

The Creators Project

29 Artists Explore Abstractions of the Color Black

Antwaun Sargent — Jul 27 2016



*Sol LeWitt, Wall Structure Black, 1962, oil on canvas and painted wood. 39" x 39" x 23-1/2" (99.1 cm x 99.1 cm x 59.7 cm).
Photograph by Ellen Page Wilson © 2016 The LeWitt Estate / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York*

What do you see when you see the color black? In 2015 curator, Adrienne Edwards wrote “Blackness in Abstraction” (<http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazine/blackness-in-abstraction/>) in *Art in America*, an essay that cogently explores Adam Pendleton’s recent “Black Dada” works and outlines a history of contemporary artists’ conceptual visual ruminations, which have presented blackness in multitudes since the early 1940s. At Pace Gallery, Edwards has expanded on her

written argument in mounting an exhibition organized under three themes—“Into the Black,” “To Come Thickly,” and “Showing up to Withhold”—and takes its name from her assessment of recent art history. *Blackness in Abstraction* features a mix of forty artists’—including Robert Rauschenberg, Carrie Mae Weems, Sol LeWitt, Glenn Ligon and Adam Pendleton—abstract meditations on a hue that exists socially and politically as one of the most charged constructions of identity and signifiers of a condition.



Koji Enokura, Figure No. 7, 1982, acrylic on cotton. 83" x 81-1/8" x 18-1/8" (210.8 cm x 206.1 cm x 46 cm). Courtesy of the Estate and Blum & Poe, Los Angeles/New York/Tokyo/ Photograph courtesy Blum and Poe © Estate of Kōji Enokura

“Blackness, in the fullest sense of the word, has a seemingly unlimited usefulness in the history of modern art,” Edwards writes in the exhibition catalogue, echoing her 2015 essay. “*Blackness in Abstraction* is a form of visual note taking, entirely provisional, experimental, suggestive, and capacious,

like much of the art it presents.” She adds, “Less concerned about chronology and genealogy, it is one singular, very subjective trace of the persistent presence of the color black in art, with a particular emphasis on monochromes, from the 1940s to today by an international, intergenerational group of 29 artists. They explore black as a material, a method, a mode, and/or a way of being in the world, necessitating complex thinking and sensorial engagement on the part of the viewer.”



Installation view of Blackness in Abstraction Pace Gallery 510 West 25th Street, New York, June 24, August 19, 2016. Photo by: Kerry Ryan McFate / Pace Gallery

Robert Irwin’s *Black Painting with Blue Edge*, which is organized under, “Into the Black,” is a honeycombed aluminum panel painted in a lacquered black that breaks into a suppressed dark shade of blue in the center, evoking shining light playing on the surface. It’s Irwin’s way of showing how, “Circumstance, of course, encompasses all of the conditions, qualities, and consequences making up the real context of your being in the world.” Irwin’s blue-black painting suggests a history of racial description and the conditions that come with it. In a *New York Times* review of Toni Morrison’s recent novel, *God Help the Child* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/19/books/review/toni-morrison-god-help-the-child.html>), artist Kara Walker details what it means to have blue-black skin, even amongst your own:

