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An Exhibition in Upstate New York Is Redefining How Museums Convey Black Trauma

Alex Greenberger

Installation view of "Black Melancholia," 2022, at CCS Bard Hessel Museum of Art. COURTESY CCS BARD HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART

When art historian Nana Adusei-Poku visited the Neue Nationalgalerie's 2006 exhibition "Melancholy: Genius and Madness in Art," she was struck by the vision of sadness that the Berlin museum had to offer. She was impressed by the breadth of the show, which featured well over 250 works, many of which had something in common with Albrecht Dürer's famed 1514 engraving Melencolia I, in which a sad-looking angel and a forlorn putto appear lost in thought. But looking at all the art on view, she saw nothing that resembled her own experience. "Where are all the people of

color?” she thought to herself.

More than 15 years on, Adusei-Poku has curated her own exhibition in response, “Black Melancholia,” which is on view at Bard College’s Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York, through October 16. Although it is only a fraction of the size “Melancholy,” with only 38 works, its ambitions far exceed its scale.

With “Black Melancholia,” Adusei-Poku has set out to redefine how museums convey trauma, grief, and alienation as they are experienced by the Black community. It’s a bold goal, especially at a time when shows like this one are slowly becoming more common at major U.S. institutions—consider the case of “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” one of curator Okwui Enwezor’s final shows, which filled all of New York’s New Museum last year. But “Black Melancholia” bucks the trend by looking beyond the current moment to explain how past pangs of sadness continue to ripple out toward the present.

In an interview, Adusei-Poku said she wanted “to talk about a condition that has existed basically since Enlightenment. It holds Black subjects and subjectivity within a space of uncertainty, pain, sorrow, and loss, within potentials that are certainly not going to be actualized.” What she ended up with was an idiosyncratic show that spans several centuries, with work by few artists that are well-known to the general public.

Walter Price, Global Outcry, 2018–20. COURTESY CCS BARD HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART

Her sensibility is obvious from the jump, when viewers enter an initial gallery that mostly contains artworks from the 20th century. Rose Piper’s undated painting Grievin’ Hearted shows a Black figure whose face is cradled in his bent arm; a Black woman looks on forlornly in the background. (The Piper piece is from the Clark Atlanta University, one of several HBCUs that lent to the show.) Hope for the Future, a 1945 Charles White print, shows a Black mother holding her child as she gazes out a window,

toward a noose hanging from a leafless branch in the distance. Sculptures by William Artis and Selma Burke depict figures that clutch their legs, communicating a mixture of mournfulness, anxiety, and agony.

The centerpiece of that first gallery is evidence of an object that no longer exists: Augusta Savage's ca. 1938 sculpture Realization, which showed a man slumped against a half-nude woman's leg. The work, like many others by Savage, was lost, and the only remaining traces of it exist as photographs.

The gesture to include only images of Savage's sculpture, and not the work itself, is the exhibition's "most melancholic" one, according to Adusei-Poku. It's a move that best expresses the metaphorical kinds of violence evoked in this show, which is entirely devoid of images explicitly depicting police killings, the horrors of slavery and the Jim Crow era, and economic disenfranchisement.

"This is a show about being in that space where you know that you will potentially be in some way or another subjected to violence, that your ancestors have been subjected to violence," Adusei-Poku said. "It's about the sadness that that evokes in you"—the "you," of course, being not the white viewers museums typically address, but the Black ones who were so long ignored by them.

From here, the show's timeline flits between the past and present. It reaches as far back as the 19th century, with an 1885 nightscape showing a dark sea by Edward Mitchell Bannister, and all the way up to today. There's even a Rashid Johnson film that shows the artist and his family as they numbly went about their daily rituals during the 2020 lockdown.

Ain Bailey, Untitled (Our Wedding) (still), 2022. COURTESY CCS BARD HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART

In Adusei-Poku's hands, history feels unstable—that is very much her point. She wanted to evoke lineages and legacies that had been lost, and to spotlight attempts to reclaim them.

