



BETWEEN YESTERDAY & TOMORROW

The Department of Arts & Culture manages the Culture Commons Gallery to showcase the work of San Antonio-based artists and to tell the stories of the city's diverse community – its people, places, history, and culture. Culture Commons has continuously strived to highlight underrepresented groups. This includes highlighting the long struggle for equality by African Americans, women and Mexican Americans in the *United We Are One* exhibit. The *We Are* exhibit, celebrating the identities and narratives of 12 LGBTQIA+ artists, was the first of its kind hosted by the City of San Antonio and reflected on experiences and challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community. The *Status of Women in San Antonio: Reflections on the Pursuit of Gender Equality* exhibit covered profound and deeply important topics women throughout San Antonio face daily. *Between Yesterday & Tomorrow: Perspectives from Black Contemporary Artists of San Antonio* continues Culture Commons' commitment to celebrating the diverse communities of artists in this city.

"Between Yesterday & Tomorrow: Art of Our Time that WORKS"

Essay by Aïssatou Sidimé-Blanton,
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Between Yesterday & Tomorrow: Perspectives from Black Contemporary Artists of San Antonio is curated by Barbara Felix and debuts in the City of San Antonio's Culture Commons Gallery three years into the art industry's widespread pledge to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. It's the most recent push for greater openness in all walks of life and in contemporary artistic expression. In looking at visual expression, the elephant in the room is what's meant by "Contemporary Art." The question is salient because historically in Western art traditions a specific style or subject matter would gain popularity with wealthy art patrons and then artists would flock to it to gain patronage (read "income" and commissions for their art) and to be named the preeminent artist of the day. However, the overriding acceptable images were Biblical scenes, characters in literary works, and powerful people usually with Anglo-European features (e.g., royalty, military leaders, and later wealthy merchants, and politicians). In the late 1800s the first African American artists began fleeing to Europe to study art freely and gain any modicum of recognition so long as they painted or sculpted the proscribed images.

It wasn't until World War I that European and American art scenes began to break with centuries-old traditions. What started with the Great War, the challenging of mores, and a "democratization" of power centers was exacerbated by the Second World War. The entities that crowned the great artists began expanding beyond individual patrons to museums and arts foundations – and most recently to fine arts cultural centers. In the upending of tradition, the definition of "fine art" was broadened to encompass hot button social issues, popular culture, and/or new techniques applied to old themes. The push for an end to colonialism abroad and Civil Rights for all in the U.S. in the 1950s and 60s shook the foundations further. Events such as the college student stand-ins that resulted in African Americans being able to sit anywhere in the Majestic Theatre and other movie houses in San Antonio in 1961 began to have an impact on art.

This ultimately led to a widespread explosion of art that reflected Black and Brown people's histories and aspirations. Globalization of industry, cheaper travel, and a general push for representation that reflected America's multicultural heritage spurred us further. In 1984 America had a nationwide introduction to fine art by and about African Americans on the set of a hit, primetime tv show, *The Cosby Show*.

In 2023, Contemporary Art is, generally speaking, art made today. However, artist and art historian Dr. Samella Lewis's seminal work *Art: African American* published in 1990 identified what broadly remain the key recurring themes in contemporary art by Black artists in America: mission-driven similar to Social Realism art pioneered by Mexican artists of the early 20th century, a focus on historical reclamation, functionalism, and subversive tendencies to reinterpret and revalue Black bodies and culture, and to use whatever materials are at hand (called "found objects").

On display through November 17, 2023, *Between Yesterday & Tomorrow* presents 36 works by 17 Black San Antonio artists who employ a mixture of techniques, including painting, collage, photography, wood carving, printmaking, and assemblage of found objects. The artists range in age from 28 to 84. In line with San Antonio's reputation as Military City USA, many of them moved to San Antonio during their or family members' military service and then stayed, with the bulk hailing from elsewhere, including Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Saluda, South Carolina; Kansas City, Missouri; Detroit, Michigan; Phoenix, Arizona; and Beaumont, Texas; Oklahoma, and Rwanda. Six of the artists have been members of a local collective co-founded by art patron Aaronetta Pierce and that is in its 40th year of promoting art by and about People of Color, the San Antonio Ethnic Art Society. Their artwork reflects many of the traits identified by Dr. Lewis, but in a way that has made space for immigrant voices and stories, and non-Western techniques.



