

## FREDERICK J. BROWN (1945–2012)

An artist who grew up on Chicago’s South Side, Frederick J. Brown began his career in 1970 in the context of the New York avant-garde. During the four decades that followed, he applied his distinctively vivid expressionist approach to both figurative and abstract works. A perfectionist who was unafraid of grand projects, he covered a wide thematic range, conveying the emotions and spiritual essence of his subjects. Through his art, he expressed his life-affirming attitude and empathy for the human experience.

Brown drew freely from many sources, including Renaissance altarpieces, German Expressionism, folk art, and Abstract Expressionism. Of mixed African American and Native American heritage, Brown was also inspired by African art and culture, as well as Native American sand paintings. Of these influences, Abstract Expressionism was of special significance to him. During his years in New York, Willem de Kooning became a mentor and friend. Brown affectionately referred to de Kooning as his “artistic godfather,” and described Abstract Expressionism as “a very beautiful, lyrical language.”<sup>1</sup> Romare Bearden was a long-time friend and a great influence on Brown as well. Additionally, Brown showed with Bearden’s gallery in the early 1970s. Brown paid tribute to legendary figures in jazz and blues, with whom he had close and mutually supportive relationships. The impact of their music resonates in Brown’s work and can be felt in his notable jazz portraits.

Brown often presented his subjects in a heroic manner achieved by his use of large-scale formats. In such images, he honored what his subjects gave to the world, expressing his veneration for them and for their own dedication to their work. He likewise conveyed his humble sense of gratitude for the blessings he had received. As an artist, he felt he was “on assignment in life,” following a calling “to provide beautiful and lasting things on earth” that could be a “catalyst to show other people that whatever they can conceive can come true.”<sup>2</sup> While creating images that often tell stories, Brown drew on a wide repertoire of styles to produce works that are visually strong and direct. The noted art historian, Lowery Stokes-Sims, who has written several times on Brown’s work, states that the sumptuousness of his vocabulary afforded him “inexhaustible opportunities for further improvisation,” while his “ever-permutating vision” fed his “enormous capacity to explore and absorb the world around him.” Sims gave recognition to “his ability to retranslate his impressions within his own carefully conceived cosmogony.”<sup>3</sup>

Brown was born on his family’s homestead in Greensboro, Georgia in 1945. Only a month after his birth, he and his mother moved to Chicago, where he grew up on the South Side in an extended family that he described as “motivated, faith-filled, and matriarchal.” He recalled that his grandfather, who worked in a steel mill, thought “he was the boss, but everyone knew who

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel A. Siedell, “Frederick Brown: The Jazz Paintings,” Sheldon Solo (Lincoln, Neb.: Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, 1997) and quote from Regina A. Perry, *Free Within Ourselves: African-American Artists in the Collection of the National Museum of American Art* (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> Richard Wilkinson, “Frederick Brown: A Profile,” *Image: A Journal of the Arts & Religion* 9 (Spring 1995), p. 35.

<sup>3</sup> Lowery Stokes Sims, “Frederick Brown: American Archetypes and Heroes,” in *Frederick J. Brown: Recent Paintings, 1981–1985—“Heroes and Rulebreakers,”* exh. cat. (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 1985), p. 3.

was in charge, my grandmother.”<sup>4</sup> His father managed pool halls, taverns, and shoeshine stands. An early influence on Brown was his football coach Bernie O’Brien at Chicago Vocational High School, where Brown was a cornerback on the football team. Brown recalled that O’Brien told the team members that he wanted to teach them the game of football, not so they “could all become professional players, but so [they] would learn to pick [themselves] up when life knocked [them] down.”<sup>5</sup> In high school, Brown was an honor student and won national drawing contests.

In 1963, Brown enrolled in the University of Illinois School of Architecture, where his training in architecture would have an influence on the scale of the paintings he would later create. He stated in 1995: “You can’t make the scale too large for me, as I was trained with the huge scale of buildings.”<sup>6</sup> While studying architecture, he also took art courses with Roland Ginzler and John Richardson. Brown’s broad-ranging knowledge of art history began at the university, where Ginzler brought his attention to European old masters, such as Rembrandt, Velázquez, Titian; modernists including Picasso and Max Beckmann; the Expressionist art of Francis Bacon; and the eccentric imagery of Ivan Le Lorraine Albright. In 1965, Brown transferred to Southern Illinois University in Carbondale, where the visionary R. Buckminster Fuller was an esteemed professor of multidisciplinary studies. Fuller’s impact could be felt in Brown’s expansive and grand thinking throughout his career. Brown took particular interest in Fuller’s theories on outer space, which became a key influence on Brown’s “Galaxy” series.

