

Time framed

NEW BMA EXHIBITION PUTS 1963 IN AN ARTISTIC PERSPECTIVE



ERNEST WITHERS, "I AM A MAN."

Art fulfills many roles in society: it informs, it provokes, it decorates. One of its most powerful functions, though, is as response to monstrosity. A famous example is Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, without which visceral painting arguably no one would remember the murderous and unprovoked bombing of that small village during the Spanish Civil War.

This Sunday, the Birmingham Museum of Art will open perhaps its most historically significant exhibition ever.

Entitled *Etched in Collective History* and curated by Dr. Jeffreen Hayes, this collection of contemporary works seeks to deal artistically with the Civil Rights Movement in general and the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing in particular.

As Dr. Hayes has written, "This exhibition presents multi-media works: photographs, sculpture, installation, collage, paintings, prints and drawings that demonstrate the diversity in both art making and artists' responses to the movement, death, race, violence, memory, loss and hope." Some of the images are jarring, such as Spider Martin's 1965 photograph, *Who Needs Niggers?* or Demetrius Oliver's chromogenic print, *Till*. Some are thought-provoking, such as Theaster Gates's *Civil Tapestries*, constructed in part from decommissioned firehoses. Some are profoundly moving, such as Whitfield Lovell's conte on paper, *Kin VIII (1619)* or Chris McNair's photograph of his late daughter, Denise. The works compiled for *Etched in Collective History* challenge a spectator's preconceived notions of what 1963 really meant to Birmingham.

Museum Director Gail Andrews wrote, "Believing that artists are among our best guides in leading us to new ways of seeing and understanding the world around us, we invited some of the most highly-regarded young contemporary artists working today to come to Birmingham." One such is acclaimed New York artist Shinique Smith, designer of a special installation invoking the memories of the four victims of the church bombing.

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Weld: What does the title of this exhibition mean to you?

Shinique Smith: To me, it means moments in our history that we all share, as Americans and as human beings, intergenerationally.

Weld: What was your first connection, artistically or otherwise, to Birmingham?

SS: This show!

Weld: You were raised by your mom up in Baltimore. Do you see any similarities between Charm City and the Magic City?

SS: Somewhat. I mean, we're a little farther north, Southerners who are considered Northerners. Baltimore does have certain qualities as far as hospitality, and Baltimore's also predominantly black, so there's a lot of similarities there.

Weld: You were as yet unborn when the Klan did their murders at the church downtown. How did you orient yourself to take on the challenge of dealing with this event artistically?

SS: That's the thing. I don't have firsthand knowledge of the Civil Rights Movement and that event. I was born in 1971, so my closest connection to that is my family. My mom was born in 1953, and my grandparents are from Virginia, so the older members of my family had to go through Jim Crow and the Movement. My mother was a little younger than the girls who were killed in the bombing, so I can relate to it all from the people that I know and my own personal experiences being a woman, growing up in America. When I approach it artistically, I don't feel I can illustrate the event, but I take all the research and testimonial type of things and see what other things I can relate that to, to make it grounded within myself.



CHRIS MCNAIR, "HUMAN DIGNITY."
IMAGE COURTESY OF THE
BIRMINGHAM MUSEUM OF ART.

My work for the show is really inspired by children and starts with the four girls at the core of it, but when I was asked to do this show, I couldn't help but be emotional also about Sandy

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

Hook and, more recently, Trayvon Martin. So I think my piece is taking all that in, and the girls, what their lives could have been like, and kind of interweave all those things through objects, and come to an epiphany, an emotional release through these objects.

Weld: It sounds as though you're approaching your installation through the point of view that the Civil Rights Movement is less an historical fact than a present, continuing reality.

SS: Yeah. History is ever-present and breathing and living and being rewritten as our culture evolves.

Weld: In some of your previous works, especially one you did for the Mother Clara Hale Bus Depot in Harlem, a child's perspective seems to be an especially important element. Were you able to see the world through the eyes of the Four Little Girls in this installation?

SS: I feel like I go in and out of that. With all my work, to a certain extent, I approach it with my child-vision. I try to recreate that feeling of discovery that I felt when I was a kid, using modest materials or whatever's available to create, you know, Barbie clothes or a fort; the kind of wonder and mystery you could find in everyday objects. So, with this, I've read and tried to find information about the girls, and listened to some documentaries to find out what their interests were, so that I could get to know them a little better.

They're halted in time, because they're forever children. They never got to grow up, so, in my mind, when I'm working with some of the objects, I think, "Maybe they would have liked this," or that kind of vibration. Also, thinking about the potential that they could have had, or their futures, where their interests might have been and where they could have gone, I've tried to interweave some of that into the piece.

But sometimes those ideas are bigger than one mere work of art. I feel like the experience of doing this piece — the things I've achieved in it and haven't achieved — will filter into my next work.

Weld: *The New York Times* recently reported that you would be incorporating dollhouses, for example, into this installation. Can you tell us a little about how you're bringing all this about?

SS: I guess it did begin with that. I had been collecting dollhouses because I had this idea, really a dream, of a piece I was making that had such structures in it. I wasn't sure what I was going to do with them, and then I started to discuss ideas for this show with Jeffreen Hayes. The dollhouses were new and present, so I took the four largest ones as the core objects and started

JAMES COHAN GALLERY

from there, incorporating toys and books and some clothing and shoes, sourced from Birmingham, in the piece.

For me, it's a huge honor to be part of this, to work with this kind of curatorial vision. Jeffreen has really been supportive in letting my idea breathe and evolve. It's daunting, but I go back and forth, because I always want to do well and work as strong as I can, and that's affecting, but I also kind of feel like I want Birmingham to be proud of me. My only hope is that people who view my work in the exhibition can pull some relationship out of it, and some sense of reflection and lightness. And when they go through the show, for sure, they're going to be touched.