



Smithsonian Institution

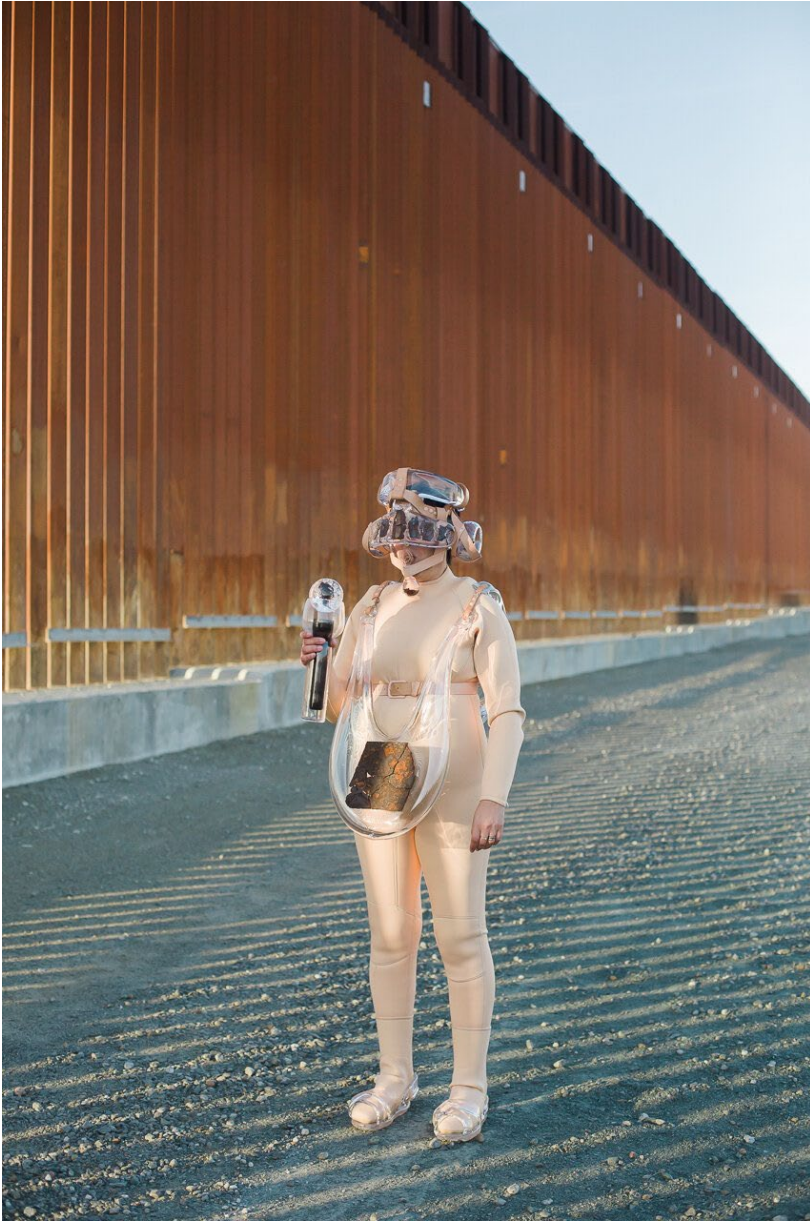
OUR SHARED FUTURE: COLLECTIONS HIGHLIGHTS OCTOBER 2023

The following feature highlights a One Smithsonian approach to collections acquisition and stewardship. These highlights show how the Smithsonian is focused on diverse representation within the collections that reflect the full story of the American experience.

SMITHSONIAN MUSEUMS COLLABORATE ON JOINT ACQUISITIONS

Around the country and the world, museums are feeling an urgent need to diversify their holdings to make them better reflect the full scope of art and human history by acquiring works by women artists and artists of color. The Smithsonian Institution's diverse museum complex offers a unique opportunity for collaboration and shared acquisitions among the Institution's art and culture museums. By working together, the Smithsonian's museums are leveraging their resources to acquire key works from artists that reflect the experiences of the people we serve and bring new voices and perspectives to the critical issues of our time. These acquisitions not only increase the diversity of the artists in our collections but also provide context around current issues that involve civics, history, and social justice. Supported by internal funding sources such as the **Latino Initiatives Pool** and the **American Women's History Initiative Pool**, the museums and the Institution as a whole are supporting the Secretary's priorities to pursue relevance and ensure that all our visitors see their stories reflected in our museums.