Without an architectural program, Brown’s advisors suggested that he give painting a try, and he decided to do so, inspired at the time by an exhibition of the work of Francis Bacon. Painter and SIU professor, Larry Bernstein, who had studied with Hans Hofmann, further introduced Brown to the contemporary art world. Bernstein would invite figures from the New York avant-garde, like Alan Kaprow, to SIU as guest lecturers and professors. When a professor questioned whether Brown had the guts to become a painter, he took up the challenge and became a painting major.<sup>7</sup> The impact of his second major, psychology, would be apparent in his perceptive characterizations in his portraits.

After graduating, Brown returned to Chicago, where he was the first African American hired in the advertising department of the Chicago Tribune. In 1969, Brown traveled to Europe, visiting Copenhagen, London, Rome, and Paris. In Paris, he spent time with jazz musician and composer, Anthony Braxton, (who was Brown’s former high school classmate) and Braxton’s friend Leroy Jenkins, also a jazz musician and composer. During that time, Brown painted a series of twenty watercolors of his friends. These paintings were then featured in a solo show of Brown’s work at the University of Chicago in 1970, sponsored by the Illinois Bell Telephone Company.<sup>8</sup>

After selling his possessions from Chicago, Brown moved to New York in 1970, where he was reunited with Anthony Braxton and met the saxophonist Ornette Coleman (before renting his

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<sup>4</sup> Wilkinson, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Wilkinson, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Wilkinson, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Wilkinson, p. 30.

<sup>8</sup> Wilkinson, p. 32.

own loft, Brown stayed at Coleman’s infamous loft at 131 Prince Street—known as the “Artist House”). Brown settled in Soho, where he found himself at the center of the New York avant-garde scene. In New York, Brown met the playwright Tennessee Williams, artists Andy Warhol, Larry Rivers, and Forrest Myers, and jazz figures including Alice Coltrane (pianist and wife of John Coltrane), Ed Blackwell, Charlie Haden, Don Cherry, and Chet Baker. During his first week of living in New York, Brown convinced the director of Flats Fixed Gallery, situated in a former tire-repair shop, to feature his work in a group show that also included work by Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, and Warhol. Brown’s circle grew to encompass the video photographer, Anthony Ramos, the poet and activist, Felipe Luciano, and other painters including Grégoire Müller, Frank Bowling, and Daniel LaRue Johnson. Inspired by the jazz musicians that he met, Brown stated that he learned the necessity of contributing something to the community and was inspired in his work ethic. He recalled: “I walked into the highest possible standard of artistic devotion.”<sup>9</sup>

Nonetheless, Brown’s early years in New York were difficult. His landlord cut off his heat and hot water for six months when he could not afford to pay his rent as he was often on the verge of eviction. Among his influences and peers during the early 1970s were Romare Bearden and Frank Bowling. With Bowling, Brown worked closely to develop staining techniques using raised platforms. In 1971, Brown began his “Galaxy” series, consisting of gestural and stained abstractions based on photographs of the Milky Way belonging to the Alder Planetarium in Chicago. In 1973, Frederick Brown’s painting, *Pre-Natal Conversation with Mr. and Mrs. Euphemia and Alberta Laster and Geneva Brown* (1972) was mentioned by Frank Bowling in his essay, *A Modest Proposal*, published in *Arts magazine*.<sup>10</sup> In the mid-1970s, he worked on paintings with Grégoire Müller, anticipating the Neo-Expressionist movement as they worked to integrate figuration into abstract compositions. In addition to such collaborations, Brown directed and performed in multi-media productions, including *Be Aware* (1972), *Stolen Moments* (1976), and *Portrait of a Painter* (1975), for which Anthony Braxton composed and performed the music, while Anthony Ramos created videos of the latter two projects. Brown’s loft at 120 Wooster Street became a major gathering place in Soho during this period.

In 1968, Brown completed a major painting measuring 18-by-12 feet later acquired by a private collection in Connecticut. Brown’s first solo gallery exhibition occurred in 1975 at Noah Goldowsky Gallery, which held shows of work by Jules Olitski, Dan Christensen, and Bowling. By that time, Brown’s work was already in several noted collections, including those of Chase Manhattan Bank, the Connecticut Bank and Trust, American Telephone and Telegraph, and the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Connecticut. When Brown expressed a desire to meet de Kooning, Noah Goldowsky facilitated the introduction by driving Brown to de Kooning’s home on Long Island. De Kooning instilled in Brown an awareness “that art is a very old profession, going back to the cave paintings of the prehistoric era,” and told him that when he became successful at painting, he would be able to help other people with the money he made.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Wilkinson, p. 32.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Bowling, “A Modest Proposal,” *Arts Magazine* 72 (February 1973), pp 55–59.

