

## 30 AMERICANS

New Britain Museum of American Art • New Britain, CT • [nbmaa.org](http://nbmaa.org) • Through October 30, 2022

Installed for aesthetic impact and engagement under 16' ceilings and throughout three connected galleries, *30 Americans* at the New Britain Museum of American Art (NBMAA), presents artwork by contemporary Black makers from the collection of the Rubell Museum in Miami, Florida. The NBMAA exhibit is curated by university-affiliated scholars, who also self-identify as of African descent.

This major exhibit includes Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mickalene Thomas, Kara Walker, Hank Willis Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, and the figurative expressionist Robert Colescott, whose dazzling, eroticized painting parodies America's racial fault line.

Self-portraits by Mickalene Thomas introduce the opening theme, "Making a Way Out Of No Way: Radical Black Self-Making in Contemporary Art." Studded with rhinestones—black, white, blue, gold—Thomas' 11 x 6' diptych *Baby I Am Ready Now*, glows with her feminist brand of glam and sensuality.

Kehinde Wiley's monumental 9 x 9' *Equestrian Portrait of the Count Duke Olivares* is modeled after an iconic Diego Velazquez hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Wiley's re-make presents a youthful Black subject assuming the role of military general atop a white steed. He is dressed in khakis, sneakers, and a red hoodie, depicting a baseball player for the Negro Leagues. A three-quarter profile emphasizes the youth's backward glance, as if Wiley's subject is asking, "What's up with you?"

Hank Willis Thomas' digital C-print *Branded Head* chillingly re-contextualizes Nike's universally recognizable swish logo, from fashion brand coveted by celebrities to the history of



Mickalene Thomas, *Baby I Am Ready Now*, 2007, diptych, acrylic, rhinestone, and enamel on wooden panel, 72 x 132" (182.9 x 335.3 cm) overall; 72 x 60" (182.9 x 152.4 cm) left panel; 72 x 72" (182.9 x 182.9 cm) right panel.

Black enslavement, and "branding" as a sign of ownership.

Artworks in the third gallery include a wall-length Kara Walker, *Camptown Ladies*, the artist's black silhouettes recounting the ambiguities of antebellum life, and two Nick Cave Soundsuits, one glowing with beads and flowers and the other resembling a

tropical song bird. Both acknowledge traditions of adornment in African-inspired cultures.

"This sculptural form," Cave writes, "creates a camouflage, masking and forming a second skin that also conceals race, gender, and class, forcing one to look without judgment." As an embodiment of the best of what we can be, Cave's unique artwork transcends these boundaries in celebration of the creative impulse.

—Susan Rand Brown



NXTHVN WOMEN ARTIST REPS JON BUTCHER PAT ADAMS BABAROOSA

# ART NEW ENGLAND

CONTEMPORARY ART AND CULTURE

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The Gallery Issue