

Media Contacts:

Amy Mannarino, 202-783-7373

amannarino@nmwa.org

Stacy Meteer, 202-783-7377

smeteer@nmwa.org

Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today

October 13, 2017–January 21, 2018

*First U.S. exhibition dedicated exclusively to the presentation of abstraction
by an intergenerational group of black women artists*



WASHINGTON—A landmark exhibition of abstract paintings, sculptures and works on paper by 21 black women artists will be on view at the National Museum of Women in the Arts ([NMWA](http://nmwa.org)) Oct. 13, 2017–Jan. 21, 2018. *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today* places the visual vocabularies of these artists in context with one another and within the larger history of abstraction. This exhibition celebrates those under-recognized artists who have been marginalized, and argues for their continuing contribution to the history and iconography of abstraction in the United States. *Magnetic Fields* is the first exhibition dedicated exclusively to the formal and historical dialogue of abstraction by black women artists.

From the brilliant colors and energetic brushwork of Alma Woodsey Thomas's paintings to shredded tire sculptures by Chakaia Booker, works featured in this exhibition testify to the enduring ability of abstraction to convey both personal iconography and universal themes. The exhibition underscores the diversity of abstract art, which lies in its material construction and conceptual underpinnings, as well as in its practitioners.

Magnetic Fields features a range of works, including early and later career examples, several exhibited for the first time, and the long-awaited reappearance of iconic works such as Mavis Pusey's large-scale painting *Dejyqea* (1970), featured in the Whitney Museum of American Art's landmark 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*.



“By highlighting each artist's individual approach to materials, composition, color and content, *Magnetic Fields* creates a context for a lively and visual conversation among these artists,” said NMWA Director Susan Fisher Sterling. “The project also vigorously expands the art-historical narrative on post-war American abstract art. This exhibition shifts our attention to key practitioners who have not received their due, fostering a deeper appreciation of their accomplishments and asserting a new parity of value for their work.”

Magnetic Fields also pays tribute to the lived experience of each of the featured artists who have come individually to pursue abstraction, disrupting the presumption that only figurative works can convey personal experience. Collectively, work by the select group of prolific creators, born between 1891 and 1981, represents a range of approaches rooted in Abstract Expressionism, Color Field painting and Minimalism, with emphasis on process, materiality, innovation and experimentation. The artists in the exhibition are:

Candida Alvarez (b. 1955)
Chakaia Booker (b. 1953)
Betty Blayton (b. 1937, d. 2016)
Lilian Thomas Burwell (b. 1927)
Nanette Carter (b. 1954)
Barbara Chase-Riboud (b. 1939)
Deborah Dancy (b. 1949)

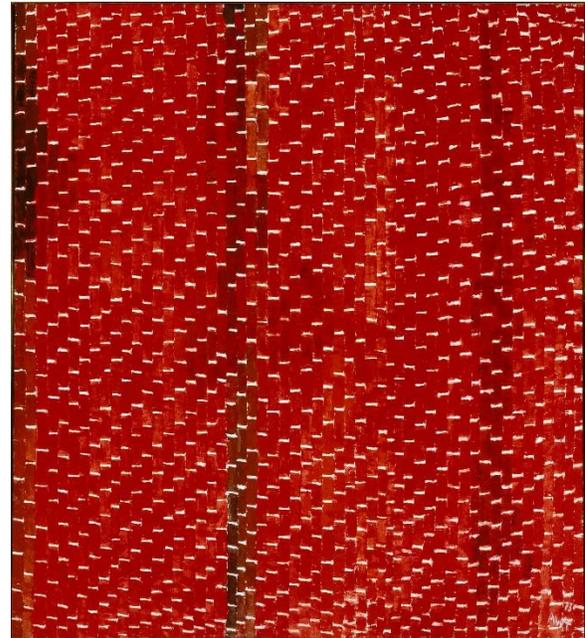
Mary Lovelace O'Neal (b. 1942)
Howardena Pindell (b. 1943)
Mavis Pusey (b. 1928)
Shinique Smith (b. 1971)
Gilda Snowden (b. 1954, d. 2014)
Sylvia Snowden (b. 1942)
Kianja Strobert (b. 1980)

Abigail DeVille (b. 1981)
Maren Hassinger (b. 1947)
Jennie C. Jones (b. 1968)
Evangeline "EJ" Montgomery (b. 1930)

Alma Woodsey Thomas (b. 1891, d. 1978)
Mildred Thompson (b. 1936, d. 2003)
Brenna Youngblood (b. 1979)

"As curators, we are honored to present this incredible, intergenerational group of artists," stated co-curators Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina. "This exhibition is intended to be a platform to further their visibility, as well as to generate more inclusive conversations about the history of American abstraction that consider the accomplishments and contributions of women artists of color going forward."