<sup>11</sup> Wilkinson, p. 34.

In the late 1970s, Brown's tendency toward figuration progressed in works that demonstrate his "adept interpretations of German expressionism, cartoon imagery, and folk elements," along with glyphic elements suggestive of "the history of American Indian . . . and evolution."<sup>12</sup> His work also paralleled such developments as the Pattern and Decoration group (exemplified in the work of Miriam Schapiro and Robert Zakanitch) and New Image Painting, introduced in a 1978 show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. In 1979, Brown married the dancer Megan Bowman, a constant in his life, with whom he would have two children, a daughter, Sebastienne, and a son, Bentley.

In 1983, he began an association with Marlborough Gallery where he would be represented until 1990. From his first show at Marlborough in 1983, his painting, *Ascension*, was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Suggestive of the influences of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italian painting, this painting was featured in the travelling exhibition, *New Narrative Paintings: Selections from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York*, alongside the work of Fernando Botero, James Rosenquist, Roger Brown, and Louisa Chase. In others from the show, Brown drew from Christian iconography, depicting *The Flagellation*, *The Crucifixion*, and *The Last Supper*. His images transcended their religious subjects, conveying his view that works of art can testify to something numinous and transcendent. In 1984, Brown was deemed an "artist to watch" in *ARTnews*, while a year later in an article in *Vogue*, Barbara Rose identified him as a "Rule Breaker," among the artists "who were invigorating paintings—with arresting content, jarring colors, and explosive forms."<sup>13</sup> In a review of Brown's 1984 exhibition at Marlborough, Ruth Bass observed in *ARTnews* that Brown "sees art as a form of shamanism, a vehicle for concentrating spiritual energy in physical form."<sup>14</sup> Bass felt that the unifying factor in Brown's various sources of inspiration was "an interest in people, in expressing the feelings of the figures in his works as well as his own, and a supreme self confidence in his ability to convey these feelings with paint."<sup>15</sup>

Brown began his "Blues" series in 1988. Consisting of portraits of jazz and blues musicians, the series would eventually consist of over 350 works. In the images, Brown captured the blues as "expressions of triumph, survival, and sadness," evoking human suffering and drama. His expressionist style was well suited to the emotion of the music itself.<sup>16</sup> His subjects included popular artists such as Ornette Coleman, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holiday, and Lionel Hampton, as well as lesser-known musicians.

In 1985 and 1987, Brown taught art at the Central College of Fine Arts in Beijing. In June 1988, he had a retrospective of one hundred works at the Museum of the People's Revolution (now the National Museum of China). The exhibition was the first at China's foremost museum to present a Western artist's work in a solo format. The museum was situated on Tiananmen Square, where

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<sup>12</sup> Sims, "Frederick J. Brown: Portraits in Jazz," p. 18 and Lowery S. Sims, "Interview with Frederick J. Brown—February 1988," in *The 1960s, A New Generation: American Painters and Sculptors* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Barbara Rose, "Rule Breakers," *Vogue* (June 1985), pp. 247–49.

<sup>14</sup> Ruth Bass, "The Artists, The Critics Are Watching," *ARTnews* 83 (November 1984), pp. 78–79.

<sup>15</sup> Bass, "The Artists, The Critics Are Watching," pp. 79.

<sup>16</sup> Wilkinson, p. 36.

Brown gave a demonstration of his painting, a year before it was the site of the explosive student uprising. In 1992, he created a five-panel painting, *The Life of Christ Altarpiece*, for the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, St. Louis University. Its three central panels represent the Baptism, the Descent from the Cross, and the Resurrection of Christ, while two side panels depict the Madonna and Child and the Descent into Hell. In March 1989, Brown was featured, along with artists including Betye Saar, Howardena Pindell, and Benny Andrews, in an article by Patricia Failing in *Artnews*, addressing the changing reception of work by Black artists due to the growing awareness of perceptual predispositions that had often resulted in discriminatory practices in the art world.<sup>17</sup>

In 1993, Brown completed *The Assumption of Mary* for the new library at Xavier University in New Orleans. He saw the painting—rendered on a single canvas that measures three stories tall—as a tribute to the accomplishments of women in African American culture. In it he featured a huge dark-skinned Madonna, between Pope John Paul II and Mother Katherine Drexel, who founded the university. At the center is a river that could be the Mississippi from New Orleans, while also referring to other rivers, such as the Jordan. Below it is a choir made up of eighty-nine twentieth-century jazz, gospel, soul, and blues musicians, including many who had lived in New Orleans, such as Louis Armstrong, Aretha Franklin, and Thelonius Monk.

