PROMENADE

FLOWERS AND FIGURATION IN THE MARIELUISE HESSEL COLLECTION

Both a verb and a noun, the word “promenade” describes a leisurely walk or stroll, as well as the place where said strolling is done. A promenade is taken for pleasure, display, or exercise. It is a performance, a presentation, an exhibition of the self. This exhibition offers a promenade of sorts—a place to wander among a selection of paintings, photographs, and sculptures from the Marieluise Hessel Collection that span art historical contexts.

Promenade is designed to mimic the symmetrical architecture of large landscaped gardens like that of Blithewood manor, which lies just west of the Center for Curatorial Studies. Many of the works are layered with patterns and feature the recurring presence of flowers and plants as both visual motifs and subjects. The artworks on view share a preoccupation with identity, illuminating the ways intensely personal experiences and broader political and cultural conditions shape the self—a theme that runs throughout the Hessel Collection.

Promenade: Flowers and Figuration in the Marieluise Hessel Collection is curated by Lucas Ondak and Luke Whittaker.

KUDZANAI CHIURAI AND KEHINDE WILEY

Due to their scale and position, two works in *Promenade* stand as visual compass points: Kudzanai Chiurai's *Tea Party* (2021) and Kehinde Wiley's *Portrait Abdoulaye Thiaw* (2021).

In *Tea Party*, two figures look forward with expressions that are difficult to discern. Near the bottom of the painting, the rich black background dissolves into an abstract explosion of colorful lines, a disembodied arm, and scribbled block letters that spell "AND YET." Chiurai, a multidisciplinary artist and activist, uses his practice to examine sociopolitical and economic issues in Zimbabwe, South Africa, and the wider African continent. In 2008, he self-exiled from Zimbabwe after facing arrest for a series of murals and posters he created criticizing the government.

The gaze of the figures in *Tea Party* is met by a contemplative expression from the sitter in *Portrait Abdoulaye Thiaw*, as if they are in conversation. Though Wiley sets his subjects against backgrounds that

appropriate the conventions of 18th-century European aristocratic portraiture, they often wear modern clothes: T-shirts, hoodies, jeans, baseball caps, sneakers. This contrast is an overt critique and correction of the erasure of African American presence in art historical narratives.

SAMUEL FOSSO, ROBERT MAPPLETHORPE, AND MALICK SIDIBÉ

Within the Hessel Collection, Mapplethorpe is a pivotal figure: he was the first photographer Marieluise Hessel acquired before she went on to collect hundreds of photographs—589 by over 200 artists to date. A critically acclaimed and consistently controversial artist, Mapplethorpe's work and legacy are often a part of contemporary artistic discourse. For instance, a wide-ranging 2019 exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, entitled *Implicit Tensions*, considered the agency of his sitters and the representation of homoerotic desire, the female figure, and the Black male nude, among other topics within his work. In the exhibition, works by Mapplethorpe were shown alongside an expansive presenta-

tion of photographic work by contemporary artists, including *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93) by Glenn Ligon, which critically responded to Mapplethorpe's presentation of Black men.

Promenade presents a selection of four works by Mapplethorpe from the seventy-three included in the Collection, including two self-portraits and two iconic images of flowers, which have often been interpreted as metaphorical stand-ins to the human body. These photographs are placed alongside works by artists Malick Sidibé and Samuel Fosso, both of whom portrayed Black subjects in ways that center agency, history, and personal expression.

Fosso is known for his "autoportraits," where he photographed himself in 1970s fashion as well as in costume, dressing up as recognizable figures such as Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Angela Davis. Before he was 14, the artist opened his own portrait studio in the Central African Republic, where he began creating the autoportraits as a way to fill unused camera film. Similarly, Sidibé used a portrait studio in his practice. He invited the individuals and groups he photographed to bring cherished belongings, props, and outfits to his studio. Working after Mali's indepen-

dence from France, his images capture a particular moment in the country's history when individual and collective presentation was in a state of flux.

MANUEL ÁLVAREZ BRAVO, HANS-PETER FELDMANN, RACHEL HARRISON, GABRIEL OROZCO, AND ROSEMARIE TROCKEL

In this grouping, the work of each artist reveals how the human form persists as a prevailing interest in the Hessel Collection, even as it is abstracted or intentionally withheld from view. The *idea* of a person persists in the figurative foliage of Manuel Álvarez Bravo's photography, in the ghostly smoke rising from the cement building in Gabriel Orozco's image, in the outstretched hands in Rachel Harrison's photograph, in the missing child in Hans-Peter Feldmann's photo, and in the suspended sweater in Rosemarie Trockel's collage.

