

Herald Tribune

David Huffman: "Black artists get personal with politics in Sarasota Art Museum exhibition"

By Marty Fugate

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David Huffman's "Basketball Pyramid" is featured in the Sarasota Art Museum exhibition "Personal to Political: Celebrating the African American Artists of Paulson Fontaine Press." RYAN GAMMA PHOTO/PROVIDED BY SARASOTA ART MUSEUM

"Personal to Political" lives up to its name at Sarasota Art Museum. It showcases the work of 17 Black contemporary artists affiliated with Paulson Fontaine Press. They all get personal when it comes to politics. What do they have to say? That depends on the person.

These creators often agree. But they're 17 individual voices, not a chorus. This show comprises 46 fine art prints, eight quilts, four mixed-media sculptures and one installation. A 900-word review can't do them all justice. But here are a few personal favorites.

David Huffman's "Basketball Pyramid" (2011-2025) grabs your attention. This towering installation is a stack of 650 basketballs in the shape of a pyramid. It's a powerful work, on a literal level. Once you know the symbolic code, it's a metaphorical full court press.

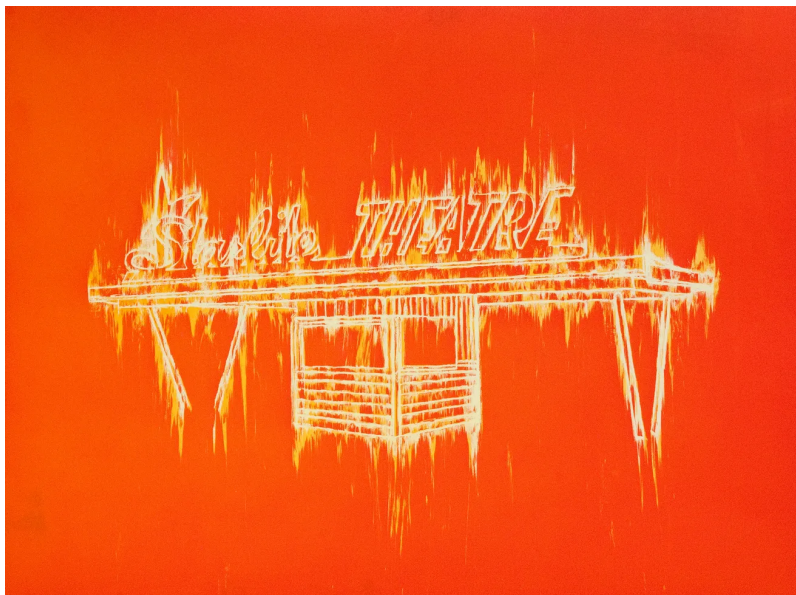
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Ancient Egypt's pyramids were pinnacles of African invention and built by slave labor. Depending on the spin, the basketball speaks of Black athletic success or the exploitation of Black athletes. Pyramids and basketballs are both two-sided symbols. Huffman confronts you with that ambiguity without resolving it. His installation tosses the coin. But he lets you make the call. (Once this show ends, the symbolism ends with it. At that point, the museum will donate all 650 literal basketballs to community groups serving young people.)

Gary Simmons' "Starlite Theatre" (2012) is a stripped-down, simplified etching of a ruined drive-in movie theater in Dallas, Texas. The foreground's a line drawing of the theater's wrecked marquee. The background's a featureless, crimson color field. Pretty simple. Ah, but it's the perfect shade of hellfire red. And the lifeless, lightless neon sign seems painted with fire. (Or slashed into the silkscreen print.)

It's an electrifying image. But the history behind it turns up the voltage. After opening in the 1950s, this drive-in always welcomed Black moviegoers. That wasn't the norm in Texas in that segregated time. The 1950s were unhappy days for most Black people. These days, there's a reactionary push to delete the racist chapters of American history. Simmons' etching resists that Orwellian erasure.



