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CASVA

Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts

CASVA's New Initiatives in African American Art: A Statement of Purpose

The Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art is launching a series of initiatives intended to promote the study of African American art and related fields. For five years the Center will dedicate energy and resources to this important area of advanced research, which remains underrepresented both nationally and internationally. The various initiatives will include professorial appointments, a postdoctoral fellowship, visiting senior fellowships, research associates, and a series of publications. In connection with these programs the Center also seeks to foster greater diversity of experience through collaborative relationships.

In the course of its forty-year history CASVA has dedicated attention to several special initiatives across the globe, including research on the art of southeast Asia and Latin America. The new initiatives in African American

art history speak to important issues closer to home, responding to new opportunities and needs. The acquisition by the National Gallery of the Corcoran Collection in 2014 included some two hundred works by African American artists (doubling the Gallery's existing holdings), as well as the historic archive of Thurlow Evans Tibbs Jr. The Gallery seeks to be a leader in this field, as it is in art of the United States more generally, and its collection continues to be enriched through the acquisition of individual works by African American artists, including Archibald Motley Jr., Kerry James Marshall, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Theaster Gates, Lou Stovall (fig. 1), and Glenn Ligon (fig. 2).

The National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC), which opened its doors in 2016, is dedicated to the history and understanding of the African American heritage of the United States. In 2017 Howard University, nationally renowned for the teachers and graduates in its historic fine arts program and home to one of the most important university collections of African and African American art, celebrated its 150th anniversary. These two landmark events point to the special opportunities for research in African American history and art history in Washington, DC. The recent appointments at the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art of a curator of African American manuscripts and an archivist

for the African American Collecting Initiative will further strengthen resources for research in the specific scholarly subject of African American art and the building of national collections.

CASVA seeks to make a contribution to this vital field of research, strengthening new collaborations. Building upon the 2017 Wyeth Foundation for American Art Symposium dedicated to the African American art world in twentieth-century Washington, DC, and encouraged by a subsequent advisory group meeting held at the National Gallery in September 2017, the Center is embarking on a series of new initiatives in its established program areas of fellowships, meetings, publications, and research.

The Andrew W. Mellon Professor, a position inaugurated in 1994, is in residence at CASVA for two years. This extended appointment encourages the professor to play a significant role in the life of the Center and the National Gallery, while conducting full-time research on independent projects. The appointment of Professor Steven D. Nelson of the University of California, Los Angeles, as Mellon Professor for 2018 to 2020 was approved by the Board of Trustees in 2017. Nelson is professor of African and African American art history at UCLA and director of the UCLA African Studies Center. He has been an influential scholar and inspiring teacher in the fields of both African and African American art and will be completing volumes on the Underground Railroad and on the visual cultures of blackness while in residence.



Fig. 1. Lou Stovall, *Breathing Hope*, 1996, color screenprint on wove paper, Gift of Lou, Di Bagley and Will Stovall

Richard J. Powell, John Spencer Bassett Professor of Art and Art History at Duke University and recipient of the College Art Association's Distinguished Scholar Award, has been named as the Edmond J. Safra Visiting Professor for 2018 to 2019, an appointment that brings an eminent scholar, curator, artist, or critic to the Gallery. The position, which has recently been endowed, is intended for a distinguished colleague with an interest in any aspect of the Gallery's collections, who will forge relationships across the institution during a period of four to six months. Trained in art at Morehouse College and Howard University and in art history at Yale, Powell has been involved in many exhibitions, including *Back to Black: Art, Cinema, and the Radical Imaginary* at the Whitechapel Art Gallery and *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* at the Hayward Gallery, London, and the Corcoran Gallery of Art. His volume *Black Art: A Cultural History* is a foundational text. He has published catalogs on Romare Bearden, Beauford Delaney, Barkley L. Hendricks, and John T. Scott, among many others. Powell's most recent exhibition, *Archibald Motley: Jazz Age Modernist*, brought new attention to this artist's work and provided powerful support for the purchase of Motley's portrait of his grandmother, Emily Motley, by the National Gallery this year.

