

Art in America



Carrie Mae Weems: *Leave! Leave Now!*, 2022, digital video installation with mixed media, 25 minutes.
Photo: COURTESY THE ARTIST AND JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

IN ABSTRACT, HAUNTING, AND POIGNANT WORKS, ARTISTS REFLECT ON THE GREAT MIGRATION IN A MAJOR EXHIBITION

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January 30, 2023

In 2021 *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow wrote an op-ed about his move from New York to Atlanta, arguing for others to follow him on a path that has been called a “second Great Migration.” He was referring, of course, to the historical period between the 1910s and 1970s, during which millions of Black Americans moved from the South throughout the United States, seeking greater economic and political opportunity. While that movement was driven largely by increasing factory jobs in the North and dire conditions in the South, the patterns of relocation during this period also included shifts to the rest of the states. Mounted during a now decades-long pattern of Black Americans returning to the South—whether to gain political majorities, as Blow advocates, or find different communities and opportunities—the exhibition “A Movement in Every Direction: Legacies of the Great Migration” illustrated this history through commissioned works by 12 contemporary artists.

Curated by Jessica Bell Brown of the Baltimore Museum of Art and Ryan Dennis of the Mississippi Museum of Art, the show started in Jackson, Mississippi, and traveled this past fall to Baltimore. Its second iteration opened with abstraction, pairing a sculpture by Torkwase Dyson with a painting by Mark Bradford. Dyson’s sculpture comprises four black trapezoidal prisms nearly 7 feet tall made of steel and glass, arranged symmetrically on the floor; connected by black steel armatures, they suggest an ancient navigational tool, and evoke the movement of the show’s title. Each shape tapers toward its opposite, and, as one walks around them, their tones shift, manifesting both reflection and transparency. Bradford’s painting is a grid of vibrant yellow and black panels, based on an advertisement from a 1913 issue of the NAACP

magazine *The Crisis* that sought Black families to move to Blackdom, New Mexico. This archival record, reproduced on each panel with raised lettering made with a caulking gun, is evident only on close inspection. From afar, the piece seems to depict flickers of fire glowing in the night sky.

Whether an invitation to a utopian future or the trace of a faded memory, many works that were on view point to a community whose distance from the present is emphasized through abstraction, a formal strategy that can reduce images to their most basic elements. As with an object moving toward a horizon, historical distance can reduce evident detail. Leslie Hewitt's three minimal sculptures from 2022, which were spread throughout the exhibition, for example, are small geometric forms made of wood, metal, and glass that echo the fragmented architectural contours of her grandmother's family's home in Macon, Georgia—a domestic space that also served the community as an upholstery shop and grocery store. Disconnected from each other, and from the site to which they allude, these shapes, like Dyson's, evoke migration as a state in which a subject feels abstracted from a place of origin.

Many artists in the show alluded to the racial dynamics of architecture and urbanism. Zoë Charlton's sculptural installation *Permanent Change of Station* (2022) includes, within a large drawing and sculpture, a drawn depiction of an aerial view of Levittown, Pennsylvania, a 1950s planned community famous for excluding African Americans. Allison Janae Hamilton's three-channel video installation *A House Called Florida* (2022) centers on a seemingly haunted house in a region of northern Florida referred to as the Forgotten Coast, vulnerable to hurricanes and flooding. The ghostly presence in Hamilton's video might be the specter of all those who left during the Great Migration, after the frustrations of failed land ownership efforts like the Southern Homestead Act of 1866. Finally, *The Double Wide* (2022), a sculptural installation in which Theaster Gates pays homage to his uncle's trailer in Mississippi, features framed family photographs, rows of jarred pickles, and a two-channel video depicting a performance by Gates's ensemble, The Black Monks. A candy store in the daytime and a juke joint by night, this double-wide, like Hewitt's grandmother's house, was an example of the multivalent innovations of Southern Black architecture.

The play of language in Hewitt's titles—each includes the terms *slow drag*, *barely moving*, and *imperceptible* in a different order—relates to the performative use of language in *A*ray* (2022), a video installation by Steffani Jemison that features Lokia Black, a TikTok performer from Alabama. In one scene we see her working with an acting teacher to broaden her emotional range. She says, "Just wait till you see where I go next" with sadness, then with jealousy, then with bitterness. The phrase, repeated again and again and again, suggests the internal monologue of someone making a trek away from home. But the work also implies that first-person narratives are an important component of the historical record.

Storytelling is at the center of Robert Pruitt's monumental drawing *A Song for Travelers* (2022), which depicts 16 people gathered around a central figure who is wearing a costume inspired by ceramics in the Texas Southern University collection. The composition is based on a candid ca. 1980 photograph of a Pruitt family backyard gathering; the artist has inserted additional details alluding to stories about his family's migration from rural Texas to Houston. Though the narratives are indirectly conveyed, their drama is evident in the characters' fantastical costumes, inspired by archival images of church choir members, Masons, soldiers, and civil rights leaders. Their story highlights the fact that the Great Migration did not just include moves from the South to other parts of the US, but also from rural to urban centers within the South.

Concluding the exhibition was a powerful and more purely narrative work, *Leave! Leave Now!* (2022) by Carrie Mae Weems, a video installation resembling an old theater in which the artist and her sister tell the story of their grandfather Frank, who was a member of the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union, and worked on land in Arkansas. After he was attacked by racist union busters and almost beaten to death, he fled to Chicago on foot. Red velvet curtains come to read as tinged with the violence of this tale, while a trick projection conjures the uncanny presence of her relative.

Weems's work was key to the show: it shares a story of how and why people fueled the Great Migration without resorting to archival materials or aesthetics. (The curators instead published a critical reader that compiles primary documents.) As an exhibition reflecting on a history and legacy, "A Movement in Every Direction" brought together artists who act like historians but blur the boundary between the institutional and the personal. Their works make up a collective archive that

is shifting in form: The body is an archive. Architecture is an archive. Language is an archive. History is lived by people, and this exhibition gave us an opportunity to track the Great Migration's impact through stories told by artists it shaped.