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ARTS & THEATER

# 130 artworks at the Athenaeum tell the truth about the black American experience. Here are 8 of them.

By SUSAN DUNNE  
HARTFORD COURANT  
OCT 22, 2019 | 8:06 AM





Arcmanoro Niles' 2016 oil on canvas "When We Were Young" is one of the artworks is part of "Afrocosmologies: American Reflections." (The Petrucci Family Foundation of African American Art)

“Afrocosmologies,” a new exhibit at Wadsworth Atheneum, features 130 artworks by African Americans who seek to present themselves, their world and their histories in their own way, liberated from interpretations foisted upon them by non-blacks throughout the centuries.

The exhibit, which fills galleries on the second and third floors of the Hartford museum, is a dazzling array of works created from 1885 to the present day. A few reflect the sense of anger and sorrow that one would expect considering African Americans' history of oppression. But most of the works are more celebratory, with artists glorying in their blackness and their freedom to tell the truth as they see it.



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The exhibit's curator, Frank Mitchell, wants audiences to embrace the word afroc cosmology "as an orientation that embraces the African diaspora as a way of seeing and understanding." Mitchell is director of the Amistad Center for Art & Culture.

Afroc cosmology is defined another way by Berrisford Boothe, curator of the Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African-American Art, which loaned the Atheneum 68 artworks in the show.

"We wanted to come up with a word to talk about a particular kind of new modernism," Boothe says. "How do we speak about ourselves when it's only been 100 years or so that we've been

allowed to?”

Boothe even hesitates to label the work as African American art.

“You’ve never seen a box of gay crayons or black crayons or female crayons,” he says. “This is American art. All these stories by people who live, were born, were raised, died in America.”

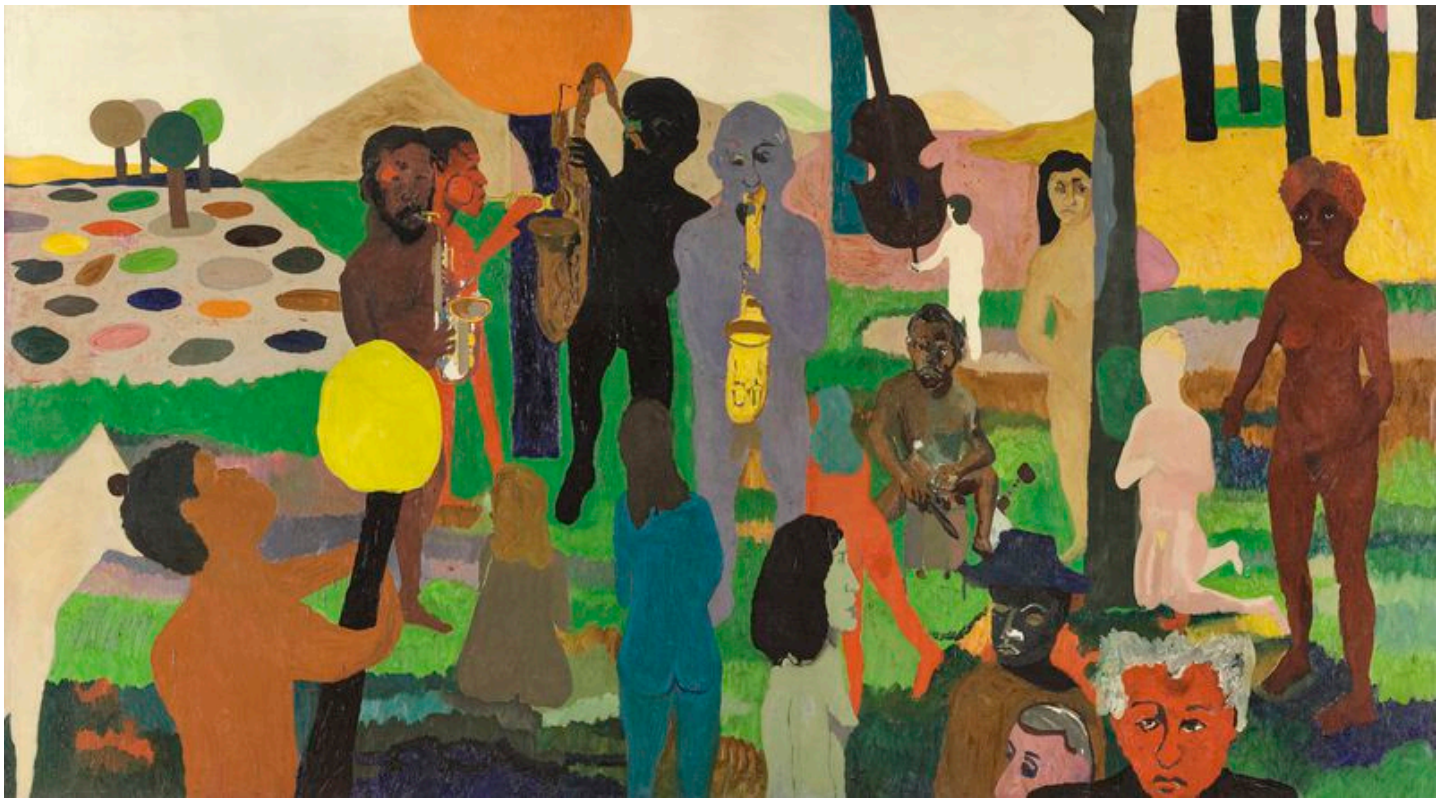
Twenty-two of the artworks are a series of 1977 screenprints by Jacob Lawrence titled “The Legend of John Brown.” Brown was an abolitionist who led a siege on Harpers Ferry and was hanged for his troubles.

