

JORDAN SCHNITZER **MUSEUM OF ART**



LOOK.
Listen.
Learn.
Act.

January 9 - June 14, 2021

LOOK. Listen. Learn. Act.

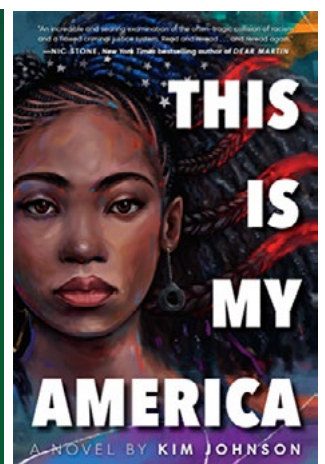
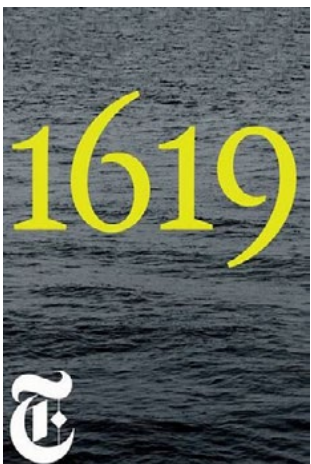
Focus West Gallery: January 9 - June 14, 2021

Every year, the JSMA partners with the University of Oregon's Common Reading—campus-wide programming around a shared book and its themes—to organize a Common Seeing exhibition that explores and expands on the Common Reading through visual art. The 2020-21 novel is *This is My America* by UO Assistant Vice Provost for Advising, Kimberly Johnson. The Common Reading's charge of *Listen. Learn. Act.* incorporates different bodies of work across multiple platforms, focusing on Blackness, Black experience, and dismantling racism. The JSMA's "Common Seeing" features works by Hank Willis Thomas and Alison Saar from the collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer and works by Lezley Saar and Kara Walker from the JSMA's permanent collection. Even if you have not yet read *This is My America*, consider the quotes from author Kimberly Johnson and the book's protagonist, Tracy Beaumont, included in this gallery guide as you look closely at the artworks.

The art of Hank Willis Thomas, Kara Walker, and sisters Alison and Lezley Saar compels us to look, listen, learn, and act. As you view each work, compare and contrast how the four artists address Blackness and the Black experience. Open yourself up to what the objects are saying to you. Learn about the subjects, references, histories, and stories that inspire these artists. Do the imagery or messages shared by the artists reflect any of your personal experiences? What will you do to dismantle racism?

The JSMA believes that art can move people to change. As an academic art museum, it is critical for us to listen, learn, and act in order to build trust and understanding. We are committed to the advancement of anti-racism in museum culture and diverse and equitable approaches in our work. The JSMA's exhibitions and public programs strive to amplify multiple perspectives, experiences, and voices. **LOOK. Listen. Learn. Act.** is generously made possible by the Jordan Schnitzer Family Foundation. Visit <https://jsma.uoregon.edu/SharedVisions> for additional resources about Black artists whose works have been or are currently featured in the JSMA's *Shared Visions* program: among them, Alma Thomas (1891-1978), Ed Clark (1926-2019), Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), Mark Bradford (b. 1961) and Rashid Johnson (b. 1977).

For more information about all of the University of Oregon's Common Reading resources, including *The 1619 Project Podcast* and the work of award-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, and a schedule of events, visit: <https://fyp.uoregon.edu/common-reading-2020-2021>



Hank Willis Thomas



Hank Willis Thomas (American, b. 1976)

An All Colored Cast, 2019

UV print on retroreflective vinyl, mounted on Dibond (shown above without and with an external light)

98 x 182 ¼ inches

Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer



(Photo courtesy of the artist and Kayne Griffin Corcoran.)

Conceptual artist Hank Willis Thomas addresses the pervasiveness of stereotypes in American pop culture, media, and advertising. Trained as a photographer, he uses a variety of media and formats to challenge perspectives on race relations in the United States. His works confront the commodification and exploitation of Black bodies and Black identity. Thomas lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Thomas's massive *An All Colored Cast* is a grid of 36 archival headshots of Black actors and musicians and other performers of color: visit the virtual tour at <https://mpembed.com/show/?m=SH-qtbEPjdEk&mpu=885> for the names of everyone pictured. A layer of retroreflective vinyl (an industrial material that

Thomas uses regularly in his works) obscures the subjects under bright blocks of color. These portraits become visible only when a directional external light, such as a camera flash, is applied or when the work is viewed with specially filtered glasses. Thomas pointedly demonstrates that even when looking in the same direction, people don't necessarily see the same thing at the same time. The piece's color-grid format directly references American artist Andy Warhol (1928-87), who was commissioned to make a large, multi-panel grid portrait of socialite and art collector Ethel Scull, a white woman, in 1963 (For more information about this artwork, visit <https://whitney.org/collection/works/6131>).

