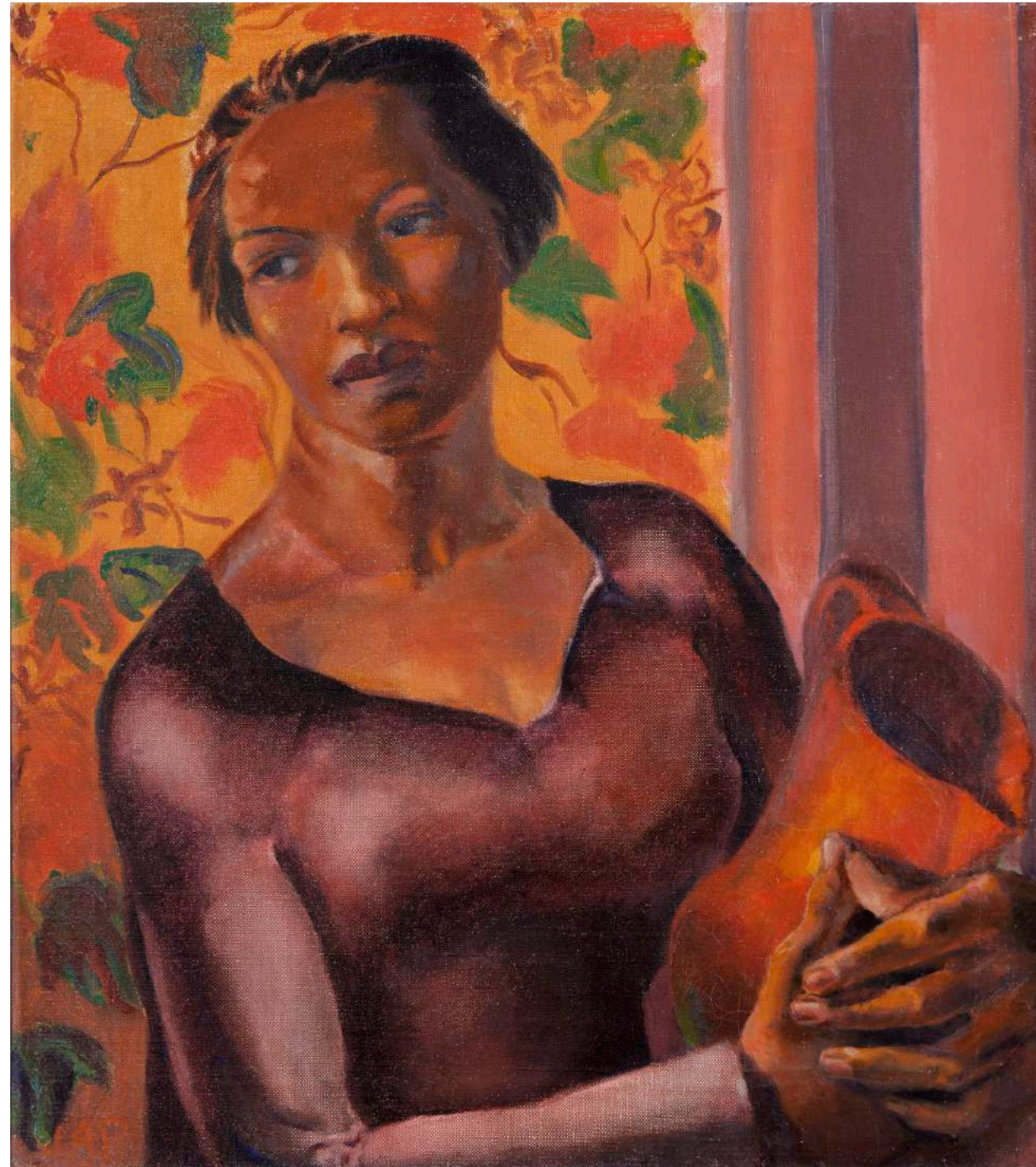
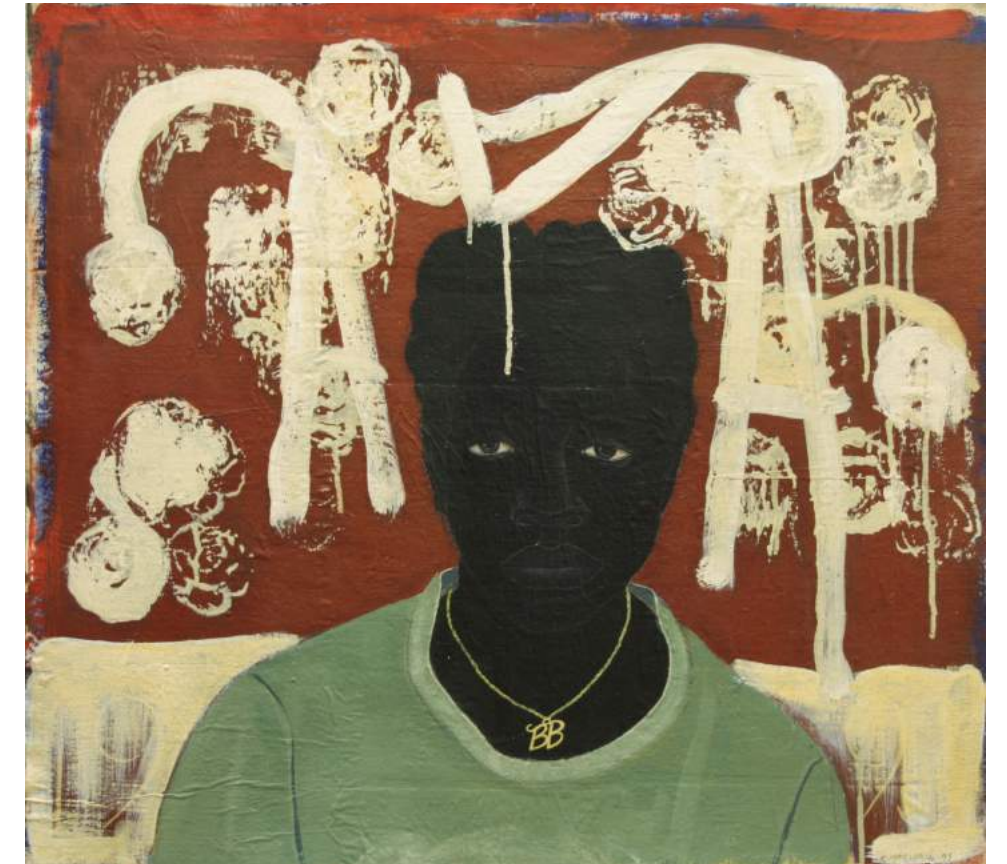