"Starlight Theatre, 2012" by Gary Simmons is featured in the Sarasota Art Museum exhibit "Personal to Political." COURTESY PAULSON FONTAINE PRESS/PROVIDED BY SARASOTA ART MUSEUM

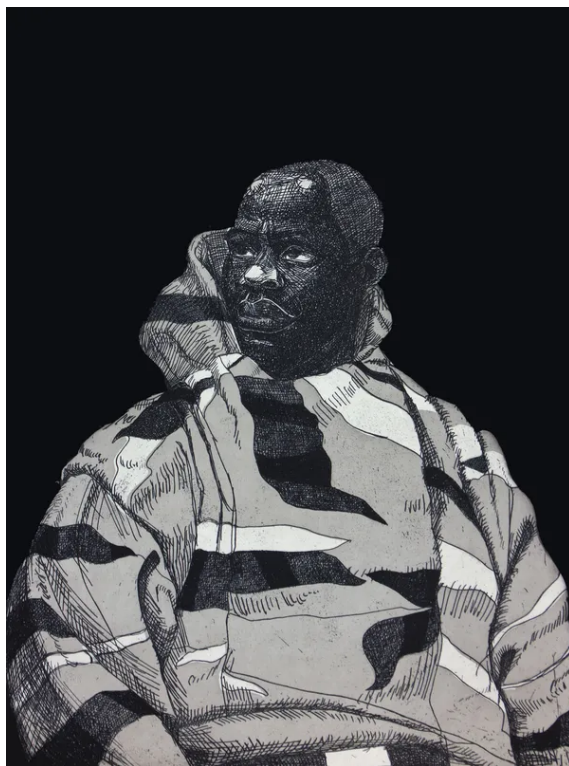
Radcliffe Bailey riffs on Black history in his "Lessons of the Hour" series of aquatint prints. It's a deeply personal take. The heart of each lesson is a photograph from his grandmother's archive. Bailey's "In the Garden" (2003) revolves around a group portrait of African American school children. Tough kids, in a segregated classroom in the early 20th century. The photo is a window to the past. It opens in a jazzy, abstract background. A river of music runs it – a few notes from "Lift Every Voice And Sing," the unofficial Black National Anthem. Like Simmons, Bailey fights the tide of selective historical amnesia. The lesson of this hour? Don't forget the past.

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Portraits are Kerry James Marshall's claim to fame. He's clearly appropriated the moods and methods of heroic classical portraiture with one key difference. Marshall's portraits celebrate ordinary Black people, not pale European gods, heroes, or royalty. His "Handsome Young Man" (2010) isn't Caesar, Napoleon, or King Henry VIII. Yet he sits with regally confident power. The young man's relaxed, his head in a three-quarter turn, his eyes looking coolly away. He's worthy of respect and he knows it. The artist knows it, too.

Those are just a few highlights. The show's political pieces also include Lonnie Holley's sculpture, "The Black Business Man" (2025). It began as a disturbing found object – a cannister of birthday-balloon helium riddled with bullet holes. (The machinery of joy, shot to hell by violence.) Holley's "Through the Night" evokes the dark voyages of slave ships. (The eclipse of countless African lives.) Two political statements. But softly spoken, not shouted.



Kerry James Marshall's hard ground etching "Untitled (Handsome Young Man)" from 2010 is featured in the "Personal to Political" exhibition at Sarasota Art Museum. COURTESY PAULSON FONTAINE PRESS/PROVIDED BY SARASOTA ART MUSEUM

While these artists are politically engaged, their prints aren't the fine art equivalents of editorial cartoons. There's no call to action, no enemy to fight. Political struggle is the subtext of their work, not a telegraphed message. It's there if you look for it — and look deeply. Usually.

But a few artists are into art for art's sake. Period. Their work is as personal as it gets. You can look for political points in their prints. But there's nothing to see.

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These purely personal pieces include Woody De Othello's "Steppin Through the Night" (2021), a cluttered still life with no political axe to grind. Loretta Bennett's "Blues" (2007) resembles an abstract album cover from the Be-bop era. It's actually her take on the fabric creations of Gee's Bend Quilters, an Alabama-based collective that she belongs to. Bennett's print stands alone as her new creation. But five prints in this show faithfully recreate the work of the Gee's Bend artists. Their five original quilts weren't part of this traveling exhibition. Lacie Barbour, this exhibition's managing curator, incorporated them for Sarasota Art Museum's show. They now hang side-by-side with the prints they inspired.



