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African American Perspectives: A Trio of Exhibits at the Milwaukee Art Museum Showcase Accomplished Black Artists

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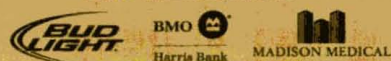
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African American Perspectives

A TRIO OF EXHIBITS AT THE MILWAUKEE ART MUSEUM SHOWCASE ACCOMPLISHED BLACK ARTISTS ::BY CURTIS L. CARTER

At the Milwaukee Art Museum, it isn't often that museum exhibitions address issues of aesthetic and social import, but its thought-provoking "30 Americans" and "Wisconsin 30" exhibitions are an exception. A three-hour, five-channel digital video, "Question Bridge: Black Males" by Hank Willis Thomas, Chris Johnson, Bayeté Ross Smith and Kamal Sinclair, completes a trio of exhibitions showing until Sept. 8.

These exhibitions offer viewers a fresh look into contemporary American life as seen from the perspectives of an exceptionally talented gathering of black artists. Not since "Songs of My People" (1993) and "Watts: Art and Social Change in Los Angeles" (2003) at the Haggerty Museum have black artists received so much attention in Milwaukee.

What, then, are we to take away from viewing this art? When I first saw "30 Americans" in Washington, D.C., last year, I was struck by the range and visual power of

the works, much of it unfamiliar. This probably means that accomplished black artists are still under-represented in mainstream museum exhibitions and collections today.

These exhibitions invite discussion of important questions facing all Americans. For example, what counts as black identity in relation to a society of increasing diversity and complexity? As expected, individual artists approach this question from different perspectives. Kara Walker's *Camptown Ladies* references a 19th-century song by Stephen Foster used in concert with blackface minstrels. Walker's life cycle narrative is expressed in elegant black silhouettes spread across a large wall in the gallery. Gary Simmons' installation, *Duck, Duck, Moose*, employs white Ku Klux Klan hoods seated on randomly placed chairs with a hanging rope in their midst to invoke memories of an ominous threat from the past. Moving beyond these historic references, Hank Willis Thomas's digital print *Basketball and Chain* explores the manipulative uses of

contemporary advertisements that exploit iconic dreams of fame and success linked to a career in basketball. Overall, direct references to African heritage are few, apart from Sharon Kerry-Harlan's *Woman with Roses*.

Other artists among the "30 Americans," including Jean-Michel Basquiat, Robert Colescott, David Hammons, Gary Simmons, Carrie Mae Weems and Kehinde Wiley, raise questions concerning race, religion and sexuality. Artists from the "Wisconsin 30" group reference social commentary, environment and images drawn from literary or other personal experiences. Among them: Reginald Baylor, Tyanna Buie, Larry Chatman, Richard O. Lewis, Christopher McIntyre, Ras 'Ammar Nsoroma, Mikal Floyd-Pruitt, Evelyn Patricia Terry and Iverson White.

"Question Bridge: Black Males" invites men in a variety of life situations to explore black male identity; the artists accomplished this by posing questions and obtaining responses from interviewees. The results are framed in video dialogue for viewers to experience in a separate gallery.

One important outcome of these exhibitions is to inform our community of the contributions of contemporary African American artists both in the global art world and in Wisconsin. Judging from the excitement shared by artists and guests at the opening previews, this project promises to be a special opportunity for the Milwaukee community to explore and appreciate the contributions of black artists to our understanding of American art and culture.

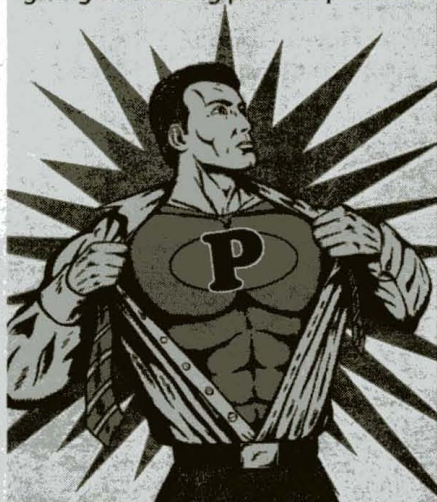
Kehinde Wiley,
Triple Portrait of Charles I, Oil and enamel on canvas, Triptych, 82 x 96 in., 2007

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