CHSDM AND SAAM, WITH AWHI FUNDS: TANYA AGUIÑIGA, *METABOLIZING THE BORDER*



For more than 20 years, Aguiñiga has worked along the 2,000 miles of the U.S.-Mexico border wall—an experience that has culminated in her most ambitious work to date, *Metabolizing the Border*. The artist produced a performance suit made of blown glass and embedded with border fence remnants to help process—metabolize—her fraught experiences at the border. In January 2020, the artist wore the suit during a performance at the border fence.

Metabolizing the Border was included in the Renwick Gallery's 50th-anniversary exhibition and catalog, *This Present Moment: Crafting a Better World*, and featured in SAAM's "Drawn to Art" comic series about women artists.

Metabolizing the Border allows both the **Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum (CHSDM)** and the **Smithsonian American Art Museum (SAAM)** to broaden conversations about the history of the U.S.-Mexico border and the people whose lives are continuously shaped by its dominating presence. The purchase was supported through the **American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool**, administered by the **Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative**.

Tanya Aguiñiga (B. 1978), *Metabolizing the Border*, 2018-2020. Joint museum purchase with Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum and Smithsonian American Art Museum through the American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool, administered by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative—photo by Gina Clyne.

NMAAHC AND NPG, WITH AWHI FUNDS: EMMA AMOS, *WILL YOU FORGET ME?*



Emma Amos, Will You Forget Me?, 1991. Acrylic on canvas with fabric collage and African fabric borders, 65 x 45 in. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and National Portrait Gallery, Museum purchase through the American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool, administered by the Smithsonian American Women's History.

A New York-based painter, printmaker, textile designer, and educator, Emma Amos was the only woman to join the pathbreaking African-American artist group Spiral at the invitation of Hale Woodruff in 1964. In the *New York Times*, she stated, "It's always been my contention, that for me, a black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act." Amos often spoke out about racism and sexism, especially in the art world, and she was an active member of feminist groups throughout her career, including the Guerrilla Girls. Amos also served as an editor for the feminist art magazine *Heresies*. Her work has been featured in international retrospective exhibitions organized by the Tate Modern, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Georgia Museum of Art, among others. Artsy.com posthumously named Emma Amos as a 2020 Artsy Vanguard in the category "Getting Their Due."

An autobiographical painting from Amos's acclaimed *Falling Figures* series depicts the artist holding an oversized photographic portrait of her mother, India, who died in Atlanta in 1979 when the artist was 42. India's memory remained a guiding force in her daughter's life. The source photograph for the portrait of India was taken before Amos was born, when her mother was a twenty-year-old college student. Amos's notion of time as fleeting, beyond control yet contained in the images of those who have lifted her is the focus of the work. This is signaled in her painted incorporation of what looks like a sepia photograph, emphasizing the importance of the

photographic portraiture found in family albums as a key mode of preserving Black family histories. The use of kente cloth on the border and Dutch trade cloth for the dress reference Amos's place within the African diaspora.

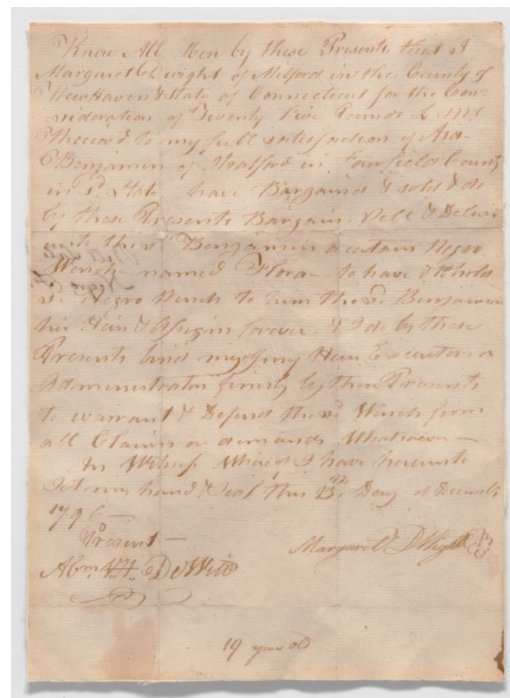
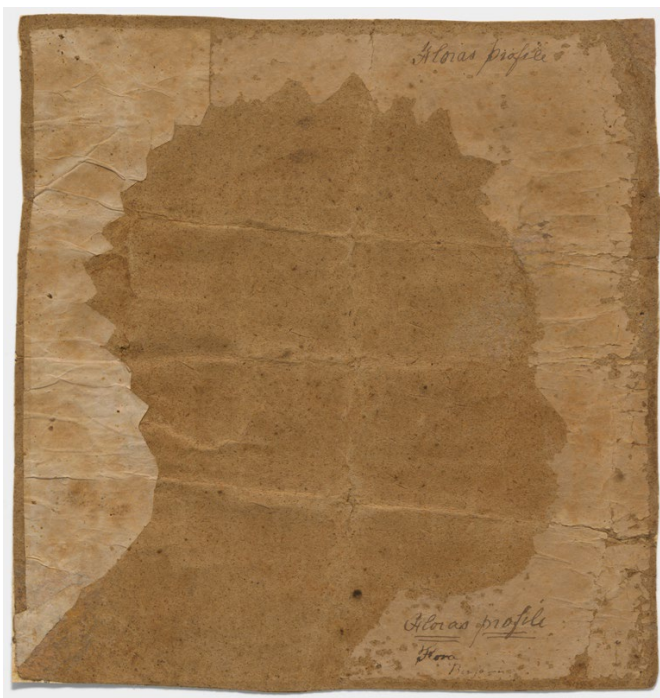
Amos was a forerunner in the practice of conceptual portraiture, which has influenced acclaimed contemporary artists today, including Amy Sherald. Her feminist and social justice lens contributes to the work and vision of the **American Women's History Initiative** and the **Our Shared Future: Reckoning with Our Racial Past Initiative**. The **National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC)** and the **National Portrait Gallery (NPG)** jointly acquired the work.