Steven Nelson has analyzed the relative absence of African American scholars in senior positions in art history departments in the United States. Richard Powell has pointed to a chronic disinterest among degree programs, museums, and research institutes in this vital field of African American art studies, which, according to him, was initiated a century ago by Freeman Henry Morris Murray with the publication of his *Emancipation and the Freed in American Sculpture* in 1916. The presence of these outstanding senior scholars at CASVA will inspire new interest and leadership in the field, and we are grateful to UCLA and Duke

University for sharing this vision and endorsing Nelson's and Powell's residencies at the National Gallery.

In CASVA's fellowship program a special preference for researchers working in African American art, African art, and African diaspora studies was expressed in this year's calls for applications for the Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow and for visiting senior fellowships. The results have been very positive and will strengthen even further as the initiatives become better known. New support for these visiting senior fellowships is provided by the Leonard A. Lauder Fund, endowed in 2018 to encourage diversity in art-historical research, and by endowment gifts from Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Beinecke. Both contributions have been made in connection with the challenge grant from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Investment in people and in building a scholarly community remains among CASVA's highest priorities. Another long-term investment lies in the exploration, publication, and transmission of new scholarship. The video presentation of last year's historic artists' panel at the Wyeth symposium, posted on the Gallery's website, continues to reach a wide audience. We are fortunate that Jeffrey Stewart, professor and former chair of black studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, has agreed to serve as scholarly editor of the volume on the African American art world in twentieth-century Washington, DC, which will document the symposium in the Studies in the History of Art series. Stewart is a distinguished investigator of African American art and the black experience, and his biography of Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, appeared just a few months ago.

In the past decade CASVA has developed a seminar series intended to convene a group of scholars around a topic of shared interest. After discussion and an exchange of papers under the guidance of a scholarly editor, the resulting essays are published in an affordable format. The fourth in this series will

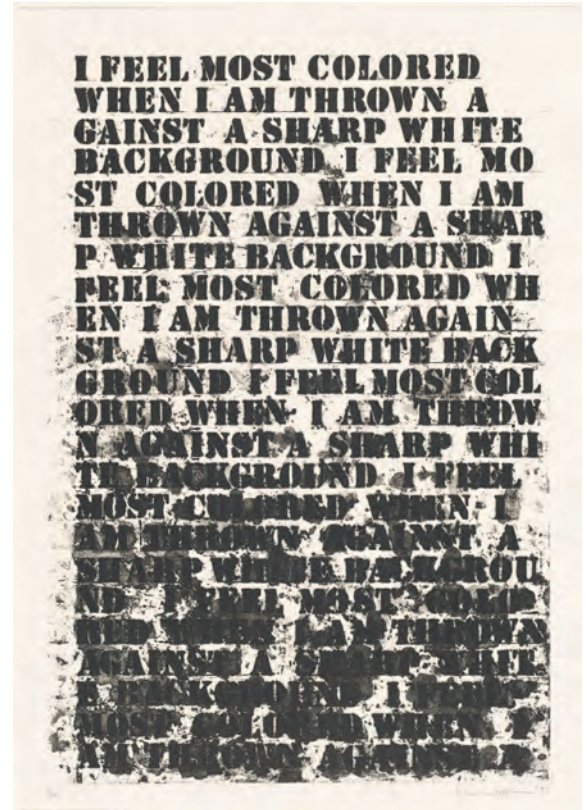


Fig. 2. Glenn Ligon, *Untitled: Four Etchings [B]*, 1992, softground etching, aquatint, spitbite aquatint, and sugarlift aquatint in black on Rives BFK paper, Gift of Werner H. and Sarah-Ann Kramarsky and the Collectors Committee Fund

treat the subject of “Black Modernisms,” under the direction of Steven Nelson, A. W. Mellon Professor, and Professor Huey Copeland of Northwestern University, who is currently chair of CASVA's Board of Advisors. The list of participants includes distinguished colleagues from across the United States, and the meetings will take place in the coming twelve months.

Each of these new initiatives will surely produce others, and in the long term we hope to establish a well-founded commitment toward the advanced study and collecting of African American art at the National Gallery and beyond. We are extraordinarily fortunate to have colleagues who wish to take the lead in these endeavors and are excited by the road ahead.

• Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*