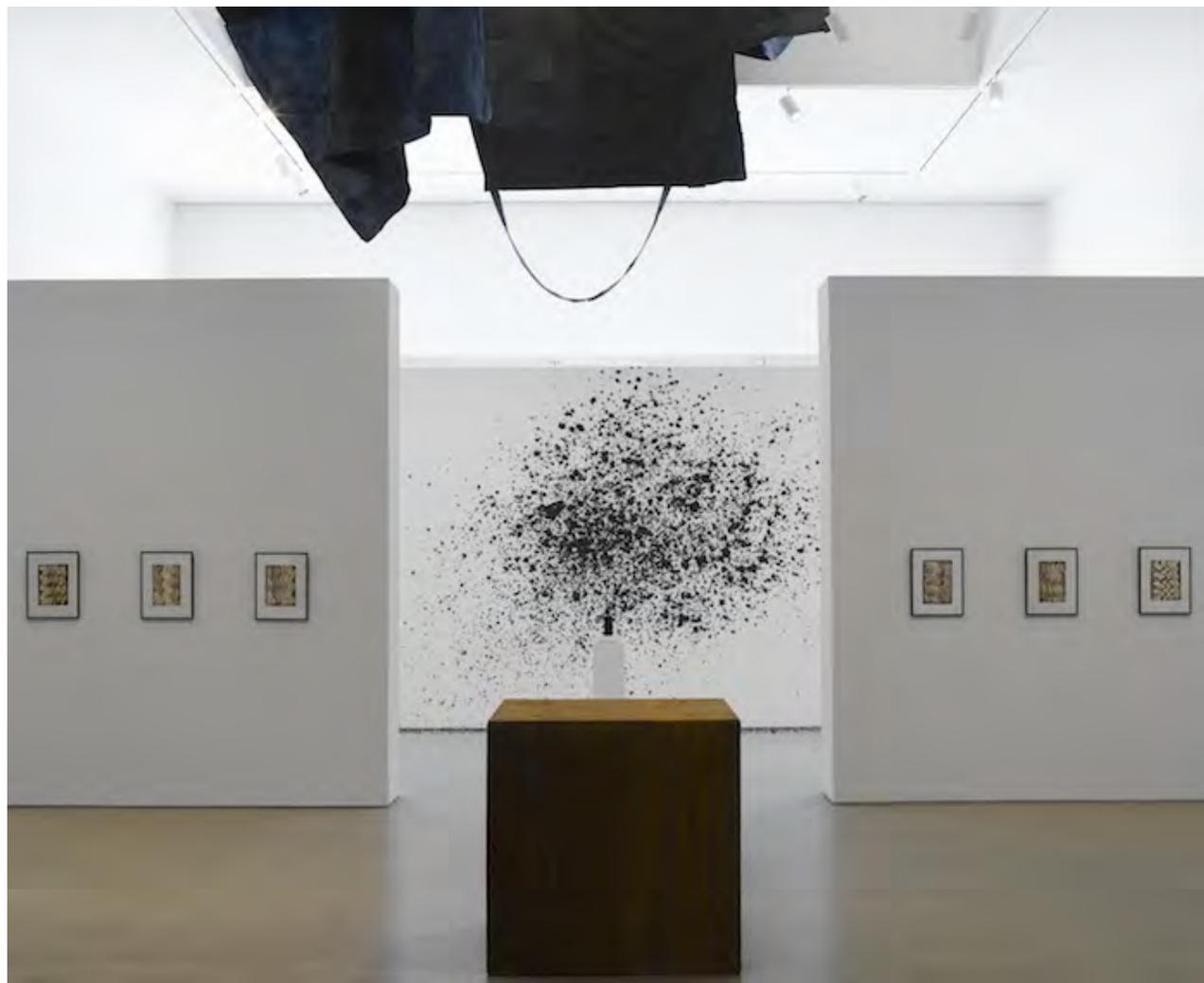
“At the heart of the novel is a woman who calls herself Bride. Young, beautiful, with deep blue-black skin and a career in the cosmetics industry, she was rejected as a child by her light-skinned mother, Sweetness, who’s been poisoned by that strain of color and class anxiety still present in black communities. ‘It didn’t take more than an hour after they pulled her out from between my legs to realize something was wrong,’ Sweetness says. ‘Really wrong. She was so black she scared me. Midnight black, Sudanese black.’”



Wangechi Mutu, Throw, 2016, site specific action painting site specific dimensions. Courtesy the artist. Photograph courtesy the artist © Wangechi Mutu

The deep exploration the art in Edward's exhibition allows into the color black and its many meanings is also seen in Wangechi Mutu's performance, *Throw*. The work, which is a part of the "To Come Thickly" section of the exhibition, occurred before the show opened to the public. A barefooted Mutu, dressed in a long black dress and matching gloves, strolled into Pace Gallery, and for a few minutes