NMAAHC AND NPG, WITH AWHI FUNDS: FLORA SILHOUETTE AND BILL OF SALE

The silhouette and the bill of sale for a nineteen-year-old woman known as Flora, along with Flora herself, originally belonged to Asa Benjamin (1763-1833) of Stratford, Connecticut. At an unknown date, the papers were stored in the basement (former slave quarters) of the Captain David Judson House, an early-eighteenth-century building in Stratford. They were possibly deposited there by one of the residents, Sarah Plant Judson (1775-1857), the sister of Asa Benjamin's wife. In 1925, the Judson House was bequeathed to the Stratford Historical Society. The documents were discovered in the 1960s when the Society renovated the house.

The miraculous 225-year survival of the portrait of Flora, together with the legal document that altered her destiny, constitutes a unique historical legacy. Display of these documents will take every precaution to ensure their physical longevity and maximize their public impact. The portrait of Flora and the bill of her sale will alternate between the **National Portrait Gallery** (NPG) and the **National Museum of African American History and Culture** (NMAAHC), with mandatory rest periods in between to slow degradation from light exposure.

As noted above, the portrait of Flora and the bill of her sale constitute a unique and somewhat miraculous historical survival. Because of the rarity and significance of these artifacts, the NPG and NMAAHC are pursuing joint ownership as a means of reaching diverse audiences, maximizing interpretive programming, and facilitating scholarly research. These artifacts provide a unique opportunity to fill a gap in our collections through the representation of an enslaved woman whose life spanned the American Revolution and the period of the Early Republic. Flora's name, face, and biography will allow us to personalize the monolithic, 200-year history of slavery in New England through the human scale of an individual African American life. The indexical nature of Flora's silhouette, which was traced at life-size directly from her cast shadow, makes her portrait especially effective in conveying a tangible sense of human presence. By viscerally connecting present-day viewers with a woman from the past, we believe the portrait of Flora will elicit an empathic response and spark curiosity about her life as well as the experiences of other African-American women in early-nineteenth-century New England.



Flora silhouette and bill of sale, ca. 1777 – 1815. Collection of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture and National Portrait Gallery purchased through the American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool, administered by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative.

HMSG AND SAAM: ARTHUR JAJA, *LOVE IS THE MESSAGE, THE MESSAGE IS DEATH*

For twenty years, Arthur Jafa has straddled the worlds of filmmaking and fine art, focused in both spaces on framing Black bodies, Black life, and Black stories with a belief in their transcendent beauty. When Jafa debuted the seven-and-a-half-minute video, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, in 2016, it was instantly recognized as one of the most important artworks of the twenty-first century. A powerful montage of original and appropriated footage, it presents the whiplash of joy, pain, transcendence, and tragedy that constitutes the African American experience through a hundred years of moving-image recordings. The **Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden** (HMSG) featured the video in the 2017 exhibition, *The Message: New Media Works*, and in 2018, partnered with the **Smithsonian American Art Museum** (SAAM) to co-acquire the work. As noted at the time, its presence in the Hirshhorn collection affirms its globally defining impact, while at SAAM, the work extends three centuries of American artists wrestling with the country's racial complexities.

