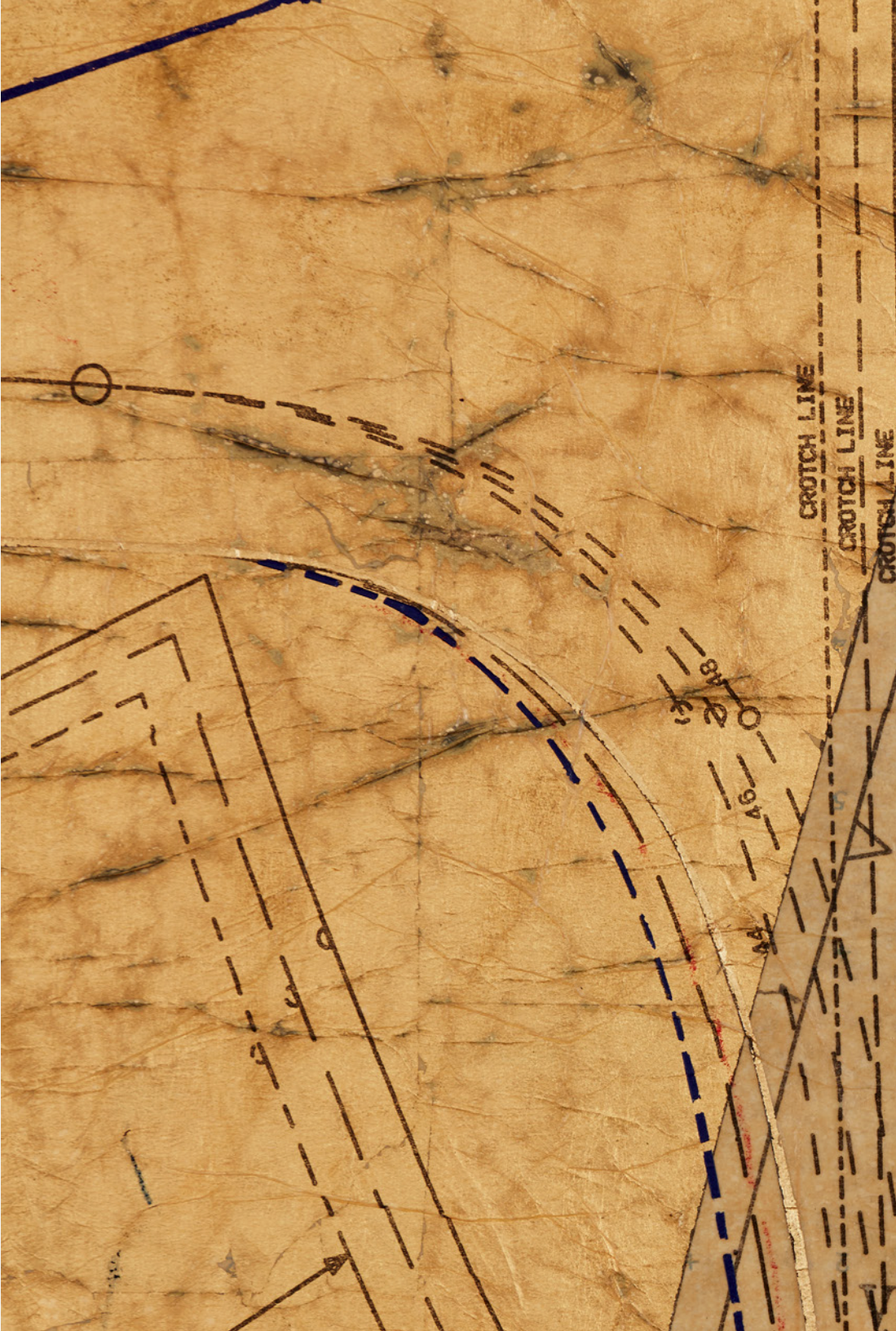


A close-up photograph of a gold leaf surface, likely on a book cover or a piece of art. The gold is heavily textured and shows signs of wear, with dark smudges and scratches. A metal fastener, possibly a screw or a rivet, is visible on the right side, partially embedded in the gold. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the metallic sheen and the intricate details of the surface.

GILDED

Contemporary Artists Explore Value and Worth



CROTCH LINE

CROTCH LINE

CROTCH LINE

16

FRONT LINING A B
 DOUBLURE DEVANT
 FORRO DEL FRENTE
 FUTTERVORDERTEIL
 FODERA DAVANTI

CUT 2

Vogue Patterns

PATTERN GLOSSARY

ENGLISH	FRANCAIS
APPLIQUE	APPLIQUE
BLOUSING	PARTIE BLOUSANTE
CASING	COULISSE
CENTER	MILIEU
CENTER BACK	MILIEU DOS
CENTER FRONT	MILIEU DEVANT
CONTRAST	CONTRASTE
CROTCH LINE	LIGNE DE FOURCHE
CUT ...	COUPER ...
CUT OFF FOR ...	COUPER ICI POUR ...
	COUPER ... SUR



