist of African American descent by providing conditions for full employment as an artist and the uninhibited opportunity to experiment with new materials, technologies, equipment, and stylistic genres. New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Atlanta, and Cleveland became centers of intense production.

Porter believed that Karamu House, founded in Cleveland in 1915 by Russell and Rowena Jelliffe, exempli-
1. ELMER W. BROWN. *Dorie Miller Manning the Gun at Pearl Harbor* (1942).
Oil, 34 1/2 x 46”. Cleveland Artists Foundation; Gift of the Elmer W. Brown Estate.
When the Cleveland Artists Foundation decided two years ago to begin a project focusing on the African American art of this region, we knew it would be an groundbreaking project, but little did we know how exciting and exhilarating it would be to discover these artists and their work.

Some of the artists whose work is featured in the exhibition and publication are very well known, others are not. In some cases very little of an artist’s life and work has been revealed by research, thus one of the important goals of this project is to uncover information about these and other artists and their work. To learn about these artists, their lives and the obstacles they have overcome has been an honor and an inspiration.

After this exhibit has been shown in the three venues scheduled, Cleveland’s African American art will take its place in the historical and cultural history of this area. Much of this art reflects Cleveland’s history and some subject matter is personal; all of it records events, persons, and emotions that are part of our collective experience. In this year of Cleveland’s Bicentennial, it is important to recognize the contributions of all our citizens and to leave a record of those accomplishments for the future.

The Cleveland Artists Foundation recognizes the support and help of the Board of Trustees, the efforts of the Curatorial and Advisory Committees, the project director, Zita Rahn, and the financial and volunteer backing of so many individuals, organizations and foundations.

The Cleveland Artists Foundation brings you this exhibition and book within the context of our mission: to preserve, research and present the artistic legacy of this region. It is our hope that it will help uncover new information about the artists featured in the exhibit and bring to the public’s attention those about whom we have no knowledge.

NINA FREEDLANDER GIBANS
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