

National Museum of Women in the Arts
Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction,
1960s to Today
Guide by Cell Audio Guide Transcripts



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Hi! Welcome to the National Museum of Women in the Arts' cell-phone audio guide for Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today, on view through January 21, 2018.

To hear from the artists and the curator of Magnetic Fields, look for the blue cell-phone icon on the labels in the exhibition and press the item number indicated followed by the pound (#) key.

Interrupt any audio recording simply by pressing another item number and the pound (#) key.

Press the star (*) key for instructions at any time.

The Women's Museum is grateful to the contributing artists of this audio guide.

Virginia Treanor, associate curator, National Museum of Women in the Arts, welcome (1:23)

204#

Hello, I'm Ginny Treanor, associate curator at the National Museum of Women in the Arts, and it is my pleasure to welcome you to the exhibition Magnetic Fields, Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today. This first-of-its-kind exhibition focuses on abstract art made by black women artists. Historically sidelined because of their race and

gender, the artists represented in this exhibition nevertheless persisted, and continue to persist, in their commitment to abstraction.

Women artists and artists of color are often expected to create works informed by their identity, in which the usual modes of representation are figuration and narrative. Abstraction, however, can be a powerful vehicle for the expression of complex ideas, thoughts, and feelings, as it is not beholden to the confines posed by the representation of the human body or historical events. Abstraction in all its forms, whether with expressionistic color and gesture or with muted geometric shapes, allows artists the freedom to explore a variety of topics.

Intergenerational in scope, this exhibition argues for the enduring relevance of black women in the history and iconography of abstraction. It highlights the trailblazers of the older generation, who rigorously persevered alongside

their male contemporaries for decades. It also presents the work of younger artists, who sustain the pursuit of abstraction and are shaping its future.

Maren Hassinger, Wrenching News, 2008 (1:14)

205#

Hello, I'm Maren Hassinger. In my forty-plus years as an artist, I've used a variety of materials and methods: wire rope, rope, steel, paint, newspapers, fabric, paper, welding, wrapping, binding, casting, knotting, stacking, weaving, movement, video, film, and on and on.

Wrenching News is torn, twisted, gathered, and bound pages from the New York Times, our paper of record in the U.S. It includes all the news: good and bad, often heartbreaking, and infuriating news. Wrenching News is resolved as a mandala, a Buddhist and Hindu symbol of the universe—appropriate, as I speak of unity and eternity.

My career has been an attempt to speak honestly about our world, our shared histories. More and more, I've been drawn to the way we treat each other and the world we have created together. So while my work is being made in this very real season of change, it persists in finding value. It speaks of equality and hurricanes and tyrants, yet I believe in the power of the previously disenfranchised, and the possibility for a cumulative joy, a recovery.

Evangeline “EJ” Montgomery, Sea Grass, 1998, and Sunset, 1997 (1:10)

206#

My current works engages etching, lithography, and monoprints, focusing on a range of processes linked to memory. In earlier print series, I digitally manipulated photographs by blending textures, color, and figurative elements. My works on paper and painting infuse calligraphic marks and notations referring to nature.

These color field works are tactile engagements of memories, of place, as well as abstractions of life experiences and cultural connections. Sea Grass represents the coral reef and kelp growth around the Catalina Islands of Southern California, a favorite skin-divers' hangout spot. Sunset represents the burning redwood trees in the mountains of California. The meaning of these marks and characters delineates a sense of communication that, for me, seems universal.

Shinique Smith, Whirlwind Dancer, 2013–17, and Bale Variant No. 0017, 2009 (2:37)

207#

Hi, this is Shinique Smith. I'm so grateful to speak to you today about my works that are featured in Magnetic Fields. It's such an awesome show with such powerful women artists; I'm so honored to be a part of. And especially—

with the two works that are in the show—they are two of the favorite works that I've ever made.

Whirlwind Dancer is a painting that I began in 2013, and worked on it until earlier this year. Wow, time flies! It was just earlier this year that I finished this painting. It went through several stages of evolution, and it's formed with text at the base of it.