Using the stylistic markers of twentieth-century Pop Art, Color Field painting, and Minimalism in his most recent body of work, Thomas infuses the visual cues of screen color calibration charts with the power dynamics of fame and representation. The language around color is particularly charged in the filmmaking industry: consider such technical terms as "color correction" and "white balance" against the historical backdrop of American desegregation and the development of Technicolor in the twentieth century.

Questions for reflection and discussion:

An All Colored Cast confronts Hollywood's lack of authentically inclusive representation and perpetuation of stereotypes. How does Thomas's choice of materials and decisions on presentation make this issue visible? What are some Hollywood stereotypes you grew up with? Why does the artist focus on historic actors and not contemporary ones?

In *This is My America*, Tracy describes how the media used specific photographs to shape public perception of Angela Herron and Tracy's brother, Jamal Beaumont: "Angela's homecoming photo flashes on the screen. She is smiling bright, her hair in those rolling blond waves. They do a close-up on her face, angelic precision, the way they highlight the photo with doctored light around her face. I'm jarred into reality when Jamal's picture flashes on the screen. The word *suspect* stamped under his name. They didn't use [...] his homecoming picture, a school photo, or a picture from the countless track meets and fund-raising dinners. Instead, they use a [cropped] photo of Jamal with a red cup in his hand, middle finger up, a big grin on his face. I remember it from his Instagram." (Pages 86-87)

Alison Saar



Alison Saar (American, b. 1956).
Rise, four prints from an edition of 100, 2020
Linocut
11 x 8 ½ inches (each sheet)
Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

[In] each generation I see more opportunities for women of color in the arts. For my mother, Betye Saar, black artists were getting some attention nationally as the work coincided with the civil rights movement and the Black Power movement. For myself, I saw a second wave of artists of color and women artists being recognized and shown both nationally and internationally.

—Alison Saar
Excerpt from interview with Becca Martin-Brown, 2019

(Full interview available at: <https://freeweekly.com/2019/09/04/a-maker-not-a-writer/>)



(Photo courtesy the artist.)

Alison Saar grew up in Los Angeles and makes sculptures, assemblages, installations, and prints. Her mother, Betye Saar (American, b. 1926), is an acclaimed collagist, assemblage artist, and printmaker, and her father, Richard Saar (American, 1924-2004), was a ceramicist, painter, and art conservator. Her biracial identity and her experiences as a woman inform her artistic practice. Recurring themes in her work include duality, gender, race and racism, and the African diaspora. African, Latin American, and Caribbean spiritual traditions and folk art are also sources of inspiration.

With one fist raised in a sign of protest, the woman presented in Saar's linocut **Rise** is surrounded by the halo-like effect of chisel-marks. Saar was inspired by the Black Lives Matter Movement and used her power as an artist to amplify calls for racial justice and structural change. She created and sold her **Rise** linocuts as a fundraiser to support three community organizations in Los Angeles: Dignity and Power Now (DPN) (<http://dignityandpowernow.org/>), Summaeverythang Community Center (<https://summaeverythang.org/>), and Crenshaw Dairy Mart (<https://www.crenshawdairymart.com/>).

In a 2020 interview with *The New York Times*, Alison Saar shared more about her decision to depict a powerful, anonymous Black woman in her print **Rise**: "I looked at a lot of images of women from the Black Panther movement with their Afros and fists raised and then contemporized the hairstyle to say we're still fighting the same battle. I didn't want it to be one woman. I love Angela Davis, but there are a lot of other women that don't get recognized, and I'm paying tribute to them all." (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/arts/design/alison-saar-los-angeles.html>)

Questions for reflection and discussion:

This is My America addresses the racial inequalities inherent in the American justice system and demonstrates how one young woman uses her voice to fight against injustice. In the Author's Note, Kim Johnson writes, "The prison-industrial complex is a \$182 billion industry that feeds off the lives of Black, brown, and poor people caught up in its vicious cycle. (prisonpolicy.org/reports/money.html) While mass incarceration is a complex problem, I wanted to simply (*ha ha*) focus on how it's almost impossible to prove someone is innocent without adequate representation." (page 393)

Why do you think Alison Saar used the linocut printing technique?

In the gallery, four editions of **Rise** are installed in a grid. How does the effect of grouping multiples of the same image change the experience for viewers?

How does this image relate to posters from the Civil Rights Movement? How do you express your activism?

