The concept for this exhibition grew out of African Impressions/Contemporary Art, a series of symposia that I initiated at Temple University, exploring modern and contemporary art from the perspective of African influences and voices. The symposia raised questions for students, faculty, and the general public as we examined the problems of traditional art historical categories and curatorial practices and the pervasive exclusivity of an art world dominated by elite, white patronage. At the Fist & Foot: Black Dance in Visual Art symposium, Dr. Robert Farris Thompson asserted that “Africanist aesthetics” are cultural retentions that permeate the visual art as well as the music, dance, philosophy, language, religion, and social fabric wherever people of African descent live. Eluding easy categorization, many of the artists represented at these events complicate familiar symbols, confronting us with taboos concerning the African Diaspora and its cultural influences, racial politics, and colonial history.

The works in From Taboo to Icon: Africanist Turnabout come from some of the artists who had participated in these symposia and from many others who share a common passion or perspective. The artists range from established to emerging, and represent diverse ethnicity, geography and generations. In work that is highly personal and idiosyncratic, they share a self-conscious response to the censoring, impact, and celebration of Black and African Diaspora cultural aesthetics, which have been considered taboo in some historical contexts and iconic in others. These artists also re-investigate omissions in history and contemporary American culture by questioning appropriation and what is seen and unseen in popular culture and fine art.

The artwork in the exhibition is loosely grouped into three subthemes: 1) Black Bodies Confront the Gaze, 2) Ancestral Legacies and Futuristic Visions, and 3) Forbidden and Familiar Spaces. The first grouping relates to works that are grounded in the body, including the history of how Black bodies have been represented in images and artwork, and how this has reflected issues of power, gender, and race. It also reflects the personal experiences of artists as they investigate the nuances of contemporary identity and self-revelation. The second subtheme reflects a process of digging into African ancestral and aesthetic cultural retentions that some artists undertake in their work. Also, in this group are pieces that layer past, present, and future by combining symbols, rituals, and even prophesy apocalyptic or revolutionary times to come. The third selection taps into collective cultural memories that deal with specific architectural, geographic, and culturally symbolic spaces.

The meaning of Africanist Turnabout in the exhibition title is tied to the shifting attitudes by mainstream Western cultures towards African and African Diaspora cultural influences. For example, those classical African artworks and religious objects that were considered “primitive” by many European and American museums are now highly valued and seen as masterpieces of culture. In a more mainstream example, the Hip Hop music and fashion trademarks of Black urban Americans, viewed as taboo by white middle class in the 1980s, have become perhaps the greatest cultural export of American popular culture.

Many of the artists in this exhibition work with “Africanist” aesthetics, values, and concepts in their work, continuing their own cultural lineage or relating to the array of “Africanisms” that pervade American and Caribbean culture. However, a number of works in the show will also challenge or complicate the very notion of traditional African aesthetics in a changing global and commercialized context. The variety of relationships and attitudes to Africanist influences gives this exhibition a breadth that reflects the deep and ongoing impact of cultural legacies and also the freedom of individual artists to delve into the psychological aspects of taboo and icon.

Sophie Sanders
Curator

Front cover: Hank Willis Thomas
Scarred Chest, 2003
Lambda photograph
40 x 30 inches
Courtesy of Jack Shainman Gallery

The B(r)anded series is a result of an exploration, and subsequent appropriation of the language of advertising. By employing the ubiquitous language of advertising in my work, I am able to talk explicitly about race, class and history in a medium that almost everyone can decode.

—Hank Willis Thomas
People of African descent have had a long troubled history in America. While there have been huge strides and accomplishments, the struggle for progress continues. I don’t believe we, as people, can be patriotic when “our” country has continually ignored many of the social and economic issues plaguing our communities. I hope that by first recognizing the inequality that still persists within the fabric of American culture we can then begin to collectively work toward change for future generations. —Sahar Coston
Simone Leigh

*Head, 2006*

Found object, beeswax and porcelain
48 x 22 x 6 inches

Informed by sources as varied as colonial anthropology, 70’s Afrocentrism and fundamentalist Christianity, my installations of abstract objects could be considered a contemporary recreation of a natural look. I investigate the self, nostalgia, authenticity, education and place through forms like the ethnographic object, diorama and chandelier. Objects are collected, decorated, scarred to amplify or designify the black body of it’s Orientalist markings.