A CALL TO ARMS: RECLAIMING “WOKE-ISM”

In mid-2020, communities across the U.S. began to call for a reevaluation of how policing was practiced in Black and Brown communities when faced with repeated video footage of egregious, unwarranted use of deadly force. Those calls coalesced into a repeated chant to “Stay Woke,” that is to stay vigilant to ensure change occurred. Similar to the Black Power movement of the 60s and 70s that sparked a wave of art focused on uplifting and energizing Black communities, San Antonio’s current Black artists are responding to social issues and pressures that families face today.

Edward Harris, a native of San Antonio’s East Side, presents *The One with Working Hands* and *I wish Someone told me this when I was younger*. These two pieces feature red and black silhouettes made of fabrics, oil, and lace. In line with many of their previous works, the images are intentionally androgynous to draw attention to the exploitation and marginalization that viewers of all backgrounds face. As someone who identifies as non-binary, Harris says, “We are all in some oppression and need to come together.”

Alethia Jones chronicles her personal struggles and triumphs when faced with crisis in three mixed media paintings. Made of burn marks, acrylic, leather, and markers, these narrative pieces are densely packed with Jones’s trademark symbols of open eyes, floating hearts, and cacti. The viewer is driven to consider the pressures that could spark the central figure in each piece to first stand, bat in hand, among the wreckage she has wrought in *A Black Girl’s Soul Cleanse*. And, what music could expel that pain and rage in *Sound Therapy* to result in the smiling girl in a yellow dress who floats above it all in the final piece of the trio, *She Shines Her Light*.

Similarly, **Calvin Pressley’s** central figure faces a crossroads in *Contemplating Flight*. The inner turmoil is conveyed in its doubled-over posture, collapsed feathers and various shades of blue and black that permeate the piece. Pressley was introduced to oil painting by University of Texas San Antonio professor and artist Ricky Armendariz and has recently been experimenting with color to convey various emotions, similar to abstract artists, even as his works tend toward narrative figures like one of his favorite artists, Kerry James Marshall. The headdress of cowrie shells obscures the visage and harkens to his longstanding interests in masks and masking.

In two new pieces, **Kaldric Dow** expands his practice beyond his trademark life-size, realistic paintings of busts of famous African American entertainers and Civil Rights figures. The skin and hair of the male and female subjects in *Dynamic* and *Wave King* were collaged with various patterned materials, thereby adding an extra layer that hints at tattoo art and deeper-than-skin meanings.

Anthony Francis moves the dialogue beyond the singular entity into a snapshot of an interaction between generations. In his staged photo titled, *Lanece and Rico, A Dance and or Things a Mother Might Do 2021*, a woman in a red tank top is holding the arm of a young man in a black t-shirt who has one

fist raised in the air. Like the best Charles White sketches and paintings (such as *I Accuse*), Francis’s young man peers with resolve past the woman and out of the canvas at something the viewer can’t see. Their poses are elaborately performative but engender profound questions such as what would we do for love of a child, and what do mothers face especially when raising young Black men in a city where 30% of African American households are led by a single parent.¹ They reflect his ongoing research into feminist theory and Black studies.

PLACE OF REFUGE: GOD & FAMILY

In times of trouble and respite, religious institutions and internal social gatherings have been a place of retreat and rejuvenation in many African American communities. As such, they have frequently been inspiration for visual art in the African American community, from internationally acclaimed 19th century painter Henry Ossawa Tanner and Archibald Motley to folk artist Clementine Hunter and Ernie Barnes, as well as regional artist Jonathan Green. In today’s parlance it’s a celebration of “Your People” and what artist Carmen Cartiness Johnson calls her “villages.”² It resonates with a city that is historically family and church-oriented due to its Spanish and Roman Catholic roots, and with this post-pandemic era that has residents looking to celebrate life after years of isolation and worry over the unknown.

