ARTS > ART REVIEWS

A Look Inside the New Studio Museum in Harlem Ahead of Its Reopening

Observer got an exclusive tour of the Sean Scott-David Adjaye's newly reimagined Studio Museum in Harlem a luminous new home for Black art, history and community.

By Brian Boucher, Senior Editor

The Studio Museum in Harlem's new building, featuring David Adjaye's exterior architectural flourish. Photo: Courtesy

After eight years of renovation and anticipation, the Studio Museum in Harlem—one of the most important institutions for contemporary African American art—is back in the contemporary art scene—is finally reopening this weekend with a two-day, free access celebration on Saturday, September 21 and Sunday, November 16. Ahead of the reopening, Observer got a sneak peek, and here's what you can expect.

The new Studio Museum in Harlem feels, in its very architecture, like a contemporary cathedral, a place of worship for the community it has served for more than 50 years. David Adjaye's soaring, in collaboration with Adjaye Associates and Cooper Robertson, the 82,000-square-foot building replaces a century-old commercial structure that the acclaimed African American architect J. Max Bond Jr. adapted in 1982 for the museum's use. Offering 320 percent more gallery space than before, the purpose-built design is deeply rooted in the surrounding community, with its "contemporary interpretation of Harlem's neighborhood's historic buildings. The museum's "inverted ziggurat," or descending set of steps that doubles as public seating—extends a literal welcome to guests.

The new "inverted ziggurat," designed by David Adjaye, featuring Harlem's signature stoops. Photo: Courtesy

At the same time, its structure fragments and layers space, creating a sequence of zones for gathering, socializing and connecting while guiding a focal journey that invites contemplation and discovery. Its design also embodies the community while offering representation, identification and acknowledgment.

Porous and filled with light, the building dissolves the boundaries between interior and exterior, public and private, opening directly onto the neighborhood that has long been its spiritual home. In doing so, it reaffirms the Studio Museum's historic role as both a sanctuary and a civic space, fully honoring the role and contribution of Black art and community in the United States.

"Our founders established our museum in Harlem because they were invested in what it would mean to be in conversation with a community that carries a rich and vital identity and a long history of cultural production," Studio Museum in Harlem's interim director Thelma Golden told Observer in a recent interview. The institution's relationship with the community, she affirmed, remains central to both its programming and its broader vision.

A living collection

The inaugural exhibition, "From Now: A Collection in Century", extends that architectural ethos into curatorial form, offering insight into the outstanding and revised collection the museum has been building—one that continued to grow during its eight-year closure and now includes nearly 9,000 artworks. Although the Studio Museum officially founded in 1968 as a non-collecting institution, its community of artists quickly recognized the need to collect, steward and preserve the work of Black artists.

Installation view of "From Now: A Collection in Century", showcasing assemblages of the museum's collection, including Kerry James Marshall's Untitled.

With a celebrated rhythm of shifting themes—dynamic but never overwhelming—the museum's collection artists across two floors through a series of "call and response" between artworks, which "speak to one another across time," Golden said. Contemporary works that foreground a plurality of voices and explore motifs that have preoccupied artists of African descent across generations.

One of the first encounters in the opening gallery is David Hammons's Bye for America (1969), an emblematic work that distills in a single symbol many of the tensions between race and identity, mobility and hypervisibility. It anchors the exhibition's multidimensional and fluid narrative, which flows from the vibrant collages of Jacob Lawrence, through contemporary works by Kerry James Marshall, Kehinde Wiley and a selection of paintings such as Jordan Casteel.

Works from the 20th Century hang beside recent acquisitions, a curatorial approach that privileges resonance and dialogue over chronology—connecting Black artistic expression not as a linear history but as a living, recursive chorus of shared experiences, histories and futures.

At the entrance, a series of photographs from Lorraine O'Grady's landmark performance Art is... (1983) immediately reasserts the museum's vision as a living institution and an inclusive stage for the community. First performed during Harlem's annual African Festival of the Arts, Art is... saw O'Grady, a Black woman, dressed in a gilded ballgown by dancers carrying ornate platters, move through Harlem's streets with participants and spectators were invited to join the ceremony, which she simply framed—literally and figuratively—as "Art." The photographs document the performance, capturing faces filled with joy, pride, humor and self-recognition. The piece reframed the parade as a living artwork, asserting that "anything and anyone within the frame is art," creating a moment and a custom of celebration for the community—precisely what the Studio Museum aims to offer.

