

The Washington Post

"These two powerful displays of Black abstract art and design meet the moment"

By Kriston Capps

September 18, 2026



The "Revelation" exhibition at the National Museum of African American History and Culture brings together works by 38 painters, photographers and sculptors. (Dontez Henderson/Smithsonian Institution/National Museum of African American History and Culture)

When the National Museum of African American History and Culture opened its doors in 2016, it gave the National Mall new footing, with exhibits tracing the country's Black roots from before its founding to the present day. In a short time, the museum emerged as the Smithsonian Institution's bedrock, its foundation.

Under the stewardship of its first chief curator, Jacquelyn Serwer, and director Lonnie G. Bunch III — now the outgoing secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, who announced his departure earlier this month — the museum built an art collection meant to help viewers see both forward and back in time.

Now, during a time of duress, with President Donald Trump's White House bearing down on the Smithsonian, and just ahead of the museum's 10th anniversary, the museum has assembled powerful displays of Black abstract art and design in two exhibits that meet the moment.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

The theme of these twin shows, "Revelation: A Journey Into Abstraction" and "Reset: Abstraction Embodied in Design," is abstraction, embodied in functional objects as well as fine art by such artists as painter Sam Gilliam, photographer Gordon Parks and designer Jomo Tariku. At a glance, such a grouping might seem too subdued at a time when the administration is pondering content warnings for museums on the Mall. But these shows tap into a long tradition of Black artists negotiating political crises through nonfigurative artwork. Too subtle for the censors — perhaps — but proof that a Smithsonian museum can still mount a face-forward critique of power in all its forms.

"Revelation," the exhibit of Black abstract art organized by longtime African American Museum curator Tuliza Fleming, brings together works by 38 painters, photographers and sculptors. There are ceramic vessels, the first artworks of any kind by African Americans on this continent, including an antebellum stoneware jar (1852) by David Drake (better known as Dave the Potter), an enslaved artisan who often inscribed his name in his works.

Another ceramic piece, made more than 150 years later, is the spiky, cactus-like "Black Vessel for the Traces of Our Young Lords and Their Spirits — Vessel #5" (2022) by Theaster Gates, a conceptual artist reaching across time to vibe with Drake. Recent craftworks by Adebunmi Gbadebo and Simone Leigh fill out the room. As a show, "Revelation" moves in this epicyclic fashion, highlighting artists who advanced the abstract form while pairing them with responses by contemporary practitioners.

Think of the show as a series of dialogues. Another piece by Gates, "Wings I" (2022), is made up of two trapezoidal pinewood wall sculptures, hanging as mirror images. The pinewood was repurposed from floorboards used in New York's Park Avenue Armory, which was built in the late 1800s for New York's Seventh Regiment, a militia unit that fought for the Union during the Civil War. Hank Willis Thomas's "Spiral" (2022) joins red and white fabric stripes from American flags with gray and white cloth strips from prison uniforms. Both of these works invoke the minimalist stripe paintings of Frank Stella while taking the format in wildly different directions.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508



"Some Clouds Are Darker" by Juan Logan. (Dontez Henderson/Smithsonian Institution/National Museum of African American History and Culture)

Still other works presented in "Revelation" defy the idea of abstraction altogether. Juana Valdés's striking ceramic installation "Redbone — Colored China Rags" (2017) looks like a fabric rainbow of light-skinned tones. Juan Logan's painting "Some Clouds Are Darker" (2010) features a dark, glittering cloud looming over a representation of Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, where enslaved Africans were quarantined in "pest houses." It's a gorgeous landscape distillation of pure pathos.

Even modest works stand in for much larger stories. One is "Untitled" (1989), a hard-edged geometric diagram by Felrath Hines, one of the artist's later works. Fines, a civil rights activist, was a member of the Black artist collective Spiral, founded by painter Romare Bearden in 1963. As a painter, Hines, who died in 1993, wanted to be known as an abstract artist, not exclusively as an African American artist. His story underscores the fraught position of many Black artists, who did not want to be categorized as a second tier of modern art. In the 1960s and '70s, when gallery shows were still segregated, Black abstract artists in particular risked being pigeonholed, with their work — gestural or geometric or color field — viewed as either inherently Black or effectively neutral.

