



Two-Eyed Seeing: Contemporaneous Pasts and Futures at the Blaffer Art Museum

**Blaffer Art Museum
Celebrating 50 years**

December 9—December 17, 2023



Figure 1



Figure 3



Figure 2



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 1. Anton Mozart. *Cabinet with Altar for Private Devotions*, 1601. France or Italy. Cabinet: pear wood, ebonized walnut, oak, and conifer with steel-etched, part fire-gilt brass mounts and fittings. Paintings: oil on copper. Courtesy of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation.

Figure 2. Jean-Baptiste. *Oudry Allegory of Europe*, 1722. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation.

Figure 3. Unknown Japanese. *Arita Bowl*, early 18th century. Ceramic. Courtesy of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

Figure 4. Hieronymus Francken III. *A Collector's Cabinet*, c. 1640. Oil on panel. Courtesy of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

Figure 5. Nikolaus Rugendas *Equinoctial Sundial* Late 17th Century Silver brass gilt and original leather case. Courtesy of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

Two-eyed seeing makes visible the influence of historical European art while raising key considerations about what—and who—is missing, omitted, or rewritten from historical memory or collective consciousness.

Founded in 1973, the Blaffer Art Museum—then known as the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Gallery—was home to the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Collection, a robust collection of European paintings from the sixteenth through early-nineteenth century. In 1979, the Blaffer Foundation re-acquired the collection and moved it to the Museum of Fine Arts Houston. Since 2000, the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation has stewarded and cared for a collection of early modern European art from approximately 1500 to 1800 in a dedicated wing consisting of five galleries at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston on permanent view.

On the occasion of the Blaffer Art Museum's fiftieth anniversary, artworks and objects from the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Collection are presented alongside selected works from the significant roster of contemporary artists who have previously shown work at the Blaffer over the museum's fifty-year exhibition history. The artists included in this exhibition are Bennie Flores Ansell, Debra Barrera, Michael Ray Charles, Mel Chin, Matt Manalo, and Gabriel Martinez, all of whom challenge or reference historical conventions using display, material, or formalist approaches in their artistic practices. While traditional museum displays separate historical European artworks from contemporary artists, there are important precedents for this installation, particularly in the early history of the

Museum of Modern Art, which hosted a major exhibition of Italian Renaissance painting, entitled *Italian Masters*, in 1940.¹

This exhibition weaves together cultural and artistic approaches by drawing from the practice of two-eyed seeing, referred to as *etuaptmumk* by First Nations people in the Mi'kmaw language, of looking with one eye toward Indigenous ways of knowing, and the other eye toward European knowledge and worldviews. A similar approach by scholar and activist W.E.B. Du Bois known as 'double consciousness' describes the ability to constantly see oneself through the eyes of another in the construction of racial, cultural, and artistic identities among Black people in the United States. The practice of two-eyed seeing is informed by the early history of art collecting, the role of cabinet of curiosities, and the study of nature through art. Thus, this way of seeing simultaneously makes visible the influence of historical European art while raising key considerations about what—and who—is missing, omitted, or rewritten from historical memory or collective consciousness. Two-eyed seeing as a practice enables art museums to honor the past while looking forward to the future. Historical works from the Blaffer Collection are displayed alongside contemporary artworks to examine the circuitous lineage of art and museum history through objects.



Unknown German or Dutch. *Folding Spoon with Case* 17th Century Mother-of-pearl and silver, leather case with stamped gold foil
Courtesy of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation

Along with the exhibition, the Blaffer Art Museum Student Association (BAMSA) and museum docents took part in a “Museum of the Future” workshop. Their responses in the workshop are illustrated through visual ideation by artist Virginia L. Montgomery. The workshop asked questions such as:

What is missing in museums?

What does art have to do with the future?

How do exhibitions engage systems of power?

How do exhibitions convene urgent topics of the moment?

How can exhibitions be a convener for community?

Are museums neutral?

What is the future of art museums?

