

Art

This article is more than 9 months old

'What are we passing on?': artists examine importance of inheritance

In a new exhibition at the Whitney Museum, the concept of inheritance and its many meanings is explored



Sadie Barnette - Family Tree II, 2022. Photograph: Henrik Kam Photography

Some of what I've been thinking in my personal and professional life is, what are we passing on? Like, what are we giving to the next generation? What are we bringing to them, consciously or unconsciously? The future is unknown.

The Whitney curator Rujeko Hockley shared these thoughts while telling me about her new group show at the museum, titled Inheritances. Running through February 2024, the show is a wide-ranging, multifaceted approach to the concept of inheritance and the many, many meanings it can hold.

Hockley's exhibit grew, in part, out of two very demanding, avant-garde artworks made by Black creators. The first was Ephraim Asili's widely acclaimed 2020 film The Inheritance, which will be screened as a part of the show. Set among a group of Black intellectuals living together in a house in West Philadelphia, The Inheritance mixes strands of political action, Black history and culture, and lots of humor, while drawing inspiration from Jean-Luc Godard's contributions to French New Wave cinema.

"Asili's film is a combination of documentary and narrative," said Hockley. "There's a lot of archival material, a lot of historical referencing. It's thinking a lot about the past, the kinds of events, histories, cultures within the African diaspora and how they might lead us to act in the present and the future."

According to Hockley, the other major artistic inspiration for Inheritances was Lorraine O'Grady's substantial piece, Rivers, First Draft, a 1982 performance piece in Central Park which now lives in Inheritances in the form of 48 photographs printed in 2015. Referred to by O'Grady as a "collage-in-space" the piece seeks to synthesize the Caribbean and New England strands of her identity, while also blending different eras from her life: childhood, adolescence and adulthood.



Lorraine O'Grady - Rivers, First Draft: A Little Girl with Pink Sash memorizes her Latin lesson, 1982, printed 2015. Photograph: Courtesy of the artist

"I was really interested in thinking about artworks that had not been seen at the museum previously," Hockley said. "I was thinking of works that can sometimes be complicated to show, because they're so large, or they have a complicated installation, or for XYZ reason. And so with Lorraine, the challenge was finding breathing space for her 48-print installation."

From there, Hockley assembled nearly 60 other works, bringing together a thorough meditation on inheritances in their many forms. "It's really one of the great privileges of my job to get to look at different artworks and really try to make connections for the public," she said.

Inheritances deploys its substantial holdings across nine galleries arranged by theme: inheritances across the human lifespan, artistic inheritances, historical inheritance and inheritances from our ancestral memories. The thematic content of the show is ambitious, ranging from slavery and the Great Migration to Covid, African religious traditions, the human lifespan, colonization and the sources of artistic creativity.

"My goal with the show is to create a group exhibition that has a point of view but that allows individual artists to speak their truth," she said. "It's really important to me that the installation has a certain feel. I was very thoughtful about how we progress through the exhibition."

There are many standout artists and pieces in the show. One of them is the Oakland-based Sadie Barnette, whose art frequently draws on themes of family and inheritance, as she works through her own history and that of her family, including her father Rodney Barnette, who was a member of the Black Panther party and later opened San Francisco's first Black-owned gay bar. Barnette's Family Tree II is a salon-style collection of framed photos, text, ephemera and one very fabulous holographic vinyl couch. The piece is an ideal way to parse the idea of inheritance on a human, familial level, grounding viewers in the things that are passed among family members and down generations. "Family Tree is really emblematic of a lot of the ideas in the show," said Hockley.

Drawing on the inheritance of history, Cameron Rowland's five pieces are powerful and jarring. Price Per Pound uses two 19th-century cotton scales to evoke ideas of enslavement and dehumanization that continue to reverberate today, while the scales' mounting - which makes them look like long-barreled guns - brings to mind different but related inheritances. His Lynch Law in America, which takes the form of a blue-light phone kiosk - ostensibly present so that those in need can call for assistance - evokes the use of technology to control Black individuals through threats of surveillance and violence. The presence of Rowland's pieces, full-sized and virtually touchable, lends a visceral touch to the exhibition.

"Cameron Rowland has several works that are thinking about the connection between history and enslavement," said Hockley, "and its connection to the kind of police-industrial state in our contemporary society. It delves into specifics around New York - the city and the state - as a player in the slave trade, in contrast to the beliefs that this was localized in the south. He's really trying to make the connection explicit."

Sherrie Levine's series of photographs After Walker Evans raise questions about the gaze centered by the renowned photographer's lens, while also delving into questions around the role that artistic inheritance plays in human creativity. "Artists are always looking at their progenitors, that's built into the study of our history," said Hockley. "They're building on the past, literally. They're always taking this raw material and reformulating it."

Although Inheritances deals with heavy themes that reference tragedies and historic wrongs, Hockley found the process of putting together her show more inspiring than dispiriting. "One of the things I'm always learning is how much artists have to tell us," she said. "How much artists can be, not guides, but bestowers of a greater sense of hope for the future."

Immersing herself in amazing art that is conversant with the long currents of history let Hockley take herself out of the doom-scrolling present moment and gain a sense of perspective that she ultimately found liberating. "I felt a greater sense of hope, compared to how wild and dystopian our current times have felt," she said. "Thinking historically is always a great antidote to despair. Having a bigger aperture on time always gets me out of the sense of 'oh my God, we're living in a hellscape.' It reminds me that every generation has had challenges. It's also reaffirmed this thing that I've always believed so innately and intuitively, that artists can teach us about our own subjectivity. It takes you out of yourself and out of your time in a way that can be really productive and necessary."

Inheritances is on display at the Whitney Museum in New York until February 2024

I hope you appreciated this article. Before you move on, I wanted to ask if you would consider supporting the Guardian's journalism as we enter one of the most consequential news cycles of our lifetimes in 2024.

With the potential of another Trump presidency looming, there are countless angles to cover around this year's election - and we'll be there to shed light on each new development, with explainers, key takeaways and analysis of what it means for America, democracy and the world.

From Elon Musk to the Murdochs, a small number of billionaire owners have a powerful hold on so much of the information that reaches the public about what's happening in the world. The Guardian is different. We have no billionaire owner or shareholders to consider. Our journalism is produced to serve the public interest - not profit motives.

And we avoid the trap that befalls much US media: the tendency, born of a desire to please all sides, to engage in false equivalence in the name of neutrality. We always strive to be fair. But sometimes that means calling out the lies of powerful people and institutions - and making clear how misinformation and demagoguery can damage democracy.

From threats to election integrity, to the spiraling climate crisis, to complex foreign conflicts, our journalists contextualize, investigate and illuminate the critical stories of our time. As a global news organization with a robust US reporting staff, we're able to provide a fresh, outsider perspective - one so often missing in the American media bubble.

Around the world, readers can access the Guardian's paywall-free journalism because of our unique reader-supported model. That's because of people like you. Our readers keep us independent, beholden to no outside influence and accessible to everyone - whether they can afford to pay for news, or not.

If you can, please consider supporting us just once, or better yet, support us every month with a little more. Thank you.

Betsy Reed Editor, Guardian US



'It's just magical': the Met celebrates New York public school artwork

Read more

Most viewed

Florida 'callously' strips healthcare from thousands of children despite new law

'One of the most racist things I've ever seen': how RIBA is decolonising its HQ

Stunning police brutality will ignite a student anti-war movement in America Joan Donovan

Iran's death sentence for rapper sparks protests and undermines criticism of US

Everyone Knows That: internet music mystery solved via 1986 adult movie