The conceptual and formal connections among works in *Magnetic Fields* testify to the broad legacy of abstraction. Artists working across time and place share common aesthetics and impulses. For example, repetitive mark making, a bright color palette and cosmic references are found in Mildred Thompson's *Magnetic Fields* (1991) triptych as well as Alma Woodsey Thomas's *Orion* (1973). The kaleidoscopic merging of bright colors and organic forms in Betty Blayton's paintings and prints finds kinship in the elements of Candida Alvarez's paintings and drawings. Meanwhile, the use of carefully handled collage elements, shaped compositions and exquisitely subtle textures connects the works of Nanette Carter and Howardena Pindell.



Noticeably, younger artists in the exhibition, such as Abigail DeVille and Brenna Youngblood, who incorporate found objects with hints of representational imagery, find precedent in the torn pieces of postcard landscapes and bits of exhibition invitations imbedded in Howardena Pindell's *Autobiography: Japan (Shisen-dō, Kyoto)* (1982). Such collage elements, seen throughout the exhibition, conceal and reveal fragments of representation, serving to blur the boundaries of pure abstraction.

Political undercurrents also flow throughout the exhibition. Mary Lovelace O'Neal's use of provocative titles, as in *Racism is Like Rain, Either it's Raining or it's Gathering Somewhere* (1993), informs the reading of her monumentally scaled work. Maren Hassinger similarly uses socio-politically inflected titles and materials—specifically *New York Times* newspapers in her textural floor sculpture *Wrenching News* (2008). By twisting the newsprint, she makes its original text unreadable, evoking instead a sense of the warped perceptions surrounding media content.

"*Magnetic Fields* is an important and relevant project at a time when the art world is at last recognizing the contributions of women artists to the key moments in American art," notes Lowery Stokes Sims, curator emerita, Museum of Arts and Design, and contributing author to the exhibition catalogue. "It not only expands the roster of artists working abstractly but also bravely tackles the quandary of black women artists who often have had to overcome familial uncertainty with their chosen careers, and have had to harness color, line and form to address the inevitable and unavoidable political and personal challenges they have faced in the world."

Through its expansive scope, *Magnetic Fields* magnifies and intensifies the viewer's perspective of American abstraction, and provides an expanded history of non-pictorial image- and object-making.

Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today is organized by the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri, and is supported in part by awards from the National Endowment for the Arts and from The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

The presentation of *Magnetic Fields* at NMWA is made possible through the generous support of Marcia and Frank Carlucci, FedEx, the Sue J. Henry and Carter G. Phillips Exhibition Fund, Stephanie Sale, Mahinder and Sharad Tak, and the Black Women's Agenda, Inc. Additional support is provided by American Airlines, the official airline of the museum's 30th Anniversary.

Washington, D.C., Connections

NMWA is the only East Coast venue for this groundbreaking exhibition. Many featured artists have ties to the Washington area, especially the Department of Art at Howard University. Alumni of this department include Alma Woodsey Thomas, Mildred Thompson, Mary Lovelace O'Neal and Sylvia Snowden. Others with ties to the region include Lilian Thomas Burwell, who was born in Washington, D.C., obtained her MFA at Catholic University and lives and works in Highland Beach, Maryland; Shinique Smith, who was born in Baltimore and earned both her BFA and MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA); and Maren Hassinger, who is the director of the Rinehart School of Sculpture at MICA.

