

VOGUE

At Bard College, a Poignant Exploration of Black Melancholy

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Kenyatta A. C. Hinkie, *The Meeting*, 2021, Yupo paper, cotton paper, and acrylic. Courtesy of KACH Studio. Photo: Courtesy of CCS Bard

On Saturday, some two hours north of New York City, the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College welcomed visitors into its latest exhibitions. Opening alongside “Martine Syms: Griot College” and “Dara Birnbaum: Reaction” was “Black Melancholia,” a show that subverts traditional depictions of melancholy in the art historical canon (namely, those centering cis, white men and women) by gathering poignant depictions of longing and despair by 28 emerging and established Black artists, including Roy DeCarava, Ja’Tovia Gary, Tyler Mitchell, Walter Price, and Lorna Simpson.



Installation view of *Black Melancholia* at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art.

Photo: Olympia Shannon/Courtesy of CCS Bard

As one moves from the first gallery—where paintings backed by gauzy white fabric show Black faces and bodies curled in sorrow—and into the next, where contemporary artists like Price and Kenyatta A. C. Hinkle lean hard into scale and color, “Black Melancholia” tells a story of the Black past, present, and future. The oldest piece on display, a canvas by Edward Mitchell Bannister from 1885, is carefully placed next to Mitchell’s photograph *Riverside Scene*, from 2021; and Price’s painting *Global Outcry* faces the entryway to a final room where the works encourage deep thought and quiet listening. Among them is a video by Rashid Johnson that shows the artist navigating a typical day during the pandemic in 2020. Although he is surrounded by family and seemingly living comfortably, a sense of isolation and heaviness is obvious to any viewer. Here as elsewhere, the exhibition validates a variety of Black experiences, drawing on the many shades between triumph and trauma.



Installation view of *Black Melancholia* at CCS Bard's Hessel Museum of Art.

Photo: Olympia Shannon/Courtesy of CCS Bard

“There were several entryways into ‘Black Melancholia’—it didn’t come easy to me,” says curator Nana Adusei-Poku, dressed in the same shade of royal blue found throughout the space. “The first was an exhibition that I visited in Berlin in 2006 where the whole show was centered around Albrecht Dürer’s piece *Melencolia I* from 1514, which is a masterpiece. It’s one of the first pieces in art history that was described as a psychological portrait. I went through the show and I searched for people of color, and there were none.” The stalled career of the sculptor Augusta Savage offered another starting point. “She had quite a long practice during the Harlem Renaissance, but never really reached the type of fame or financial stability that she deserved. When I started my research on her, I also realized most of her works are lost. So I started thinking about care, and Christina Sharpe was very present in my mind, with her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. I was thinking about death; I was thinking about grief.” As a tribute to Savage, Adusei-Poku displays photographs of one of her lost sculptures in “Black Melancholia.” “There is a beautiful line by M. NourbeSe Philip in a poem called *Zong!* where she asks how to defend the dead,” the curator says. “And I just felt like Augusta needs her moment. I want people to feel what it feels like not having that moment.”



Augusta Savage with her sculpture *Realization* in 1938. Collection of The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center.

Photo: Courtesy of CCS Bard

Embedded in the work of amplifying Black thought and creativity is giving it the proper context, and to that end, in “Black Melancholia” the wall texts are robust, weaving together artist biographies and insights into their inspirations and processes, especially for the lesser-known figures. “To not have a little bit of historical reading guiding people’s gazes and supporting them in how to look at work is not very didactic,” says Adusei-Poku. Black art provides an inroad into history, and with the help of art historians and Black people telling Black stories, forgotten pasts and sensibilities can be brought into the light.

“Black Melancholia” is up through October 16, 2022.