In June 2020, HMSG and SAAM collaborated with the artist to continuously stream the work online for 48 hours. Eleven other art museums and collections in seven countries hosted the stream on their websites as well, making the work available globally beyond gallery walls. Now, in its largest and most accessible presentation for D.C.-audiences, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, is on view as the centerpiece of SAAM's special exhibition, *Musical Thinking: New Video Art and Sonic Strategies* (through January 29, 2024).

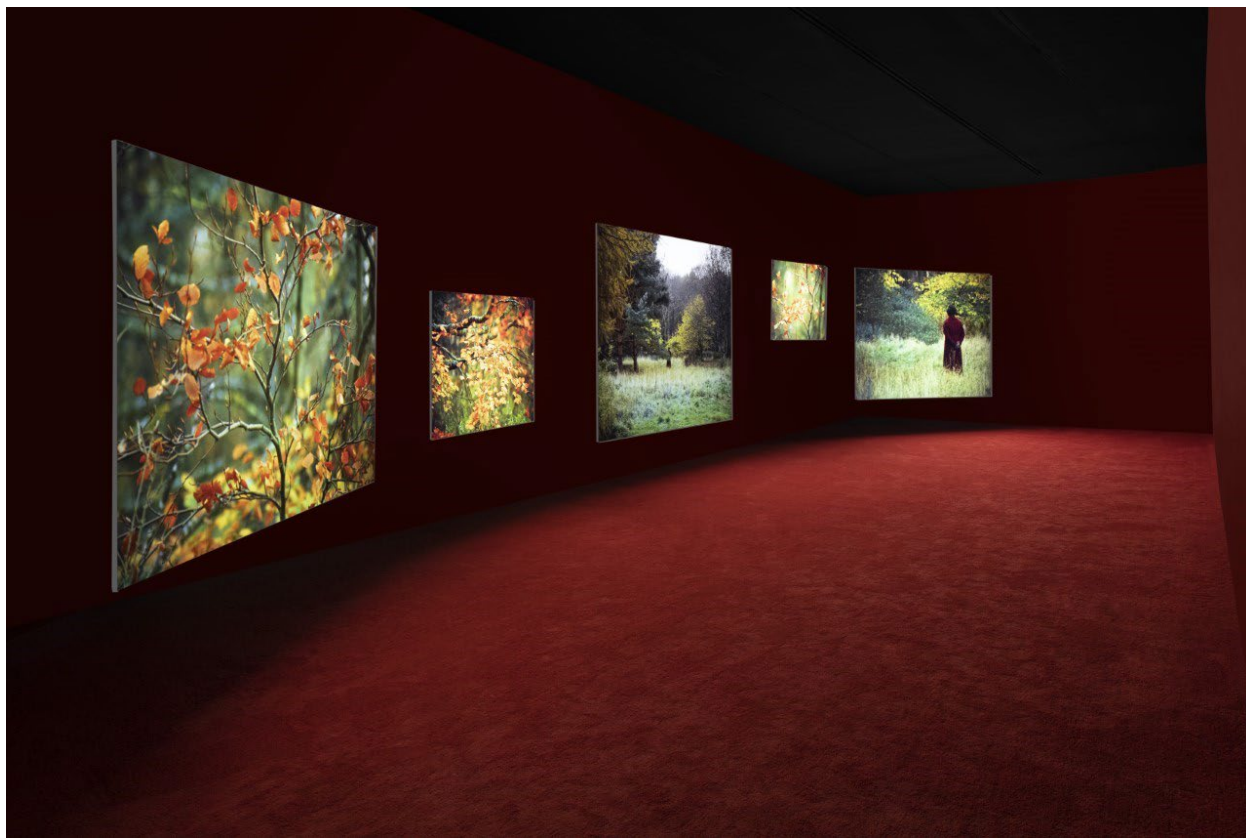


Arthur Jafa, *Love is the Message, The Message is Death*, 2016, single-channel high-definition digital video (color, sound); 07:25 min. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Joint museum purchase with the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. Gift of Nion T. McEvoy, Chair of SAAM Commission (2016-2018), and McEvoy's fellow Commissioners in his honor; additional funding provided by Joseph H. Hirshhorn Bequest Fund, 2020.001., 2020.3, © 2016, Arthur Jafa. Image courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York / Rome.

