Where My Girls At?: 28+ Opportunities to See and Support the Work of Black Female Artists and Curators This Fall

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Sep 29, 2016 - 11:18 pm

IT WAS A GREAT DAY IN HARLEM, a celebration of two important women in art—Alma Thomas (1891-1978) and Thelma Golden. The artist and the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem were both born Sept. 22. Thomas would have been 125. To mark the milestone, the Studio Museum, which is currently presenting an exhibition of Thomas’s paintings and drawings, had a birthday party. The special breakfast and exhibition viewing was hosted by Golden.

The gathering, on the first day of fall, was a birthday celebration and so much more. It kicked off an art season that is shaping up to be a rewarding one for black female artists, curators and scholars.

Early that morning, the MacArthur Foundation announced its 2016 fellows. Art historian and curator Kellie Jones and Baltimore-based bead artist Joyce J. Scott were among the 23 selected to receive MacArthur “genius” grants. That evening, Julie Mehretu’s new exhibition opened at Marian Goodman Gallery in Chelsea. “Hoodnyx, Voodoo, and Stelae” features new paintings and a new monograph will be published to coincide with the exhibition. In addition, Mehretu covers the latest issue of Cultured magazine.

Speaking of magazines, curator Sarah Lewis guest-edited the summer issue of Aperture magazine. “Vision & Justice” explored the African American experience through photography and was so popular that it sold out. After a second printing, more copies of critically recognized issue became available this month, just in time for “Vision and Justice: The Art of Citizenship.” Lewis’s exhibition at Harvard. “Examining the contested relationship between art, justice, and African American culture from the 19th through 21st century in the United States,” the show reflects the Aperture issue and complements a course she teaches. Lewis also curated “Race, Love, and Labor” at the Center for Photography at Woodstock, including artists Endia Beal, LaToya Ruby Frazier, Deana Lawson, and Xaviera Simmons.

Also on the newsstand, Smithsonian magazine dedicated its September issue to the new National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) in Washington, D.C. The special edition was published with four different covers, two of them featuring the work of black female artists—Amy Sherald and Lorna Simpson. Sherald won first prize in the Outwin Boochever Portrait Competition and her work is on view with the other finalists at the National Portrait Gallery in the “The Outwin 2016: American Portraiture Today.” Known primarily for her photography and video work, Simpson’s exhibition of new paintings opened earlier this month at Salon 94 Bowery.

A monumental event, the African American museum finally opened on the National Mall last Saturday with a grand-scale ceremony featuring President Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama. From the beginning, Kinshasha Holman Conwill, deputy director of the museum, has played major role in shepherding it forward. Conwill served as director of the Studio Museum from 1988-1999. Jacqueline Serwer, chief curator of NMAAHC, and curator Tuliza Fleming have assembled an impressive collection of early works, modern and contemporary art at the groundbreaking institution, including paintings by Thomas, Simpson and Sherald, an many other women artists, on view in the inaugural exhibition “Visual Art and the American Experience.” Previously, Serwer was chief curator of the Corcoran Gallery of Art (1999-2006).
The Caribbean Cultural Center African Diaspora Institute has moved and the Oct. 15 grand opening at its new home in East Harlem will feature a three-part exhibition co-curated by Lowery Stokes Sims (formerly of the Museum of Arts and Design and Studio Museum, where she served as director, 2000-2005) and Yasmine Ramirez. Titled “Home, Memory, and Future,” the inaugural exhibition includes artists Nicole Awai, Dawoud Bey, Bianca DeJesus, Abigail DeVille, Chester Higgins, and Whitfield Lovell, among others.

Meanwhile, an impressive next generation of curators is making its mark. Lauren Haynes, who curated the Thomas exhibition at the Studio Museum is taking on a new role as curator of contemporary art at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark. The Studio Museum’s annual artists-in-residence exhibition is curated by Amanda Hunt and features the work of Jordan Casteel, EJ Hill, and Jibade-Khalil Huffman. Exploring black male identity, Casteel’s paintings have garnered critical attention.

Last month, Jamilah James was appointed curator of the Institute of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (ICA LA). Formerly, the Santa Monica Museum of Art, ICA LA is expected to open in Spring 2017. Also in Los Angeles, earlier this year, Naima Keith was named deputy director of the California African American Museum (CAAM) in Los Angeles. This fall Keith is presenting her first exhibitions at CAAM, “Hank Willis Thomas: Black Righteous Space” and “Genevieve Gaignard: Smell the Roses.” All four curators have connections to the Studio Museum. And in Atlanta, the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art is celebrating its 20th anniversary with a new exhibition, “Africa Forecast: Fashioning Contemporary Life,” co-curated by Andrea Barnwell Brownlee and Erika Dalya Massaquoi.

Fall is full of many opportunities to see and support the work of important artists and curators. In addition to the presentations mentioned above, Simpson, Betye Saar, Mickalene Thomas, Kara Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, and Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, have multiple solo exhibitions on view this season. A selection of 28 one-woman shows follows. CT

EBONY G. PATTERSON

Installation view of EBONY G. PATTERSON, “If We Must Die...,” 2016. Image courtesy of Savannah College of Art and Design via SCAD MOA