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For Black Artists, the Motivating Power of Melancholia

A group show at CCS Bard finds a positive value to looking inward, as it celebrates Black endurance.

Holland Cotter

Left to right: Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle, “THEY: The Meeting," 2021; Cy Gavin, “Bather (Tom Moore’s Jungle),” 2019, from the exhibition “Black Melancholia” opening Saturday at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College.Credit...Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

A racist attack on Black Americans, with the spectacle of real-time pain it carries, tends to make news. But the depression that racism itself generates — the dread, anger and despair that create a low-pressure area in the soul — goes pretty much unreported. It’s that chronic condition that forms the basic theme of “Black Melancholia,” a stirring group show that opens Saturday at the Hessel Museum of Art at Bard College here.

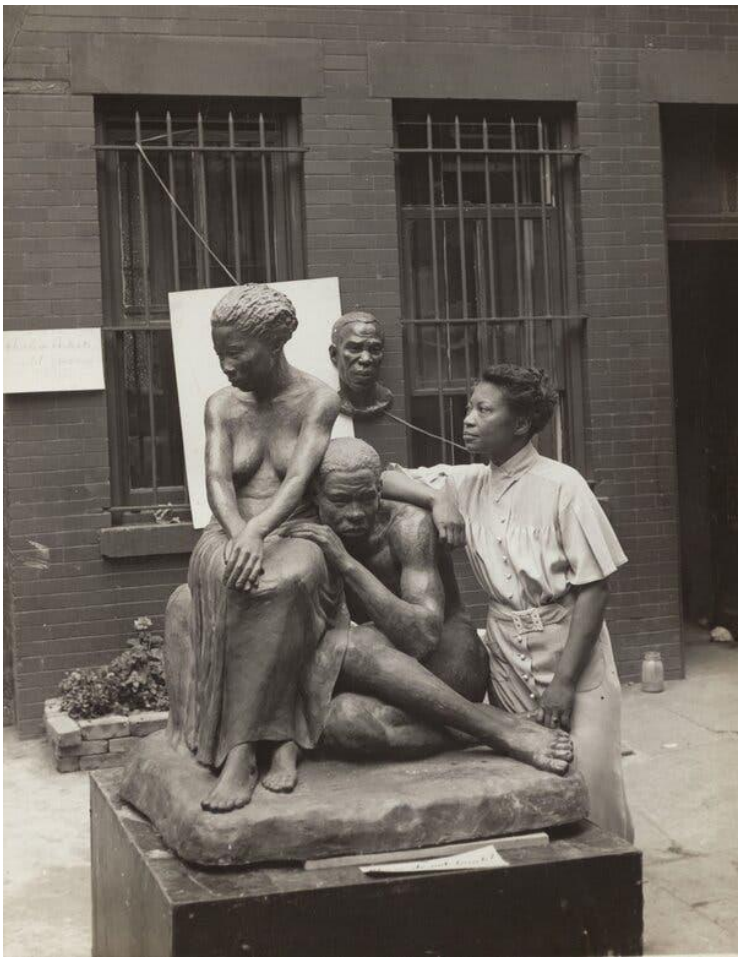
At least one other recent exhibition has approached this subject, “Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America,” conceived by the curator Okwui Enwezor (1963-2019) and realized by the New Museum in Manhattan last year. That show was a high-impact affair with big A-list objects from starry collections spread over several floors. The Hessel’s gathering of work by 28 artists is far more

modest in scale, and largely homegrown. (With a few outstanding exceptions, most of the art is from the museum's holdings.)

The Hessel show is also more thematically focused and historically grounded, no doubt in part because it emerged from, and was developed through, an academic research seminar led by its curator, Nana Adusei-Poku, an associate professor at Bard's Center for Curatorial Studies. In an exhibition brochure, she offers a capsule account of "melancholia" as a concept and a condition.

Anciently, its presence was used as a quasi-scientific explanation for a gloom-disposed temperament, a personality type that would be pathologized by Freud. But for centuries, in Europe, melancholia had positive value, even glamour. It was considered the defining trait of the creative "genius," with the definition of "genius" itself being applicable solely to white males.

The exhibition sets out to trace a modern repurposing of melancholia by Black artists. And in the brochure, Adusei-Poku cites the work that inspired her initial interest in the idea: a sculpture titled "Realization" and made around 1938 by the African-American artist Augusta Savage.



Augusta Savage with her sculpture "Realization" in 1938. After her success at the World's Fair in 1939, her career stalled; money and support evaporated. This work has gone missing.Credit... The New York Public Library, Schomburg Center

The sculpture depicts two figures. A Black woman sits, bare-breasted, hands on her knees, head bent pensively downward; a Black man, half-nude, crouches at her feet and leans against her as if for warmth or protection. His gaze, too, is cast down. There's no sign of violence or coercion, but they both look stunned, as if they'd just learned something disquieting and saddening. What? That slavery is over, yet never finished? That they have freedom, but are welcome nowhere?

Or, since we're inventing narratives, are they lost in worry about what their art historical fate might be? "Realization" is a "lost" work, untraceable; in the show we see it only in old photographs. Whether it still exists, or where, we don't know. This is true of much of Savage's output. After some professional successes — her sculpture "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (also known as "The Harp") was a hit of the 1939 New York World's Fair — her career stalled; money and support evaporated. Disillusioned with the white-controlled art world, she retreated to the farm town of Saugerties, N.Y., (about 15 miles from Bard) and there fell into obscurity, in a trajectory that prompts melancholy thoughts indeed.