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Let’s wander through “Afrocosmologies” and peer into the mind of the artists.

**‘Garden of Music’**





"Garden of Music." (Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

Bob Thompson's 1960 oil depicts naked people of all skin colors listening to music in a park. The work hangs next to a 1864 Robert Scott Duncanson oil, "Recollections of Italy," to contrast Duncanson's traditional landscape with Thompson's abstract expressionist-influenced style.

"They were both wrestling with the sublime at times in American history that nothing sublime is happening to people of African descent," says Boothe, referencing the backlash during the Civil War and Civil Rights movement. For the artists, landscape was "a point of bonding, and also a point of communion."

**‘Sunday Promenade’**





"Sunday Promenade" (Estate of Hale Woodruff / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY. The Amistad Center for Art & Culture)

Hale Woodruff's 1935 linocut shows three ladies in their Sunday



best walking away from a church as a young, stylish couple walks toward it.

“The ritual of Sunday church reinforced the community,” Mitchell says. “It was also a refuge that allowed for organizing. It also allowed leaders to arise, like Martin Luther King. The sense of community naturally encouraged spiritual leaders to have authority outside the church.”

The artwork hangs next to a display of books about King and by Coretta Scott King and Howard Thurman. Another Woodruff linocut, “African Headdress,” also is in the show.

**'Band of Angels'**



"Band of Angels: Weaving the Seventh Word." (John T. Biggers Estate / Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

John Biggers' 1992-93 painting shows a group of barefoot African women draped in robes and toting items on their heads.