Long-time San Antonio resident **John Coleman** started as a wildlife painter but transitioned to colorful acrylic paintings focused on communal gatherings to honor and preserve African American cultural practices. In *BETJEC-O*, four men gather around a table playing a game of chance. The card game is reminiscent of the Spades and bid whist games that filled many African American households on weekends and holidays. In this case, one expressive onlooker cuts his eyes hinting at what the next play may be.

Carmen Cartiness Johnson’s new work *Invitation Only* takes us to a private party. In Johnson’s trademark aerial view of the party, we see at least 14 groupings of people of all ages, hues, and body types. There are couples snuggled up, parents twirling with their children, and various other clusters of dancers and chatters. The self-taught artist has painted them in an abstracted method similar to famous painter Jacob Lawrence’s stylized figures. The packed canvas and birds-eye perspective allows the viewer to vicariously experience the intimacy and relaxed closeness of this exclusive event. For Cartiness Johnson, it’s a needed luxury that she paints because “people are happier when celebrating.”

¹ San Antonio African American Community Fund, *State of the African American Community in San Antonio and Bexar County*, January 2022, page 13.

² Parker-Nowicki, Cassandra, “Storytelling in San Antonio,” *International Review of African American Art*, volume 27, number 1, page 54.



Theresa Newsome documents the search for part of her family in three photos, *It's raining...would you like to get something to eat?*, *I was waiting*, and *90% of Our Black Men*. Newsome took up photography under the guidance of University of Incarnate Word photography professor Kathy Vargas. The black and white photos in this series highlight sprouting weeds, an abandoned playground, and a chained-off ballfield that were at the end of her trek to Virginia to encounter a father that she had never met in more than two decades on the planet. For Newsome, it was a painful experience, but also cathartic and necessary to heal.

Sculptor **Paul Hurd** took up drawing to fill the hours each day while stationed on the icy, tundra at Thule Air Force Base in remote Greenland. Sketching morphed into ceramics, and then wood carving when Lackland Air Force Base dismantled its kiln, and he no longer had a way to fire his clay works. In retirement his carvings often are made from tree limbs found (and sometimes intentionally cut) in his yard and center on the church messages he says they reveal as he carves. In the exhibition, Hurd's five walking canes are covered in mixed and matched patterns. Like the carved and cast figures that topped the chieftains' staffs of ancient West African kingdoms, Black male figures top his canes. They convey the humor and storytelling that made him a favorite of now deceased San Antonio City Mayor and art collector, Lila Cockrell: The canes are made for walking but actually twist, and bend back and forth. In addition, the male figures strike evocative poses with one waiting in orange swim trunks to be baptized (*Wade in the Water Ready*), another preening in a double-breasted navy blazer and bow tie (*Sunday Best*), while a third appears to almost keel over backward while praying on bended knees (*Praying for Deliverance*).

SANKOFA: FETCHING IT TO NOT REPEAT THE PAST

In the Akan people of Ghana there is an Adinkra symbol that reminds one that there is value in history and that, in fact, "It is not a taboo to go back and fetch what you have forgotten." It is often depicted as a backward facing bird called a "Sankofa." It became popular in American communities as Afrocentrism spread in the 80s and 90s. For a people whose ancestors had their culture, languages, families and native religious stripped during slavery, the searching could seem a futile task. Still, artists like African American sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett Mora, who traveled through San Antonio many times and learned Social Realism (the idea of making art that reflects the plight of the everyday citizen) while living among Mexican muralists, tried and, more effectively, made it their life's work to visually record the realities of their own times.