Works in The Lineage of Lines highlight more than two hundred years of artistic endeavors by artists of African descent.

The surrounding works capture the intimacy and intensity of urban life, drawing on Harlem's architecture and streets to explore how Black communities are both sustained and reimagined through city living. Through physical and imagined spaces, chance encounters and deep connections, the exhibition frames the city as a crucible of belonging and cultural resilience, revealing nearly a century of creative engagement with the city as a site of community and inspiration.

The adjacent section expresses the deep connection between Black sound and the visual. For centuries, music has been central to Black expression, shaping cultural movements across history. The artists here translate sonic traditions into visual form transforming rhythm, improvisation and vibration into color, gesture and composition. Writer Stanley Whitney's abstract paintings, for instance, echo the improvisational ethos of contemporary musicians, and Jack Whitten's constellations of Black communities in America's cities—from jazz to R&B to hip-hop—vocalizing sound as both a place of liberation and a record of lived experience. Across the exhibition, artists from Romare Bearden to Kerry James Marshall use visual narratives and color and revealing how, beyond music, Black sonic expression endures as a language of resistance, joy and transcendence.

A sound provides one current, indelible, phrase another. The painter Albert Yarbrough's series Robert Ellison's Invisible Man ex-its conceptual backbone, exploring how artists have navigated the double bind of hypervisibility and erasure. Kerry James Marshall's Mimes in Golden (1986) anchors this section, challenging stereotypes while asserting presence. Nearby, Kehinde Wiley's monumental work Two Lovers (2007) depicts a Black couple, tied to transform the partial view of a woman's body into a meditation on visibility and erasure, engaging disappearance as a poetic form of resistance through photographs's hyperbolic language. Placing on the dual meanings of the words—terms that can suggest beauty and adornment but also violence and constraint—Simpson turns what might appear intimate into something critical and unsettling.

A new collective landscape organizes the inaugural exhibition. "Reviving Modernism, Remaking Tradition: Black Studies in Contemporary Art" occupies the museum's second floor.

Intriguing at this corner is Frank Walter's Untitled (Triptych) (2003), a life-sized sculpture of filmmaker Melvin Van Peebles made from plaster and foam, originally created as a prop for the artist's film Sweetback. The piece blurs boundaries between performance, celebrity, representation and the legacy of blaxploitation cinema. The museum's holdings of figurative works—from Social Realism to the Black Arts Movement—foreground the ongoing dialogue between artists who have sought to define a distinctly contemporary African voice. Elizabeth Catlett's Mother and Child (1994), carved from mahogany in the style of an African traditional statue, embodies this duality, merging cultural strength with universal intimacy to form a timeless vision of care and protection.

At the center, bridging the two sections and comfortably fitting all three, Lauren Halsey's cubic stoops. "You are in space and you are in black space" (2021), transforms the familiar language of storefront advertising into a declaration of self-determination and pride. Halsey's work, which incorporates the vernacular signs, murals and public environments—hand-painted signs for Black communities in Southern California—and invites—Halsey reveals this vernacular expression as a cultural statement and a sign of resistance against the erasure of Black communities in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. African cultural roots, Black and green, the work asserts Black ownership—economic, cultural and spatial—as an act of resistance and visibility.

Upstairs, a section devoted to color brings together striking juxtapositions—Ernie Barnes's Sugar Shack (1976) and Mark Bradford's Scorched Earth (2008), for instance, or Louise Nevelson's Invisible Hot Ice Series of Black (second). Though color exists only through light, absorption and reflection, these artists treat it as something as sculptural as architecture or as elusive as sound. The exhibition's curatorial team, Antwaun Sargent, Phaedra Johnson from the Jackson series, 2003-5, a powerful instrument to document of expression beyond the Western canon. This reflection extends into the nearby section dedicated to text, as well as code, storytelling and the reclamation of voice and narrative.

