

# BLACK BODIES ON THE CROSS



A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 97

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



The United States of America was founded on the principles of religious freedom and equality, yet was built through slave labor and the dispossession of native peoples. *Black Bodies on the Cross* investigates the duality of black Christianity, which is rooted in both colonization and a celebration of black culture. The exhibition attempts to capture that dissonance as seen through the eyes of postwar and contemporary black artists. In depicting black subjects, these artists explore the ways in which the black experience can be understood as part of a universalizing Christian narrative that, ironically, often excludes black subjects.

In his book *Prophesy Deliverance!*, Cornell West writes, “The notion that black people are human beings is a relatively new discovery in the modern West. The idea of black equality in beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity remains problematic.”<sup>1</sup> In using the term “black bodies,” this exhibition seeks to draw attention to the objectification and dehumanization of black people throughout history—including the history of art. The featured artists depict the black experience through traditional religious narratives, thereby reclaiming their own humanity and the holy histories that were corrupted through colonization.

In her pop-up book *Freedom: A Fable; A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times*, Kara Walker explores the legacies of European colonization and the lesser-known movement of black colonization in Liberia,

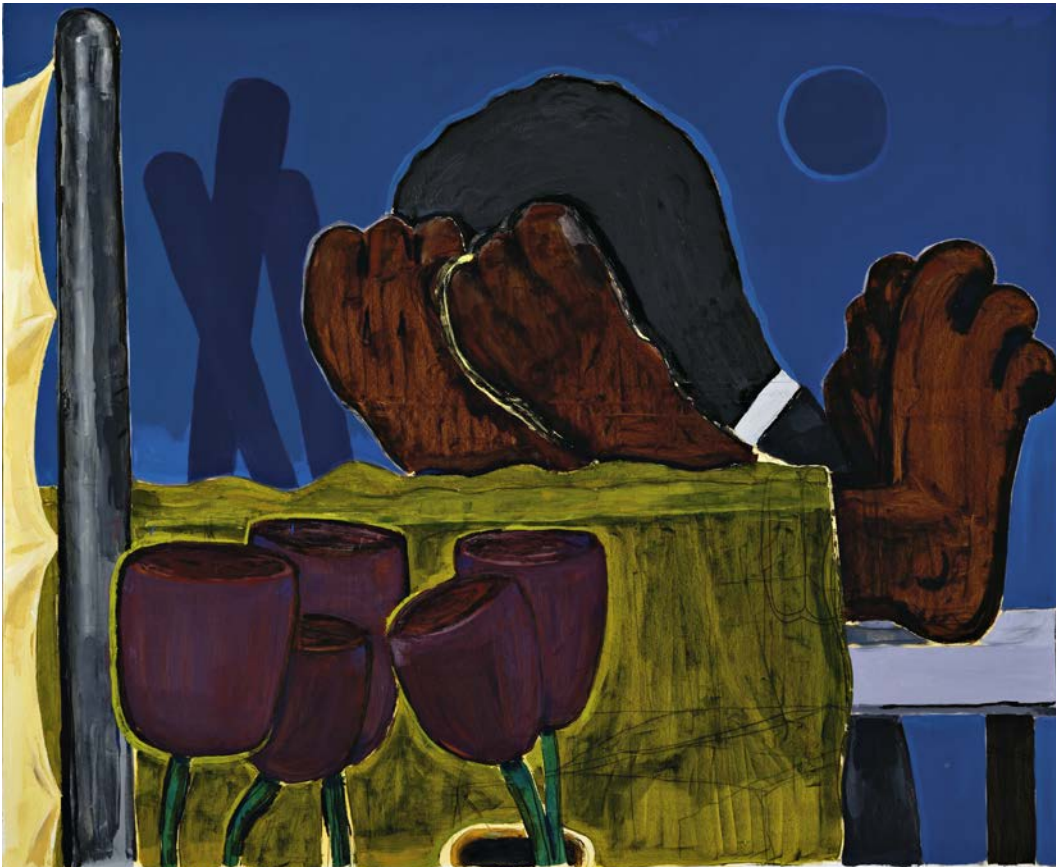
which Robert Finley proposed in 1816 as a solution to the growing number of free people of African descent in the United States. Historically, parallels have been drawn between chattel slavery and the liberation of enslaved Israelites in the Book of Exodus, inspiring belief in a promised land in which enslaved black people could be free. Walker’s *Freedom: A Fable* depicts “the future vision of the soon-to-be emancipated 19th-century Negress.” The woman, in Walker’s words, becomes her own god and journeys to Liberia in hopes of creating her own New World. Walker provides an account not only of a freed woman’s paradise, but also of her reverse journey across the Atlantic.