Exhibition Curators

- Erin Dziedzic, director of curatorial affairs, Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art
- Melissa Messina, independent curator

Exhibition Advisory Group

An exhibition advisory group has been assembled to engage in broader dialogue throughout the planning of the exhibition. Members include:

- Isolde Brielmaier, assistant professor of critical studies, Department of Photography, Imaging and Emerging Media Group, Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, and curator-at-large, Tang Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY
- Licia E. Clifton-James, professor of art history, University of Missouri—Kansas City, and professor of art history, Kansas City Art Institute
- Gia Hamilton, independent curator and director of the Joan Mitchell Center, New Orleans
- Adrienne Walker Hoard, professor of fine art and black studies, University of Missouri—Kansas City
- Sandra Jackson-Dumont, Frederick P. and Sandra P. Rose Chairman of Education, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City
- Dena Muller, arts management and development consultant, New York City
- Valerie Cassel Oliver, Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond
- Lowery Stokes Sims, curator emerita, Museum of Arts and Design, and independent curator and art historian, New York City
- Lilly Wei, art critic, journalist and independent curator, New York City

Magnetic Fields is on view at the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art June 8–Sept. 17, 2017.

Publication

Intergenerational in scope, *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today* (Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017) includes 21 artists born between 1891 and 1981, among them Lilian Thomas Burwell, Mildred Thompson, Candida Alvarez, Betty Blayton, Nanette Carter, Brenna Youngblood and Jennie C. Jones. The 144-page illustrated catalogue features an introduction by NMWA Director Susan Fisher Sterling and essays by exhibition curators Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina, Valerie Cassel Oliver, Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond, VA, and Lowery Stokes Sims, curator emerita of the Museum of Arts and Design, among others. It will be available in hardcover in the Museum Shop and online at <http://shop.nmwa.org/> at the end of November.

National Museum of Women in the Arts

The National Museum of Women in the Arts ([NMWA](http://nmwa.org/)) is the only major museum in the world solely dedicated to championing women through the arts. With its collections, exhibitions, programs and online content, the museum seeks to inspire dynamic exchanges about art and ideas. NMWA advocates for better representation of women artists and serves as a vital center for thought leadership, community engagement and social change. NMWA addresses the gender imbalance in the presentation of art by bringing to light important women artists of the past while promoting great women artists working today. The collections highlight painting, sculpture, photography, and video by artists including Louise Bourgeois, Mary Cassatt, Frida Kahlo, Shirin Neshat, Faith Ringgold, Pipilotti Rist and Élisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun.

NMWA is located at 1250 New York Avenue, NW, in Washington, D.C. It is open Mon.–Sat., 10 a.m.–5 p.m., and Sun., noon–5 p.m. Admission is \$10 for adults, \$8 for visitors 65 and over and students, and free for NMWA members and youth 18 and under. Admission is free the first Sunday of each month. For information, call 202-783-5000, visit nmwa.org, Broad Strokes [Blog](#), [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Instagram](#).

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri

The Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art opened in 1994 and boasts three locations and a rapidly growing permanent collection of modern and contemporary works of artists from around the world. The museum hosts temporary exhibitions, installations, film and video series, lectures, concerts, workshops, and other creative programs. The primary objectives of the museum are to stimulate dialogue, to foster understanding and appreciation of modern and contemporary art, and to present significant works of art as educational resources. In shaping its permanent collection it strives to reflect the vitality, complexity, and unfolding patterns within modern and contemporary art. In selecting its exhibitions it strives to represent national and international aesthetic and cultural diversity. In its educational programs (which include lectures, workshops with visiting artists, tours, family days, demonstrations, and performances in a variety of media) it strives to provide opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds, and abilities.

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Image credit lines:

Mildred Thompson, *Magnetic Fields*, 1991; Oil on canvas, triptych, 70 1/2 x 150 in.; Courtesy of the Mildred Thompson Estate, Atlanta, Georgia; Art and photo © The Mildred Thompson Estate, Atlanta, Georgia

Chakaia Booker, *El Gato*, 2001; Rubber tire and wood, 48 x 42 x 42 in.; Collection of the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Bebe and Crosby Kemper Collection, Museum purchase, Enid and Crosby Kemper and William T. Kemper Acquisition Fund, 2004.12; © Chakaia Booker; Photo by E. G. Schempf

Alma Woodsey Thomas, *Orion*, 1973; Acrylic on canvas, 59 3/4 x 54 in.; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Gift of Wallace and Wilhelmina Holladay; © Estate of Alma Woodsey Thomas; Photo by Lee Stalsworth