

United Histories, March 23, 2018-August 12, 2018

This exhibition interrogates some of the issues and profound differences that characterize the past, present, and future of the United States. How do race and class define lived experience in America? How do we address changing values and notions of domesticity and motherhood? What shifting contingencies of “freedom” are presented by differing interpretations of the Constitution? How are our national histories reflected in the complicated relationships we maintain internationally? The works in *United Histories*, and the conversations staged between them, encourage us to reexamine and reconsider American history from new and possibly challenging perspectives.

Dominic Molon
Richard Brown Baker Curator of Contemporary Art
RISD Museum

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Wallace Nutting
American, 1861-1941
Braced Bow Back Windsor Chair, ca. 1920
Pine, maple and oak
Gift of Bank of America Corporate Collection 2003.138.1

This pairing combines a Windsor chair—a design associated with colonial America—with a two-part sculpture inspired by Wilson’s 12-hour opera *The Life and Times of Joseph Stalin* (1973). Together, these works suggest how the past, present, and future history of the United States has been affected by its relationship with Russia, from the Cold War to controversies surrounding the most recent presidential election. The placement here echoes the seating arrangements at meetings between heads of the two states.

[see also: 83.151.2]

Kara Walker
American, b. 1969
Cotton Hoards in the Southern Swamp, *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)* 2005
Offset lithograph with screenprint on paper
Purchased with funds from the Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Joseph A. Chazan 2006.48

This pair of works demonstrates how artists have used historical representations to address the issues of their own times. In her 2006 print *Cotton Hoards in the Southern Swamp*, Kara Walker stencils



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figures onto images from *Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War*, published in 1866. Walker's overlaid black figures reassert the stories of African Americans that have gone untold in the historical record.

In the 1857 painting, Alonzo Chappel inventively portrays the 1636 arrival of Roger Williams in what is now Rhode Island, imagining an enthusiastic welcome by the Narragansett people already living here. This heroicized image was created when U.S. policies were forcing many thousands of Native Americans onto reservations, freeing their homelands for European settlement.

While Walker's work intentionally engages fiction to tell suppressed historical truths, Chappel's composition embellishes a historical event to support the dominant power hierarchies in the era in which he lived.

To hear Lorén Spears (Narragansett/Niantic) discuss Chappel's painting, go to
https://rismuseum.org/manual/422_the_landing_of_roger_williams

[see also: 43.003]

Mimi Smith
American, b. 1942
Maternity Dress, 1966
Plastic, vinyl, zipper, screws
Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund 2007.8

These works offer contrasting perspectives on motherhood and domesticity. Pippin, a self-taught African American painter, emphasizes the spirit of simplicity in colonial-era Quaker homes. Quietly depicting a mother and her infant child, he evokes associations with what could be seen as a less complicated historical moment in American domestic life. Smith presents a dress she made for herself during a pregnancy. *Maternity Dress* challenges social conventions and clothing designs that conceal, rather than celebrate, the transformed physical condition of pregnant women.

[see also: 44.094]



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Carey Young

British; American, b. 1970

Declared Void, 2005

Vinyl drawing and text on wall

Richard Brown Baker Fund for Contemporary British Art 2009.38

These two works engage an ongoing debate about how the Constitution is interpreted by American legislative and judicial leaders. Carey Young's installation defines a physical space where the laws of the United States do not apply. Shimomura's lithograph depicts a soldier patrolling an internment camp, recalling that the constitutional rights of Japanese American citizens were suspended during and just after World War II. Both works suggest that civil and political rights are largely contingent on the priorities of elected individuals.

[see also: 2014.9.1]

Rashid Johnson

American, b. 1977

Derriere L'Etoile Studios, printer

Exit Art, publisher

American, 1982 - 2012

Thurgood in the Hour of Chaos, from the portfolio "America America" 2009

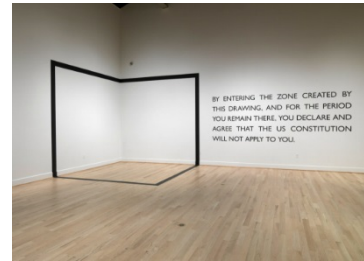
Photolithograph on wove paper

Gift of Exit Art 2012.133.3.5

These two works offer starkly different perspectives on the American justice system, informed by the 160 years separating them, and their emphasis on white or African American subjects.

The painting takes place in a barn and depicts a trial, presumably of the figure leaning back in the Windsor chair. The artist's name is likely a pseudonym for "a Whig," declaring an affiliation with the Whig Party. This work was made just after the 1848 presidential election, which had been won by the Whig candidate Zachary Taylor, a slave-holding Southerner. Whigs from the North and South soon became bitterly divided over slavery, and the party collapsed entirely leading up to the Civil War. This painting may represent an effort to deflect attention toward the less serious or troubling affairs of the time.

The sharply critical tone of Johnson's work is emblematic of the more active role political considerations have played in American art since the 1950s. Johnson spraypaints crosshairs over a model representing Thurgood Marshall (1908–1993), the first African American Supreme Court justice, underscoring the racial injustices Marshall challenged as



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a lawyer and a judge. It also recalls the logo for the hip-hop group Public Enemy, whose song “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos” is referenced in the work’s title. The song presents the perspective of an African American man imprisoned as an antiwar protestor.

[see also: 43.346]

Roger Shimomura
American, b. 1939
American Guardian, 2008
Color lithograph on Rives BFK paper
Mary B. Jackson Fund 2014.9.1

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[see also: 2009.38]

Alonzo Chappel
American, 1828-1887
The Landing of Roger Williams in 1636, 1857
Oil on canvas
Museum Works of Art Fund 43.003

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[see also: 2006.48]

A. Wighe
American, active 1849
Trial by Jury, 1849
Oil on canvas
Gift of Edith Jackson Green and F. Ellis Jackson 43.346



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[see also: 2012.133.3.5]

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Horace Pippin
American, 1888-1946
Quaker Mother and Child, ca. 1935-1940
Oil on canvas
Jesse Metcalf Fund 44.094

These works offer contrasting perspectives on motherhood and domesticity. Pippin, a self-taught African American painter, emphasizes the spirit of simplicity in colonial-era Quaker homes. Quietly depicting a mother and her infant child, he evokes associations with what could be seen as a less complicated historical moment in American domestic life. Smith presents a dress she made for herself during a pregnancy. *Maternity Dress* challenges social conventions and clothing designs that conceal, rather than celebrate, the transformed physical condition of pregnant women.

[see also: 2007.8]



Robert M. Wilson
American, b. 1941
Stalin Chairs, 1977
Lead over fiberglass armature
The Albert Pilavin Memorial Collection of 20th Century American Art
83.151.2

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[see also: 2003.138.1]