With a primary focus on paintings, the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Collection has a unique display of objects for a curiosity cabinet. Since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, curiosity cabinets have formed the antecedent of museum collection and display. Typically filled with objects from the voyages of explorers, merchants, and European rulers, cabinets of curiosities created

specialized and encyclopedic collections to represent a diverse array of materials, meaning-making, and interrelationships between the natural world and human-made creation.

The Blaffer curiosity cabinet on view at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston contains manufactured objects, known as *artificialia*, and a subset of *scientifica* (scientific instruments) made through materials such as ivory, bronze, brass, and wax, such as the *Unknown German Folding Spoon with Case and Equinoctial Sundial*.² In addition to objects collected throughout Europe, there are also objects from Asia made for European audiences. The display also includes paintings, such as Pietro Longhi’s *Display of the Elephant*, all of which form a scholarly display on the mechanisms of seeing as a form of knowledge production and meaning-making.

One of the more recent acquisitions, *A Collector’s Cabinet* by Hieronymus Francken III, exemplifies a way of seeing collections through a meta-painting, or a painting about the act of painting. The work illustrates a rich collection of art objects, paintings, and sculptures,



Debra Barrera. *The Unbreakables / Los Irrompibles: Between Us and the Gulf of Mexico 2023*, Archival pigment print on aluminum
Courtesy of the artist.

which also captures the effect which might have been produced by the display of items in an individual collector's cabinet. The "display of display" which summarizes this work's central concept is paramount to its position in the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Collection and places the practice of collecting on display.

It is not uncommon for contemporary artists to utilize interventionist methods to consider the mechanisms of museum display, the observable world, and the role of the ocular in the formation and foundation of art history. In 1992, Fred Wilson mounted a tantamount exhibition at the Contemporary, Baltimore, *Mining the Museum*, with objects from the Maryland Historical Society. Placing fine silver next to iron slave shackles, Wilson links the material history with systems of slavery, colonialism, and systemic racism. Throughout the exhibition, the museum itself becomes an object of study; a locus for a presentation of juxtapositions and sly twists to expose underlying biases and untold narratives within seemingly 'objective' historical exhibitions.

Corpus Christi-born, Houston-based artist Debra Barerra utilizes a wide variety of media to re-imagine the art historical canon. *The Unbreakables / Los Irrompibles: Between Us and the Gulf of Mexico* expands upon past work influenced by the presence of opulence and ornamentation in her childhood home. The location of these objects function as monuments for lavish events which never took place, and set a stage for faraway places—apparitions both utopic and unattainable. In *The Unbreakables / Los Irrompibles: Between Us and the Gulf of Mexico*, Barerra restages ornaments such as ceramic sculptures and granite Aztec bookends on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico. In doing so, Barerra locates the proximity and the intimacy of home in a space of boundless and effervescent encounter. This sense of re-location as a formulation of objecthood is also found in pieces selected from the Blaffer curiosity cabinet such as the Arita Bowl from the Edo period in Japan. The motif of trade routes and economic exchange depicted on the side of the vessel mirrors the way this bowl found itself into the home of a private American collector,

Let's TALK ABOUT
THE MUSEUM
OF
THE FUTURE ..

BLAFFER
50TH
ANNIVERSARY

... HOW WE STARTED:

* FOUNDED IN 1973 BY
SARAH CAMPBELL BLAFFER } ..OUR HISTORY..

1979 → MFAH : BLAFFER FOUNDATION
collection



THE BLAFFER

.. CELEBRATES
HUMAN INNOVATION
of THOUGHT...

.. WE ARE APART OF..

THE ART
ecosystem of
HOUSTON



Blaffer Art
Museum

... EUROPEAN
ART?



HOW DO WE EN
THE EUROPEAN
IS OFTEN A STAG
for FINE ART,
mu

.. THERE ARE SO
MANY CANONS!!!



.. CONTEMPORARY
ART IS GLOBAL! *

ART
TODAY



• WHO ARE MUSEUMS FOR?

! DIVERSITY..

... IS CRITICAL for MUSEUM

* HOW CAN WE MAKE
MORE ACCESSIBLE

* HOW CAN WE MAKE
INCLUSIVE?