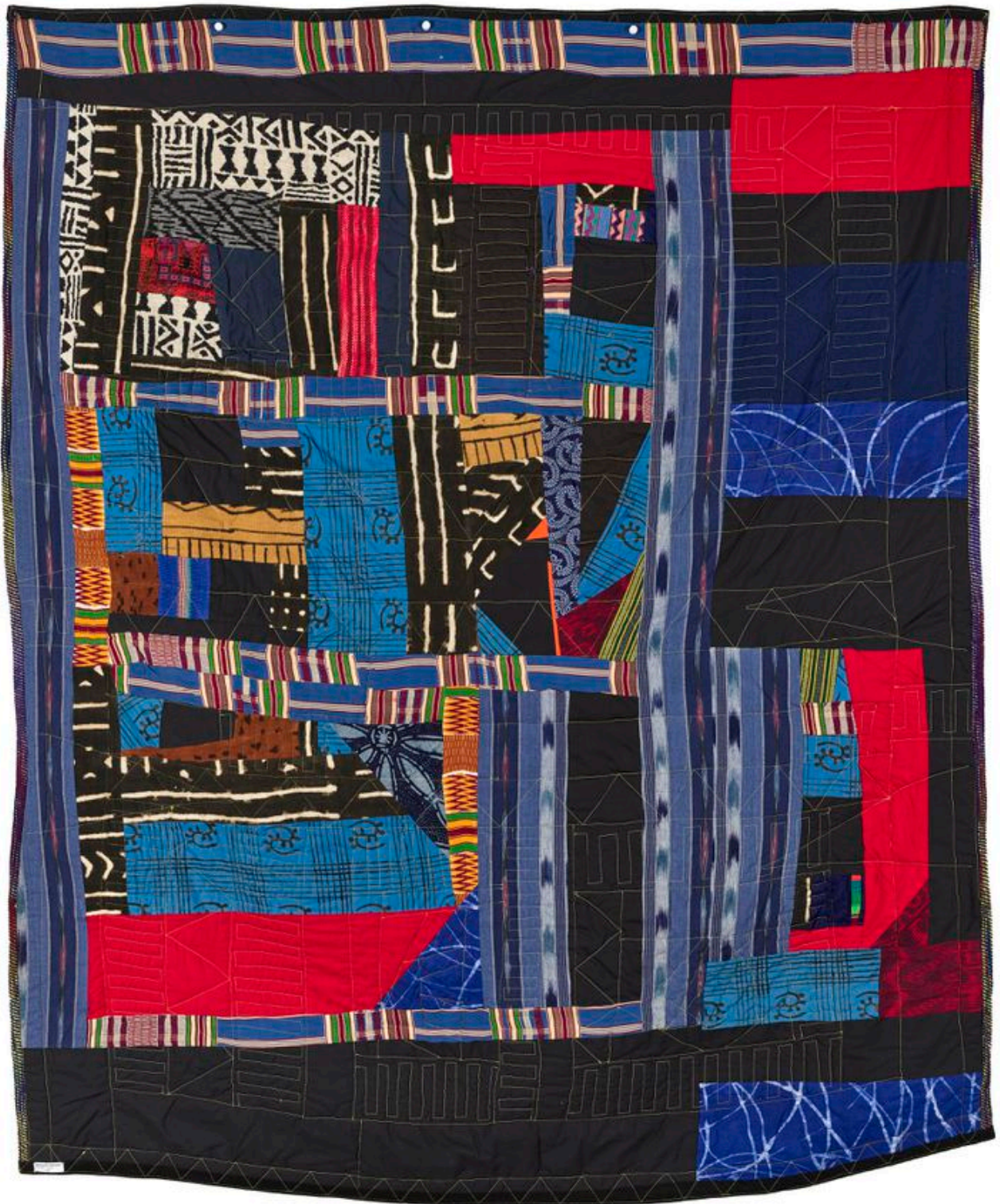
"Everything here is based on something specific, the turtles, the clothing, the boats, the birds," Boothe says. "There is a myth in Yoruba culture that thoughts are like birds. Birds and thoughts can go anywhere they want. But they have to land. Where the bird lands is where art is made."

The geometric patterns have a purpose, too.

“When you think of Africa, you don’t think of geometry. You think it’s primitive,” he says.