GULDED

Contemporary Artists Explore Value and Worth

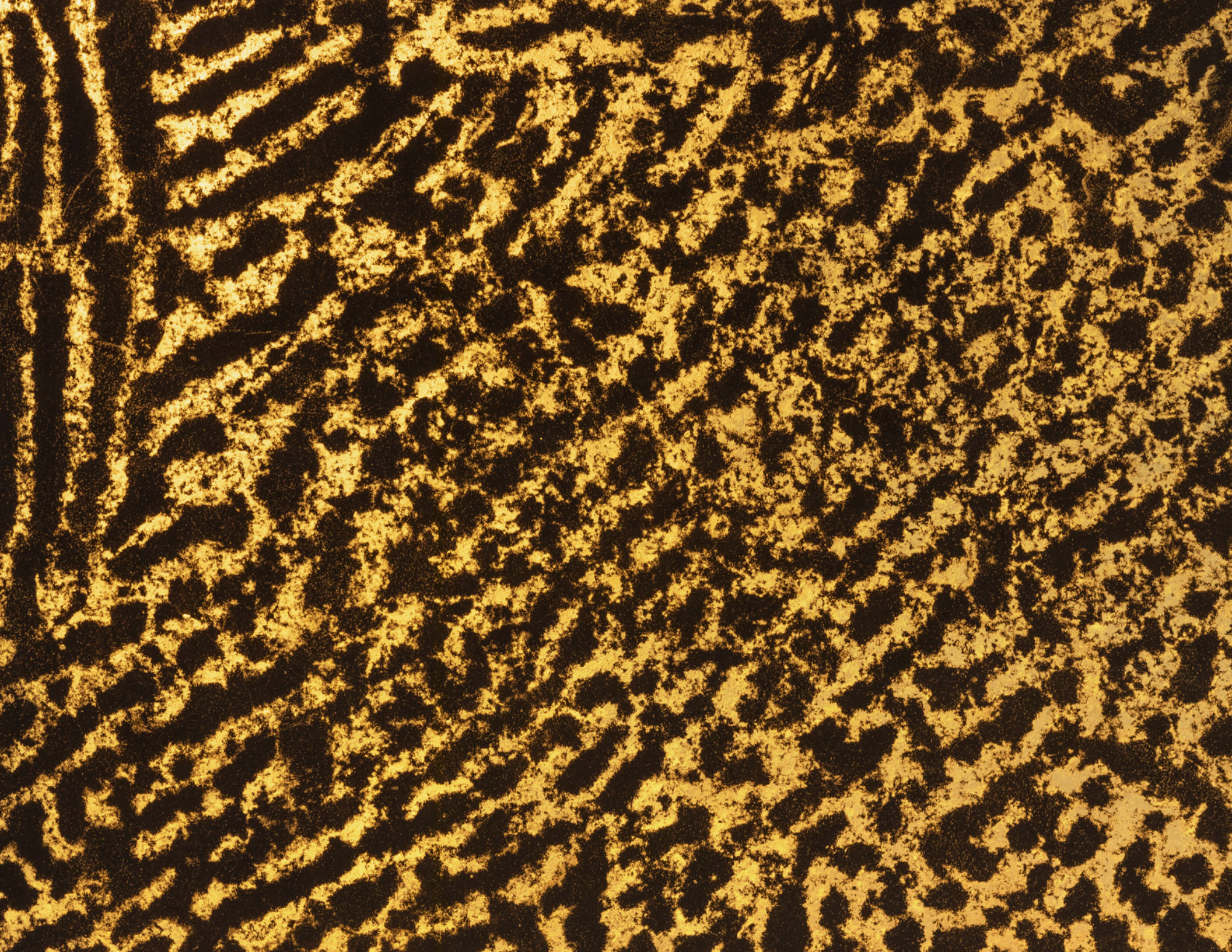
Emily Stamey

With a poem by Joshua Bennett
and essay by Rebecca Zorach

WEATHERSPOON ART MUSEUM, UNC GREENSBORO

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FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Gilded: Contemporary Artists Explore Value and Worth, a project that has been germinating for some years, has come to fruition at exactly the right moment. Just as the artists in the exhibition consider who and what our society deems worthy, over the past two years, the Weatherspoon Art Museum at UNC Greensboro has been thinking deeply about its institutional values: who we serve and what we do. Time and again in these conversations, we've returned to three core values, each of which finds resonance in *Gilded*.

We value the power of art to affect people's lives. The Weatherspoon recognizes that looking at and interpreting visual artworks impacts our ability to make sense of and respond to historical, social, and cultural concerns. The artists whose work is presented in *Gilded* likewise focus on this

pursuit of understanding the world in which we live. We are grateful to each of them for offering up a breadth of work in a range of styles that individually turn our attention to such topics as labor, equity, and the environment, while collectively attending to fundamental questions about our shared humanity.

Thank you to artists Radcliffe Bailey, Larissa Bates, William Cordova, Angela Fraleigh, Gajin Fujita, Nicholas Galanin, Liz Glynn, the late Shan Goshorn, Sherin Guirguis, Titus Kaphar, the late Hung Liu, James Nares, Ronny Quevedo, Shinji Turner-Yamamoto, Danh Vo, Stacy Lynn Waddell, and Summer Wheat. We appreciate all the lenders of their work for making this brilliant show possible. Three new works of art premiere in this exhibition through Weatherspoon-initiated

commissions, and we offer additional thanks to artists Turner-Yamamoto, Waddell, and Wheat for taking this journey with us.

We value collaborating with our faculty and students. As both an exhibition and in the form of this catalogue, *Gilded* crosses disciplinary boundaries and knits together a breadth of themes and ways of knowing. The Weatherspoon has elected to keep the show on view for two full academic semesters in order to maximize campus engagement. This fall and coming spring, classes from the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences will not only study the artworks in the gallery and learn from this publication, but will also give us their insights and reflections in return. We are excited to share their thoughts both within the museum and beyond, and we extend our thanks to each instructor and student who lends their unique perspective and voice.

We value thinking with our community. Whether you are near to or far from Greensboro as you read this catalogue, we think of you as part of a family of learners. To all of you, we offer our first fully electronic exhibition publication, a deliberate choice based on our desire to reach as many people as possible, without the limits of geographic proximity to the show or the necessity to purchase a book. We are grateful to everyone who takes the time to read a part of this publication, and especially to those who may respond to it in some way—whether by seeking out more information about one of the artists, sharing one of the authors’ ideas with a friend, or picking up one of the thematic threads in your own work.