—Simone Leigh
I listen closely to the stories contained in the common object. Whether a strand of my hair left in the sink or an amulet worn by a stranger, these items feed my curiosity. An investigation of a simple amulet grew into the collaborative Beaded Prayers Project. My scrutiny of a disembodied hair propagated a series of work on cultural, scientific, and aesthetic relevance of hair. —Sonya Clark

Sonya Clark

*Pearls of Wisdom*, 2005
Human hair and silver Ethiopian beads
8 x 8 x 0.5 inches
Juana Valdes

*Visual Literacy*, 2006

Drawing and wall installation
books, brass cup, shelf
Exhibited at Off Axis
Santa Barbara, California

As a woman, an immigrant, and a person of color my work juggles the personal and public, the details of personal life experiences and the social-political issues tied to race and class. It deals with migration and transculturation focusing on displacement and memory. I see migration as a complex process that involves the original, the diasporic community as well as the new homeland. The work ponders the migrant’s search for utopia, questions the representation of “otherness” in mainstream America and in the global arena. —Juana Valdes
This work follows my interest in the transformation of everyday citizens into Moko Jumbies ("dancing spirits") in Trinidad and Tobago’s carnival celebrations. Over the past year I have been investigating this stilt walking tradition called Moko Jumbie, which is an integral part of carnival. I have always been enthralled by Moko Jumbies, this magical spectacle that defies disbelief. I will travel back home to Trinidad this winter season to begin to learn how to stilt walk and eventually become a Moko Jumbie. —Karyn Olivier
I am interested in the way common rituals, such as the preparation and consumption of food, and the everyday objects used in these rituals can inspire a dialog. Often, the simple act of taking tea or the mere presence of a tea cup, a spoon, or a canning jar can become an important vehicle in the preservation and transmission of personal memory, ancestral knowledge and historic events. The power of association and the story telling tradition can be powerful tools.

—Debra Priestly
In this piece, I map out the tonal variations of two toddlers’ faces, labelling them with food terminology. In French, my mother tongue, a biracial person is colloquially described as café au lait, literally coffee with milk or white coffee. The pleasure derived from tasting, smelling, touching, looking, lingers on the child’s tongue where knowledge is swallowed, ingested, repeated. I playfully speculate on the terminology the next generation will be using to define their identity.

—Agnes Poitevin-Navarre
Still is a series of photographs from contemporary rap music videos. These artworks invite a second look at the so-called hip hop video vixen, displaying an interest in moments unintended by music video narratives. Once a timebased imagery, video characters now frozen permit unconventional portraits. Some photographs reveal agency rather than victimization, inviting readings of women’s willing participation in provocative constructions of identity. Other works provide reminders of the narrow representations of women in hip hop.

—Ayanah Moor
In *The Bodybuilder Series* what I am trying to do is focus on the female body contextualized and situated in the present, shorn of covering, developed and amplified in muscles and tendon, shoulders and calves.

—Deborah Willis
Through the means of translocation and transformation I create works that reference both personal identity and societal/cultural iconography. The works speak to a language and logic that is highly biographic and discursive. In my work, nature as a mysterious witness is brought into dialogue with human actions, thoughts and motivations. Through an open ended process, images emerge that express my concerns about authority, security, dominance, and freedom. My images are driven by both nature fragments and found material and seek some level of truth through a process of harmonious and discordant combinations.

—Tyrone Mitchell
I am interested in creating work that gives a voice to people on the margins of society. My installations are based on real life experiences. Everyday stories are narrated in the subject’s own words. The re-use of real life materials also addresses much larger issues: consumerism and people’s need to fill a sense of emptiness in their lives. By intentionally, introducing an unfamiliar cultural aesthetic that challenges traditional art canons, my art-installation work goes far beyond some accepted notions of beauty and aesthetics in today’s contemporary art.