NPG AND SAAM: ISAAC JULIEN, *LESSONS OF THE HOUR*

Projected across five screens for almost thirty minutes, Sir Isaac Julien's visionary film installation *Lessons of the Hour* (2019) teases the achievements and ongoing importance of America's foremost abolitionist figure and philosopher, Frederick Douglass (1818–1895). Structured around intoned passages from Douglass's key speeches, including the titular "Lessons of the Hour," "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?," and "Lecture on Pictures," the lush visuals weave together reenacted scenes from Douglass's life and lectures, shots of his historically preserved home in Washington, D.C., and more recent footage of fireworks and protests as the struggle to make good on America's promise of equality continues. In this way, the piece brings to life the zeitgeist of Douglass's era while showing how his legacy continues today. It also continues Julien's prominence as a moving-image pioneer whose cinematic and multichannel installations often center on iconic African Americans, from Matthew Henson to Langston Hughes to Alain Locke.

Julien enters the **National Portrait Gallery** (NPG) and the **Smithsonian American Art Museum** (SAAM)'s collections through this, their first major co-acquisition together, acquired in part through the generosity of the **Smithsonian Secretary** and the **Smithsonian National Board**. As NPG and SAAM share a building, they now have the unique opportunity to co-present Julien's immersive work in the context of both their historical collections galleries. The joint exhibition *Isaac Julien: Lessons of the Hour—Frederick Douglass D.C.*, opening December 2023, will debut the work for D.C. audiences and remain on view through the United States Semiquincentennial.



Isaac Julien, *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019, five-channel installation, 35mm film and 4K video (color, sound); 28:44 min. Joint museum purchase between the National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. Acquired by the National Portrait Gallery in part through the generosity of the Smithsonian Secretary and the Smithsonian National Board and Agnes Gund. Smithsonian American Art Museum purchase through the Luisita L. and Franz H. Denghausen Endowment, NPG.2023.23 and SAAM 2023.42. © Image courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro.

HIRSHHORN AND NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY: JAMES LUNA, *HALF INDIAN/HALF MEXICAN*



James Luna (Luiseño, Puyukitchum, Ipai, and Mexican-American, b. Orange, California, 1950-2018) *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, 1991
Silver gelatin print. Three elements: 60 x 48 inches each (60 x 144 inches, overall). Edition of 6 + 2AP.

Although he began his art career as a painter in the mid-1970s, James Luna is best known as a multi-media installation and performance artist with a practice rooted in unflinching self-examination. Using humor, vulnerability, and empathy, his art faces head-on the entrenched stereotypes and income disparities that ruthlessly curtail life potential for the marginalized communities with which he identified. Luna is typically presented and discussed as a Native American artist, often overlooking his Latinx cultural heritage.

A self-portrait, *Half Indian/Half Mexican*, is therefore highly significant as it examines his intersectionality as a descendant of two marginalized communities and is a direct commentary on what Luna referred to as “the absurdity of being of measurably mixed blood ancestry.” Evoking the “objective” profile picture that is evocative of both historical eugenics studies and criminal mug shots, this triptych brings issues inherent in Luna’s complex cultural identity to the surface and alludes to how those marginalized identities (the indigenous and the Mexican/Latinx) have been denigrated.

The **Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (HMSG)** co-acquisition with the **National Portrait Gallery (NPG)** was supported with funds from the **Latino Initiatives Pool Award**.

NMAAHC AND NPG: DEBORAH ROBERTS, 80 DAYS FROM THE NESSUM DORMA SERIES



Deborah Roberts, *80 Days from the Nessun Dorma series*, 2018. Paper, acrylic, graphite, and pastel on canvas, 2018. Gold fingernails added in 2022. 72 x 48 in. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture and National Portrait Gallery, Museum purchase through the American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool, administered by the Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative

Deborah Roberts has long been an advocate for telling stories of underrepresented subjects, particularly African-American women and girls. She says, "Having one's identity dismantled, marginalized, and regulated to non-human status demands action. This led me to engage image-making in art history and pop-culture critically, and ultimately grapple with whatever power and authority these images have over the female figure."

In 1944, fourteen-year-old George Stinney Jr. was executed in an electric chair for a murder he did not commit. He remains the youngest person to have been executed in a U.S. prison. Deborah Roberts's series *Nessun Dorma* (None Shall Sleep) honors Stinney's life and brings to light this tragic story of injustice and violence during the Jim Crow era of racial discrimination. The story of George Stinney, Jr. remains emblematic of the continued injustices against African Americans who continue to lose their lives due to false accusations today.

Stinney's exoneration decades later by the state of South Carolina points to the many injustices against African American youths who have lost their lives due to false accusations. When Roberts found Stinney's mugshot, she felt compelled to make this work: "I didn't want to—I was called to do it," she said.

The work is now part of the collection of the **National Museum of African American History and Culture** (NMAAHC) and the **National Portrait Gallery** (NPG), a joint purchase made possible by the **American Women's History Initiative Acquisitions Pool**,

administered by the **Smithsonian American Women's History Initiative**.