NIKKI S. LEE AND GORDON PARKS

In an image from *The Ohio Project* (1999), the photographer Nikki S. Lee sits in a tube top beside an unkempt white man pointing a gun at the Confederate flag. Directly across, American flags fly over Gordon Parks's images of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. These photographs highlight tensions in American identity: to some, the flags instill fear or trepidation, while others see them as expressions of freedom.

An author, composer, and photographer, Parks was inspired to pick up a camera in 1938 after encountering the work of the Farm Security Administration (FSA) photographers, such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans. Parks later joined the FSA himself, and in 1948 he became the first African American staff photographer for *Life*, photographing portraits, political events, and culture as well as images of war, international poverty, and gang violence. His work draws international parallels between conditions of oppression, political movements, and moments in peoples' everyday lives.

Lee draws on the visual language of social documentary photography like that of Parks. For her various *Projects* series, the artist studied communities for months, learning their gestures and dress codes, before taking on a persona and photographing herself as a fabricated member of that group. Lee's work pushes the boundaries between identifications, recasting them as ambiguous, fluid, and even self-determined.

ZOHRA OPOKU, PAMELA PHATSIMO SUNSTRUM, AND LINA IRIS VIKTOR

Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum, Zohra Opoku, and Lina Iris Viktor share a visual language. All three artists fashion multi-layered works imbued with cultural mythology and personal history. Sunstrum's artwork prominently features Black women, foregrounding them in her practice as a corrective to historical narratives that omit their influence. The figures in her works are often the artist's alter egos, who together represent a collective, overlapping narrative.

Opoku's featured artworks are drawn from her series *The Myths of Eternal Life* (2020–22), inspired by the Book of the Dead, an ancient Egyptian collection of funerary texts that was entombed with the dead and said to protect them in the afterlife. The artist created the series while battling cancer, pairing stitched images of her body undergoing radiation with photographs of bare trees that she knew would blossom and be born anew in the coming months.

Like Sunstrum and Opoku, Viktor draws from a variety of influences to write her own mythology, spanning West African sculptural traditions, ancient Egyptian iconography, classical astronomy, and European portraiture. In the *Dark Continent* (2016–19) series, Viktor works with a restricted color palette of gold, black, and gray and combines photography, painting, performance, and sculpture with ancient gilding techniques and the ritualistic use of 24-karat gold leaf. The dense layering imbues each work with a sense of being overgrown, where the divide between figure and nature becomes permeable.

NAN GOLDIN AND DEANA LAWSON

Deana Lawson's photographs appear spontaneous, personal, and intimate, yet the lens of her camera transforms the mundane into the theatrical. Her Black subjects are staged as both self-assured and self-authored while simultaneously shown in the middle of performance, caught in the act of self-representation. In *Roxie and Raquel, New Orleans, Louisiana* (2010), twin sisters kneel back to back in the center of a bed in a dance-like pose. Lawson often incorporates fiction into her work, asking subjects to pose with costumes, belongings, and even babies that are not theirs, and frequently in homes that aren't their own. Yet she does not reveal which aspects of her images are fabrications, and which are real.

Also on view are images from Nan Goldin's *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* series, the artist's diaristic documentation of the gay subculture of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In particular, she captures her chosen family and personal love life, as well as the impact of heroin and AIDS

on this community. Neither artist's images display a softness or gentleness—rather, they depict a closeness that is made all the more stark when the subjects stare back.

HUMA BHABHA, SABLE ELYSE SMITH, AND JOE ZUCKER

Dense layering emerges as a common mode throughout the artworks in the Hessel Collection. However, the artists work in different mediums and evoke diverse themes, such as the violence of the US justice system in Sable Elyse Smith's *Coloring Book 66* (2020) and the hybrid figures from horror and science-fiction in Huma Bhabha's *Untitled* (2013). Like Robert Kushner, also on view, Joe Zucker produced work at the height of the Pattern and Decoration movement and incorporated organic and representational elements into his practice. Yet, through the use of uncommon materials like cotton, *Lightning Like Lady* (1982) evades easy aesthetic categorization.

These works in *Promenade* point to the metaphorical and physical layering present

in multiple practices and mediums. This method formally evokes the overlapping emotions, themes, and ideas each artist aims to process or represent in their work.

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