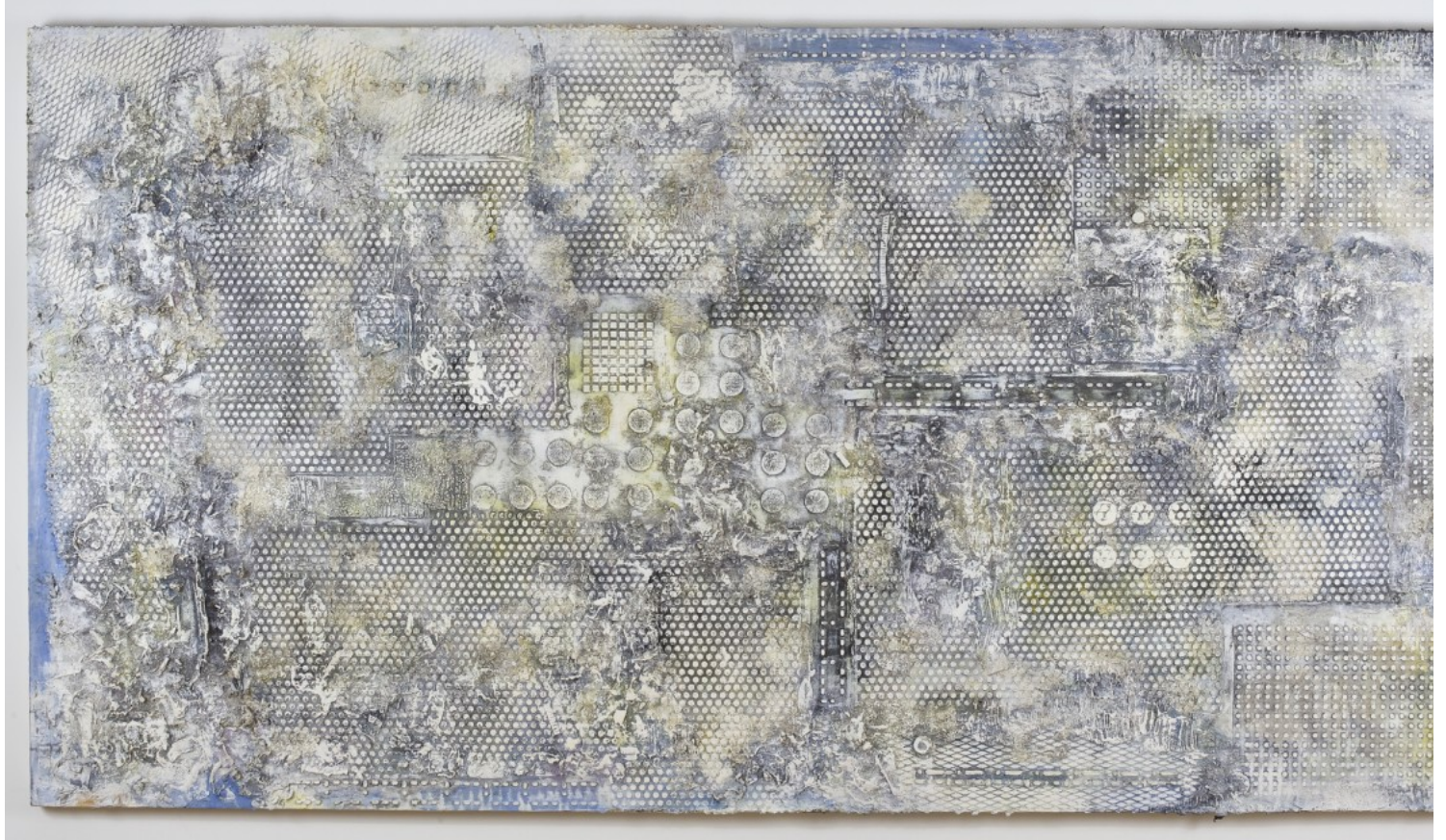


## Review

# Portraits and Other Likenesses from SFMOMA

By Anton Stuebner June 23, 2015

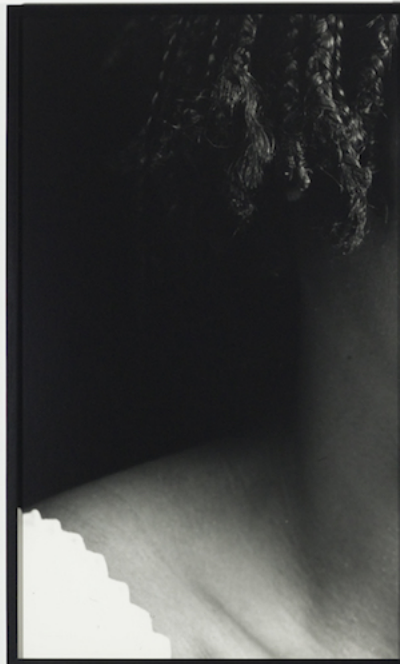
Now on view at the Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD), *Portraits and Other Likenesses from SFMOMA* asks its audience to consider: What is a portrait? This may seem like a straightforward question, an inquiry more related to the particularities of style and form than to complex historical narratives. But as the thirty-six artists whose work is included in the exhibition reveal, portraiture bears its own troubled relationship to genealogies of violence and erasure that excluded nonwhite bodies from representation in Western art. By asking their audience to consider what “makes” a portrait, the show’s curators Lizzetta LeFalle-Collins and Caitlin Haskell provoke far more trenchant questions about race and subjectivity. How do you define your identity when your physical likeness has been culturally othered? And how do you engage with representational traditions that have historically denied people of color?



Jack Whitten. *Bessemer Dreamer*, 1986; acrylic and mixed media on canvas; 60 x 120 in. Collection of SFMOMA; purchase, by exchange, through a fractional gift of Shirley Ross Davis. © Jack Whitten.