Willie Cole (b. 1955) *Eva Mae*, from "Beauties," 2012. Intaglio and relief (63 ½ x 22 ½ in.) Binghamton University Art Museum. Museum purchase with funds donated by John Copoulos '73, 2019.8.



James A. Porter (1905-1970) *Woman Holding a Jug*, 1930. Oil on canvas (21 x 19 ½ in.) Fisk University Galleries, Nashville, Tennessee.



Top: Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955) *Lost Boys: AKA BB*, 1993. Acrylic and collage on canvas (28 x 30 in.) Art Bridges © Kerry James Marshall. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York
 Bottom: Romare Bearden (1911-1988) *The Family*, 1975. Color aquatint and photo engraving (19 ½ x 25 7/8 in.) Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2010.51 © 2019 Romare Bearden Foundation / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY

**NOT BUT NOTHING OTHER:
 AFRICAN-AMERICAN PORTRAYALS, 1930S TO TODAY**

September 5-December 7, 2019

Binghamton University Art Museum

Binghamton University Art Museum
 Binghamton University
 Binghamton, NY 13902
Binghamton.edu/art-museum

INTRODUCTION

“not but nothing other: African-American Portrayals, 1930s to Today” presents an array of depictions of and by Black Americans, providing a wide-ranging survey of how artists over the last ninety years have responded to the challenge of picturing African-American selfhood in paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings and photographs. Key eras of creative production, from the Harlem Renaissance to the Civil Rights and Black Power era, as well as our present moment, are represented by artworks drawn from the holdings of prominent US public collections, along with works from the Binghamton University Art Museum. *“not but nothing other”* features some of the most significant artists of the last one hundred years, including pioneers such as Romare Bearden and Aaron Douglas, breakthrough figures of the 1970s such as Emma Amos and Barkley Hendricks and contemporary innovators such as Glenn Ligon and Kerry James Marshall. From portraits of artists and intellectuals to re-imaginings of historical figures such as Harriet Tubman, from realistic renderings to conceptual experiments, these works evidence the ongoing struggle to affirm Black identity within an America still marked by the history of segregation. Gathered together in this exhibition—the first time such an extensive selection of artists of color has been shown at the Art Museum—they attest to the rich artistic legacies of self-representation bequeathed to the present by multiple generations of African-American creators.