The gestural mark in my work is a free-flowing form of calligraphy, of text—bits of poetry, bits of affirmations, things that I'm getting out. It's this type of gestural abstraction, of calligraphic line work, is the way that I can most directly express my emotions.

And with this painting, all that was going on in the world, in my life, as a woman, as a black woman, as a wife, as a daughter, in this world, in the U.S., was whirling around me. All the negativity and all the fear and sorrow and

beauty and love—I was just letting it flow around me, and that's why it's called Whirlwind Dancer: because I think that the way to walk through this world is dancing, dancing in the whirlwind even when times are bad.

Bale Variant No. 0017 was completed in 2009. I hand-dyed the layers of grays and blues. Black is really hard to achieve—a true black—with a hand dye, or a true white—white is white, so there you go. And all these pieces of fabric and clothing were dyed by my hand, and then I invited people close to me to come in to write their forms of affirmation or prayer, the things that were important to them at the time, to be bound within the bale.

So, the bale and the painting, in my work, they're very similar—because either the fabric is tied up with this gestural line, this free-form flowing of expression, this energy that's explosive on one side, or fabric and clothing are bound with ribbon and rope to become this potential

bound, wound-up energy of possibility. They're two different sides of the same coin for me, and so I hope you can see my hand in both works, and I hope that you enjoy them. Thank you.

Mary Lovelace O'Neal, "Little Brown Girl with your Hair in a Curl"/Daddy #5, 1973, and "...And a Twinkle in Your Eye"/Daddy #6, 1973 (1:48)

208#

Two drawings from the lampblack series: number one, "Little Brown Girl with your Hair in a Curl"/Daddy #5; number two, "...And a Twinkle in Your Eye"/Daddy #6. Both pieces come from a song my father wrote on the occasion of my birth. The two are made of charcoal, pastel, tape, glitter, and overblow from the compressor-sprayed large paintings.

My works prior to this presumably quiet and contemplative lampblack series were brushy, boisterous, unruly pieces, moving mountains of water and color. Other times, they might be whispering inaudibly, spreading rumors, making love, or fighting for a cause.

These two both speak to my affair with the uncluttered minimalist viewpoint. As with cheating on a lover, I was always sneaking around, day tripping, skulking like Mrs. Jones—never satisfied with the flatness and singleness and loneliness I sensed and saw in the iconic minimalist constructions. As a result, my pieces were always hiding figurative elements and a host of non-doctrinaire components. These two are perfect examples of this hiding, these secret characters disguising themselves as line, or mist, or air, or color, or darkness—unable to be still, often unable hold silent. For goodness' sake, they might just burst right into the middle of the drawing with a gigantic blue moon. Sometimes, these works appear joyful, masking seriousness and sadness. Other times,

they are indeed joyful and happy to be living in contradiction.

Howardena Pindell, Autobiography: Japan (Shisen-dō, Kyoto), 1982 (:53)

209#

The painting Shisen-dō was painted after I returned to New York City after living in Japan for seven months on a U.S.–Japan friendship grant. There were a number of artists from all different disciplines who were sent to Japan, and Japanese artists were sent here to the States. Shisen-dō was a small garden near where I was living in Kyoto; it was quite beautiful. I feel the work was influenced not only by the garden-gardens, but also the dry gardens, including Kinkaku-ji and Ginkaku-ji, which means golden temple or—I believe—silver temple.

The texture also was part of the way that I worked, but it worked out well—or I would embed images.

I was very, very amazed at the Japanese, especially the traditional culture, because it was exquisite, absolutely exquisite.

Candida Alvarez discusses her process (:52)

210#

My work really moves from actual bodies and locations that I depopulate or I dismantle to get to something that is more about the painting. I start with drawings sometimes, and I take pictures that I find or that I create myself, and then they kind of get built up and dismantled in the process of painting. And so, the colors are building up against the drawing armature, but at the same time, they're pulling away, so there's some tension, hopefully. I never know what the end result will be; I'm always looking

to be surprised. And the painting process, for me, is a wandering and wondering. At some point, it collapses into something fairly mysterious but very engaged. So that's my work.