—Pepón Osorio
The Medusa Series is a new body of work that explores Matriarchs and their roles in my life and the lives of a greater community. In particular Mothers, Daughters, Artists, Social Activists, Community Leaders and connecting their beauty to those of past divine women who have played a comparable role and have also been denied their proper respect, due to an opposing and male dominated modern society. From my craft, I humbly bring these elements to the surface paying homage to their energy.

—José Ortiz
My work as a visual artist investigates ideas of memory and exile and the relationship of Africa to Diaspora. The photographic process, is the grounding medium for my work. I use mark making techniques such as oil, pastel, charcoal and graphite. The intension is to blur the distinction between these medias and is meant to examine the tension between both history and myth, and memory and forgetting. Photography captures time; it renders memory suspended, transfixed, and static. The process of mark making by contrast, performs an act of imagination, or recreation and activation in the present.

—Terry Boddie
My sculpture uses a variety of materials and devices to encourage contemplation. Ideas, forms, textures, synergistically juxtaposed and nestled in incongruent combinations challenge formal spatial logic, as well as quick intellectual responses. I seek to create work that exudes a whole presence that upon closer scrutiny it’s myriad sections surrender their history to reveal a resonating core and a narrative that unfolds uniquely to each viewer. —Colin Chase
By combining incongruous and often contradictory shapes, I am able to play with how those shapes are perceived. New interpretations become available. The resulting sculptures make use of mundane objects whose “everyday” aspect acts as a cover for some alternate purpose. A hat can be about “attitude.” The wheel suggests control. As an artist I use the process of making sculpture to give physical form to the concealed nature of those mundane objects that cohabit and provide a background to our everyday lives.

—Syd Carpenter
It seems to me that my work occupies a space between outsider art and mainstream consciousness, being not entirely one or the other. My childhood life in rural Jamaica contrasted to my later experiences in a more urbane Western world created a paradox I have never really shed. My ideas tend to be mythic narratives, often folklore or legend mixed with my own inventions to form parables about life today. The images manifest a personal lexicon evolved over time, providing for me a world vision of fantasy wrestling reality, past and present, about what is primitive and what is not.

—Keith Morrison

Keith Morrison
African Tango, 2000
Watercolor
40 x 30 inches
Art lovers say that my art is rebellious, comical, political, even erotic but most of all that I excel in pictorial narration, realism and iconicity. My working style is flexible, incorporating social commentary, word juggling, political cartooning and sometimes graffiti. I just work straight from the mind. My artistic aspiration includes expanding my artistic talent, while collaborating with other artists and individuals from across the globe regardless of nationalities, origins, sex, age, social status or culture.

— Ghariokwu Lemi
“Madwara” is a Swahili word meaning attractive, striking, or stunning circles or spots. *Orange Flower* uses a resist and dyed technique stitched and marbled with background rust color discharged and marbled with olive green and purple dye.

—Lucy Lau
As the veil lifts between the two worlds, I begin to see a distinct, profound visage of Spirit in all its manifestations. As subtle as a pensive stare, or the curl of the lip, the spirit gesture completes our own, allowing others to See—to sense our humanity. Our humanity illuminates the connection between body and spirit, revealing the soul and its intent. It is the juxtaposition of these realms and its subtlety or lack thereof that motivates my creativity.