Numerous individuals have invested their time and talents to make *Gilded* a reality. The project was conceived and led by Emily Stamey, the Weatherspoon’s curator and head of exhibitions. I am grateful for her vision, dedication, and tenacity in realizing this project during especially volatile times. In this publication, her thoughtful consideration of the show’s contemporary artworks is accompanied by contributions from art historian Rebecca Zorach, Mary Jane Crowe Professor in Art and Art History at Northwestern University, who offers up a reflection on the historic uses of gold in the arts; and from poet and scholar Joshua Bennett, Professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth, who shares a moving personal account of his recent encounter with one particular golden artwork from the mid-twentieth century. Their writing has been edited and the book as a whole has been overseen by the keen eyes and wise guidance of Terry Ann R. Neff of t.a. neff associates. And the publication’s exquisite design and electronic production have been thoughtfully and expertly executed by Lucia | Marquand.

It is no overstatement to say that every person on the Weatherspoon Art Museum staff contributed in a measurable way to planning, mounting, programming, and sharing this exhibition with our communities. I extend my thanks to our exhibition designers and preparators Shane Carrico and Susan Taaffe; academic and community engagement team Ann Grimaldi and Robert Rose; collections, registration, and visitor services team Alice Culclasure, Elaine Gustafson, Bobby Jessica Holt,

Angela Matkins, Joseph Watkins, and Brad Young; business manager Valerie McConnell; head of communications Loring Mortensen; and senior director of development Michael Watson. We are also grateful for the leadership and support of UNC Greensboro Chancellor Franklin Gilliam, Provost Debbie Storrs, and the staff, faculty, and students of UNC Greensboro who make a place a community.

When I arrived at the Weatherspoon in September 2020, I encountered the remarkable exhibition, also curated by Emily Stamey, *To the Hoop: Basketball and Contemporary Art*. The show should have been on view at its second venue by then, but the COVID-19 pandemic changed those plans, along with millions of others around the world. The silver lining was that for the rest of the year, UNC Greensboro students and the community sought solace in

the museum's galleries and found a safer place to connect with one another during one of the toughest moments in our collective memories. We are grateful that *Gilded* will travel to two fine community and campus museums. Thank you to our colleagues at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee, and the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth in Hanover, New Hampshire, for presenting and sharing this exhibition with your constituents.

Gilded is able to shine thanks to the generous financial support of the Seymour and Carol Cole Levin Foundation and Martha and Clifford Thompson. If there is a gold standard for gratitude, they are worthy indeed.

Juliette Bianco
Anne and Ben Cone Memorial Endowed Director



IZM



REBECCA ZORACH

GOLDIEN DREAMS

*So the bold
indigo witchery and tangerine haze with
which our African ancestors colored their gaze
has nearly grown cold,
and the sunset today, like a beacon glaze
is a vision of glittering gold.*

—Margaret Danner, “Gold is
the Shade Esperanto”

In “Gold is the Shade Esperanto,” the poet Margaret Danner watches as gold comes to claim the place of other colors. As currency, gold reduces everything to monetary equivalence. As color, too, it flattens differences, its seemingly universal sheen making it the “shade Esperanto”—and not in a good way. In its aspirations, the language Esperanto would

seem to represent something positive, a way of building bridges in a world of conflicts. But for Danner, gold dissolves communal ways of seeing based in cultural traditions—the indigo and tangerine colors she evokes—into the desire to possess and display wealth. We may think we prize special aesthetic qualities in gold, its shine and smoothness. Gold may seem to possess essential qualities that make it uniquely suited to serve as a container of value—its relative uselessness in the making of tools, its malleability, its recognizability, its rarity. But do its material qualities only entice us because its place in an economic system invests those qualities with value?

Gold seems to oscillate between positions—
aesthetic seduction and metaphorical meaning,

monetary value and moral degradation. Certainly, all over the world, throughout much of human history, people have used gold. They have associated it with divinity, honor, immortality, and power. Some societies have considered gold divine in and of itself. It is often considered the most appropriate material for conferring honor on divine figures and kings. Ancient Egyptians equated it with the flesh of the gods; for the Aztecs it was produced out of their bodies as divine excrement. It has been used to adorn luxury vessels; it has served as grave goods in burials; it represents elaborate halos and backdrops for holy figures in European paintings; and sometimes it even coated entire temples, such as Qorikancha, the “Golden Enclosure” of the Inka kings, a monumental temple covered in sheets of gold.¹

It is sometimes difficult to disentangle political and religious uses of gold, especially when rulers are understood as divinely sanctioned or as relatives of the gods. An ambiguous relationship to political rule appears in the South American object known as the *Muisca Raft*, an intricate artwork that illustrates a ceremony in which a Muisca ruler (from what is now Colombia) was coated with gold dust and ceremonially dunked in Lake Guatavita.² The many glittering details and the hanging pieces on the king’s headdress create a sense of animation in the scene. The whole object looks as if it was constructed from many pieces of gold wire fused together, but it was actually produced by the lost-wax method, in which an artisan creates a wax model, coats it in clay, and then heats the clay to

allow the wax to melt and drain out of what then becomes the mold for the gold object.³

This object reminds us that before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous artisans in the Americas mastered numerous metallurgical techniques, some of which were not known elsewhere at the time. But few golden artifacts from this time period remain; as late as the nineteenth century, huge quantities of South American artifacts were routinely melted down by Europeans for their monetary value and as part of a colonial strategy of annihilating knowledge of Indigenous cultural history. It was a strategy that cut across continents. The *Gold Rhinoceros of Mapungubwe*, uncovered in 1934 at a gravesite in northern South Africa, did not meet the fate of literal liquidation, but its modern reception tells a similar story; the rhinoceros was immediately hidden away because it did not fit the colonizers’ historical narrative.