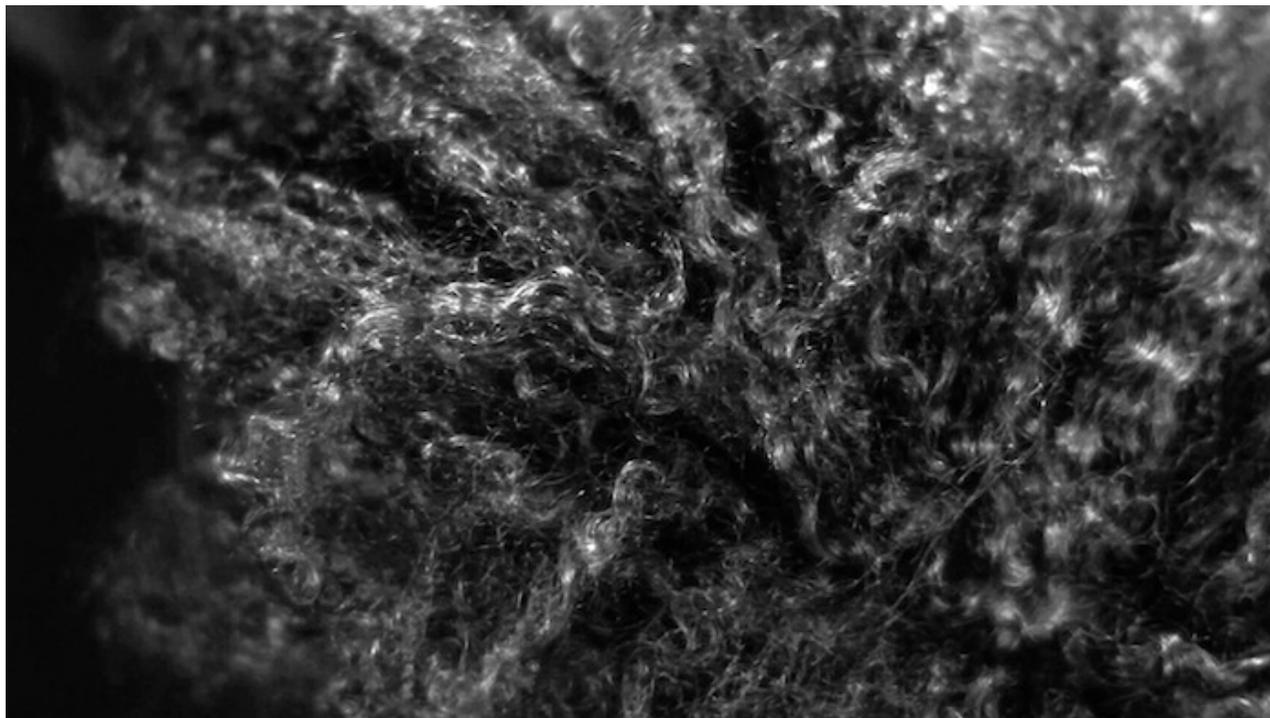
stood silently reaching into a basket and throwing a sticky black pulp against a white wall. The now-infamous protester who threw his shoe at President George W. Bush inspired the site-specific scene. The results of Mutu's performance now adorn the gallery walls in a material protest. Mutu's action also brings to mind writer Zora Neale Hurston's essay, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me" (<http://www.ycps.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/How-it-Feels-to-be-Colored-Me-by-Zora-Neale-Hurston.pdf>)." Embodied in Mutu's constrained throws is the full force of blackness and a visual translation of Hurston's famous 1928 declaration: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background."



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Lorraine O'Grady's *Landscape (Western Hemisphere)* shows explicitly what blackness means when applied to the body and its features. In the 18-minute video work, "O'Grady transforms her hair into a moving abstract landscape. As each wavy strand sways, crinkles, and rustles to the wind, a faint collage of sound from the North American hemisphere's rural and urban landscape is audible," writes Edwards in the exhibition catalogue. The slow-moving movie is featured in the "Showing Up To Withhold" area

of the show alongside works by Ad Reinhardt and Steve McQueen. It is a clear contemplative illustration of America, rooting the souls of black and white folks in a kind of historical and present day blend. “I’m really advocating for the kind of miscegenated thinking that’s needed to deal with what we’ve already created here,” says O’Grady.



Lorraine O’Grady, Landscape (Western Hemisphere), 2010-2011, single channel video for projection Duration 18 minutes. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York © 2016 Lorraine O’Grady / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

“The exhibition puts forth an experience of diverse approaches to blackness through specific works of art,” writes Edwards. “Blackness is a highly evocative and animating force in abstract art; many of the participating artists responded to the exhibition as a proposition, a call, and created new pieces for the occasion.” She adds, “The works in *Blackness in Abstraction* are assembled in a constellation of relations driven by two questions: what does it mean to black an object and what is it that a black object does?”

Blackness in Abstraction continues through August 19 at Pace Gallery. For more information, [click here \(http://www.pacegallery.com/exhibitions/12802/blackness-in-abstraction\)](http://www.pacegallery.com/exhibitions/12802/blackness-in-abstraction).