



Curating California: Expanding African American Art

Amanda Cachia & Naima J. Keith

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Curating California: Expanding African American Art

Amanda Cachia: Tell us about your new job and the community in which you work.

Naima J. Keith: I joined the California African American Museum (CAAM) in February 2016 as the deputy director of exhibitions and programs. While I'm relatively new to the position, I'm a Los Angeles native who was very familiar with the museum prior to working here. CAAM began formal operations in 1981—it

was chartered by the State of California in September of 1977—and its mission is to research, collect, preserve, and interpret for public enrichment the history, art, and culture of African Americans, with an emphasis on California and the western United States. The museum is located in an area of Los Angeles called Exposition Park, alongside the California Science

Center and Natural History Museum, and across the street from the University of Southern California, so it's really at the heart of a bustling and accessible neighborhood. Over the last thirty years, CAAM's audience has come to see the museum as a vital resource to learn more about African American art and history in California. Our visitors are primarily African American, but we find that we attract a number of local residents and international tourists from various ethnic backgrounds. I'm looking to build upon the museum's remarkable legacy by reaching even more visitors and new audiences, and to share with them the museum's attention to the power of art and history, which both have so much to teach us about the world we live in today. CAAM is brimming with potential, I think it's destined to become a leader among LA institutions, and I'm passionate about being a part of that development by directing its curatorial and educational programming.

Cachia: How do you approach the politics of diversity in your curatorial practice?

Keith: I've committed my curatorial practice to promoting and supporting artists of color, and I've been fortunate enough to work for museums that share that passion. Oftentimes, people think of diversity only along ethnic or cultural lines. I try to address the politics of diversity by supporting artists at various points in their career, working in diverse geographies and in a range of media. For example, while at the Studio Museum in Harlem, I curated *Charles Gaines: Gridwork 1974–1989*, the first museum survey of the early work of a career that now spans four decades. While well known in Los Angeles, Charles's work wasn't as familiar to East Coast audiences. I wanted visitors not only to learn about Charles's work, but also to understand how his work serves as a critical bridge between the first-generation Conceptualists of the 1960s and 1970s and those artists of later generations exploring the limits of subjectivity and language. My goal for the exhibition, more broadly, was to contribute to the dialogue around the diversity of artistic practices in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly those of artists of color.

Cachia: What's one of the most profound experiences that you've ever had as a curator?

Keith: I've been blessed to have had many, but I would say one of my earliest profound experiences was working with Kellie Jones on *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*, held at UCLA's Hammer Museum in 2011–12. Kellie

This interview took place on November 8, 2016, at the California African American Museum in Los Angeles.

is a brilliant curator committed to the highest level of research and scholarship. Under her guidance, I learned that exhibitions should be thoroughly researched, leaving no loose ends or unanswered questions. She also taught me that there are multiple ways to think about African American art exhibitions, in terms of weaving in multigenerational stories and artists from different ethnic backgrounds (when it makes sense). It was amazing to see her champion artists of color and to see the amount of work, time, and effort that it takes to execute a successful exhibition. It wasn't just about having a few casual conversations with the artists, picking the objects, and that's it. In curating, there's a deep commitment that you make to an artist and to a subject matter that should not be underestimated. Second, my experience working on Charles's project was extraordinary: championing an artist in whom I really believed, and whom other people might take for granted, was very satisfying. It was my first time really earnestly believing that this artist deserved this show, and I believed in it enough to put in years of research to make sure it was the best project it could be, and that it reflected what Charles deserved. I didn't expect the level of success the exhibition went on to receive, so I found that extremely gratifying, especially to see his work collected by various museums, which put him into different conversations and elevated him to a different level of respect and recognition with regard to Conceptualism.

Cachia: Do the vision and objectives of CAAM line up with your own personal and professional goals?

Keith: Yes. CAAM is a remarkable museum, for its collection, enthusiastic staff and board, and track record of significant exhibitions. Personally and professionally, I hope to continue to maintain and strengthen CAAM as the worldwide nexus for ideas and dialogue about artists of African descent. For example, curating a history exhibition that's straightforwardly linear is not that interesting to me. I'm much more attracted to presenting exhibitions that reflect the complexity of the event and the ideas behind it. At CAAM, I also want to support the curators' desires to orchestrate exceptional art and history exhibitions, education experiences, and public programs, while attracting funding and community support. I'd like to launch creative initiatives that can bring art and history closer to their audiences, either through collaborating with other museums throughout the country or by bringing exciting projects to Los Angeles.