The part of the African continent best known as a gold-producing region is West Africa, which was the source of much of the gold that found its way into European coffers in the Middle Ages.⁴ But in the same period, Southern Africa also had significant quantities of gold and sophisticated metalsmiths who, as in this case, made startlingly naturalistic figurines covered in gold leaf. Along with several other golden animal figures found nearby, the rhino may have been part of a luxury divining bowl.⁵ The Kingdom of Mapungubwe was located at what is now the northern edge of South Africa in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Its presence and the artistry apparent in this and other artifacts defied apartheid-era



TOP Unidentified artist, *Untitled (The Muisca Raft)*, about 600–1600. Gold, 4 × 4 × 7¹¹/₁₆ in. Museo del Oro, Bogotá, Colombia

ABOVE Unidentified artist, *Gold Rhinoceros of Mapungubwe*, about 1220–90. Gold foil, 2¹/₂ × 5³/₄ × 1³/₈ in. University of Pretoria Museums, Mapungubwe National Heritage Collection, South Africa



Benvenuto Cellini,
Sogeannte Saliera
(Saltcellar), 1540–43.
Gold, enamel, ebony, and
ivory; 11¼ × 87/16 × 10¾ in.
Kunsthistorisches Museum
Vienna, Kunstammer

ideas about the “primitive” character of African culture and in particular the “empty land” myth, which promoted the lie that there were no African inhabitants in Southern Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans.

The relationship of gold and power is evident in one of the most famous European objects made of gold, Benvenuto Cellini’s famous saltcellar created for the French king Francis I. Many talented European artists of the Renaissance got their start as goldsmiths: the material made this trade one of the most prestigious to which an artisan could aspire. Cellini is known as a sculptor of large-scale bronzes, but the saltcellar is one of his most famous works. It serves as a container to hold salt and pepper, substances that now seem mundane, but were at the time costly commodities that served as potent symbols of land and sea, of local and foreign wealth. The vessel also hints at the place of gold within European colonialism, in which dreams of glittering riches made gold the pretext for the bloodiest of conquests. Traveling to the Americas, Spanish conquistadors heard rumors of what they thought was a fantastic city of gold. They called it “El Dorado,” the gilded one (a name that may have actually originated with the ceremony represented by the *Muisca Raft*), and sought precious metals to feed Europe’s appetite for goods from China. The Nahuatl text of the Florentine Codex, a manuscript produced in Mexico City in the sixteenth century, says of the Spaniards that “they crave gold like hungry swine.”⁶ Catholic writers rationalized conquest with claims of high-minded religious necessity,

as when José de Acosta—a moderate in colonial terms—argued that precious metals were “given” by the Creator to the Indies in order to draw Europeans there for purposes of conversion to Christianity: “The wisdom of the eternal Lord sought to enrich the lands of the world that are furthest away and inhabited by people the least civilized, and put the greatest abundance of mines there . . . in order to invite men to seek out these lands . . . and communicate the religion and worship of the true God.”⁷

Gold—or rather the desire for gold and that desire’s destructive effects—has also, often, been subjected to critique. In his 1556 *De re metallica*, a treatise on metals and mining, scholar Georgius Agricola catalogues all the quotations from ancient authors he can find concerning gold, citing a succinct Plautus (“I hate gold”), the moral concerns of Propertius (“by gold is faith destroyed, by gold is justice bought”), and Diphilus’s calculus of power (“nothing is more powerful than gold. By it all things are torn asunder; all things are accomplished”).⁸ These concerns show up in attacks against idolatry in religious contexts as well. In Jewish and Christian traditions, idols are often described as being made of gold; the original instance is the Golden Calf destroyed by Moses. In the sixteenth century, Protestant Reformers drew upon this discourse in critiquing Catholic use of luxurious materials in their efforts to honor God. These concerns cut across religions. Within Buddhism, gold has a similarly conflicted history—employed to give honor but also, at times, outlawed as a material with which to do so. The *Golden*

Buddha in Bangkok, Thailand, created in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, is the largest solid gold statue in the world, but at some point in its history it was covered in plaster and adorned with less precious materials—to evade criticism for the luxury material, or to protect the statue from theft, or both. The golden core was discovered accidentally in 1955. Ambivalence about gold appears, too, in a common phrase about devotional practices in Thai Buddhism: the metaphor of “gilding the back of the Buddha” refers to the act of doing good deeds unostentatiously, without any expectation of praise.

Along with the destructive character of the colonial quest for the metal, gold also brings along with it notions of transformation and illusion, thanks to the age-old practices of alchemists who attempted to fabricate gold out of other metals. Extracted from the “bowels” of the earth, it can represent destructive attitudes toward nature. Gilding may suggest deception—the idea of a glowing surface that hides emptiness at its core. As a backdrop to representational painting in medieval and Renaissance gold-ground painting, gold can function in multiple ways: honoring the figures, flattening the field of representation, reminding viewers that we are looking at a physical object on which pigment and gold leaf have been placed, distancing us from the surface, or, conversely, bringing us into a heavenly realm.