Additional quotes from *This is My America* to consider:

"Inside, I feared I wouldn't have the stamina. I wouldn't have enough to give Daddy and Jamal. Now I no longer have that fear. No longer have the burden of doing it alone. I stand straighter. My ancestors' strength pouring into me, fully armored so I can fight to prove their innocence." (Tracy, pages 196-197)



Alison Saar (American, b. 1956)

Sorrow's Kitchen, 2019

Acrylic on found wood and linen trunk drawer
28 x 12 x 10 inches

Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

The historical, cultural, and personal references within Alison Saar's works provoke viewers to consider multiple layers of meaning. Found objects, such as the ceiling tins and linen trunk drawers, are salvaged and transformed. Two works titled *Sorrow's Kitchen* combine many of the themes and imagery that Saar has explored for years. This title pays homage to the poignant personal narrative of writer Zora Neale Hurston (American, 1891-1960). Saar's artworks make visible Hurston's statement that "I have been in Sorrow's Kitchen and licked out all the pots." from her autobiography (*Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942). Her quote continues, "Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands."



Alison Saar (American, b. 1956)
Sorrow's Kitchen, 2020
 Wood, tin, acrylics, spray tar, ceiling tin and linoleum
 Collection of Jordan D. Schnitzer

Saar regularly uses the color blue as a sign of melancholy and cold. She has also described her creative process as similar to the musical genre of the blues: particularly, how blues performers incorporate humor into heart-wrenching songs. Saar thinks of the kitchen as a multi-purpose space: a site of creation and nourishment. During her childhood, she watched how her mother used the family's kitchen as a printmaking studio, with acid baths for her etchings in trays on the counters. In several recent works, Saar uses the tools and symbolism of a kitchen to stage domestic slaves as warriors. Skillets and silverware become weapons of reclamation in the hands of empowered Black women. In 2020, Saar created a cookbook project, titled *Recipes for Trouble*, to accompany this body of work:

http://www.lalouver.com/html/gallery-history-images/other-resources/Alison-Saar_Recipes-for-Trouble.pdf

Questions for reflection and discussion:

In *This is My America*, Tracy's close relationship with her mother is often strained by the challenges of navigating the criminal justice system and their family's hurt and upheaval due to Mr. Beaumont's wrongful conviction and the police's pursuit of Jamal. What roles do food, mealtimes, and togetherness play in the book? How does this compare to artist Alison Saar's use of kitchen imagery in her work?

In *Sorrow's Kitchen*, what might the woman be saying to her reflection? How does the base of the sculpture add to your experience and interpretation of the work?

Additional quotes from *This is My America* to consider:

"At the table, Mama leads us in grace. All heads bowed and thankful at a break from everything causing pain [...] Plates pass around, a miracle the way it washes away fear from earlier." (Tracy, page 258)

"When I'm ready, I force myself to study Mama, because I need to learn that strength so I can pass it down, like a family recipe. An heirloom. A curse." (Tracy, page 270)

Kara Walker



Kara Walker (American, b. 1969)

no world, Edition XXII/XXV, 2010

Etching with aquatint, sugar-lift, spit-bite and dry-point, printed on Hahnemuhle Copperplate Bright White 300gsm paper
27 x 39 inches

Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Irwin R. Berman; 2013:35.1

In Kara Walker's works, racial caricatures and vignettes from American slave narratives represent the enduring trauma of the transatlantic slave trade. Walker works across media—making silhouettes, paintings, installation art, and films—to speak to this legacy of racism and violence. Her frequent use of stereotypes, depictions of sexual violence, and humorous or satirical elements is intended to provoke reactions. Walker has explained, "Challenging and highlighting abusive power dynamics in our culture is my goal; replicating them is not." She currently lives and works in New York City.

no world is one of six scenes in Walker's intaglio series *An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters*. Two exaggerated characters, a plantation owner and an African man, appear in the "New World" with items that were exchanged for slaves, like tobacco and sugar. An approaching slave ship is held above the waves by human hands. The image of a Black woman underwater suggests several possibilities, among them escape, suicide, or murder. She could represent over one million slaves that never made it to shore. Equally ambiguous is the position of the viewer: witness to these events, a fellow victim in the water?

The UO's 2020-21 Common Reading theme, *Listen. Learn. Act.*, focused on The 1619 Project and the "1619" audio series hosted by Nikole Hannah-Jones for fall term. This ongoing, interactive initiative from *The New York Times Magazine* began in August 2019, the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery. The 1619 Project aims to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of our national narrative. You can access the podcast and related resources at

<https://fyp.uoregon.edu/1619-project-page>.



(Photo: Michele Crosera, <http://www.karawalkerstudio.com/biography>)

Questions for reflection and discussion:

What does the phrase “*no world*” mean to you? How does this print comment on the past as well as the present?

What does Walker’s landscape communicate to you?

