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CHECKLIST

Jacob Lawrence, American, 1917–2000
Flight II, 1967, opaque watercolor and tempera
over graphite on wove paper
Bequest of Jay R. Wolf, Class of 1951; W.976.204

Glenn Ligon, American, born 1960
White #1, 1995, etching and aquatint on wove paper
Purchased through the Phyllis and Bertram Geller 1937 Memorial Fund;
PR.996.6

Faith Ringgold, American, born 1930
United States of Attica, 1971–72, offset poster
Gift of the artist and ACA Galleries, New York; 2012.23

Kara Walker, American, born 1969
Freedom: A Fable: A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times, Peter Norton Family Christmas Project 1997, 1997, cut from paper
and mounted on a contrasting background
Gift of the Director of the Hood Museum of Art; MIS.997.53

Fred Wilson, American, born 1954
Arise!, 2004, spitbite aquatint with direct gravure
Purchased through the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation Fund;
PR.2004.26

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Fred Wilson, *Arise!*, 2004, spitbite aquatint with direct gravure.
Purchased through the Sondra and Charles Gilman Jr. Foundation Fund; PR.2004.26

TEXT AS IMAGE/IMAGE AS TEXT

Narratives of African American History and Identity



Faith Ringgold, *United States of Attica*, 1971-72, offset poster. Gift of the artist and ACA Galleries, New York; 2012.23

The written narrative is the most valued form of knowledge production throughout modern Western history. Scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. has even argued that the entire Western sense of self since the Enlightenment has rested upon written records (Henderson, 67). This has significant implications for, among others, African American slaves, who were systematically denied participation in written discourse. Hegemony applies here: the term describes power that is so pervasive and naturalized that it functions almost invisibly, and the written text has been the hegemonic form of historical and cultural knowledge production, including the onetime mainstream perpetuation of the racial hierarchy. It is not only a question of who has written history, but more importantly, who *can*? And *how*? With this background as a rich framework for critique, text as image has in turn become a powerful tool for artists interested in illuminating the dominant ways of manufacturing narratives and claiming knowledge.

In *Flight II*, one in a series of illustrations for the children's book *Harriet and the Promised Land*, Jacob Lawrence intervenes in dominant modes of historical narrative. This scene depicts Harriet Tubman, hidden by flapping chickens, leading two children through the town of one of her former masters. Lawrence's mission was always to translate African American history, as mediated through stories from his Harlem neighborhood, into a visual narrative. This community-oriented history, assembled as a collection of illustrations, challenges individually authored accounts of linear narratives. In *Flight II*, Lawrence also evokes African American folk traditions in which the past is incorporated into the living present. Simply by choosing Tubman as the subject for his 1968 book, Lawrence relates her nineteenth-century struggle to the fight for civil rights in the 1960s. Additionally, his inclusion of children allows his young contemporary readers to imagine themselves in that past. Because Lawrence's images are not mimetic of but complementary to his text, they successfully imply that the imaginative filling of gaps in language is central to a recuperation of African American history.

Faith Ringgold opened her 1995 autobiography *We Flew over the Bridge* by proclaiming, "I have always wanted to tell my story, or, more to the point, my side of the story" (*American People, Black Light*, 7). Ringgold's 1971 poster *The United States of Attica* demonstrates how her activism always informed her artistic production. In it, Ringgold appropriates familiar tools to construct an alternative national history, such as an American map that also evokes a flag with the black nationalist color scheme. She undermines any residual patriotic symbolism, however, by leveraging this tool as a critique of the American history of violence, locating and dating episodes of war, riots, and racial violence throughout the map. She also gestures toward the ultimately communal nature of both history and identity by inviting viewers to add their own knowledge of American violence to Ringgold's initial effort.

The other three artists represented in this exhibition are set apart by their highly self-conscious engagements with text itself. In much of his art, Glenn Ligon uses excerpts from prominent African American writers to give visual form to ideas about African American identity. Through quotation, Ligon reflects on those resonances of the past in the present that extend beyond the original speaker, and on the representation of self in relation to constructed identities, cultures, and histories (Ligon, 7). In *White #1*, the fragmented text particularly frustrates our desire to glean clarity and meaning from language and, in this case, an authentic representation of black identity.

In her pop-up book *Freedom: A Fable*, Kara Walker uses an arsenal of visual language tropes that evoke nineteenth-century representations of blackness, including cut-out silhouettes of plantations, ocean waters, and hoop skirts, in order to tell the story of an emancipated female slave's attempt to journey to Liberia, during which she is tragically (and ironically) killed by other freed slaves. Walker intensifies to an absurd degree the imagery of racialized and sexual violence that populates the textual silences of antebellum history. While seducing the viewer with her beautiful forms, Walker, like Ligon, insists on pointing back to viewers and their assumptions and desires rather than offering absolution or resolution in terms of the events in question. Unlike the generally coherent, linear narratives of other storybooks, *Freedom: A Fable*

presents readers with fragmented characters who act unpredictably and anecdotal episodes that confound our hopes for narrative logic and legible dichotomies indicating good and evil, guilty and innocent, and black and white. In her stories, Walker notes, "Both masters and slaves cannot be viewed through a moral lens, as it is precisely the impossibility of escaping an immoral and corrupt system that leaves no room for benevolence from either side" (Walker, 365).

Fred Wilson also gives form and voice to the Other. In *Arise!*, several spots of black ink are paired with speech bubbles that contain lines by black characters from canonical white literature. The spots in *Arise!* evoke the "one-drop rule," which ascribed black identity to anyone with "one drop of black blood." With this provocative starting point, Wilson goes on to introduce various, often divergent voices into the work's conversation, insisting on the virtues of dialogic expression rather than whole, totalizing narratives. In this way, he demonstrates that "no cultural object stands alone, outside of the social and ideological context of other objects, texts, social forces, and institutions . . . Dialogic expression refuses to accept the arrogant assumption that there is one language, one image, one isolated story through which the absolute truth can be articulated" (Berger, 12). By frustrating viewers' desires for didactic meaning, Wilson draws attention to and quickly upsets the dominant ways of reading cultural texts as simple expressions of history and identity.

The five works in this exhibition encompass practices of narrative storytelling in a way that is appropriate to and reflective of the moment in which they were created. While the two earlier artists give voice to untold stories of American history, the three contemporary artists frustrate the viewer's natural impulse toward received notions of established narratives. They use their art to disrupt the racialized, hegemonic function of written text in the construction of history and identity.

Emma Routhier '12
Levinson Intern



Glenn Ligon, *White #1*, 1995, etching and aquatint on wove paper. Purchased through the Phyllis and Bertram Geller 1937 Memorial Fund; PR.996.6