Bernice Appelin-Williams takes up the torch in two assemblages made of found objects from defunct San Antonio businesses and homes that were demolished to make way for construction of the Alamodome stadium in the 1980s. In the past, the Cuero, Texas native repurposed shooting targets into altars and third-hand suitcases into box art à la Louise Nevelson. In *Slave Narratives: Transbluency #5* and *#4* in the same series, Appelin-Williams uses text from federal Works Progress Administration (WPA) interviews conducted in the 1930s with former Texas slaves, photos

collected in flea markets, cowrie shells, found charms, beads and even gold leaf to visually represent the wealth that amassed in the Americas, and Texas specifically, through the slave trade.

Appelin-Williams, who studied art and urban planning, hopes it works as an antidote to the nationalism and intolerance of The Other that has gained traction in recent years, and that was proved destructive in previous epochs.

Similarly, fiber artist and quiltmaker **Deborah A. Moore Harris** blends Conceptual Art techniques of making text central in the artwork with her own burgeoning symbology to showcase key historical moments in *American Legacy Too*. Nine Civil Rights events since the first enslaved Africans were brought to the United States in 1619 are encoded in text and images. Sometimes obvious but at other times obscured, the composition has the effect of luring the viewer to spend more time on the artwork, and Harris hopes, to investigate beyond the headlines. For Harris, a regular poll judge and election clerk in Bexar County, there is nothing worse than an uninformed voter and citizen – particularly at a time when many rights once thought settled by legal precedent are being challenged and overturned by the courts.

WE ARE AN IMMIGRANT CITY, IMMIGRANT NATION

Texas has long been a region that attracted immigrants, whether Spanish conquistadors and Catholic missionaries, or Southern cotton farmers looking for fertile ground and, after Emancipation, a place to hide with their illegal slaves. Today, San Antonio, is at the intersection of major U.S. highways running east to west and north to south and remains a stop for many travelers from various parts of the globe.

Alain Boris Gakwaya's two paintings, *Childhood Memories* and *Second Home*, reflect his experiences immigrating from Rwanda at age 16 to San Antonio. The simple line drawings are embellished with pastels in primary colors. In their visual simplicity they are a departure from his earlier works that featured dense markings similar to Jean-Michel Basquiat's paintings, colorful draped fabric similar to Robert Rauschenberg, and skulls that he adopted from Mexican folkloric traditions encountered locally. Yet they capture the search for the familiar that plagues many new immigrants when trying to acclimate to new environs.

Naomi Wanjiku's artistic practice developed as the rise of Feminist Art in the 70s and multiculturalism of the 80s made space for a redefining of fine art to include craft and non-European definitions of beauty. Throughout her career, Wanjiku has experimented with the basket-weaving she learned from her grandmother as applied to fibers and non-plant materials, such as metal strips, and with manipulating sheet metal into sculptures that appear to flow or undulate like the dances of the women-only societies she grew up around in her native Kenya. In two large wall hangings, Wanjiku assembled strips of red, yellow, and amber fabric and paper pieces and then crocheted the strips together using steel wire and yarn. *Voices of Africa* is a vibrant, abstract expression of the thousands of different peoples of the continent.

AFRO-FUTURISM AND BEYOND

In the newest trends in Contemporary Art there is a focus on understanding the unknown and projecting technological advances, and what they portend – or can be used to create – in the future. It draws in part from spiritualism but also a greater acceptance of graphic art into the art canon. For many African American artists, futurism is an approach that allows one to dream a better world.

Don Stewart's entry into the art world was via comic books and figurative narrative, meaning visual storytelling. His three paintings are visual explorations of the interior mental capacities. In *Now*, four people leap from what looks like one planet to the next, while in *Serenity*, the viewer peers at a glowing being whose body appears to be a portal into another universe that is much more lush and vibrant.

Angela Weddle's three drawings reflect the pressures facing San Antonio's urban landscape as the 7th largest city in the U.S. continues to expand. Weddle, a New Orleans native, turned to drawing after losing all her artwork in Hurricane Katrina in 2005. That traumatic event and its aftermath sparked a concern for vulnerable, un-housed populations and the environment. Those concerns have only grown as she has observed San Antonio's competing pressures toward preservation and expansion. The density of the composition in *Growth*, *Sprawl*, and *Food Chain* engender a sense of being confined by stone amidst shrinking blue sky and vegetation. From a person who was forced from her ancestral home, they are a challenge to the viewer to reconsider the definition of "home" and what the viewer is willing to give to retain/create that "home."