Ask: WHAT
of



THIS ENGAGE "LEGACY"?
AN CANON STARTING POINT
ART, BUT THERE IS SO much more art!



MUSEUMS SHOULD EMBRACE → CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS WHO USE TRADITIONAL MEDIUMS IN A NEW WAY!

* DIVERSE EXHIBITION: PROVIDE ENTRY POINTS for ART

WHAT IS OUR ROLE?
... MUSEUMS FILL ...
* GAPS IN ART EDUCATION IN HOUSTON ...

THE BLAFFER REPRESENTS PEOPLE in OUR COMMUNITY
WE ♥ HOUSTON ARTISTS!
↳ BIPOC
↳ LGBTQIA+ ♡

* BAMSA
We Want you Here!
Gen Z
* THE BLAFFER DOES A GREAT JOB of KEEPING with THE TIMES and WELCOMING STUDENTS (BECAUSE MUSEUMS CAN BE INTIMIDATING...)

“EVERYBODY Loves ART, BUT HOW PEOPLE EXPERIENCE ART MATTERS.”

BLM MAKING A STATEMENT
“IT'S TONE DEAF WHEN MUSEUMS DON'T INCLUDE ART from the LOCAL COMMUNITIES”

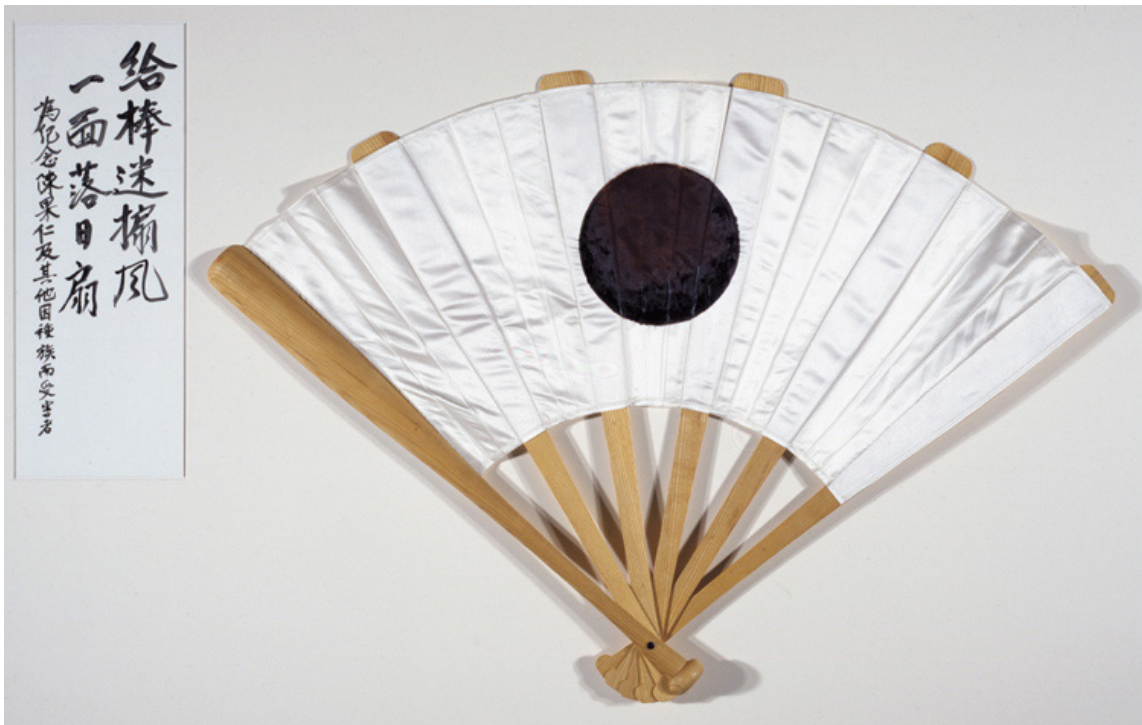
MUSIC
CRAFTS
EVENTS
CULTURAL ACTIVITIES for EVERYONE

MAKE MUSEUMS AFFORDABLE? SOCIAL MEDIA PROMO of FREE DAYS!
MAKE MUSEUMS ACCESSIBLE?