—Kimberly Camp
Betty Leacraft

Camouflage: A Means of Survival, 1992
Dyeing, photo-transfer printing, piecing, quilting
72 x 52 inches

I dedicate Camouflage to the memory of my African ancestors, to the ancestors of all indigenous peoples of the Americas, and to their present day descendant’s on the endangered list of humanity whose genes are being collected. Camouflage explores a few of the many syncretisms and mechanisms of survival created by Africans forced into new environments under the yoke of slavery and oppression. Particular importance is placed upon the ability of the captured Africans to continue practicing their spiritual beliefs, customs, rituals, martial arts, dances, music, and languages. —Betty Leacraft
left:
Melvina Lathan
Jack Johnson, 2005
Photo linen and fabric
33 x 43.5 inches

right:
Earl Fyffe
Shanty-t, 2005
Found materials, wood, nails, glue and screws
88 x 36 x 11 inches

Jack Johnson is part of my Boxers on the Canvas series in which I utilize observations culled from my seventeen years experience as a professional boxing judge. I relay the dilemma of the first African American World Heavyweight Titleholder whose contest occurred during the post-slavery era of bigotry and White Supremacy in the U.S. Through re-contextualized historical and contemporary images, viewers outside the steamy realm of boxing can join me in a ritualized moment of physical output, while those inside can further appreciate the tremendous social/cultural bond with which only we identify.

—Melvina Lathan

If one can get beyond the shabby appearance of a shanty structure, stepping inside one would find some of the kindest, most generous, caring people. This piece is not so much about the shanty’s structure, but a celebration of the communities all over the world who live in shantytowns. These people build shelters from whatever materials they find, such as plywood. Shanty-t is a tribute to the resourcefulness and resilience of the human spirit.

—Earl Fyffe
The inspiration for this body of work comes from ongoing questions I have about home; as a political structure, a psychological identity, and a physical dwelling. I have lived on three continents. I own no land. The idea of land, as a space, a void, overwhelms me. But all you need is a fence to validate it... a door to separate inhabited space from no-man’s land. I am desperate to solidify a vastness and through my materials make space, tangible.

—Ruby Amanze
My work celebrates the land as a continuous recycler, the compost site of memory and time. Recycled images of mechanically produced billboard posters, and enlarged digital prints of my drawings, are contrasted with the more immediate mark of my hand. I’m interested in utilizing the language of drawing and the idea of recycling as a means to understand and communicate ideas about constructed and deconstructed memory and landscape. —Sophia Ainslie
Heather Marie Davis

*Apron Project*
Site specific ongoing project

My work addresses exoticization, dislocation, racial stereotypes, and disobedience. Old photographs, symbolism, and appropriated images from explorer magazines, tourist books, and found or collected objects are utilized to evaluate Black, Negro, Afro-, African identities in relationship to Whiteness, the desire to assimilate, or to be White. My work addresses how people are defined and self-define—by their culture, their country, or their skin color. My projects are a result of internal family racism, reactionary revolutions, interracial relationships, and miscegenation.

—Heather Marie Davis
“I am because we are,” according to the southern African concept of Ubuntu. My tissue paper quilt is not only an allusion to the African Diaspora, but also represents a bond of unity. The tissue paper suggests our very fragile world. People are suffering both in the US and around the world from the lack of access to basic human rights, including housing, food, healthcare, education and employment. Joined together we have the strength to eliminate these insufficiencies.

—Maya Freelon Asante
The main focus of my work is to immerse myself in the creative process. I enjoy the freedom of playing and experimenting with new materials and mediums and letting the process guide me intuitively and subliminally to divergent places and directions. These places are often reflections of my early childhood memories of growing up in Haiti in the small village of Labalen where distinct visions of climbing calabash trees and interacting with various types of animals in my grandparent’s yard guide and inform my art making practices.

—Franky Laude
JC: At first I thought it was about digging, but now I think its more about adventure.

KM: The adventure of what?

JC: I don’t know, just the adventure of . . .

KM: Hmmm . . . Part of me thinks thats a cop out, but part of me feels exactly what you mean. (And so it was, on that night of their middle class black lives, that they decided to step outside).  —Jamal Cyrus
My paintings combine woodcut, collage, and drawing on paper. Formally, they are studies of wood grain and its capacity to evoke water surfaces, thumbprints, and other natural patterns. Their infinite quality may recalls textiles, but it rather derives from the abstract tradition of Islamic art. Infinity is perhaps all I retain from that tradition, while I question its geometry and underlying Platonic aesthetic. Unlike Plato, I think that perfection is to be found in nature, and not in lines drawn with a ruler. —Emna Zghal
Reiko Tomita and
Roy Reid/Rfive

(Untitled) EM bamboo, 2005
Color photograph
Collection of the artists

We work together as Rfive (R5)
Design and collaborate in a variety of mediums including textiles and photography. In January 2008, our work is being exhibited at Hayashi House and Design Festa Gallery, which are both located in Tokyo, Japan. We live and work in Brooklyn, NY.