In his book "1971: A Year in the Life of Color," scholar Darby English writes about the contradictions facing Black artists who yearned to be read fully, a story that culminated that

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

year with more than a dozen artists withdrawing in protest from "Contemporary Black Artists in America," an exhibit of mostly abstract Black artists assembled by a White curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Several artists from that troubled, if nuanced, show have works at the African American Museum, including Alvin Loving and Mavis Pusey.

Other artists on view considered Black art exhibits to be a different kind of racial barrier. One of them, Ed Clark (1926-2019), was arguably the first modernist painter to use a shaped canvas; his elliptical color field painting "The First Oval (Vetheuil)" (1968) belongs in any survey of the evolution of modern art. But as English writes, criticism of Clark's work in his own day could not resist "the urge for symmetry between biography and picture" — that is, flattening the work of a Black abstract artist in essentialist terms. In 1971, a pivotal year, Clark participated in "The De Luxe Show," an abstract survey in Houston that was probably the first racially integrated art exhibit in U.S. history.



Simone Brewster's "Negress Chaise." (Dontez Henderson/Smithsonian Institution/National Museum of African American History and Culture)

"Reset," assembled by another stalwart African American Museum curator, Michelle J. Wilkinson, features works by 11 designers, presented together in one alcove space. It's a small spattering of objects, mostly chairs, easy to read as a subset of the larger show, but it stands on its own.

Among the works are Simone Brewster's "Negress Chaise" (2010), a black tulipwood lounge supported by legs shaped like cubist breasts, a self-contained system for comfort and oppression. Michael Puryear used poplar and pecan from the Monticello and Mount Vernon estates to craft the elegant "Dan Chair" (2010), whose wooden legs are marked with raised scars,

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

a nod to the scarification experienced by African Americans enslaved on the plantations of Thomas Jefferson and George Washington. If the history of exhibiting Black abstract art is fragmented, the history of showing Black design is practically nonexistent, making Wilkinson's presentation invaluable.



"Lights From the Garden" by Jamal Cyrus. (Dontez Henderson/Smithsonian Institution/National Museum of African American History and Culture)

"Lights From the Garden" (2019), an installation by Jamal Cyrus, partly reconciles the forms of "Reset" and "Revelation." It's a set of chairs modeled after those on the stage at the Audubon Ballroom in New York City when Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965. Here the bentwood chairs are arranged in the shape of a minbar, the traditional raised pulpit of a mosque, and pierced by stainless-steel rods that represent the forensic trajectory of the rounds that killed the Muslim activist and civil rights icon. There's nothing abstract about it, really. Paired with a timeline of events in the life of Malcolm X, the piece showcases the explanatory power of the Smithsonian at its best.

There are meaningful omissions in this show, among them Raymond Saunders, the collage artist responsible for the 1967 manifesto "Black Is a Color," and David Driskell, the painter and scholar whose work could occupy an entire floor of the museum. Still, "Reset" and "Revelation" drive at

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

critical questions: What does it mean for Black artists to make post-painterly work, when their traditions diverge from the European canon? And what about when those modernisms collide?



"The Awakening" by David Huffman. (Dontez Henderson/Smithsonian Institution/National Museum of African American History and Culture)

Those themes come to a point in David Huffman's "The Awakening" (2022), a cosmic tapestry of real and abstracted signs: quilted patterns, basketball shapes, sphinx heads and fiery pigment, all framed by a hard-edged fold of pink and gray stripes.

**JESSICA
SILVERMAN**

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508

Near the bottom of his Afrofuturist landscape, in a move familiar from a whole century's worth of modern art, the painter has inserted some stray letters. The letters spell out the name of Emmett Till, the young teenager lynched in Mississippi in 1955 before he was old enough to drive. Huffman uses every strategy available to him as an abstract artist — rhythm, humor, brushstroke and beauty — while insisting on a Black historiography. Those same tools, and that same courage, can still be found at the museum, the present crisis be damned.

Revelation: A Journey Into Abstraction and ***Reset: Abstraction Embodied in Design***. Through June 2028 at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, 1400 Constitution Ave. NW.

JESSICA
SILVERMAN

621 Grant Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94108
jessicasilvermangallery.com +1 415 255 9508