With its shine, gold confuses boundaries. It seems often to add evocative, metaphorical value to what should, economists tell us, be simply

a matter of rational calculation. Stamped with imagery, it takes on diverse values and cultural qualities. In Herman Melville’s 1851 novel *Moby Dick*, Captain Ahab nails a gold doubloon minted in Quito, Ecuador, to the mast of the *Pequod* as the reward for whichever sailor will spot the elusive white whale, object of his murderous quest for revenge. Melville writes of the coin, “Now those golden coins of South America are as medals of the sun and tropic token-pieces. Here palms, alpacas, and volcanoes; sun’s disks and stars, ecliptics, horns-of-plenty, and rich banners waving, are in luxuriant profusion stamped; so that the precious gold seems almost to derive an added preciousness and enhancing glories, by passing through those fancy mints, so Spanishly poetic.” Is the material in excess of its economic value, or is it the economic value that is itself already fundamentally irrational, despite its pretenses to rational order? In the novel, Ahab is possessed with a passion for slaughtering the whale that has overtaken the voyage’s ostensibly rational motive of the pursuit of wealth. Pip, the young Black cabin boy who loses his sanity after being temporarily abandoned at sea, retains his ability to observe things the other sailors don’t. He points out the central status of the gold coin that spurs the sailors on in their proxy pursuit of Ahab’s quest, prophesying the crew’s doom: “Here’s the ship’s navel, this doubloon here, and they are all on fire to unscrew it. But, unscrew your navel, and what’s the consequence? . . . And so they’ll say in the resurrection, when they come to fish up this old mast, and find a doubloon lodged in it, with



Unidentified artist, *Golden Buddha*, Wat Traimit, Bangkok, 13th–14th century. Gold, approximately 9 ft. 9⁵/₈ in. high

bedded oysters for the shaggy bark. Oh, the gold! the precious, precious gold!—the green miser “I’ll hoard ye soon!”⁹

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have absorbed and intervened in these complex histories in a variety of ways. They have played with gold as material in relation to fictive value, labor, and exchange. In contemporary art, gold plays many roles, oscillating between flatness and depth, movement and stasis, and fantasy, luxury, and critique. The contemporary

artists in *Gilded* give critical attention to the metaphorical meanings of gold in art, producing their own richly meaningful reflections. In particular, they suggest how gold can reveal tensions and reverse values in transcultural contexts. Is gold the shade Esperanto? Rather than letting it dissolve difference as a universal solvent, these artists throw it, materially, in the way of smoothly functioning cultural hegemonies. They come at gold aslant, posing new critiques and making new meanings.

NOTES

1. Here and elsewhere in this essay, I draw on the book I co-authored with Michael W. Phillips, Jr., *Gold: Nature and Culture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

2. Juan Rodríguez Freyle, *El Carnero: conquista y descubrimiento de el Nuevo Reino de Granada* (1638), vol. 1, 21.

3. María Alicia Uribe Villegas and Marcos Martínón Torres, “Composition, colour and context in Muisca votive metalwork (Colombia,

AD 600–1800),” *Antiquity* vol. 86 (2012), 772–91, 777. See also Heather Lechtman, “The Inka, and Andean Metallurgical Tradition” in *Variations in the Expression of Inka Power*, ed. Richard L. Burger, Craig Morris, and Ramiro Matos (Washington, DC: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2007), 314–15.

4. On West African gold in the Middle Ages, see Kathleen Bickford Berzock, ed., *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art,*

Culture, and Exchange across Medieval Saharan Africa (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

5. Alex Duffey, “Mapungubwe: Interpretation of the Gold Content of the Original Gold Burial M1, A620,” *Journal of African Archaeology* 10, no. 2 (2012), 175–87.

6. Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 19.

7. José de Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (Seville: Juan de Leon, 1590), 196–97. My translation.

8. Georgius Agricola, *De re metallica*, trans. Herbert Clark Hoover and Lou Henry Hoover (London: The Mining Magazine, 1912), 10.

9. Herman Melville, *Moby Dick, Or, The White Whale*, chapter 99.



THE THIRD HEAVEN
THE SECOND-CORINTHIANS
12-2-3



JOSHUA BENNETT

CROWN OF THORNS, PT. 5

(jazz sonnet for James Hampton)

My last piece of mail last year was a book of poems by Denis Johnson named in honor of the artist, James Hampton, who built a sculpture from tin foil & cardboard big enough to fill a room, which it does, even as I write this, it looms gargantuan over its own space in the Smithsonian, labeled in accordance with its grandeur & glamor, its luminous gold & aluminum grammar, The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations' Millennium General Assembly, which, to clarify, is the only known work of art Hampton crafted in his 56 years on Earth, the latter part of which he labored as a janitor, night after night, gathering metal for a masterwork he built in secret, a scene almost Vulcanic, hammering in the silent darkness of a Washington, D.C. garage miles away from where the work would one day stand, first discovered by a landlord on the hunt for overdue rent, the irony of which merits consideration elsewhere, perhaps, yet I am here, first, to celebrate James, the tireless genius, his throne built not only, you see, from what most would call garbage, detritus, unworthy or nothing at all, but dreams like a second flesh no earthly weapon formed against him could kill.

James Hampton, *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nation's Millennium General Assembly*, about 1950–64. Mixed media, dimensions variable. Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC. Gift of anonymous donors





EMILY STAMEY

GOOD AS GOLD

Gold. The very word conjures visions of treasure, wealth, and glory. Across time and cultures, gold has served as a metaphor for what we value most. The metal is rare, precious. Its vibrant color does not tarnish or fade; its malleability permits melting and pounding into countless forms. This brilliance and seeming immortality account for gold's prominence in religious traditions. The ancient Egyptians used gold to signal connections to the sun god Ra. The Hindu god Shiva is described as fluid gold. Jewish texts claim the Ark of the Covenant was covered in gold inside and out. The Buddha is said to have gold-colored skin. The Inka built temples of gold. Across countless other spiritual practices, gold is a symbol for the divine, the wise, and the everlasting spiritual plane.

In the secular realm, gold stands in for goodness, excellence, brilliance, and wealth: *a heart of gold, going for gold, a golden era, striking gold*. In accoutrements and regalia of power, rings that signal love, and coins of trade, the metal has profound social significance. As much as we recognize these positive associations, folklore and history also warn of the dangers of desiring too much gold—from King Midas's ultimately murderous golden touch, to the violent decimation of one culture by another in pursuit of gold, to the human and ecological disasters that can result from gold mining.