—Reiko Tomita and Roy Reid/Rfive
Nadine Patterson

Second Street, 2007

Philadelphia: Digital still

The image shows my love for movement, and the play of color and light. It is a documentary photograph that expresses the beauty of a moment. —Nadine Patterson
My works form an arsenal of confrontational collages, engaged in visual war—“fair.” They are created to raise questions about America’s domestic and foreign policy. And depending on your politics when viewing this work, what you may find reflecting back at you, is your world view imploding in what James Baldwin called a “very disagreeable mirror.” My aim as an anti-imperialist artist is to create truth and beauty, reflect the reality of our lives, and liberate the exiled from exile. —Theodore A. Harris
The archaeological dig at the site unearthed remnants of the foundation supporting the bow window in which Washington stood to receive visitors as well as the foundation of the kitchen where Hercules, Washington’s enslaved African chef, worked. I have explored recording the excavation site at various times of day in an attempt to capture the importance of this moment that shows the connection, as well as to quote Frederick Douglas, “the hypocrisy and its barbarity around American slavery in the face of its shouts of liberty and equality.”

—John Dowell
Curator's Statement

When visual representations achieve a compelling prominence, through continuous rotation and repeated exposure in a revered or secular environment, an icon is conceived. Icons recapitulate ideals and actions central to human life, representing standards of thought and action that illuminate critical values. Social, political, economic and religious ideals are encoded and communicated to us through iconic representations of qualities such as leadership, beauty, family, community, wealth, strength, talent, wisdom, tradition, vision, spirituality and divinity.

Icon and taboo have similar effects: both encapsulate the desires, fears, needs and triumphs that are among the most vital and basic aspects of human life. To discuss the difference between taboo and icon is to consider the workings of power and authority. Taboo forbids and therefore inspires rebellion. To dismantle or demolish a taboo is to describe the indescribable or speak the unspeakable. The act of exposure makes the unthinkable familiar to a confounded, desensitized culture of capitalists. Taboos and icons become pre-packaged, labeled and mass-produced.

"From Taboo to Icon: Africanist turnabout" comes from a need to continue the unfinished conversations begun by some (writers, philosophers, curators and artists) but condemned and censored by many. As curators, we continue to be advocates within our study and practice as artists, educators and historians. Our intention for this exhibition is to revisit a topic that originally traced the transition from taboo to icon, restoring and expanding it by creating new connections between individual and community at all levels: local and international, public and private, men and women and among various cultures.

We are encouraging community engagement. The act of turnabout happens through the exhibition's dialogue with many communities, generating a conversation that will transcend the various dialects that inhibit and confine us to fixed margins and categories. Each artwork has a distinct voice that contributes to the conversation, and the visual pitch, aesthetic tone and complex messages addressed by the artists. These works create rifts in the illusion of a culture of equality and homogeneity.

By frequent repetition of these icons and taboos, subjects and issues gain visibility and prominence but also a familiarity that undermines their effect.

But why is it controversial when taboos become less transgressive? Why question the integrity of icons? To move these symbols toward a shared understanding or acknowledgement reduces their power to shape and measure individual existence and reflects new directions of thought and conduct that could alter conditions of human life for the better.

Shervone Neckles
Curator

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The lucid moment shared during the critical instant of collaboration that is portraiture, is universal. The moment of recognition resonates. We restlessly and relentlessly seek ourselves in every visage. If this practice is pursued without prejudice, our goal is achieved in a sublime recognition and the revelation is that of something beyond mortal cognition. The testament is documented in a recorded discourse that occurs between myself and the individuals who consented to this exercise. —Lonnie Graham