WHAT IS THE LANGUAGE of CULTURE?
?

OUR IDEAS and STRATEGIES for CHANGE

our ...
* .. MUSEUM of the FUTURE ...
... SHOULD HAVE ...
* EXPANDED FORMS OF LEARNING - AUDIO, VISUAL, TACTILE!
* MULTI-LINGUAL ...
* WALL TEXTS IN MULTIPLE LANGUAGES
* UNIVERSAL DESIGN ... 26% of AMERICANS are DISABLED ...
* MUSEUM as COMMUNITY CENTER
* WELCOMING GROUPS like BAMSA



Mel Chin, *Fan Club* 1994. Ash wood, blood on Chinese silk, ink on paper. Courtesy of the artist.

and then to the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Collection in 2014. The octagonal form is decorated in underglaze blue with a European harbor scene showing two tall ships, a rocky shore and a fortified wall in the distance beneath clouds, a well with a circular frame showing similar ships and craft with sailors, surrounded by an octagonal leafy frame. The inner rim is decorated in a border with eight leaves in the corners, and a band of half-flowerheads and leaves above the foot ring. The bowl narrativizes the same history of circumnavigation and material circulation it simultaneously embodies. Through seeing across time, space and place, a world is created within the object through the varying location and subsequent dislocations through its storied past.

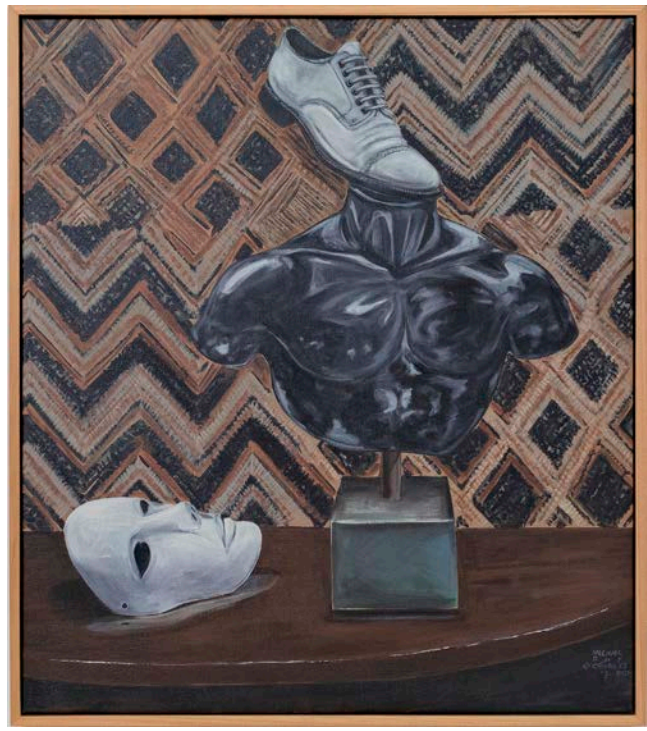
The practice of two-eyed seeing is also evident in works such as Mel Chin's work *Fan Club* (1994), which contains a baseball cap sliced into fan-like sections and reconstructed with silk and blood to commemorate the tenth anniversary of Vincent Chin's death. Vincent Chin was a Chinese American engineer bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat by two white autoworkers in Michigan in 1982. At the time of the assault, the two men who killed Chin blamed the Japanese auto industry for widespread layoffs and unemployment among U.S.

workers. Vincent Chin's racially motivated murder is cited as a significant moment to catalyzed Asian American activism for civil rights.