As Rebecca Zorach describes in her essay, gold "seems to oscillate between positions," shifting from positive to negative connotations depending on context. The exhibition

documented in this catalogue presents works of art that feature gold within the chronological and geographic context of the United States today. To best understand this moment, it is worth recalling some of the roles that gold has played in the country's national narrative.

Along with other commodities, it was the search for gold that drove European exploration and conquest in the Americas. Throughout the Constitutional Convention, George Washington sat in a chair bearing on its headrest a carved and gilded sun—an emblem that Benjamin Franklin famously mused could be rising or setting on the infant country. Less than a decade later, in 1793, the first federal building constructed under the Constitution was the US Mint in Philadelphia, which coined copper, silver, and—in the highest denominations—the gold quarter eagle (\$2.50), half eagle (\$50), and eagle (\$10). Gold rushes in North Carolina, Georgia, California, and Alaska during the nineteenth century fueled westward expansion and with it the seizure of Native lands. In the midst of those races for gold, the completion of the nation's first transcontinental railroad was ceremoniously marked with a golden spike.

As industry boomed at the end of that century, the gulf widened between those with extreme wealth and those in dire poverty. The decades from 1870 to 1900 have become known as the "Gilded Age." Taken from the title of satirist Mark Twain's 1873 novel, the term has come to connote the era's glittering veneer of opulent architecture, extravagant fashion, and lavish luxuries—in contrast to the gritty reality of

the exploited workers and corrupt politics that facilitated such conspicuous consumption. By definition, a gilded item is one that has been made to appear as though it were constructed of solid gold. Historically, that illusion was achieved by applying incredibly thin sheets of gold leaf to an object's surface. It is that covering that Twain referred to derisively. Revising the expression of praise "Golden Age," he characterized his own times as "gilded" to metaphorically underscore how the glamor of a few covered up the painful hardships of many.

In the twentieth century, the United States wrestled both economically and politically with very literal questions of whether to sustain a gold standard for currency, and over the access of private citizens to buy and sell gold—debates shaped by the economic turmoil of the World Wars and Great Depression, among other moments of social upheaval. The century also witnessed the emergence of novel uses for gold in transistors, lasers, medical treatments, microchips, and aerospace technology. With advances in media technologies—from radio, film, and television to the internet—the glittering lives of celebrities became a mainstay of popular culture, with regular events to honor their fame: Gold medals were awarded to Olympic athletes starting with the 1904 games in St. Louis. Gold-plated Oscars were first presented to Academy Award winners in 1929. Terrazzo stars with gilded names were unveiled for the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1958. And the first gold-plated Grammys were presented in 1959.



TOP John Folwell, *Rising Sun Armchair* (detail), 1779. Mahogany and gold leaf, 60⁷/₁₆ × 30¹/₂ × 22¹⁵/₁₆ in.



ABOVE Robert Scot, *5 Dollar Coin*, 1795. Gold, ³/₃₂ in. diameter × ¹/₃₂ in. Division of Work and Industry, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC. Estate of Josiah K. Lilly



TOP Andy Warhol, *Gold Marilyn Monroe*, 1962. Silkscreen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 6 ft. 11¼ in. × 57 in. Museum of Modern Art, New York. Gift of Philip Johnson

ABOVE Lorraine O'Grady, *Art Is . . . (Girl Pointing)*, 1983/2009. Chromogenic photograph in 40 parts, 20 × 16 in. Edition of 8 plus 1 artist's proof

As commodity and symbol, gold remains culturally significant today. From the popular fascination with “bling” to the persistence of gold as the material of choice for wedding rings, the yellow metal still signals power, prestige, and permanence. Simultaneously, however, we are more aware of the toxic waste and hazardous conditions that are part of its mining process, and environmental and social justice campaigns urge us to avoid “dirty gold.” And yet, in still other realms, gold is aligned not against health but with it, in gold-based medications to treat rheumatoid arthritis and in developing methods to target cancerous tumors with gold nanoparticles.

Within so many of these contexts—across time and geography, in spiritual and secular realms—our understanding of gold has been inextricable from the arts. Gold jewelry, gilded architecture, and embossed coins are the work of artisans whose techniques and traditions have been passed down and cultivated over centuries. Throughout modern and contemporary artistic practice, we see artists recall and turn to these precedents in a breadth of work that draws on gold’s symbolic content. Andy Warhol’s iconic 1962 gold painting of film star Marilyn Monroe and Jeff Koons’s famed 1988 gold-glazed ceramic sculpture of singer Michael Jackson are examples of how pop artists used the color to underscore the value we place on fame. Conversely, conceptual artists Yves Klein and James Lee Byars used gold to suggest the transient and ephemeral. In the late 1950s, Klein sold immaterial artworks for a kilogram of gold, giving the buyer a handwritten receipt

in return; a stipulation of the sale, however, was that the buyer burn the receipt and let the ashes fall into a river, while Klein likewise tossed the gold into the water. Both parties retained only the experience of the exchange. In 1994, Byars donned a gold lamé suit and lounged in a gilded room as part of *The Death of James Lee Byars*, an enigmatic performance that has been variously interpreted as a meditation on the functions of memorials and on the possibility of an afterlife. More recently, in 2016 Maurizio Cattelan installed a functioning solid gold toilet in the bathroom of the Guggenheim Museum for all visitors to use. Titled *America*, the extravagant luxury item was intended, in the artist’s words, to be “one percent art for the ninety-nine percent.”