"Steppin Through The Night" from 2021 by Woody De Othello, featured at the Sarasota Art Museum exhibit "Personal to Political." COURTESY OF PAULSON FONTAINE PRESS/PROVIDED BY SARASOTA ART MUSEUM

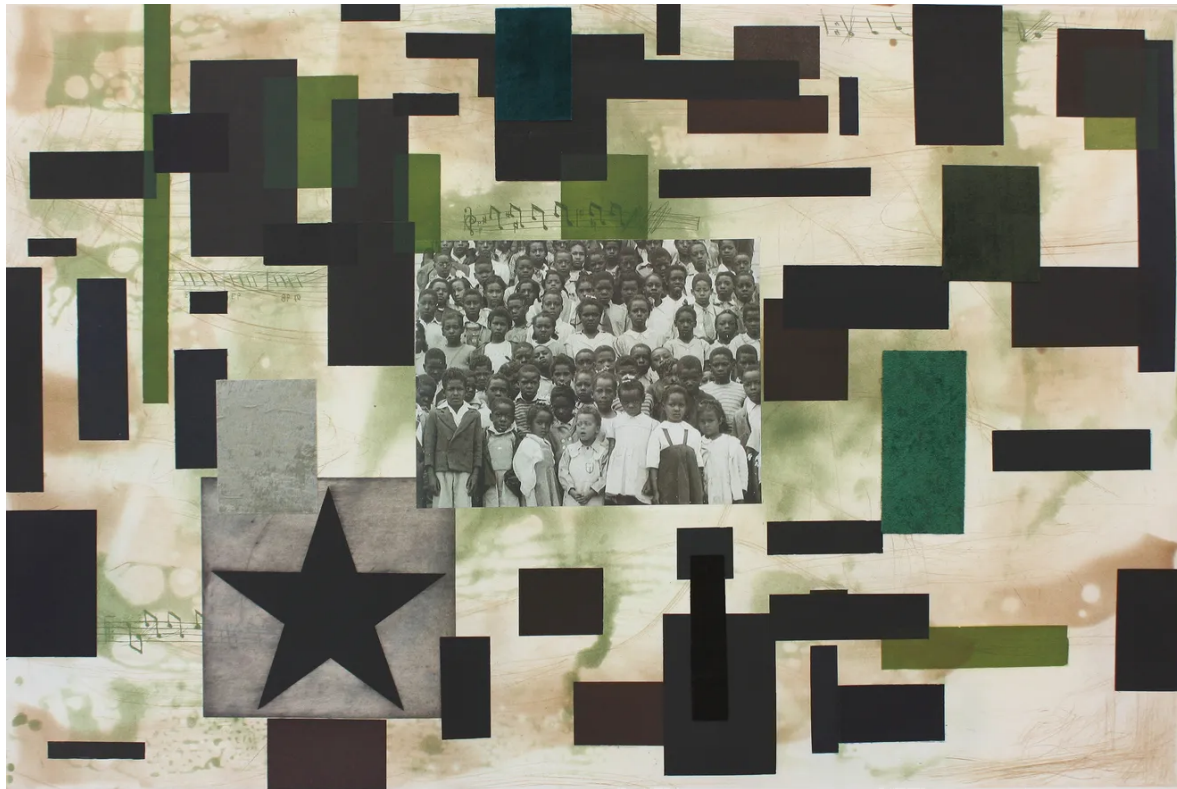
These printers and quilt makers dazzle the eye with beautiful patterns. That's the only message they send. For such apolitical artists, the medium really is the message. For them, it's just that simple.

But the truth is far more complicated.

Politics isn't limited to what you have to say. It's also about the community you belong to. Your tribe. Your mutual support group. Your collaborators.

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"In the Garden" from 2003 by artist Radcliffe Bailey is featured in the Sarasota Art Museum's "Personal to Political: Celebrating the African American Artists of Paulson Fontaine Press." COURTESY OF PAULSON FONTAINE PRESS/PROVIDED BY SARASOTA ART MUSEUM

Speaking of which ...

Fine art printing is an inherently collaborative medium. And that makes it inherently political. That's plain to see in this show. Just look around. Collaborative creation surrounds you on all sides. In fine art printing, that's the only way it's done.

A solitary artist can be a one-man band with an empty canvas. Fine art printers don't have that option. It's a team effort, like movie making or improv comedy. If you want to create a decent print, you need to play well with others.

That's why Paulson Fontaine Press made common cause with these Black artists and empowered them to create the work you'll see here. That collaborative solidarity made it all possible.

And that's as political as it gets.

"Personal to Political" draws on Paulson Fontaine Press' collection of fine art prints. It was organized by Bedford Gallery and curated by Carrie Lederer, the former curator of that gallery.

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