Adusei-Poku takes that emotion as central to the American Black experience and identifies it in work by some of Savage's younger Black contemporaries: in the hunched-over marble figure titled "Sadness" by Selma Burke (1900-1995); in a vivid painting of a prone figure by the Detroit-based Charles McGee (1924-2021); and in a beautiful half-abstract painting, "Grievin' Hearted," by Rose Piper (1917-2005) who, after a brilliant start in the 1940s, had to give up art to care for her disabled spouse and their child. (She supported the family by working for a greeting-card company.)

Left, Selma Burke, "Sadness," circa 1970; right, William Artis, "The Quiet One," 1951.Credit...Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Charles McGee, “Despondency” (no date).Credit...Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

(It’s worth noting, incidentally, that all three of these works are on loan from museums associated with Historically Black Colleges and Universities — Spelman College, Howard University, and Clark Atlanta University — museums that were, until fairly recently, the only academic institutions to regularly collect Black art.)

Biographical information about all of these artists appears, along with art historical commentary, in the show’s unusually interesting object labels, as if to remind us that art can be as much a personal expression — of melancholia, among other things — as a formal statement. As if to make the point clearly, the text accompanying Roy DeCarava’s gorgeous 1953 photograph “Hallway” incorporates words by the artist himself.

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Compositionally, this shot of a narrow, penumbral domestic space is a stunner. And for him it was also an emotionally complicated flashback to a lived past. It was "all the hallways I grew up in … hallways that had something to do with the economics of building for poor people. It just brought back all those things that I had experienced as a child in all those hallways."

The DeCarava images introduce sections of the show in which the definition of "Black melancholia" expands in several directions, all encompassing various modes of subjectivity, inwardness.

One is the emotion of nostalgia, or some version of it. It feels tender in Ain Bailey's 2022 video meditation, commissioned for the show, on her parents' wedding pictures, with minute details — the lace of a gown, the smile of a bridesmaid — lingered over and returned to, as if physically touched.

Ain Bailey, "Untitled (our Wedding)," 2022.Credit...Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

From a crawl by Pope.L, “The Great White Way, 22 miles, 5 years, 1 Street (Segment #1: December 29, 2001),” 2001-2006.Credit...Pope.L and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York

Reverence radiates from Alberta Whittle’s textile hanging, floating on high, made from clothes — European, African — owned by her cosmopolitan Barbadian grandfather. And in a 2001 documentary video clip the New York-based conceptualist Pope. L, who once advertised himself, sardonically, as “the Friendliest Black Artist in America,” embarks, in Superman drag, on a 22-mile belly-crawl up Broadway from Wall Street to his birth-home in the Bronx.

That grueling, abject Pilgrim’s Progress of a performance, which took five years to complete, has much, symbolically, to say about the motivating power of melancholic spleen and about the creative genius of Black endurance in navigating the Great White Way.

Pure dystopian spleen bursts forth elsewhere, in Walter Price’s “Global Outcry” (2018-2020), a panoramic Final Days battlefield of a painting, and in Cy Gavin’s “Bather (Tom Moore’s Jungle)” (2019) with its single, silhouetted Black figure apparently being incinerated by a radioactive-red landscape.

Left to right, Walter Price, “Global Outcry,” 2018-2020; Arcmanoro Niles, “Love I Try Even Though I’m Going to Fail (Rock Bottom Was Calling My Name),” 2020.Credit...Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Alberta Whittle, “Road Openers (For E)," 2019. Reverence radiates from her textile hanging, made from clothes owned by her Barbadian grandfather.Credit...Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/DACS, London; Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Kenyatta A.C. Hinkle’s, “THEY: The Meeting” (2021), with its image of three Black women — Three Graces — posing in a lushly painted paradise garden seems to offer a contrastingly utopian vision of Nature. But something’s off: the figures have been cut-and-pasted from a colonial-era postcard designed to sell a version of what Europe wanted and needed Africa to be.

The show has a fair amount of figurative painting — Valerie Maynard, Arcmanoro Niles and Danielle McKinney add further strong examples —- though it stays refreshingly clear of the portraiture that is currently auction house clickbait. And some of the most absorbing contributions are abstract.

An installation by Charisse Pearlina Weston is a standout. Titled, all in lowercase, "of the. (immaterial. black salt. translucence)" and made for the show, it's an elaborate, low-to-the-floor ensemble of photographs, printed texts, and glass elements (cast pieces and cut sheets, textured and smooth, whole and broken, some recycled from earlier installations), stacked and layered atop and across plain wood benches made by the artist's father.

Works by Charisse Pearlina Weston -- "a standout," our critic says -- include "of the. (immaterial. black salt. translucence)," from 2022 (on floor). On the wall, left to right, "that old saying is true: you've to weep what you sow, 2017"; "Untitled," 2017; and "(i can) feel it when you lie to me," 2022.Credit...Lauren Lancaster for The New York Times

Individual components are rich: photographic images suggest extraterrestrial forms; the texts are samples of Weston's intensely mournful poetry, the benches and glass evoke modernist architecture. But nothing is simple. The arrangements alternate impressions of transparency and obstruction, neatness and disarray. Weston, who will be doing a residency at Bard this fall, has spoken of references in similar earlier installations to architecture as entrapment; to transparency as an instrument of surveillance, to fragmented glass as a symbol of "broken windows" policing.

In short, references to both melancholia and Blackness are there, but kept oblique. In this way her work lines up with recent and influential forms of critical writing about Black art by figures like the cultural theorist Fred Moten and the curator Legacy Russell, who use plain, nonacademic language in complex ways that slow easy entry, thwart quick reads, and resist pat conclusions about what, if

anything in particular, Blackness might be. The show takes a similar approach to its theme, holding out the possibility that an under-examined low-pressure area could be a source of cloud-clearing storms that expose a quieter, continuing sense of loss.

Black Melancholia

June 25-Oct. 16, CCS Bard Galleries at the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., 845-758-7598, ccs.bard.edu.