Romare Bearden also draws parallels to the Middle Passage, in which enslaved Africans were brought across the Atlantic, in his screenprint *Noah, the Third Day*, which depicts Noah as a black man. By doing so, he renders the ark as no longer just an ark, but a reminder of oppression and a symbol for rebirth. Bearden also incorporates well-known religious narratives and rituals into his monumental collage *Palm Sunday Procession*, which features robed black figures.<sup>2</sup> Within the black church, the black body is often ritualized through clothing. Donning “Sunday Best,” for instance, acts as a way to celebrate the black body and exalt the Lord.<sup>3</sup>

The church quickly became a cultural archive through which black spirituals entered the public consciousness. To this day spirituals provide a sense of community, just as they did for the various tribal groups who were brought together through the diaspora.<sup>4</sup> In his bold woodblock prints featuring African Americans, Ashley Bryan illustrates black spirituals in a way that allows some people—especially children—to experience their lyrics for the first time. For others, Bryan’s prints may suggest the internal rhythms that connect many African Americans to their ancestors.

In Shirley White’s essay “A Consideration of African-American Christianity as a Manifestation of Du Boisian Double-Consciousness,” she applies W. E. B. Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness to the social and political presence of the church. The same disconnectedness and otherness that comes from the dual experience





of a black person in American society also applies to the black experience in the Christian church. One can be perceived as both a fellow believer and an inferior.<sup>5</sup> Anglo-Saxon religion also deems elements of black culture, such as root work or Hoodoo, as deviant, thereby creating another source of tension within black Christian experience.<sup>6</sup> Bearden captures this tension through his incorporation of both Christian and Hoodoo subjects in his works, such as the “conjur” woman who appears in many of his compositions, as seen in his screenprint *In the Garden*.

This exhibition uses the words “on the cross” in its title to directly engage with the brutal killing of black bodies through slavery, lynching, and, more recently, through police brutality. In his bold painting *Untitled: Remembrance of Things Present*, Enrico Riley draws parallels between the deaths of black people at the hands of the police and the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. By

portraying a mother grieving over the body of her son, Riley acknowledges both the Renaissance tradition of the Pietà and the suffering that accompanies the many black lives cut short. *Black Bodies on the Cross* seeks to engage viewers with works that explore the multiplicities of the black experience through the universalizing narrative of Christianity.

Victoria McCraven '19  
Homma Family Intern

#### NOTES

1. West, *Prophesy Deliverance!*, 47.
2. Pinn, “Black Theology, Black Bodies, and Pedagogy,” 197.
3. Pinn, “Black Bodies in Pain and Ecstasy,” 82.
4. Jones, “The Foundational Influence of Spirituals in African-American Culture,” 255.
5. White, “A Consideration of African-American Christianity,” 30.
6. Pinn, “Black Bodies in Pain and Ecstasy,” 80.

## CHECKLIST

Romare Bearden, American, 1911–1988. *Palm Sunday Procession*, 1967–68, collage of paper and synthetic polymer paint on composition board. Gift of Jane and Raphael Bernstein; P.986.77.4

Romare Bearden, American, 1911–1988. *Mother and Child*, from the portfolio *CONSPIRACY: The Artist as Witness*, 1971, screenprint and offset lithograph on Arches paper. Gift of David R. Godine, Class of 1966; PR.972.224.2

Romare Bearden, American, 1911–1988. *In the Garden*, from the portfolio *Prevalence of Ritual*, 1974, screenprint on wove paper. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund; PR.975.58.1

Romare Bearden, American, 1911–1988. *Noah, the Third Day*, from the portfolio *Prevalence of Ritual*, 1974, screenprint on wove paper. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund; PR.975.58.5

Romare Bearden, American, 1911–1988. *Salome* from the portfolio *Prevalence of Ritual*, 1974, screenprint on wove paper. Purchased through the William S. Rubin Fund; PR.975.58.3

Ashley Bryan, American, born 1923. *Somebody's Knocking at Your Door*, from *I'm Going to Sing: Black American Spirituals, Volume II*, 1974, linocut on wove paper. Purchased through the Claire and Richard P. Morse 1953 Fund; 2013.39.3

Ashley Bryan, American, born 1923. *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, from *Walk Together Children: Black American Spirituals*, 1974, linocut on wove paper. Gift of Elizabeth and Michael Mayor; 2014.38

Enrico Riley, American, born 1973. *Untitled: Remembrance of Things Present*, 2017, oil on canvas. Purchased through the Winky Fund; 2019.3.1

Kara Walker, American, born 1969. *Freedom: A Fable; A Curious Interpretation of the Wit of a Negress in Troubled Times*, 1997, artist's book; offset lithographs and five laser-cut, pop-up silhouettes on wove paper. Gift of the Director of the Hood Museum of Art; MIS.997.53

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Cover: Romare Bearden, *Palm Sunday Procession*, 1967–68.  
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Inside left: Ashley Bryan, *Swing Low Sweet Chariot*, 1974.  
© Ashley Bryan

Inside right: Enrico Riley, *Untitled: Remembrance of Things Present*, 2017. © Enrico Riley

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