In 1994, Brown was commissioned by the American banker Crosby Kemper for a site-specific project for the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City. This resulted in “*History of Art*,” a series of 110 paintings, in which Brown created his personal interpretation of the progression of art through human history. The work is installed in the museum’s *Café Sebastienne* (named after Brown's daughter).

In 2002, a retrospective exhibition organized by the Kemper Museum, *Frederick J. Brown: Portraits in Jazz, Blues, and Other Icons*, traveled to several additional museums, including the American Jazz Museum, Kansas City; the New Orleans Museum of Art; and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

In September 2008, Brown initiated a symposium, held at Cornell University, at which artists, musicians, dancers, and poets considered the Creative Movement of the 1970s and the role of Brown’s loft as a creative nexus in Soho at the time. The speakers included bassist Charlie Haden; saxophonists Henry Threadgill, Sam Rivers and James Jordan; Anthony Ramos, Felipe Luciano; songwriter Malcolm Mooney; writer and music critic Stanley Crouch; designer Jean Claude Samuel; and Brown’s wife, Megan. In 2012, a show of Brown’s art was held at the Museum of Contemporary and Religious Art, St. Louis, and in 2012–13, another show of his paintings was organized by the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art.

Most recently, the Sugar Hill Museum, New York, hosted a solo exhibition of Brown’s work entitled, “*Frederick J. Brown: Dreams and the Possibility of...*” from October 23, 2019 through September 27, 2020. Co-curated by the artist’s son, Bentley Brown, this retrospective exhibition spanned Brown’s fifty-year career focusing on the artist’s conception of “dreams” through three

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<sup>17</sup> Patricia Failing, “Black Artists Today: A Case of Exclusion,” *ARTnews* 88 (March 1989), pp. 124–31.

lenses: the imagined landscape, aspiration and possibility, and “the American Dream.” By focusing a critical eye on Brown’s use of motifs and fictional characters, this exhibition highlighted tensions between notions of self, myth, home, and the American narrative as presented by the artist.

Brown’s work is represented in many private and public collections, including the Adler Planetarium, Chicago; Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock; Brooklyn Museum, New York; the Greenville County Museum, South Carolina; the Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Missouri; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, St. Louis, Missouri; the National Museum of African-American History, Washington, D.C.; the National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.; the New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana; Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona; Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, Illinois; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.; and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut.

-Lisa N. Peters, Ph.D.

## CV

1945, Born, Greensboro, Georgia

2012, Died, Scottsdale, Arizona

## EDUCATION

1968, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, Illinois (B.A. Art and Psychology)

## SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

The Kennedy Center, Washington, D.C., *Frederick J. Brown: Music is my Muse*, 2023.

Berry Campbell, New York, *The Sound of Color*, 2021. [Curated by Dr. Lowery Stokes Sims]

Sugar Hill Children’s Museum of Art and Storytelling, New York, *Frederick J. Brown: Dreams and the Possibility Of . . .*, 2019.

Yellow Box Gallery, St. Thomas University, New Brunswick, Canada, *Legends of Jazz! Portraits by Frederick J. Brown from the Collection of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery*, 2016.

Truman Medical Center, Kansas City, Center for Healing Arts, *Frederick J. Brown Watercolors*, 2015–17.

Monte Pearson Gallery, Lakes Art Center, Okoboji, Iowa, *Works by Frederick Brown*, 2013–14.

Museum of Contemporary and Religious Art, St. Louis University, *A Tribute to Frederick J. Brown*, 2012.

Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans, *Twenty Jazz Portraits*, 2006–2009.

Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, *Frederick J. Brown: Portraits of Music I Love*, 2005.

Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City, *Frederick J. Brown: Portraits in Jazz, Blues and Other Icons* (traveling exhibition), 2002.

Thomas McCormick Works of Art, Chicago, *Frederick Brown: Faces*, 1998.

Lakes Art Center, Okoboji, Iowa, *Frederick Brown: The Blues Paintings*, 1997.

Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, *Frederick Brown: The Jazz Paintings*, 1997.