In **Kwanzaa Edwards's** *Gaia of The Fight*, the artist harkens to the name for the Goddess of the Earth, Gaia or Mother Earth herself. At its essence the Gaia icon encompasses, and can maintain, a balance between all living and inanimate objects. There are many faith traditions which have a similar goddess, such as Prithvi in Hinduism. In Edwards's incarnation, Gaia is a four-armed, brown-skinned woman who sports a glowing sky-blue Afro hairstyle while plants sprout from her womb. It reflects Surrealist influences and is a celebration of Black womanhood and confidence in the feminine.

Wardell Picquet, another New Orleans native who fled to San Antonio during Hurricane Katrina and then chose to stay due to the warm, family-friendly vibe, offers three views on the connection between the feminine body and the planet. Picquet studied under MacArthur "Genius" fellow John T. Scott who was known for his kinetic sculpture, multi-layered collages, and compositions that used negative space to embed multiple images into a single overarching image. Picquet's art is a mixture of figurative painting intersected by his trademark collaged black grid. The female figures appear to have two faces and is an erupting, red and orange inferno in *Earth Dream: Perpetuan*, a more subdued red in *Earth Dream: Substantia*, and soothing green and blue in *Earth Dream: Eternas*. In the first two images the faces peer both forward and backward, while both faces look forward in *Eternas*. Collectively they hint at ageless cycles of creation and destruction.

CONCLUSION

Between Yesterday & Tomorrow reflects San Antonio as a mid-sized, Southern city at the edges of changes. Individually the artists tell their own stories and are often self-referential. But the exhibition also is a doorway through which viewers can see themselves and their times reflected back. The art in the exhibition is an affirmation that "Yes, you are here. Yes, your words/thoughts/concerns/interests have value." That YOU matter. For a people historically ignored and, at worst, degraded, it is corrective and perhaps healing. Through a variety of techniques, the artists challenge viewers to go beyond the Instagram-worthy photos and see the context before and the implications/hints at what's to come in each piece. Every image is a portal into a vibrant, ever-expanding fine art multi-verse. As a whole, they speak of a people creating art always with a broader social purpose.

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AUTHOR BIO

Aissatou Sidimé-Blanton (She/Her) is a collector of contemporary visual art by African American women, and Vice President and former curator of the San Antonio Ethnic Arts Society (SAEAS), a 40-year-old (in 2023) POC arts organization that coordinates public art exhibits and raises funds to underwrite one-on-one art training for youth in San Antonio, TX. She also is a member of the San Antonio Area Foundation's Community Advisory Committee that approves arts-related grants. A former newspaper reporter, Sidimé-Blanton has contributed arts-related articles to *International Review of African American Art*, *San Antonio Express-News*, *Black Focus* magazine, *Tampa Tribune*, and *Blackbook.com*. She has facilitated exhibitions at former StoneMetal Press Printing Studio for Valerie Maynard, MacArthur "Genius" Fellow, John T. Scott, Steve Prince and Deborah Roberts of Austin. She has curated a survey of regional contemporary African-American women artists focusing on Texas women at the Carver Community Cultural Center in San Antonio (2014); a poetry-visual art exhibition at Gemini Ink and Southwest School of Art (2015); and most recently "Re/Devaluing Colorism: The Intersections of Skin Color and Currency," an exploration of the roots, tentacles and offshoots of global Colorism. It featured 14 female artists, a commissioned poetry-dance performance, teen-girl art workshop, activities for art teachers, tips for parents by a diversity trainer, and full-color catalogue at the then Southwest School of Art (December 2019 through April 2020). She and her husband, Stewart Blanton, also partner with the San Antonio Ethnic Art Society to underwrite the SAEAS Abaraka Award, a \$3,000 biennial grant that supports visual arts, arts research and curatorial projects by African American women artists/art professionals; or more information go to saethnicartsociety.org.



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