**Nanette Carter, Illumination #1, from the series
"Illumination," 1985 (1:31)**

211#

(Rhythmic music intro.)

Illumination #1 is first in the series of 49 works created between 1984 and 1986. After returning from Rio de Janeiro in Brazil around 1984, my hope was to capture the spirit, music, and life of this vibrant city. Music was everywhere—on the streets, in the clubs, and people singing on buses, celebrating life. The Afro-rhythms and syncopations are what I captured. It was illuminating to discover the African retention of music, along with the

Yoruba religion from Nigeria. Due to the close connections between the Roman Catholic saints and the Yoruba deities, or orishas, the slaves were able to retain their religious beliefs, music, and dances, unlike slaves in North America.

The rhythmic mark-making with oil pastels in Illumination #1 is integral to this work. Visually, you can almost hear the sound of the oil pastels hitting the surface of the board. Large, almost sculptural shapes appear to be swinging in motion. Overall, this is a festive air in this work.

(Rhythmic music outro.)

Lilian Thomas Burwell, Winged Autumn, 2007 (1:27)

212#

I identify this work, Winged Autumn, as an example of the turn of my work away from the more inferential and figurative work of the earlier years. I do continue to identify my work process as a channeling of spirit, and I see spirit as a source and expression of whatever I am—as a result of life experiences, belief systems, and convictions.

The visual manifestation operates much like point and counterpoint, or call and response—meaning that each cut or direction of the tool on the wood, each color or swipe of the brush on the canvas, takes place in response to the previous action. I rarely, if ever, have a game plan, but I do reach toward the something in me that shares the something in you.

This piece was undertaken when I was no longer physically able to create the heavier shapes that I had felt better attuned to. So I cut forms out of clear Plexiglas and subjected them to enough heat to make them malleable before adding them to the composition. That approach may suggest my sense of soaring into infinity. Now, I myself, well into the autumn of my years, am still learning to fly high and higher—my present mantra: living for possibility.

Nanette Carter, Cantilevered #14, from the series “Cantilevered,” 2014 (:55)

213#

“Cantilevered” is an architectural term meaning “to be anchored at one end and balancing the structure that it sends out horizontally.” This is my metaphor for surviving the 21st century. We are all having to balance jobs, family,

social media, the news, health, and more, on our shoulders.

In Cantilevered #14, from a series that has 37 works to date, it is the black-and-white painted element on the lower left that is holding up this entire structure.

Since 1996, I have been working with oil paints on frosted Mylar, which is a sheet of plastic first used by architects in the '60s. I have created all the textural surfaces that you see. I cut my shapes then collaged the shapes to create these structures.

Sylvia Snowden, June 12, 1992 (2:02)

214#

Hi. Sylvia Snowden. June 12 celebrates the day my parents were married, Dr. George W. Snowden and Mrs.

Jessie Burns Snowden. The painting was part of a series honoring my parents, which was shown at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in 1992.

My brother, my children, and I were very fortunate to have the love and support of good parents, who helped me become a better mother.

My painting is expressionistic, and I paint in series. The work has always been in this vein, but to me, it has changed over the years. I am of an era where one developed her style. For example, artists like Sarah Vaughan developed her style manner using her voice. This is by no means a comparison, but an effort to communicate by example my work. It comes from within, not an outside force to change styles. Although I am able to paint in different styles, as I learned in the thorough training at Howard University, expressionism is my style. It is a communication between the canvas and me, which is

governed by the intellectual and emotional states acting as one, a unification; examination of the subject matter and its treatment, figurative or without figure. It's purely based on my choice, which is dictated by the complexity of the subject. Therefore, it requires quite a bit of concentration on my part.

My mother was attracted to color, and I grew up in a home with the use of strong color. My father appreciated the arts. The influences on my life, even today, are my parents and Howard University Department of Art. I enjoy painting, and painting is a part of me.

