

Artists of Color Ask: When Is Visibility a Trap?

In “Going Dark” at the Guggenheim, 28 artists explore urgent questions around what it means to be seen, and to see each other.



Sandra Mujinga’s “Spectral Keepers,” 2020, at the Guggenheim Museum. The green light has a paradoxical effect: It makes the figures harder to see. Credit...Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times

By Aruna D’Souza | Oct. 26, 2023

Your first encounter in the Guggenheim Museum’s ambitious new show, “Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility,” is likely to be with four looming figures draped in voluminous garments. It’s hard to see if anyone (or anything) is underneath the slightly futuristic hoodies. Acid-green projected light — known as chroma green, used by film studios for “green screen” effects — bathes the big gallery off the rotunda. The result is paradoxical — the figures are so huge they should be unmissable, but with this intense illumination you may have trouble making them out.

Watch this installation, by the artist Sandra Mujinga, long enough, and when you turn toward the rotunda, something remarkable happens: The stark-white museum turns entirely pink. (The effect subsides as your eyes readjust.)



Installation view of “Going Dark” at the Guggenheim, featuring the work of 28 artists who explore the question of what it means, especially for people of color, to be subject to increased surveillance yet at the same time erased from the field of vision, forgotten in the social landscape. Credit...Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times

Mujinga’s work is a fitting introduction to a show that asks what it means to be seen, and to see each other, especially when seeing takes place across racial and other forms of difference. What does it mean, especially for people of color, to be hyper-visible and subject to increased surveillance, while at the same time erased from the field of vision, forgotten in the social and political landscape? How does looking at each other through these layers of stereotyping and misunderstanding distort our perception of the world? If being visible is a trap, is there solace to be found in near-invisibility?

These are questions the show’s curator, Ashley James, raises in “Going Dark,” which features work by 28 artists, including three new commissions. Among them are Faith Ringgold and Charles White, the distinguished elders of the exhibition; Lorna Simpson and David Hammons, celebrated conceptualists of the ’80s and ’90s; and a troupe of younger artists including Tiona Nekkia McClodden, Sondra Perry and Farah Al Qasimi.

It’s a compelling counterpoint to the art world’s seemingly endless hunger for Black portraiture by superstars like Jordan Casteel, Amy Sberaldo, Henry Taylor and Kehinde Wiley, who have long been offering images of Black subjectivity through figuration. In this show, the figure is often barely there.



Faith Ringgold's "Black Light" canvases of the late 1960s: from left, "Black Light Series #3: Soul Sister," 1967; "Black Light Series #11: US America Black," 1957; and "Black Light Series #4: Mommy and Daddy," 1969. Credit...Faith Ringgold/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, via ACA Galleries, New York; Photo by Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times

The Guggenheim's former director, Richard Armstrong, wrote in his preface to the thoughtfully designed catalog that the show is "a manifestation" of the museum's "dedication to engaging new and diverse audiences." This is the first time that 17 of the 28 artists — largely Black, and all of color — have work on view there, including Ringgold, Dawoud Bey and Chris Ofili.

One of the key artworks in the show is Kerry James Marshall's painting "Invisible Man" (1986), inspired by Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel. In that book, the nameless main character lives in a state of social obscurity — "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me." Marshall translated that idea into paint — a faint outline of a naked man barely emerges out of the inky background. It is almost, but not quite, a monochrome. The picture is difficult to make out, but also uncomfortable to look at — the stark white eyes and teeth of the figure, along with his naked pose, veer dangerously close to old, cruel stereotypes.



In Kerry James Marshall's "Invisible Man" (1986), inspired by Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel, the painter equates invisibility with black paint.
Credit...Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times

Given the Guggenheim's longstanding focus on abstract art, the exhibition's engagement with the monochrome — in the work of Ellen Gallagher, Sable Elyse Smith, and Ofili, among others — constitutes an important, race-inflected lens through which to consider modernist art. Ringgold's "Black Light" canvases of the late 1960s show her literally reducing the amount of white in her pigments, resulting in a palette of near-blacks. Rejecting the debasement of dark-skinned people in white culture, she created images of moon-faced, wide-eyed men and women that require the same kind of careful scrutiny as an Ad Reinhardt painting.



Tomashi Jackson's "Day Glow (Backlash)," from 2022, consists of historical photos from the civil rights movement printed on layers of vinyl; as the viewer moves in front of it, the image becomes more or less readable. Credit...Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times

Glenn Ligon and Tomashi Jackson draw upon other midcentury movements. In Ligon's "Figure" (2001), 50 self-portrait photos silk-screened on brightly colored paper veer in and out of legibility, created by his Andy Warhol-inspired technique; they ask what happens when you add race to the Pop artist's mix of queer desire and celebrity culture. Tomashi Jackson's "Day Glow: Backlash" (2022) consists of historical photos from the civil rights movement printed on vinyl. By enlarging the dots of her halftone process (shades of Robert Rauschenberg) and layering the vinyl with marble dust, paper bags, canvas and other materials, the artist messes with viewers' optical perception while encouraging them to question their relationship to the history these archival images contain.

