

# 'Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition' Review: Intriguing History Hits a Sour Note

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By James  
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**'Riffs and Relations:** African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition" is the title of the new exhibition at the Phillips Collection. "Razzes" might seem more like it. The show of 53 artists is front-loaded with contemporary work designed to "call out the canon," according to one wall label, through loud statements and sour notes. Too bad, because, past the shrill opening gallery, this exhibition has something worthwhile to say.

## **Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition**

*The Phillips Collection*  
Through May 24

Yes, in the opening room it's hard not to pass judgment on "Judgment of Paris," a 2018 photograph by Ayana V. Jackson. Here the artist in period clothing inserts herself into an ensemble that updates Edouard Manet's "Luncheon on the Grass (Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe)"

of 1863. According to the wall labels, Ms. Jackson's image is meant to suggest a "counternarrative to historical readings that have interpreted the black body as colonized, enslaved, or impoverished." Nearby, Renee Cox, Mickalene Thomas and Carrie Mae Weems all offer their own sendups of Manet's picnic lunch. Yet up against Pablo Picasso's "Le déjeuner sur l'herbe, after Manet I" (1962), a still electrifying composition here on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, these contemporary photographic retakes seem more like derivative politicized statements.

Next up, "Pushing Back the Light," a 2012 painting by Titus Kaphar, reproduces Claude Monet's "Woman With a Parasol—Madame Monet and Her Son" (1875), but with canvas now ripped and smeared in tar. This time the actual offending work has been hauled over from the National Gallery of Art to face its accuser. "While we are talking and thinking about color," Mr. Kaphar declares in his wall label's opening arguments, "there are people on the other side of the world who are suffering because of their color." Of course, there are people suffering here and now for having to consider this ham-fisted painting.



### Ayana V. Jackson's 'Judgment of Paris' (2018)

Photo: Ayana V. Jackson/Mariana Ibrahim Gallery, Chicago

"Riff" is a term originally from jazz that means a repeated, elaborated or improvised phrase. "Relations" means kinship, but also retelling and comparison. The history of modern art has indeed resounded with a complexity of syncopations both riffed and related. Through a layering of old and new, modern art has pushed and pulled a wide body of influence into a new global movement.

As modernism drew from African sources, black artists were especially attuned to its formal inheritance. Alain Locke, the Harvard-educated Rhodes Scholar of the Harlem Renaissance and the editor of the formative anthology "The New Negro" (to which he contributed the title essay), seized on modernism's turn to African aesthetics as a path to liberation. The peripheral galleries of "Riffs and Relations" give a sense of the excitement this all engendered. In the 1920s, the early black modernist Hale Woodruff went to Paris to study African art and its influence on Cézanne and Picasso. His paintings "The Card Players" (1930) and "Africa and the Bull" (1958) engage with both European and African sources. At the



same time, the German-born artist Winold Reiss came to New York and helped to illustrate Locke's anthology with "African Phantasy: Awakening" (c. 1925) while influencing the pan-African aesthetics of his student Aaron Douglas, who is also on view. In the 1940s, sculptor Ossip Zadkine—born in what is today Belarus and seen here with his 1918 work "Forms and Light (Mother and Child)"—taught Harold Cousins, on view with the abstract, welded steel "Le Matador" (1955), and the always extraordinary Elizabeth Catlett, here with her mahogany figure of "Ife" (2002).



Hale Woodruff's 'The Card Players' (1930)

Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

In certain works, such modernist interplay continues to the present day. Martin Puryear's enigmatic sculpture "Face Down" (2008) owes a self-acknowledged debt to Constantin Brancusi. The black, wooden wall reliefs of Leonardo Drew remap the grids of Piet Mondrian. With examples from the "European Modernist Tradition" right next to the "African American Artists" of the title, the works ultimately speak for themselves about just who is out to riff, relate, or razz. A "Nude" (c. 1939) by William H. Johnson is a powerhouse of

modernist figuration. “Xpect” (2018) by Mequitta Ahuja, however, a self-portrait that remakes Picasso’s “Les Femmes d’Alger,” forgoes invention for another “intervention into the canon of art history.”

Organized by guest curator Adrienne L. Childs and the Phillips Collection, “Riffs and Relations” relies too much on a thematic presentation that burdens a fascinating historical subject with middling contemporary work. The Phillips Collection bills itself as “America’s first museum of modern art”—it opened nearly a decade before New York’s Museum of Modern Art—but this largely postmodern show often misses out on the deeper history of modernism and the Phillips’s own relations with black artists. To better understand that story and its characters—Horace Pippin, Richmond Barthé, Sam Gilliam and many others—visitors should explore the museum’s permanent collection. While the Phillips is temporarily closed, the exhibition’s scholarly catalog also offers a good place to linger.

—Mr. Panero is the executive editor of the *New Criterion*.

**Editors’ note:** The Phillips Collection is currently closed due to the coronavirus.

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