**‘Spirit of the Cloth’**





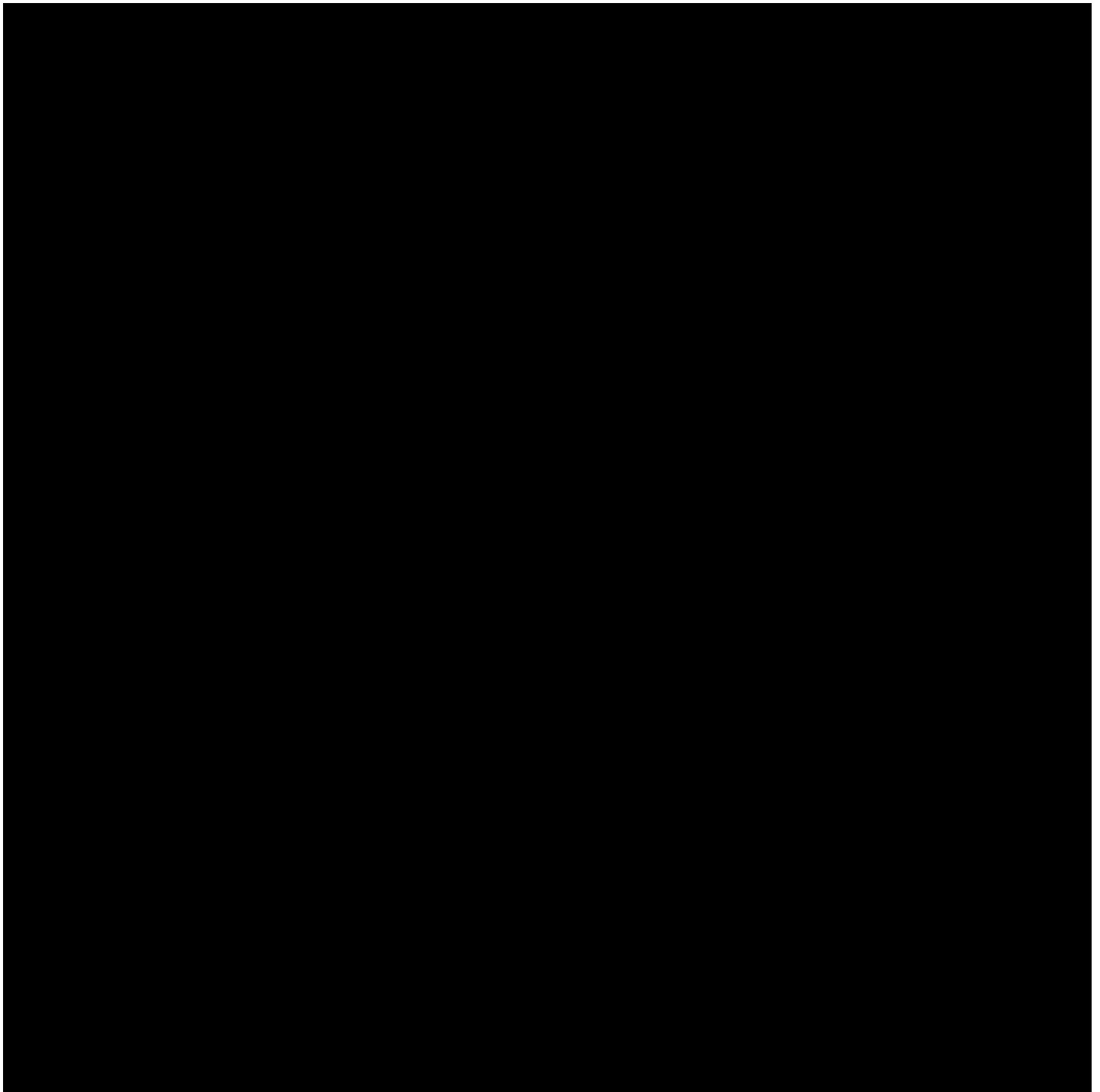
"Spirit of the Cloth." (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

Ed Johnetta Miller's asymmetrical quilt made in 1993 uses multicolored patches and bits of African cloth to make an abstract

pattern. The nation's vibrant tradition of African American female quilters is a reflection of blacks' historical tendency of "making the most with the least. It's a function of how clever we are at doing with what we have," Mitchell says.

Miller, who lives in Hartford, will do a gallery talk on Nov. 21 at noon. On Jan. 20, the last day of the exhibit, she will lead an all-ages quilting activity at the Martin Luther King Jr. Community Day from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**'Namesake'**



"Namesake." (Kenturah Davis. The Petrucci Family Foundation of African American Art)

Kenturah Davis' 2015 self-portrait was made using an ink stippling technique. Davis created an image of herself on rice paper by manipulating the text of the 13th amendment, the 1865 addition to the Constitution that ended slavery.