The forty-eight works featured in *Portraits and Other Likenesses* fill the top two floors of MoAD’s galleries and represent a wide range of media, from painting and photography to installation and performance-based sculpture. Many of the works are by African American artists and engage volatile histories of racial violence in the United States. Kara Walker’s bi-paneled charcoal and pastel drawing *Daylights (After M.B.)* (2011), for instance, depicts a man on safari next to a Josephine Baker–like dancer in a torn skirt as part of a dense visual narrative documenting the exoticization of people of African descent in American and European popular culture during the early 1920s. Kenyan-born sculptor Wangechi Mutu’s mezzanine installation *High Chair and Strange Fruit* (2005), by comparison, uses less readily charged objects (a spilled and upturned bottle of red wine, a child’s wooden high chair) to create potent metaphors about bodily violence that transcend specific nationalized histories.

Jack Whitten’s *Bessemer Dreamer* (1986), with its gray and green paint overlay on top of stainless-steel mesh, offers yet another contrasting approach to “portraiture.” Though its color fields more closely resemble landscape, Whitten uses abstraction to suggest how even diffuse forms can be felt as intensely personal marks of selfhood. Photography, too, serves as a vital means of self-representation. Lorna Simpson’s installation *Necklines* (1989), for example, juxtaposes close-ups of a black woman’s neckline with text prints bearing derivatives of the word *neck* (“necklace,” “necking”), suggesting relationships between bodily recognition and language, as well as language’s potential to mark certain bodies as vulnerable (the histories of lynching and hanging invoked by compounding “break” and “neck” into “breakneck” make this all too horrifyingly clear). Conversely, Nick Cave’s performance-based sculpture *Soundsuit* (2009)—a full-body suit covered in patterned macramé and found faux floral appendages originally designed to make noise while the wearer dances—considers how bodies resist recognition and identification through various forms of masking, covering, and distraction (both visual and auditory).



necktie  
neck & neck  
neck-ed  
neckless

necking  
neckline  
necklace  
breakneck

Lorna

Simpson. *Necklines*, 1989; gelatin silver prints and engraved plastic plaques; 68 1/2 x 70 in. Collection of SFMOMA; Accessions Committee Fund purchase. © Lorna Simpson.

In photographic prints like *Sista Sista Lady Blue* (2007), Mickalene Thomas features strong black women styled in an Afro-chic aesthetic indebted to 1970s Blaxploitation film heroines like Pam Grier and Tamara Dobson. Amid retro living-room sets, these women lounge comfortably on couches in poses that immediately recall odalisque models of 19th-century erotic painting. Thomas, however, empowers her models by depicting them with a cool confidence; their direct gaze and self-assured stance reaffirm their place as active subjects within the frame.

*Between Ourselves Again* (2015), a new commission by SFMOMA for the exhibition, re-creates the living-room sets in Thomas' photographs, down to the ashtray with half-smoked cigarettes and the stacks of books—*Roots*, *Song of Solomon*, *Native Son*—lining the shelf below a vintage television screening reruns of *Soul Train*, the classic late-night dance show hosted by Don Cornelius that featured many of the top black singers of the 1970s and 1980s. For Thomas, re-creating the material stuff of 1970s black culture is a necessary continuation of cultural traditions vital to African American identity. They are, quite literally, integral to keeping the histories alive. Instead of a single subject in *Between Ourselves Again*, Thomas utilizes cultural signifiers to create a sculptural collage that is an immersive portrait of a particularly rich time and place in black consciousness and culture.

The many iterations on portraiture are staggering. One of the most significant works on display, however, offers a direct and critical response to portraiture's historic origins in painting. Kehinde Wiley's *Alexander the Great* (2005) depicts a larger-than-life canvas of a young man in athletic streetwear. Clad in a yellow headband, blue jeans, a brown hoodie, and a San Diego Padres jacket, the man is rendered with an almost photorealistic intensity; the orange satin-finish nylon of his jacket wrinkles and folds with an eerie resemblance to actual fabric. His steady, straight gaze projects a self-assured confidence; at almost eight feet tall, *Alexander* is a superhuman presence, an impressive subject whose strength is almost physically palpable.





Mickalene

Thomas. *Sista Sista Lady Blue*, 2007; chromogenic print; 40 3/8 x 48 1/2 in. Collection of SFMOMA; gift of Campari USA. © Mickalene Thomas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo: Katherine Du Tiel.

But if his clothes clearly mark him as a contemporary figure, his gestures and posture place him in a much stranger historical tradition. Posed in front of a winding gold and emerald fleur-de-lis backdrop, *Alexander* stands with his right arm on his hip and his left arm slack. In his left hand, he lightly holds a curious object: a gold-handled sword, its finely wrought scabbard studded with red stones. While the sword's origin is indeterminate, the pose is anachronistic, reminiscent of flamboyant Renaissance portraits of European monarchs, such as Flemish painter Gaspar de Crayer's *Philip IV (1605–1665) in Parade Armor* (1628). By invoking this gesture associated with court paintings, *Alexander* enters into a lineage of portraiture that places him alongside kings. Wiley makes a decisive intervention in a historically white tradition of portraiture by using the form of the court painting to depict a contemporary black subject. In doing so, he also marks his work as an act of resistance against the racist histories endemic to these creative traditions.

Resistance is a powerful force in *Portraits and Other Likenesses*, and in reimagining traditions of portraiture, the artists featured not only reinsert black subjects into the pictorial frame, they also redefine these creative traditions as inherently mutable and, as such, capable of representing complex subjectivities that exist beyond the boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

*Portraits and Other Likenesses from SFMOMA* is on view at Museum of the African Diaspora, in San Francisco, through October 11, 2015.