Candida Alvarez, best friends forever, 2009 (1:37)

215#

best friends forever is a painting from 2009. It was painted with Flashe paint on canvas, and I like this painting very much because it reduces all the shapes into real minimal

colors, and the focus is on the composition or the structure of the painting—how the shapes build up to become the painting.

best friends forever could be my relationship to the painting, to painting as a practice, to the notion that friendships are like colors on some level—but they're slow and leading, and sometimes they're exuberant like yellows, and sometimes they're sort of quiet and distant and contemplative.

BFF, or best friends forever, is a desire, is a wish, to have an engaged relationship over a long period of time. Like painting and my relationship to painting, I hope that we can be best friends forever. Although friends do have arguments and disagreements, they make up—hopefully they do—and they hang in there for life. So it's kind of a riff on what we, as human beings, need in our lives, right? We need friendship. We need community.

Also, this painting is important because it was chosen by Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons as a collaborative painting for her men's couture garments.

Deborah Dancy, Winter into Spring 2, 2015, and Winter into Spring 4, 2015, from the series “Winter into Spring” (:30)

216#

Winter into Spring, 2015—these works are about the bleakness of winter during the winter months of 2015 where Connecticut was deep in a really hard, cold, snowy freeze. I was thinking about the emergent spring, and these works express that sense of anxiety and desire to see color.

Mary Lovelace O’Neal, Racism is Like Rain, Either it’s Raining or it’s Gathering Somewhere, 1993 (2:56)

217#

Speaking about the work is more difficult than making it.

Hmm, what to say about this painting, Racism is Like Rain, Either it’s Raining or it’s Gathering Somewhere?

Perhaps how it comes to be, its antecedents—at Skowhegan, circa 1963, I encountered a substance: lampblack powdered pigment. It sat in the corner of my mind for several years until graduate school. And for the next 25 years of painting, it became my material of choice.

I developed a technique that may have seemed counter-intuitive, which was using a chalkboard eraser to hand-drive dried lampblack powdered pigment into the unstretched canvas, where it remained unfixed.

I determined that one could not make a flatter painting than that, even as it presented a very human, seductive, velvety surface.

Who cares about flatness? Well, at that time, a whole bunch of makers and critics. Consequently, the making with this dusty substance answered two groups of folks: those who insisted that black artists make black, naturalistic paintings, and those who insisted that paintings be flat.

What is all this to do with Racism is Like Rain? Well, the brushy, color-saturated surfaces of action painting and the uncluttered, minimalist viewpoint were two attitudes that had interested me as a young maker. This painting is one of a large number related to a construct I had worked over many years—mating a contemplative, quiet air-in, finely grained, porous surface to a brushy, unabashedly, flat-out splashing, excitable, fluid material: paint. It was one of a

group of paintings that formally responded to work created in the late '60s and throughout the '70s, loosely referred to as the lampblack series. It was also a response to having grown tired of the non-giving of the floor and wall and other hard surfaces on which the earlier paintings and drawings were made.

Moreover, these paintings responded to my suddenly needing the alive feeling of the breathing in-and-out that was offered by canvas on a stretcher bar. And I needed the lickable, kissable, sensuous oil paint palette offering material that could buttery or crusty, filmy or opaque, thick or thin, as I fancied, whimsy being my guide.

Since January of 2017 this very year, Racism is Like Rain, Either it's Raining or it's Gathering Somewhere is more relevant than it was a quarter of a century ago when it was created. It references a sad fact of our daily lives here in the United States of America.

I dearly love this piece, and, were there more time, the stories she would tell.

Howardena Pindell, Untitled, 1972–73 (:45)

218#

The painting Untitled is an early work. I was very, very enamored by the circle, the use of close-value color. Ad Reinhardt influenced me in terms of color that was very close—so that you would have, like, a black-red or a black-blue, and only when you stared at it could you see it [laughs]. Anyway, so that painting I did after I had gotten my MFA at Yale School of Art in 1967, and then my work evolved from my being a figurative painter—that happened at Yale—to my being an abstract painter, but it shifted again in 1979, when I started to become more involved with figurative images and an autobiography series.

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