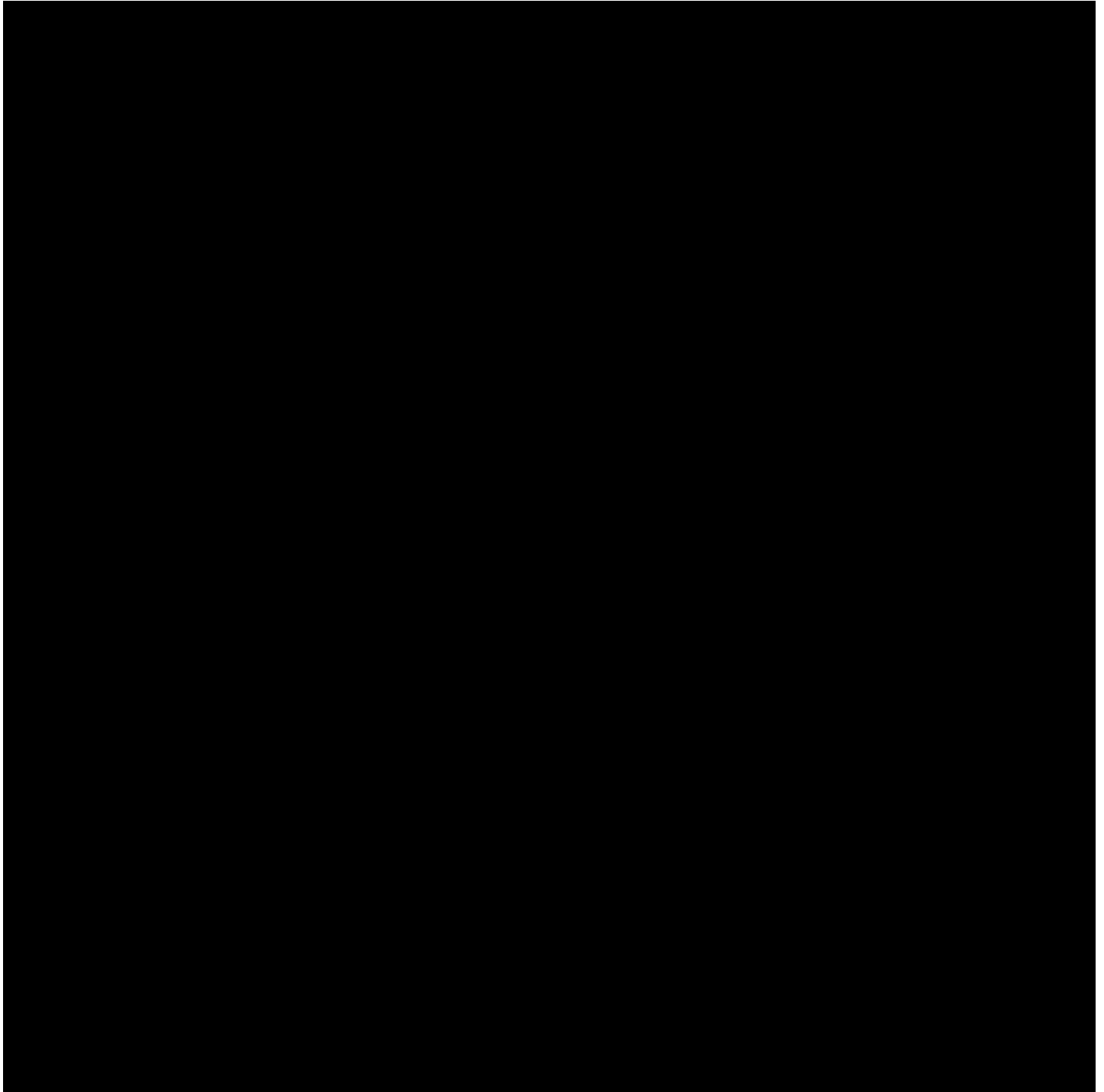
“An actual element of language is being reclaimed by an artist to speak of herself the way the general culture can’t,” Mitchell says.



“She’s deconstructing the language and reconstructing it ... writing herself into the narrative.”

Davis is a 2019 studio fellow at NXTHVN, the artist incubator set up by artist Titus Kaphar in New Haven.

## **‘Waiting’**



"Waiting." (The Petrucci Family Foundation of African American Art)

Carl Joe Williams' 2016 mixed-media work showing a young man standing and a mother, babe in arms, sitting at a bus stop. Halos circle all three of their heads. A cell phone illuminates the man's face. Williams' painting surface is a mattress.

