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Review: '30 Americans' wows with size, but leaves you wondering about subtleties

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You won't be able to help it. When you walk into the big gallery of "30 Americans," newly up at the Tacoma Art Museum, you'll gasp.

Sparkling with rhinestones in front of you — Mickalene Thomas. Taking up the whole wall on the left — Kehinde Wiley. Iconic with history — Jean-Michel Basquiat. But while most of this touring show of contemporary African-American artists smacks you in the face with sheer size and quality (and some smaller moments of deep reflection), it leaves you wondering about some of the subtleties.

First, it has to be said: Over its eight-year lifespan, "30 Americans" has gone from being a groundbreaking collectors' vision (every work belongs to the Rubell Family Collection in Miami) to a game-changer for art. Many of the younger artists in the show now have busy solo careers thanks to this spotlight; many more regular Americans now have a much broader concept of contemporary art, one that includes black artists.

So it's a vitally important show. It's also a huge one. Despite the reduction from more than 200 works to 45 at the Tacoma Art Museum, there's still some big, big art.

Kehinde Wiley's "Sleep," a reclining male nude stretched heroically on an altar-like bed of flowers, with a loincloth to give him both coverage and sacred status, is 11 by 25 feet, the biggest painting local curator Rock Hushka has ever hung there. It dwarfs viewers, and that's by design: Wiley is the master of turning tables, of taking the white European tradition of artistic ennoblement and shining it onto regular black people. Up close, Wiley's skill is even more impressive, with a glassy, near-photographic precision that's made more human by the couple of blurry spots (the man's chin, his right thigh). The wall text highlights the historical connection (Restout's "Sleep" of 1771), but there's a surprising lack of discussion on Wiley's symbolism: death vs. sleep, the tattoo on the man's arm, the flowers, the elevation.

Other big pieces dominate the room with equally shorthand text references.

Kara Walker's "Camptown Ladies" stretches completely along the widest wall, the black cutout paper silhouettes doing demonic, appalling things in a pretty-pretty antebellum South: stealing babies, melting into puddles like hot wax, riding slaves like jockeys on horses. The fascinating part is how Walker, through simple color and line, blurs racial boundaries, with an enigmatic ending.

Other big works dominate the gallery, creating interesting sightlines (or blocking them) through sheer size. The walk-along narrative of "Camptown Ladies" finishes in ghastly stained carpet, dripping down the wall in a reference to contemporary American poverty — and a kind of finger-salute to museum art that's not touched on in the wall text. From the middle, half of Walker's mural is obscured by the wall of cotton bales by Leonardo Drew — the profits of slavery obscuring the social reality. All of them, plus the Wiley, are literally reflected in the deep glass and deeper shadows of Rashid Johnson's "The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club," a portrait of a man in quasi-'70s outfit with an ironically grim gaze.

Every work in the big gallery, and most in the small, challenges the viewer in some way, from Basquiat's tortured, hyperactive ode to Charlie Parker "Bird on Money" to the scratched-out topography of Mark Bradford's "Whore in the Church House," where the vertical of streets merges confusingly with the horizontal of maps and memories. Glenn Ligon's neon "America" sings with tawdriness; Gary Simmons' "Duck, Duck, Noose" squats in the middle like a Klan ceremony at a birthday party; another Wiley reigns from an elaborate gilt frame.

There are some small moments you shouldn't miss.

William Pope.L's Superman video is difficult to watch, physically and emotionally, but it pulls you powerfully into its metaphor of suffering. Renée Green's seemingly random grid of vintage film stills gradually creates a narrative of power, gender and cultural memory. Hank Willis Thomas' hunky athlete rears over his red stilettos with a perplexed gaze. Noah Davis' "Painting for my Dad" is overpowered by Wiley's "Sleep," yet with its hard-won shadows and the almost-holy light of its protagonist, staring bravely out from a cave, is far more poetic, and more human.

But despite some good community comments, there's not enough challenge in the museum's words. Nina Chanel Abney's larger-than-life class portrait tells the backstory of how her art class couldn't "get" her work until she rendered them as people of color, handcuffed in prison jumpsuits with a gun-wielding blonde officer. Yet it doesn't go into why it's a problem that black art should be solely about explaining blackness to white people. The show explicitly lumps all works into the category of "identity," without actually addressing artists such as Ligon, who point out the oversimplification. And it doesn't adequately explain why works like Nick Cave's floral-textured sound-suit or Purvis Young's fiercely gloomy neighborhood address issues other (bigger?) than identity: human perception, social justice. They're part of the Rubells' collection, but they don't all fit neatly into an easy theme.

That's the bigger point you should take away from "30 Americans." African-American art isn't just about identity, or slavery, or advertising, or any one theme. Just as Latino art isn't, and white art isn't, and German art isn't. It's diverse and spectacular and evolving and hard to contain — and that's the real power of this show.

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