Arthur Roger Gallery, New Orleans, *Echoes of New Orleans*, 1991.  
Marlborough Gallery, New York, *The Blues by Frederick Brown: Recent Paintings*, 1989.  
Marlborough Gallery, New York, *The Blues by Frederick Brown*, 1988.  
Marlborough Gallery, New York, *Frederick Brown: Paintings*, 1986-1987.  
National Museum of the Chinese Revolution, Beijing, *Frederick Brown: A Retrospective*, 1986, 1987.  
Marlborough Gallery, New York, *Frederick J. Brown: Recent Paintings, 1981-1985—"Heroes and Rulebreakers,"* 1985.  
Marlborough Gallery, New York, *Paintings by Frederick J. Brown and John Alexander*, 1983.  
Noah Goldowsky Gallery, New York, *Frederick J. Brown*, 1975.

#### SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Dixon Gallery and Gardens, Memphis, *Black Artists in America: From Civil Rights to the Bicentennial*, 2023.  
Hudson River Museum, New York, *Order/Reorder: Experiments with Collection*, 2022.  
Hudson River Museum, New York, *African American Art in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century*, 2021.  
Ullens Center for Contemporary Art, Beijing, *Frederick J. Brown: Memories 1988 with Peter Wayne Lewis: Boosters*, 2016.  
Pearson Lakes Art Center, Okoboji, Iowa, *Visual Melody: Works by Frederick Brown and Larry Rivers*, 2012.  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., *African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era and Beyond* (traveled to Muscarelle Museum of Art, Williamsburg, Virginia (2013); Mennello Museum of American Art, Orlando, Florida (2013); Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts (2013); Hunter Museum of American Art, Chattanooga (2014); Crocker Art Museum, Sacramento (2014)).  
Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Washington, D.C., *Free Within Ourselves: African-American Art from the Museum's Collection* (traveling exhibition), 1993-94.  
Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, *25 Years of African-American Art*, 1993-94.  
Reader's Digest, Pleasantville, New York, *Faces and Figures: Selected Works by Black Artists from The Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1988.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, *The 1980s: A New Generation*, 1987.  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, *Recent Acquisitions of 20th Century Art*, 1987.  
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock, *1<sup>st</sup> National Drawing Invitational*, 1986.  
Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art, Ridgefield, Connecticut, *Contemporary Reflections*, 1971.

#### SELECTED PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Africana Studies and Research Center, Cornell University, *Ithaca, New York*  
American Jazz Museum, Kansas City  
Anderson Ranch Arts Center, *Snowmass Village, Colorado*  
Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock  
Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax  
Bethany College, *Lindsborg, Kansas*  
Brooklyn Museum, New York  
Brophy College Preparatory, *Phoenix, Arizona*  
California African-American Museum, Los Angeles

# BERRY CAMPBELL

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Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing  
Cornell University, Ithaca, New York  
Delta Blues Museum, *Clarksdale, Mississippi*  
Duke Ellington School of the Arts, Washington, *DC*  
George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia  
Greenville County Museum of Art, South Carolina  
Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, *Ithaca, New York*  
Hofstra University Museum, Long Island, New York  
Housatonic Museum of Art, Bridgeport, Connecticut  
Joslyn Art Museum, *Omaha, Nebraska*  
Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City  
Kentucky Wesleyan College, Owensboro, Kentucky  
Lake Arts Center, Okoboji, Iowa  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California  
McMaster Museum of Art, McMaster University, Hamilton, *Ontario, Canada*  
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York  
Museum of Contemporary Religious Art, St. Louis  
National Museum of African-American History, Washington, D.C.  
National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C.  
New Orleans Museum of Art, Louisiana  
Newcomb Art Museum, Tulane University, New Orleans  
Ogden Museum of Southern Art, New Orleans  
Pearson Lakes Art Center, *Okoboji, Iowa*  
Phoenix Art Museum, Arizona  
Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, Massachusetts  
SAMI Bedell Center for the Performing Arts, *Spirit Lake, Iowa*  
Save the Family Foundation of Arizona, *Mesa, Arizona*  
Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska, Lincoln  
Simon Fraser Gallery, *Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada*  
Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.  
Southern Illinois University, Carbondale  
Strake Jesuit Art Museum, Strake Jesuit College Preparatory, Houston, Texas  
Studio Museum of Harlem, New York  
Trinity Church, *New York, New York*  
United Missouri Bank, *St. Louis, Missouri*  
University Museum, Southern Illinois University, *Carbondale, Illinois*  
University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada  
Wayne State College, *Wayne, Nebraska*  
Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina-Greensboro, *Greensboro, North Carolina*  
Xavier University of Louisiana, New Orleans  
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut  
Zimmerli Art Museum, New Brunswick, New Jersey