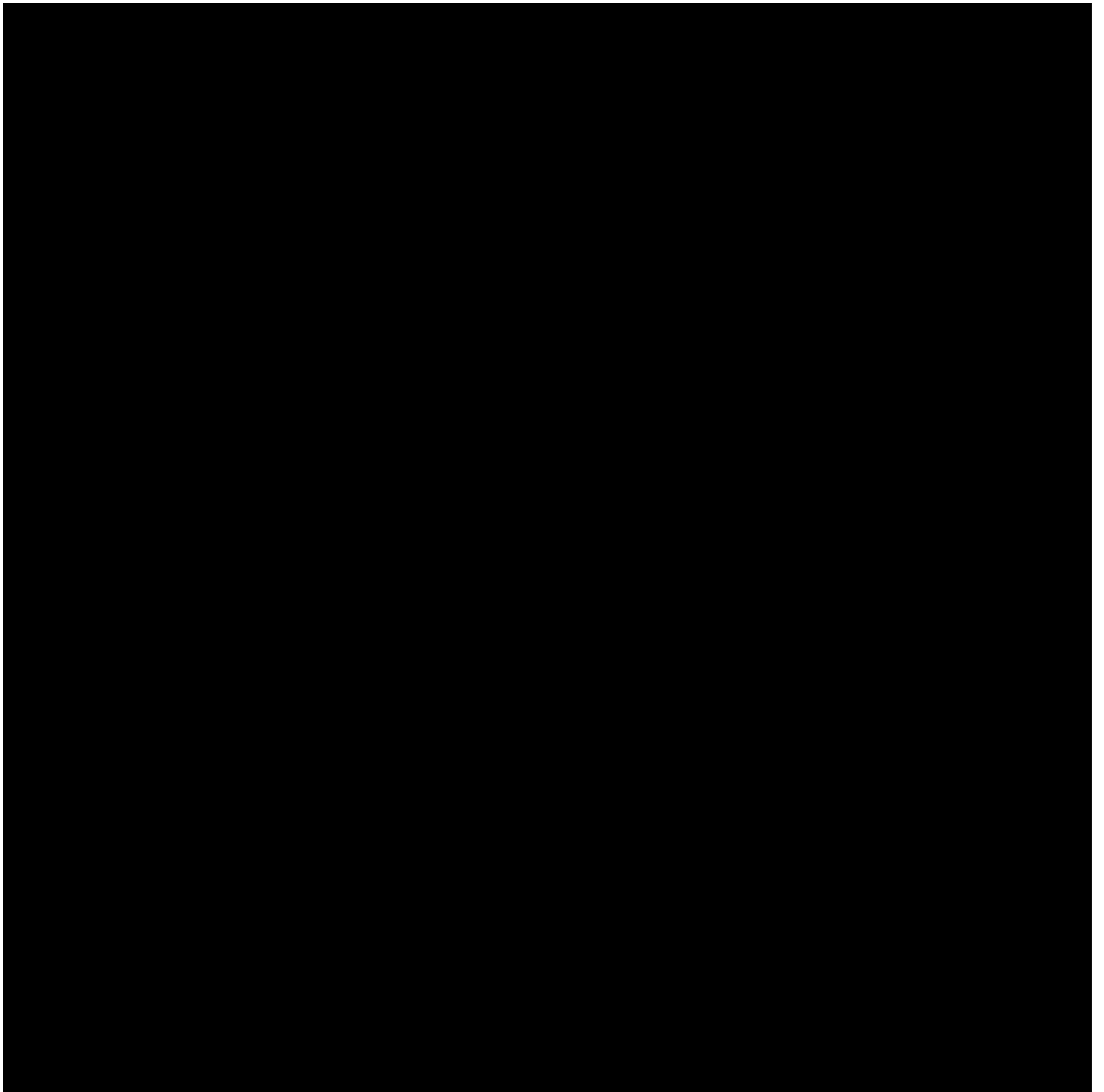
Williams is deconstructing a widely held belief, Boothe says.

“When you talk about neighborhoods of color, it's all pejorative, old dirty mattresses. On this old dirty mattress, he's basically doing neo-Cubism.”

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Williams will participate in an artists' panel on Nov. 6 at 6 p.m. with Radcliffe Bailey and Shinique Smith, moderated by Kimberly Drew.

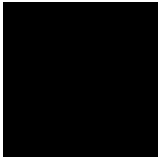
**‘Baptist’**



"Baptist." (Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art)

In Kerry James Marshall's 1992 mixed media, a black man floats in the ocean between maps of Africa and the Americas, evoking the legacy of the Middle Passage, the ocean route during the slave trade by which many kidnapped Africans died. The words "that old time religion is good enough for me" wind around the man's submerged feet.



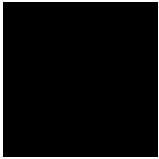


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11:59 AM

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ARTS & THEATER

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6:01 AM

Marshall "is wrestling with the African diaspora, with water, what that meant for identity," said Mitchell. Old and new gods are referenced by a series of numbered orbs, a Red Cross flag and the artwork itself, which drapes like a flag, symbolic of Haitian religion.

**AFROCOSMOLOGIES: AMERICAN REFLECTIONS** is at Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 600 Main St. in Hartford, until Jan. 20. [thewadsworth.org](http://thewadsworth.org).

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Susan Dunne



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Susan Dunne is a staff writer with a focus on arts and entertainment news. Her beat ranges from art exhibits, film festivals, books releases, residents appearing on TV or any other topic of local interest. Dunne has a journalism degree from California State University at Fullerton. Dunne came to The Courant in 1989, starting as copy editor.

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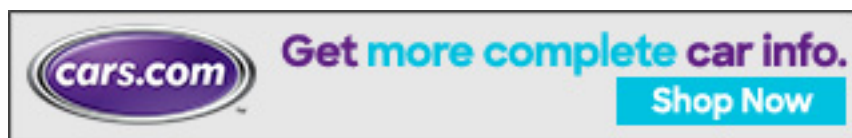
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