A number of objects in the show grapple with photography's role in classifying, colonizing, and criminalizing people of color. Much of this work shares a lineage with Lorna Simpson's art from the 1980s and '90s. In "Time Piece" (1990), Simpson captures four near-identical images of a woman that have the feel of a medical textbook or anthropological study. She is shown only from the back, however, allowing her to evade the viewer's gaze — and thus any attempt to categorize her.

Stephanie Syjuco's "Block Out the Sun" series (2019-2022) stems from her work in the photographic archives of the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Exhuming the visual records of a simulated village where Filipino inhabitants were put on display during the exposition, she rephotographs these documents, covering the subjects' faces with her hands — to protect them from our eyes.



Glenn Ligon's "Figure" (2001), 50 self-portrait photos silk-screened on brightly colored paper veer in and out of legibility. Credit...Clark Hodgin for The New York Times

The blur offers a similar anonymity to the residents of Harlem in Ming Smith's nighttime photos from her "Invisible Man" series (1988-91). Where Smith uses long exposure to create her effect, Sondra Perry, in her video loop, "Double Quadruple Etcetera Etcetera I & II" (2013) relies on a tool in Photoshop that removes unwanted elements to partially obscure the bodies of two dancers. (One dancer, the artist Joiri Minaya, is also featured in "Going Dark.") Though there is little to actually see in Perry's video — flashes of brown skin, braided hair and a shifting white chimera — I dare you to tear your eyes away.

John Edmonds overexposes his film to create solarized prints with velvety surfaces in which his Black male subjects take refuge in the shadows. A series of barely lit, moody images from Dawoud Bey's "Underground Railroad" project (2017) reminds us that for the enslaved making flights to freedom, darkness was both a space of danger and also of protection.

The hoodie, not surprisingly, shows up in many forms. Kevin Beasley casts it in resin in "... ain't it?" (2014), while Edmonds depicts young men who are doubly obscured — hoods up and seen from the back — in his large-scale photographs from 2018. Hammons mounts a hood directly onto the wall with "In the Hood" (1993) and in "Repeating the Obvious" (2019), Carrie Mae Weems introduces the garments in 39 ghostly images of Trayvon Martin, whose murder at age 17 epitomized the projection of white fear onto the Black male body.



Lorna Simpson's work from the late 1980s and 1990s, such as "Time Piece" (1990), laid the groundwork for much of the conceptual approach in "Going Dark." Credit...Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times



Stephanie Syjuco's "Block Out the Sun (Shadow)" and "Block Out the Sun (Shield)," both 2019-2020, in which the artist protects the subjects of archival photos — Filipinos put on display at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 — with her hands. Credit...Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times



Dawoud Bey photographed sites that may have been routes for the enslaved seeking freedom in his 2017 series “Night Coming Tenderly, Black,” including this image, “Untitled #14 (Site of John Brown’s Tannery).” Credit...Dawoud Bey, via Sean Kelly

And then there is “Mixed Blessing,” a 2011 sculpture by the Anishinaabe artist Rebecca Belmore, who uses a hoodie and synthetic hair to create a prone figure, its tresses fanning around it on the floor like bird feathers. Its outstretched arms can be read as a gesture of prayer, gratitude, or submission to punishment — a complicated mix that simultaneously expresses cultural pride and sorrow for the violence visited on Indigenous people.

For anyone who has been looking at contemporary art at other museums and galleries over the last few years, “Going Dark” is filled — overly so — with familiar faces. What I missed here was the pleasure of discovering new voices that often comes from a great thematic exhibition.

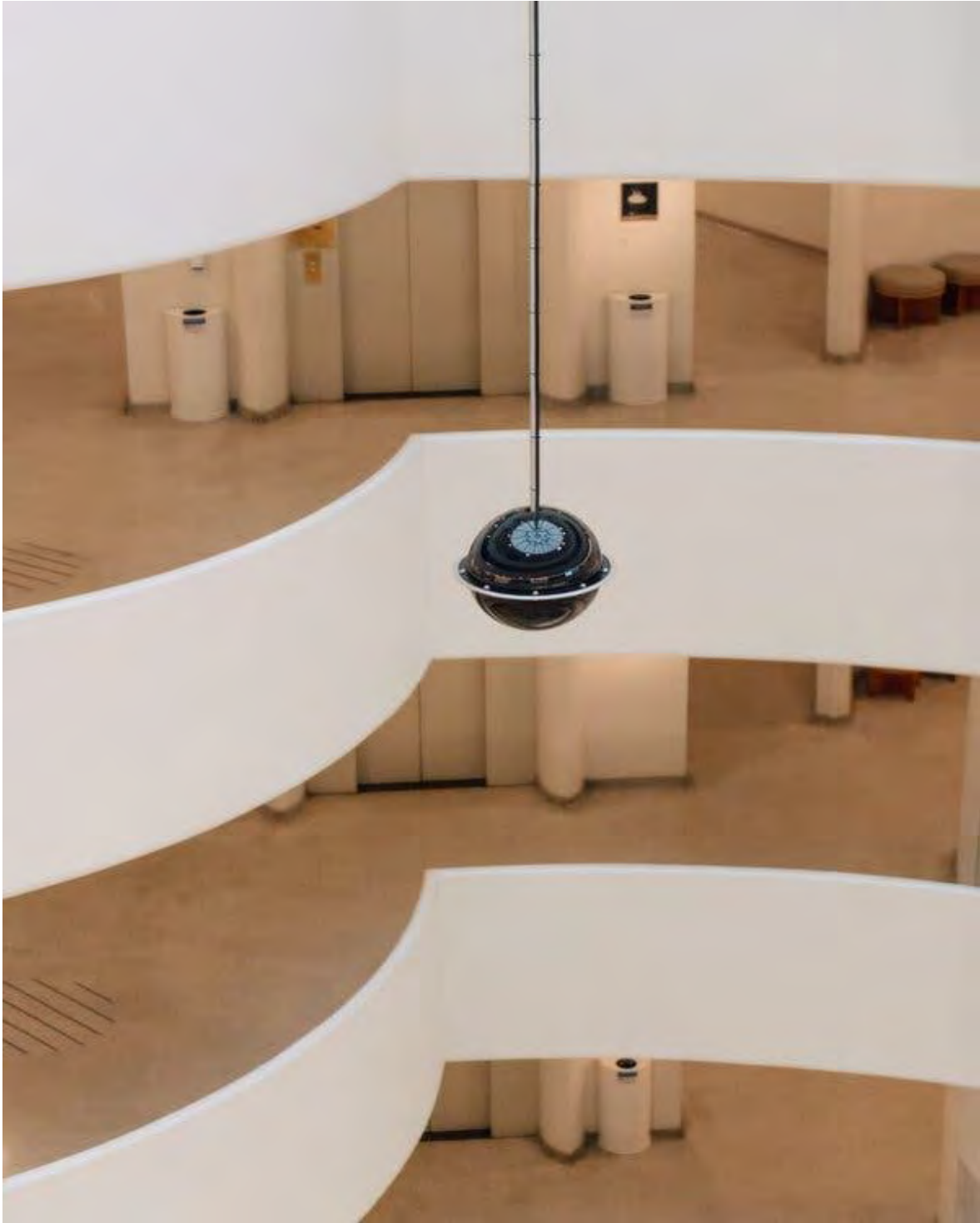
Happily, there are still surprises. Among them is an ink drawing on wood panel by Charles White (1918-1979), which the curator discovered in the artist’s archive. Made in the 1960s, one side shows an unfinished sketch of a man, while the other is a sea of blackness out of which a figure tentatively emerges — rendered as negative space. “Summhour,” a 1974 work by David Hammons, made me laugh out loud: a kitschy bouquet of daisies in watercolor and ink, obscures a clutch of brown penises, an allusion, perhaps, to stereotypes of hypersexualization.



The Canadian artist Rebecca Belmore, a member of the Lac Seul First Nation (Anishinaabe), takes up the image of the hoodie in her sculpture, in which hair fans out like bird's feathers around a figure who bends over in supplication or prayer. Credit...Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times

Spoiler alert: If you look up toward the museum's oculus you will see a mysterious black orb hanging down. It contains multiple cameras. Halfway up the rotunda, you'll be offered the option of ceding your phone to an attendant and entering a makeshift theater where you can view live feeds from those cameras of what's happening in the museum, processed through an A.I. program used by museums for security purposes. Watch closely and you'll notice the technology's occasional glitches — it sometimes misidentifies artworks as human, presumably because it can't tell the difference between an image of a body in an artwork from a sentient one. (Kind of perfect, given the show's theme.)

This site-specific installation, by American Artist, is quite brilliant: It makes palpable and immediate the hypervisibility and surveillance that so many works in "Going Dark" address. In this curtained space, we are the viewers, invisible to those outside. Re-enter the rotunda, and the camera sees us only as a potential threat. Which would you rather be?



“Security Theater” (2023), an installation by American Artist commissioned for this exhibition, explores the way we are surveilled in museums. A mysterious orb turns out to contain cameras; you can watch the live feed in a small theater halfway up the rotunda. Credit...Clark Hodgkin for The New York Times

Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility

Through April 7, 2024, at the Guggenheim Museum, 1071 Fifth Avenue, Manhattan; (212) 423-3500; [guggenheim.org](https://www.guggenheim.org).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/26/arts/design/going-dark-exhibition-guggenheim.html>