These legacies can only be understood against the backdrop of a powerful impulse on the part of a long-dominant White American culture to deny others the ability to portray themselves. Centuries of bondage, followed by legally mandated oppression, had been reinforced by a racist visual culture that, through caricature and distortion, worked to deny Black selfhood. Such stereotypes had been the subject of long struggle within Black communities that, in craft, song and various other forms of popular expression, sought to affirm their humanity, dignity and survival in the face of persistent repudiation by much of American society. Those struggles were taken up in the realm of the fine arts—in painting and sculpture—beginning in the later nineteenth-century, accelerating over the following hundred years as opportunities for education in the arts slowly, fitfully expanded for African Americans. With newfound access to training in the specialized skills of the painter and sculptor, whether at established institutions of higher learning or at the growing network of Black colleges and universities, these artists developed sophisticated portrayals of African-American life, of the individuals and communities that make up its richly diverse mosaic, refuting the xenophobic simplifications of a mainstream American visual culture.

“not but nothing other” picks up this story during the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and ‘30s, as artists such as Aaron Douglas and William H. Johnson joined colleagues in poetry, fiction and drama in elaborating a new, “Negro” art. Here we find the Black figure explored in portraits of fellow intellectuals and anonymous sitters, as well as in depictions of everyday life, some quite realistic, others inflected by the emerging styles of Euro-American modernism. Prominent individuals in Black history were also represented, especially those engaged in freedom struggles, such as abolitionist

Harriet Tubman or educator Booker T. Washington. The Civil Rights era is documented in the remarkable photographs of Gordon Parks, showing scenes ranging from crowds at the 1963 March on Washington and its most famous speaker, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to Black power advocates in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Watts in 1967. From the same moment, we also find the rough-hewn collages of Romare Bearden and the striking portrait paintings of Barkley L. Hendricks, both affirming aspects of Black identity in its rural and urban attributes, respectively. Works of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century frequently eschew realistic portrayals in favor of more conceptual approaches that present their subjects in symbolic, fragmentary and oblique form. We are as likely to “read” such art closely—whether the dense surfaces of a McArthur Binion painting or the textual portraits of Glenn Ligon—as look at it in any simple sense, and its makers often question essentializing, reductive or monolithic definitions of Blackness.

Sometimes such questioning has been seen as uniquely characteristic of our own postmodern present, when subjectivity itself—our sense of possessing an autonomous self—has been thrown into doubt and understood as determined by interlinked forces of race, class and gender. This exhibition, however, insists that for African-American artists across the twentieth century to today, selfhood was never singular and its portrayal always, necessarily multiple. Its title is borrowed from that of a recent poem by Fred Moten, who is as well-known for his critical and theoretical writings as he is for his poetry. The poem speaks of “trying to get to the essential” and of “the long migration of the new world”—themes that certainly resonate with the art on view here—but it is the title phrase’s odd doubling of negatives, the “not” and its accompanying “nothing other,” that most powerfully inspired the thinking behind this show. *“not but nothing other”* suggests an identity built on contradiction, an identity “discomposed,” as Moten might say, never complete, never guaranteed. It suggests, among other things, a complex interplay between exclusion and belonging that works on several levels. Not least, we might hear in that phrase an echo of a people who, despite four centuries of life and labor in this land, were long denied full citizenship and its benefits—the resilience and creativity of those who, although confronted over and over with “not,” have insisted on being “nothing other” than. At a time when such questions of inclusion are again of explosive import in the US, the works in this exhibition attest to art’s power to provide us with complex, inspiring images of ourselves, our histories, and our communities.

Tom McDonough, guest curator and Associate Professor of Art History

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Elizabeth Catlett (1915–2012) *Harriet*, 1975. Linocut (12 x 9 3/4 in.) Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas, 2010.57 © 2019 Catlett Mora Family Trust / Licensed by VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY