

## DAZED



“After the Dance”, Danielle Mckinney, 2022

Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

### 5 CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS REFRAMING THE BLACK FIGURE

BY ELLIOT HOSTE

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Back in February, “The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure” opened at the National Portrait Gallery in London, a major study of Blackness via contemporary artists from the African diaspora. In it, there was Lubaina Himid’s painting *Le Rodeur: Exchange*, with its suavely-dressed inhabitants, sharpened lines and bird-headed chimera; the reflective figure of Claudette Johnson’s *Kind of Blue*, staidly sprawled across a deep cobalt canvas; the kaleidoscopic clothing of Amy Sherald’s *She was learning to love moments, to love moments for themselves*; and the studied brush strokes of Hurvin Anderson, Michael Armitage, Jordan Casteel and more. With a vision executed by writer and exhibit curator Ekow Eshun – and a title taken from an essay on desegregation by James Baldwin – the show carried out its goal to “illuminate the richness and complexity of Black life”, and since then has found a new home, three and a half thousand miles away, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

And with a new location comes additional artists to expand and build upon that original London vision. “We’re in Philadelphia, we’re in a place which is almost more than 40 per cent Black. You want to do justice to that history and the cultural heritage of the city,” says Eshun of the exhibit’s transfer to the PMA, which he guest curated alongside Sarah Howgate, Erica Battle and Yocari De Los Santos. “We expanded the show, we brought in a couple more artists – Philadelphia-based artists like Jonathan Lyndon Chase – to speak back to the city... hopefully to have a conversation with

the city as a whole.” Below, we run through the five artists added to the exhibition for its US debut, who are all using their mediums to work towards a reframing of the Black figure in Philadelphia.

## ROBERT LUGO



“Maribel and Child” from the Della Robske series, Robert Lugo, 2023  
Photo: Courtesy of the artist and R & Company

First up is Robert Lugo, the Puerto Rican American ceramicist and one of the few artists in the collection not using paint on canvas as their medium. Before gaining his bachelor’s degree at Kansas Art Institute, and a master’s at Penn State, Lugo grew up in a working class immigrant community of Philadelphia’s Kensington neighbourhood and found a creative outlet in graffiti art as a teenager. If you live in Philly, or have visited for a while, you may have seen remnants of Lugo’s tag, Robske, dotted on buildings around the city.

It’s a moniker he continues to incorporate into his work today, on ceramic work that references Renaissance statuary, but remade through a Black and Afro-Latino lens. A piece in “The Time is Always Now”, *Maribel and Child*, reimagines the work of 15th-century Italian sculptor Luca della Robbia, the Madonna and child switched out for his own mother Maribel holding an infant version of himself. With these reimagined versions, Lugo questions the legitimacy of the history of Western art, one that has obviously excluded people who look like him, recentering his own family as figures of adoration. But though the work is brightly coloured like della Robbia’s originals, the small detail of an ink-black balaclava on the infant child immediately stands out, a musing on the imagined futures of working class Black and Latin children across America.

## KUDZANAI-VIOLET HWAMI



“Murapi”, Kudzanai-Violet Hwami, 2023

Photo: Private collection

Zimbabwe-born, London-based artist Kudzanai-Violet Hwami was also introduced into *TTIAN* for its Philadelphia run. With solo exhibitions around the world and her work included in the 2019 Venice Biennale, Hwami emerged as a talent since graduating from Wimbledon College of the Arts in 2016. Concerned with “deconstructing the visual representation of identity and how we experience the digital world,” Hwami brings together both digital renders and brush strokes to explore spirituality, her queer identity and the culture of her home country. At the PMA, the artist’s exploration of a double reality can be seen in *Murapi*, where pixelated canopies and crimson brush strokes combine to create a glitched-out vision of a contemplative Black figure, who could be either loading into view or dissolving from the frame completely.

## JONATHAN LYNDON CHASE

You might’ve recently heard Jonathan Lyndon Chase’s name thanks to Swedish label [Acne Studios](#), who enlisted the Philadelphia artist to construct the set for its [SS25 Paris Fashion Week show](#). Some of the figures sprawled across those Chase-designed pieces of furniture were not too dissimilar to those in his paintings, where the artist “explores the intersections of Blackness, queerness, and gender through sensual, vibrant scenes.”

With bodies which are both fully formed and abstract at once, Chase’s often disproportionate figures occupy a world between fantasy and mundanity, or comfort and unease. The work chosen for the PMA, *3 Heads and 4 Lamps*, is exemplary of that blistering style, depicting what seems to be the everyday scene of a living room kickback – until you notice the four unlit lamps rendered two-dimensional from their disuse, the vacuum of colour in place of a sofa which acts to consume its sedentary figures, and a disembodied head floating near the torso of one of the seated men. “Chase’s painted lines

articulate an interior space,” says the exhibition catalogue, “yet this scene is purposefully ambiguous and imbued with a mix of vulnerability, trust, intimacy, and exposure.”

## ARTHUR TIMOTHY



“And the Clamour Became a Voice (E Il Clamore è Divenuto Voce)”, Arthur Timothy, 2023

Photo: Courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art

Ghanaian painter Arthur Timothy is known for depicting what he refers to as “moments frozen in time.” The artist’s muses tend to be friends and relatives from Accra, with Timothy using old family photographs as a starting point for some of his works, then recasting the figures in a new light. This much can be said for *And the Clamour Became a Voice (E Il Clamore è Divenuto Voce)*, chosen by Eshun and his co-curators for *TTIAN*. In it, two figures in brightly coloured dresses and a little boy in a Spiderman hoodie are depicted standing beneath arched columns in a way that reinterprets European painters from the 16th and 17th centuries, like Caravaggio and Diego Velázquez. “Placing contemporary Black people in these compositions and spaces, Timothy imbues them with magisterial power while confronting centuries of exclusion,” write the curators in the catalogue.

## DANIELLE MCKINNEY



“After the Dance”, Danielle Mckinney, 2022

Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Marianne Boesky Gallery, New York and Aspen

The New Jersey artist Danielle Mckinney originally trained as a photographer, and you can tell just by looking at her work. Depicting everyday scenes of Black women, the paintings are arranged like cinematic vignettes, with Mckinney beginning by laying down a black background on the canvas and then allowing the women to materialise from the darkness. For *TTIAN*, Eshun and co selected Mckinney’s work *After the Dance*, which portrays a woman sleeping on a green sofa in front of a Matisse painting. The ‘Dance’ of the title refers to Matisse’s “La Danse” of which is depicted in Mckinney work, but the title’s meaning seems to be twofold. It’s possible that the sleeping figure could be returning from the club, literally kicking back “after the dance” – but it also suggests that *this* is what comes after Matisse’s “La Danse”: a bold reassertion of the Black female figure in the lineage of contemporary art.

Like her colleagues within the exhibition, McKinney’s invoking of well-known Masters, in this case Matisse, clearly works to recentre Blackness in the canon of Western art, but Eshun offers an alternative perspective, reminding us that the conversation isn’t always oppositional. “These artists, they’re based in the UK, they’re based in the US, other places, too. They’re also, in themselves, heirs to the history of Western art, and are drawing on that themselves as well,” Eshun says. “It’s not *necessarily* just about reframing, it’s also about drawing from and saying, ‘actually, look – I claim this as part of my own cultural heritage, too.’”

*The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure* is on at the Philadelphia Museum of Art until February 9, 2025.