In *Fan Club*, when the object is closed, it transforms into a U.S. sports persona of a baseball bat, and when opened, the silk stained with blood take the form of another national insignia and Orientalized object. Notions of display and object fetishization are central to the manner in which the work speaks to nationalist paranoia, mistaken identity, and stereotypes embedded within Chin's manufactured tool, weapon, and object. Similarly, *Cabinet with Altar for Private Devotions* functions as a display object acting as the receptacle for spiritual meditation and deeply held personal ruminations on grief and trauma. In the fifteenth century, as society began to trend away from public chanting of prayers in medieval times, private devotionals became more popular. This cabinet features paintings attributed to Anton Mozart, best known for his painting *Presentation of the Pomeranian Art Cabinet* (1617). The paintings illustrate the crucifixion and ascension of Jesus Christ. This cabinet was meant to act as an object for a pious person to focus on during their prayers.



Michael Ray Charles, *(Forever Free) You Are Because I Am*, 2023. Acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas. Courtesy Templon Gallery, Hedwig Van Impe and Remei Giralt Photography © Remei Giralt



Michael Ray Charles, *(Forever Free) I Am Because You Are*, 2023. Acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas. Courtesy Templon Gallery, Hedwig Van Impe and Remei Giralt Photography © Remei Giralt

In the diptych by Michael Ray Charles, *(Forever Free) I Am Because You Are and (Forever Free) You Are Because I Am*, the artist addresses the changing social dynamics in the past and present through histories of enslavement, blackface, stereotypes, pop culture, and gender identity. Charles describes his approaches as the “simplex” processing of picture-making through his illustrious career and the vast series of work utilizing a juxtaposition of different epochs on the same canvas. Exploring the presence of Black figures in Roman antiquity, Charles incorporates references to structural racism through a universe of images that address the unconscious bias laden through the optical encounter of Classical antiquity, consumerism, and the Black body. The diptych is paired with *Allegory of Europe*, painted by Jean-Baptiste Oudry in 1722. From the start of his career, Oudry was attracted to the painting of flora and fauna in the manner of the Dutch animalier painters such as Frans Snyders, Jan Fyt, Melchior d’Hondecoeter, and Abraham Hondius. Paired together, Charles’ diptych and Oudry’s work establish a visual link between references to Roman antiquity and a landscape of contemporary allegorical visions for cultural symbols

and beliefs embedded in the objects and figures in the paintings.

Between Charles’ diptych of paintings, a 17th century walnut mirror is intricately carved with icons of vanitas: skulls, hourglass (top), fruit, and flowers. The complexity of this woodcarving is a testament to the wealth and rank of the mirror’s original owner. The mirror itself is an emblem of vanitas too, as it reflects the skull and implies the transience of life. As opposed to a painting, the reflective quality of a mirror allows the viewer to see themselves as they exist in reality, while its refractive quality challenges the notion of perspective, and makes us wonder if what we see is reality at all. This was a provocative question for artists, collectors, and patrons of the arts at a time when naturalism and realism were valued above all else. Reflecting opposite to the mirror, Gabriel Martinez’s large-scale interstate shields on mirrored stainless steel previously displayed at the Blaffer in 2017. The artist conducted extensive research on the planning and implementation of interstate highways as part of a military plan to protect strategic industries from aerial bombardment. Martinez has



Gabriel Martinez, *Interstate Shield*, 2017. Mirrored steel. Photo: Installation view, Gabriel Martinez: *Everything Turns Away Quite Leisurely*, Blaffer Art Museum.

removed the color code, numbers and letters, returning the shield in a tongue-and-cheek manner to its ancient function as a tool of battle. The refraction of the mirror challenges the accepted history of military positivism in America, which embarks upon a new experiment with *vanitas* in a society where government and corporate undertakings have shifted out of focus in the eye of public perception.

While early-17th-century still-life, such as Jan van Kessel's *A Study of Butterflies, Moths, Spiders, and Insects and Vanitas Still Life with Books, a Globe, a Skull, a Violin, and a Fan* were typically focused on extreme naturalistic details, and often commissioned by natural-history collectors, or others with a scientific interest in specimens from the Netherlands or abroad. A *Vanitas* still life is an artwork which includes various symbolic objects designed to remind the viewer of their mortality, such as the skull, and of the worthlessness of worldly goods and pleasures, such as the fan and violin. Both artists, Bennie Flores Ansell and Matt Manalo, employ the politics of scientific display in their work to address Philippine history, family migration,