That notion of inclusion, albeit via a dramatically different aesthetic, was also part of artist Lorraine O’Grady’s 1983 participatory performance *Art Is . . .*, a project designed in response to an acquaintance’s comment that “avant-garde art doesn’t have anything to do with Black people.” As a joyful rebuttal, O’Grady created a giant painted gold frame on a float for Harlem’s African-American Day Parade. Below the frame, instead of a title plaque, was the text “ART IS . . .”. With that empty gilded frame and that deliberately inconclusive ellipsis, O’Grady opened up the definition of art. As the float traveled along the parade route, homes and businesses took their turn in the frame, as did the people who lived and shopped in the neighborhoods. Dancers alongside the float held out gold picture frames to the onlookers, who shouted: “Frame me, make me art!” and “That’s

right, that's what art is, WE're the art!" O'Grady thus simultaneously included those generally overlooked by the artworld and called them out as subjects worthy of artistic attention.

O'Grady's example resonates in the art featured in this exhibition. The artists represented here have turned to gold as a means to reconsider our value systems, to question who and what we deem worthy. From marginalized communities to unacknowledged labor to fragile ecosystems, they honor that which we often choose not to see. Though their styles and content are diverse, they are unified in their material use of gold: each of the artists uses the historic technique of applying gold leaf. Working with small sheets of metal pounded as thin as or thinner than a sheet of paper, they painstakingly apply it by hand to the surfaces of their paintings, drawings, and sculptures. These leaves of gold are at once fragile and enduring. Though easily torn in the process of application, once adhered to a prepared surface, they can last indefinitely. The artists have used various purities of gold, from 24k to the imitation "composition leaf" made from combinations of other metals. In some instances, they have covered the entirety of their work with the precious material, while in other instances they have reserved its use for carefully selected details. Although many of them would surely affirm Twain's assessment of cultural ills in *The Gilded Age* and note contemporary parallels, they do not turn to the technique of gilding cynically. In works critical of a range of social problems—from colonialism to racism to sexism—the artists' deliberate

use of gold leaf largely harnesses its positive metaphorical associations and deploys them to highlight topics of concern.

In turning to this time-honored technique, many of the artists likewise look to its use in historic examples such as Byzantine icon paintings and decorative Japanese screens. In addition to these direct links, however, they also cull from a broader study of artistic traditions—from Italian Renaissance furniture to seventeenth-century French painting to twentieth-century American fashion. In this regard, they are less concerned with material ties to gold and more focused on finding through-lines from past to present, far to near. Collectively the works offer up a range of fluid connections across time and space that acknowledge a shared human experience in which many of the problems we face today are longstanding, with identifiable roots in the past.

That said, these artworks are also specific to their moment. All were made during the past decade, and the economic and social contexts of this period have directly and indirectly informed their making. Reverberations of the Great Recession and the housing crash as marked by the Occupy Wall Street protests against income inequality bookend the first half of this period, while the COVID-19 pandemic and its disproportionate impact on low-income households brackets the second. Alongside, and often entwined with, these economic concerns, have been organized efforts to affirm the value of human dignity: the Black Lives Matter movement's calls to address racial discrimination,

the Standing Rock encampment's stance to protect Indigenous peoples' land and life against the incursions of oil pipelines, and the Women's March's mission to position women's rights as human rights.

At the core of each artwork lie questions of value and worth. Often interchangeable in common vernacular, these heavy terms take on meaningful nuances in the context of their use. An economist might describe value as utility and worth as price, noting that economic value is never the same as market price. A moral philosopher might distinguish between intrinsic value and instrumental value—general goodness

versus goodness for some purpose. The word *worth* appears frequently in our questioning, "Is it worth the cost?;" while *worthy* signals merit, "We gave to a worthy cause." The artists in *Gilded* turn our attention to these different meanings. Working with sheets of gold—a material long associated with moral, aesthetic, and economic values—they consider notions of worth today by holding up the people, stories, and places we so often treat as invisible. If "all that glitters is not gold," the artists represented here offer an inverse proposition: perhaps that which does not always shine is most worthy of our attention and care.





THE ARTWORKS

EMILY STAMEY



Radcliffe Bailey

UNITED STATES, BORN 1968

Third Ward

2013

Wood door with gold leaf, carved wood lock, two iron pins, nail, bottle caps, and wood base
89 × 33 × 10 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

Themes of journey, memory, and music propel Radcliffe Bailey's poetic installations and sculptures. Working frequently with layers of found elements, here he brings together a gilded door, a lock, and chains of bottlecaps in an enigmatic meditation on the value of recalling and connecting seemingly disparate histories.

A narrow, five-panel door serves as the sculpture's primary form. Resonant with notions of coming and going, the door was reclaimed from a neighborhood of compact homes in Houston, Texas. Specifically, it came from one of the homes that has been transformed into the arts and community platform Project Row Houses, which is located in the city's Third Ward. A predominantly African American community, Third Ward is anchored by Emancipation Park, a

plot of land purchased by former slaves in 1872. From that time through the mid-1950s, the district was economically vibrant; music lovers from across the region flocked to its blues-filled nightclubs and dance halls. However, following World War II, freeway development and suburban flight left the neighborhood a shell of its former self. Though it became what some have called the “cradle” of the city’s civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s, its financial challenges are ongoing. Today, in the face of gentrification, its community members continue to advocate for affordable housing.

Bailey has covered the front of his reclaimed door in sheaves of gold leaf whose warm glow evokes the richness of the Third Ward’s cultural history. Scratches and dirt on the wood surface show through the gilding and are clearly visible on the ungilded back side of the door, where looped strands of bottlecaps hang from a nail. Found in an antique shop, the handmade chain represents for Bailey a “make-do” attitude: both the willingness and the creativity to work with what one has at hand. Alongside the bottlecaps are the stacked remains of hardware from locks that have been part of the door’s lived history. A padlock’s loop, the notched opening for a chain lock, the circular casing of a deadbolt, and the narrow opening of a keyhole collectively suggest

an earnest commitment to protecting one’s home and all that it holds.