My commitment to collaboration has been a mainstay throughout my entire career. For example, I teamed up with Zoe Whitley, who is now a curator at the Tate in London, on an exhibition about Afrofuturist aesthetics called *The Shadows Took Shape*, which opened at the Studio Museum in 2013. Exhibitions focusing on Afrofuturism in the US context had been done before, so we wanted to look not only at how Afrofuturism had been adopted internationally, but also at how artists who were not of African descent had responded to the movement through visual art, music, poetry, and more. Artists of many different backgrounds have embraced that movement in fascinating ways. I've always tried to take on subject matter that I'm passionate about, but I also think long and hard about how it might contribute to the field. I've chosen to champion artists of color, and in some cases it's their first museum exhibition and their first time getting this level of attention; other exhibitions involve providing a nuanced view of something or



Charles Gaines: *Gridwork 1974–1989*, the artist at the opening reception, Studio Museum in Harlem, July 16, 2014, curated by Naima J. Keith (photograph by Scott Rudd)

Image description: Charles Gaines stands in front of several of his colorful tree drawings, his arms folded across his body and his hands resting on top of one another as he smiles gently into the camera.

someone that you thought you already knew. These motivations also run parallel to CAAM's mission, so I was honored to be chosen as deputy director.

Cachia: What work have curators done to bring more attention to the art of the African American community, and what more can they do? What do you perceive as some of the problems or challenges?

Keith: A number of curators are doing amazing work to bring greater attention to African American art, including Lowery Stokes Sims, Thelma Golden, Kellie Jones, Jamillah James, Lauren Haynes, and Rujeko Hockley, to name a few. They've all produced exhibitions and scholarship that have shaped and furthered the conversation around artists of color, and I'm indebted to their scholarship. In general, the job of a curator is to make exhibitions that both ask and answer questions about art and artists. In practical terms, that means researching, thinking about, writing about, and presenting art in ways that can simultaneously engage multiple publics, from the most notable scholars to the child visiting a museum for the first time—and everyone in between. By highlighting artists from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including African Americans, curators make museums relevant to all people, everywhere.

All museums are challenged with trying to better serve the myriad needs of our audiences, communities, and world in the twenty-first century. Ideally, the space of the museum is a place where people come together to get educated and be entertained at the same time—potentially in equal parts. And how do you sustain that engagement, especially amidst all the other available options? The museum is hopefully an in-between space for daily life where we can all come to turn on, or turn off, and recharge our senses. There are simple things that curators can do to bring more visibility to artists of color. Some curators have Instagram or other social media accounts, and it can be powerful when they highlight an artist of color through those platforms. A lot more people follow those types of accounts than people realize, and they provide all of us a great opportunity to report back on studio visits or openings for an artist of color, or to conduct research and discover new artists by following other people's accounts. Curators can also share with their networks when they learn about artists. We all talk; it's a small community, and if you know that your colleague is doing a show about radical feminist artists of the 1970s, and you happen to meet one, it's good to share that information, and also to solicit information when you are looking for something specific.

Of course, the biggest way that you can provide visibility is to curate an exhibition and advocate for a publication to support that exhibition, because the catalogue is the longest-living document after the exhibition has come down. There are so many different platforms, both online and in person, that promote artists of color. It's just about doing a little bit of legwork to learn more. As curators, we have to be willing to go that extra mile to present rich and diverse exhibitions.

Cachia: Do you think that some curators also have a fear of getting it wrong? Do you think that's why sometimes there is a reluctance from curators to work with sensitive subject matter?

Keith: It's certainly legitimate to worry if you've handled the work of an artist or a particular framing of a show delicately enough. But if you're working with living artists, just ask them and make sure that the subject matter is presented to their liking. Another approach is to reach out to your curatorial colleagues



Installation view, *The Shadows Took Shape*, Studio Museum in Harlem, November 14, 2013–March 9, 2014, curated by Naima J. Keith (photograph by Adam Reich)

Image description: Gallery installation of a large silver geometric face mask lying on one side on the gallery floor, and a series of paintings, drawings, and other works on paper on the walls.

Installation view, *Titus Kaphar: The Jerome Project*, Studio Museum in Harlem, November 13, 2014–March 8, 2015, curated by Naima J. Keith (photograph by Adam Reich)

Image description: Gallery installation on a green wall of a series of small portraits of a black man's face in different stages of being covered or masked.



for advice. I wouldn't be offended if a curator reached out to me and said, "Hey, I'm doing this show on . . . and I'd like to know your thoughts." That is doing your due diligence, because most of the time, you're probably not the first curator that the artist has ever dealt with. So it's good to make sure that no stone is left unturned. I recently read an interview with Franklin Sirmans, director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, who quoted the late Walter Hopps: "The job of a curator is to find a cave and hold the torch."¹ I find that if a curator does the research, believes in the artist or idea, and presents the work in the best possible manner, it's worth the risk of possibly getting it wrong.

Cachia: Do you think that, as a curator in a minority subject position, you have a certain agency, leadership, and power over other curators who don't occupy a minority subject position? How do you negotiate that?