In the Author’s Note for *This is My America*, Kim Johnson writes, “The death penalty is one of today’s most horrifying examples of the legacy of slavery. This is why I selected the topic of the death penalty out of many issues of mass incarceration. This history began as early as 1619, when African slaves were brought to the British colony of Jamestown, Virginia, as part of the Transatlantic slave trade” (page 394). Listen to 1619, a *New York Times* audio series hosted by Nikole Hannah-Jones, to learn the story of the Portuguese slave ship White Lion’s arrival with captive Angolan people in the Colony of Virginia in 1619, and how slavery transformed America

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/23/podcasts/1619-podcast.html>.

Additional quotes from *This is My America* to consider:

“Never imagined something like this could happen so close to home. But deep down this feeling is familiar. It runs through my veins, the blood from every generation before me passing down this fear, coded into my DNA.” (Tracy, page 271)

“Four hundred years, and we still ain’t American to them, T. All that blood. We built America. Black labor built the greatest nation in the world for free. They ripped us from our family then, and they do it again with new laws disguised as change. I’ll be in prison doing that labor for free.” (Jamal, page 298)

Lezley Saar



Painter and mixed-media artist Lezley Saar explores racial and gender identity. Her art reflects her experiences as a biracial woman who describes herself as white-passing navigating self-identification and identification by others. Often working with nineteenth-century imagery and materials, she challenges conventional ideas of beauty, normalcy, and sanity. Saar, the elder sister of artist Alison Saar, lives and works in Los Angeles.

Miss Pearly, The Transcontinental Mind Reader comes from Saar's *Gender Renaissance* series. Her adult transgender son inspired her to reexamine her own notions of gender, race, and identity. The banner's lush fabric surface has an antique appearance, but Saar actually created it with modern-day scraps from a fabric store. She depicted Miss Pearly with white hair, lashes, and eyebrows and features that could be read as masculine, feminine, or androgynous, depending on the preconceptions of viewers. None of these visual clues confirms a racial or gender identity. Miss Pearly's status as a "Transcontinental Mind Reader" suggests spiritualism, a popular form of entertainment for Victorian high society, while simultaneously referencing the improbability of reading someone else's mind.

Lezley Saar (American, b. 1953)

Miss Pearly, The Transcontinental Mind Reader, 2017

Acrylic on fabrics with fringing, braided tassels, curtain rod

85 x 45 inches

Museum purchase with funds from the Ballinger Endowment Fund; 2018:33.1



Assemblage artist Betye Saar, center, with her daughters, artists Lezley Saar, left, and Alison Saar, photographed August 28, 2016. (Carolina A. Miranda / Los Angeles Times)



(Lezley Saar at California African American Museum in Los Angeles, 2018. Photo: Gary Coronado for Los Angeles Times)

Questions for reflection and discussion:

What is traditional about Lezley Saar's portrait of Miss Pearly and what is unconventional? How does the artist contrast conformity and freedom?

How does Saar express gender and racial fluidity in this work?

Do the materials or techniques used by Saar remind you of anything? What do you think Saar wanted her choice of materials to reference?

What details in the work you are particularly attracted to?

The mother-daughter relationship, and more broadly, the parent-child relationship, is central to the narrative of *This is My America*. Through their artworks, Lezley and Alison Saar often reflect on growing up in an artistic household and what they learned from their mother, Betye Saar, a Black woman, visual artist, and feminist. Both sisters also speak openly about their biracial identities and their experiences passing for white in different spaces. In a recent interview, Lezley Saar stated "I know who I am, but I also know how I look and how I am perceived by others."

A poignant component of the story in *This is My America* is Tracy's longtime friendship with a white teenage boy, Dean Evans, and the complicated connections between the Beaumont and Evans families. Throughout the book, Tracy reflects on how each teenager and each family is perceived by others based on their racial identities: "The hurt [Dean] feels now is something I live through every day. Never knowing what lurks, what kind of ugly, racist bullshit will rear its head and hurt me. How a thing like that can easily shift my day badly. I won't fix it for him. Not in the way he wants it to be fixed—easy, without vulnerability. It's *never* been easy for me." (Tracy, pages 217-218)

Learn More:
<https://jsma.uoregon.edu/exhibitions/look-listen-learn-act>



<https://jsma.uoregon.edu/virtualtours>



Experience our new 360-degree virtual tour!

Each JSMA virtual tour allows you to stroll through the museum at your own pace, using the circle icons on the floor to navigate from location to location. You can zoom in on individual artworks, read object labels and descriptive texts by clicking on the small icons next to each work, and also access informational links, and exhibition brochures or study guides. You can also make your internet browser window larger or smaller as desired—and we recommend expanding it to full screen to take advantage of the tours' high resolution, 360-degree photos!



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