cultural memory, and environmental impacts in the United States. Ansell has cast more than one thousand small resin and ceramic wishbones to then be arranged in a museum display case. The artist used computerized tomography (CT) scans of her own collarbone—comparable to a bird's delicate *furcula*, commonly called a wishbone, which is essential to avian flight mechanics, and references the artist's desire to fly. By reclaiming the politics of display, the artist explores the fragility of objects and her own ability to transgress the mechanisms of capture. Similarly, Manalo's object and clay sculpture focuses on local collection of material and mass-produced souvenirs from the Philippines. By incorporating these objects into his work, Manalo recognizes the country's invisible labor force and omitted indigenous histories. The labor of historically marginalized are reclaimed through his work and rectify the past by collectively supplanting the mentality imposed by colonialism.

By placing contemporary artworks in dialogue with paintings from previous centuries, the exhibition places emphasis on museum display, collection practice, and

“official” histories of art. The exhibition makes connections between Indigenous and European ways of knowing and seeing through objects of significant historical and contemporary works. In doing so, it calls to consider what knowledge is produced through historical European collections and the relationship with contemporary thought, or lack thereof. The objects within the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Collection showcase hallmarks of Western epistemology: the development of scientific inquiry, the observable world, and an emphasis on rational processes and thought. How does contemporary art and artistic practice work with or against the grain of Western knowledge?

The use of traditional museum display and formalist approaches becomes the mechanism to expose ideological constructs and formation of knowledge production through an encounter with the objects themselves. By reintroducing the Blaffer collection of European paintings, we ask viewers to engage with the past in the present moment through provocative pairings of historical and contemporary artworks displayed together for the first time. As the Blaffer Museum seeks to honor the historic and cultural legacy of the patronage and philanthropy of Sarah Campbell Blaffer, we hope to bring a fresh perspective to the history and collection of European art in Houston to engage with audiences at this celebratory and reflexive moment for our institution. Through the lens of two-eyed seeing, contradictions and multivalent worldviews coalesce through the ability to see historical and contemporary artworks with manifold vision.

Footnotes:

¹ Museum of Modern Art, Italian Masters, Jan 26–Apr 7, 1940, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/2978>

² James Clifton, “Where Art and Nature Play,” in *Collecting Early Modern Art (1400-1800) in the U.S. South*, ed. Lisandra Estevez, (2021: Newcastle upon Tyne): 161.

Front Cover: (L-R) Michael Ray Charles. (Forever Free) I Am Because You Are, 2023 Acrylic latex and copper penny on canvas Courtesy Templon Gallery, Hedwig Van Impe and Remei Giralt Photography © Remei Giralt. Jean-Baptiste. Oudry *Allegory of Europe*, 1722. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation.

Centerfold: Visual ideation by artist Virginia L. Montgomery

Two-Eyed Seeing: Contemporaneous Pasts and Futures at the Blaffer Art Museum

December 9—December 17, 2023

Two-Eyed Seeing: Contemporaneous Pasts and Futures at the Blaffer Art Museum is organized by Erika Mei Chua Holum, Cynthia Woods Mitchell Assistant Curator, and Claudia Middleton Moreno, University of Houston Art History Fellow, as part of the 50th anniversary of the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston. Thank you to Jim Clifton, Curator of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation and Josine Corstens, Registrar/Curatorial Assistant at the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation for their generous care, assistance, and support in the organizing of the exhibition. Support for the exhibition is made possible by the Kress Foundation.

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The following donors sustain Blaffer Art Museum in perpetuity by giving through endowments: Cecil Amelia Blaffer von Furstenberg Endowment for Exhibitions and Programs, Jane Dale Owen Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Jo & Jim Furr Exhibition Endowment in the Blaffer Art Museum, Sarah C. Morian Endowment, and the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation Blaffer Gallery Endowment.



Blaffer Art Museum
at the University of Houston

Museum Hours
Tues —> Fri, 10am-5pm
Sat —> Sun, 12pm-5pm

Admission is always free

blafferartmuseum.org