Keith: Not necessarily. I would like to believe that I am held to the same standard as every other curator, and that my work with artists of color as a curator of color is judged by the universal standards upheld by the profession, including scholarship, innovation, and contribution to the field. I think it's a disservice to the artists and their practices to believe that I have some advantage or power just because I'm a curator in a minority subject position. For example, the show I did with Titus Kaphar in 2015 at the Studio Museum called *The Jerome Project* was Titus's investigation of his relationship with his father, who had been incarcerated. While that was a particularly moving exhibition, I don't identify with the artist on that particular subject matter because my father did not have that experience, so I didn't take my ethnicity for granted simply because we're both black. I wanted to do my due diligence in learning about the penal system and prison reform.

While from the outside, the perception might be that the threshold of accountability is lower because I'm black, I don't necessarily hold myself to those standards. I want to do it the best way I can. The burden is equal because I'm also putting myself out there with certain decisions I make regarding which artists I feel are worthy of a museum exhibition and which ones I choose to promote. There are so few getting these opportunities, and rather than treating this like an entitlement, I try to approach my work with humility and sensitivity.

1. Hopps quoted by Sirmans in Paco Barragán, "Interview with Franklin Sirmans," *Artpulse*, at <http://artpulsemagazine.com/interview-with-franklin-sirmans>, as of October 5, 2017.



Installation view, Genevieve Gagnard: *Smell the Roses*, California African American Museum, Los Angeles, 2016–17, curated by Naima J Keith (artwork © Genevieve Gagnard; photograph provided by Shulamit Nazarian, Los Angeles)

Image description: Front entrance of an exhibition with a color photograph in a white frame of a woman holding objects and staring back into the camera. A large wall text appears to the right of the entry doors, and the entire entry wall is covered with a floral pattern wallpaper.

Cachia: What are your thoughts about the issues faced by curators who occupy minority subject positions? For instance, do you encounter resistance by artists of color who don't wish to show in museums that are dedicated to African American art? I believe that these museums have a purpose, and they're important for communities that have historically been underserved. But do you ever sense a tension for folks who feel like these spaces may marginalize them within their artistic careers?

Keith: Though it fortunately hasn't come up that much, I think artists can sometimes feel as if they've had too many shows at these types of institutions, and they want to branch out. They don't want to be pigeonholed, which is understandable. But I haven't had too many artists who have said that. The Studio Museum, where I used to work, is so well known and respected that artists never treated exhibiting there as a plan B. It is seen as being on par with any other museum in the city, and just as much of an honor to show there. So I've been lucky that very few people have ever rejected invitations to show in the spaces where I've worked. Now that I'm at CAAM, people are recognizing what I'm trying to do in taking the museum in new, more contemporary directions, so artists are open to doing a show here. The community sees that I'm looking to open up a dialogue.

Cachia: What has been the response to your new directions at CAAM so far? How are you making the museum accessible to a wide range of audiences, bodies, and people?

Keith: The response has been fantastic. We had over fifteen hundred people at our first-ever fall opening celebration in October 2016, and we've received reviews and features in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Huffington Post*, *Forbes*, and *LA Weekly*, to name a few. In the past, CAAM hosted separate openings for each show at various points throughout the year. I streamlined the schedule so that all the shows open at once, an idea I borrowed from the Studio Museum in Harlem. My hope was that a visitor coming to support one show would discover another. Erika Hirugami, who runs a website called Curatorlove, recently wrote an article called "CAAM Is Finally a Place for Me" from her perspective as a Japanese Mexican citizen.² She came to our opening and then to a follow-up conversation with Mark Bradford. She said that she felt like CAAM is now a place that is doing the kind of progressive programming that makes her feel more welcomed. That really meant a lot to me because it signals that the community is responding. Many local artists have been saying they wanted this kind of environment for a very long time here in LA, and it was just a matter of someone at the helm leading the museum in that direction. For this reason, we've also received overwhelming support from the artist community. They are thrilled to see the museum moving in a much more contemporary and multigenerational direction. The responses to the changes at CAAM have all been positive, and I'm looking forward to debuting a few more surprises next season. Stay tuned!

Naima J. Keith is deputy director for exhibitions and programs at the California African American Museum in Exposition Park in Los Angeles. Prior to her position at CAAM, she served as associate curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem and was responsible for organizing exhibitions and publications. Her interests include American and international contemporary art, with a particular focus on themes of identity and conceptual practices.

Amanda Cachia has curated over forty exhibitions, many of which iterate disability politics in contemporary art. She is an assistant professor of art history at Moreno Valley College in Riverside, California, and director of the new Moreno Valley College Art Gallery, scheduled to open in fall 2018. She completed her PhD in art history, theory, and criticism at the University of California, San Diego, in spring 2017. Her exhibition *Automatisme Ambulatoire: Hysteria, Imitation, Performance* will open at the Owens Art Gallery at Mount Allison University in New Brunswick in fall 2018.

2. Erika Hirugami, "CAAM Is Finally a Place for Me," at Curatorlove.com, at www.curatorlove.com/journal/caam, as of November 11, 2016.