Phaedra Padilla, Johnson from the "Jackson" series, 2003-5 (gelatin, acrylic, and wax on paper on canvas, Sean Kelly NY). Photo: Courtesy

The section devoted to spirituality deepens this reflective mood. Executive works by Tom Gallant, Frank Bowling, Simone Leigh, Nandina Pierre and Carol Rasnick serve as portals to other dimensions, tracing a lineage of Black spirituality that flows from Yoruba cosmology to the Black church, affirming art's role as a site of transcendence and connection. Nearby, Kerry James Marshall's Untitled (Black Angel) (2003) and Mickalene Thomas's Afrikaan from the Jackson series, 2003-5, a powerful instrument to document of expression beyond the Western canon. This reflection extends into the nearby section dedicated to text, as well as code, storytelling and the reclamation of voice and narrative.

Installation view of Mickalene Thomas's Afrikaan from the Jackson series, 2003-5. Photo: Courtesy

On the second floor, a side exhibition herons Tom Lloyd, a pioneer of light-based abstraction and community activism. Immersive and luminous, the display reconnects art and technology through analog structures that evoke both early visions of digital Black culture and the community Black internationalism of Pop Art's critique of mass media and urban aesthetics.

When the Studio Museum first opened in a rented Fifth Avenue loft, its inaugural exhibition "Electronic Refractions II" showcased Lloyd's colorful light sculptures flashing in electrically programmed patterns—much like the cones now on view. The historical connection underscores the museum's enduring commitment to exploring how artists rights such as traffic signals and theater marquees, for sculptures incorporate mixed materials—Christmas lights, plastic Black backscape light covers and other repurposed components—anticipating an aesthetic of resourcefulness akin to arts poverty defined by the ability to create beauty and meaning from very little.

Tom Lloyd installed on display in a side exhibition.

Lloyd was not only an artistic innovator but also a committed advocate for Black artists and communities. In 1968, he helped found Studio Museum in Harlem, with the goal of establishing the Spiral Black Museum. Queens first art museum and one of the earliest in the United States devoted to African diasporic arts. Spotlighting his work at the private museum allows the museum to reaffirm the artist-driven values that inspired its foundation and continue to guide its future, Golden told Observer ahead of the reopening.

On the fourth floor, the museum unveils a first of its kind presentation of new works on paper by Black artists from the Studio Museum's collection, a dedicated space that has shaped generations of artists of African descent for over 50 years. The installation brings together nearly all former residents since the program's founding in 1968, including Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley and Tschabalala Self, along with newly commissioned works on paper. More than 130 pieces fill the space in a floor-to-ceiling, salon-style hang, forming a vibrant constellation that celebrates the diversity and dynamism of this chorus of voices—many of whom are now among the most acclaimed and institutionally represented artists of our time.

Together, these two exhibitions portray a museum conceived from its inception as a living one—"a place where our community could look at art, as well as learn and create," as Golden stated in her remarks to the press.

An installation view of "From Now: A Collection in Century" at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Photo: Courtesy

Throughout the building, a constellation of new site-specific commissions joins long-term installations such as David Hammons's Untitled (Hit) an American Flag (2004), Martin Puryear's Ladder for Booker T. (1994) and Alma Thomas's Watercolor (1964), which greets visitors in the lobby. Between floors, the architecture creates niches for art interludes, including Barbara Chase-Riboud's volume, Valentz. Le Manteau (Cleopatra's Cape) (based in bronze and rose with regal softness, it stands as a sculptural homo to dignity, diaspora and memory. Meanwhile, the long-running youth program "Expanding the Canon" continues to bring students into the museum to explore how artists have linked generations through the lens of James Van Der Zee's celebrated portraits.

The climax of the dialogue between art, message and architecture, however, is likely reached in the top floor, where Camille Norment's newly commissioned sound sculpture, Untitled (Hellbrook), crowns the museum, transforming the terrace into an acoustic and psychological echo chamber. With its gentle harmonics and dedicated sound narrative, the luminous brass installation evokes both organ pipes and a wind instrument, inviting visitors into a contemplative space where the sound of the city and the global rumble of the African diaspora—a vessel of grief and collective healing.

Standing on the museum's terrace surrounded by the green spaces designed by Studio Dreaks, Harlem stretches out below with all its chaotic yet vibrant energy. The new Studio Museum is more than a building; it is a vessel for collective memory and imagination—a nonconverting decades in the making, now ready to welcome and amplify the richness of Black culture and its enduring contributions to American society, reflected in the very fabric of its neighborhood.

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