One arrives courtesy of photographer Lyle Ashton Harris, whose 2020 work Succession features an array of images that are tinted red, yellow, and green—the hues of the flag of Ghana, where his distant ancestors, whom he cannot trace, came from, and where he taught for a period at New York University's Accra campus. Another comes via Ain Bailey, whose 2022 film Untitled (Our Wedding) features close-ups of old photographs from her parents' marriage. As her camera pores over

the images, they become grainy, even semi-abstract, as though this history was slipping away from her.

"In the Black diaspora," Adusei-Poku said, "you do not have the capacity to even give your legacy to the next generation because you're constantly busy with the systemic racism that you're subjected to. It's much more than just the brute violence against the body—it's psychological."

Bailey's film lies at the show's halfway point, and by the time most viewers get there, they will have noticed the exhibition's stylized design. There are no white cubes in "Black Melancholia," which is a risk—too many tweaks to the traditional museum-show formula, and an exhibition risks collapsing under the weight of its own frilliness. But Adusei-Poku has pulled it off.

The art historian, who previously taught at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies, said, "My students are always very upset about the white cube—there's always one paper about it. I thought to myself: Well, let me try to demonstrate what you can do with what we're learning here and create a much more complex picture."

The entrance to the exhibition and the walls of its first gallery are covered in white curtaining—a reference, Adusei-Poku said, to the Arnold Bode's 1955 Documenta exhibition in Kassel, Germany. That Documenta was staged at a time when Germany was still reeling from the anti-Semitic, homophobic, and racist carnage of the Holocaust, and Bode had sincerely hoped that modern art would aid in the healing process. The 1955 Documenta ended up replicating some of the same wartime power dynamics—there were no Black artists included, although there were many Jewish ones whose art might have been deemed "degenerate" by the Nazis no more than a decade earlier. (Recent research has revealed that one of the exhibition's key advisers as well as other organizers had all been members of the Nazi Party.) In wall text at the start of the show, Adusei-Poku writes she, like Bode, wanted the curtains to signal "a new beginning" to art history.

Later galleries are painted in shades of black and blue. The latter hue was borne from demands by Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle and Alberta Whittle, two artists in the show, that their work be exhibited against certain blue tones. They both submitted Pantone paint chips of their choosing, and Adusei-Poku was delighted that they ended up with similar ones. She also noted that, in 18th-century England, blue was associated with sadness.

Charisse Pearlina Weston works in “Black Melancholia.” COURTESY CCS BARD HESSEL MUSEUM OF ART

Blackness unfurls a complex series of associations within Adusei-Poku’s show. One of the exhibition’s central works is Roy DeCarava’s widely seen 1953 photograph of a dark hallway in a Harlem building. Its void-like space plays elegantly off others in the show, such as the ones evoked by the young artist Charisse Pearlina Weston, who displays an untitled 2017 photographic work in which she scratched away at an abstract black print to reveal a squarish section of hatched canvas beneath it. There are also figures who are rendered in shades of black, such as the male nude in Cy Gavin’s Bather (Tom Moore’s Jungle), 2019, whose upper half dissolves into its pink-toned background like a puff of smoke.

“It points to a long history of the representation of the Black body, of Blackness, and the relationship to the non-color black,” Adusei-Poku said.

Discussing influences on her curation for the exhibition, Adusei-Poku mentioned thinkers like Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, and Christina Sharpe, as well as the concept of Afropessimism, the idea, initially put forward by scholars like Frank B. Wilderson III and Orlando Patterson, that Black people exist in a constant state of “social death.” She did not seem to mind, however, if those who come to “Black Melancholia” are unfamiliar with any of this scholarship.

What she wanted, instead, was for viewers to encounter art in this exhibition and to come away with more expansive ideas that can’t be put simply—to go beyond concepts such as “Black joy,” which she described as a “neoliberal concept” that she “could never relate to” because it forces Black people like

her to wonder why they aren’t happy. She added, “There is a notion of melancholy that I want to situate outside of the binary.”