Dwarfing these small, machine-made metal locks, the artist has installed an oversized, hand-carved wooden bolt lock from Mali, which links this remnant of an African American row house directly to Africa. The connection is apt, as scholars have traced the architectural origins of the row house to West Africa and noted its diasporic migration from there to Haiti to the Southern United States via the slave trade. This history is akin to that of American blues music, which traces its roots through slavery back to Africa as well. Bailey notes that as he made this piece, he thought about both the blues musicians who are such a vital part of Third Ward’s history, and the contemporary Malian guitarist Ali Farka Touré, famed for his blending of traditional Malian music with American blues.

Returning to the sculpture’s front with these references in mind, one might also read the luminous gilded surface as honorific, transforming the assemblage into a sort of monument to a particular African American community and to the larger history of the African diaspora. Instead of layering the gold leaf densely to obliterate the marks and scratches on the door, Bailey invites the viewer to enjoy the gleam but not forget the scars that are part of its history.





Larissa Bates

UNITED STATES, BORN 1981

Grooming after Mexican Biombo 17th Century 2019

Gouache, ink, mother of pearl, and 22k gold leaf on panel

Two parts, 24 × 36 in. each

Courtesy of the artist and Monya Rowe Gallery, New York

Larissa Bates was born in Vermont to an American father and Costa Rican mother. Following her mother's early death from cancer, the artist spent her childhood moving back and forth with her father and siblings between their extended families in both countries. In her work, she mines both that personal narrative and larger histories of cross-cultural encounters.

Bates's White, US-born maternal grandfather moved to Costa Rica in the early twentieth century to work as a manager for the United Fruit Company. This multinational corporation took control of significant geographic regions throughout Central America and the Caribbean, leaving indelible marks on their politics and economies. Bates has long wrestled with the abusive and exploitative modern colonialism

that is part of that history, and thus her family's. Another, positive, part of her family history, however, is the work her native Costa Rican grandmother did to establish schools and advocate for women's rights, as well as the nurture that generations of women in her Costa Rican family have consistently offered.

In *Grooming after Mexican Biombo 17th Century*, Bates sets these female family members aloft in a complex scene of interior and exterior spaces. The elder women's dark tresses cascade in various directions as they tend to brushing the hair of younger women, among them the artist's mother and daughter with their distinct blond curls. Around them float expanses of water, passing rain clouds, and clusters of tropical flora. Recurrent among those flowers is a smiling

daffodil with two of its petals upstretched like arms, and sprays of tiny droplets arcing from its corona. The daffodil recalls Caribbean author Jamaica Kincaid's writing about her disdain for the colonial school curriculum that required her to memorize a British poem celebrating this European plant.¹ In addition, Bates describes the daffodil's droplets as a reference to pesticides—the possible cause of her mother's illness. Bound up in both the flower and the droplets are questions of value, the answers to which vary according to one's perspective: is a daffodil a symbol of spring and beauty or a signifier of cultural displacement? Are pesticides an agricultural aid or inimical to life?

Bates's deliberate selection of format and material also emphasizes the complexity of cultural encounters. A *biombo* is the transliterated term for a *byōbu*, a Japanese folding screen, which was first introduced to Latin America in the seventeenth century by European traders and then reimagined by craftspeople there. These prized luxury domestic goods—in both their original and inspired forms—were often lavishly covered in gold leaf. Across



her two panels, Bates includes emphatically flat, stylized gold clouds that echo those from the Mexican screens made in the Japanese style. She also gilds the outlining edges of the picture's architectural spaces and encircles variously colored mother-of-pearl fragments that shimmer across the surface like so many jewels. Rather than signaling personal wealth as did the gilding on the historic screens, Bates's glittering details serve to draw viewers into her dense imagery and ask us to look carefully at the intersections of cultures across history as we assess and reassess our values today.

Unidentified artist, *Biombo*, Mexico, last quarter of the 17th century. Oil on canvas, 6 ft. 6 in. × 20 ft. 4 in. Museo de América, Madrid

NOTES

1. Jamaica Kincaid, "Dances with Daffodils," *Architectural Digest*, March 31, 2007, accessed online.



*WhatsApp after Altar with
Images of Virgin*

2019

Gouache, ink, mother of pearl, and 22k gold
leaf on panel

Two parts, 36 × 18 in. each

Courtesy of the artist and Monya Rowe Gallery, New York



william cordova

UNITED STATES, BORN PERU, 1969

untitled (but some of us are brave)

2020

Gold leaf, graphite, acrylic, oil, and collage on paper
48 × 96 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

A native of Peru who spent his childhood in Miami and now also works in New York, william cordova regularly explores ideas of transmission, displacement, and what he calls “constellations of cultural value.” In his collaged drawings, ordinary objects—fragments of brick walls and windows, stereos and vinyl records, furniture dollies and cardboard boxes—come together in minimal, yet evocative, scenes suggesting urban spaces, communication, and

motion. Extracted from their original contexts and reassembled on vast, patchy fields of gold leaf, these often-overlooked items take on a new visibility and an elevated, almost spiritual, quality.

In this seemingly haphazard, but in fact carefully constructed scene, a highway overpass frames a makeshift performance space below. Two gooseneck desk lamps sit on the ground, their lights angled to illuminate a stereo speaker resting on a folding table. Vinyl albums, a record

player, and a megaphone are close at hand. To the left of the structure, a tower of albums supports a pole and flag, apparently marking the spot. Will this be the site of a musical performance, a protest, or some other kind of gathering? The inclusion of a broom and a bucket of water suggests the space has been cleaned and prepared, but also that whatever occurs might leave a mess—something is going to happen.

That notion of action is amplified in the graffiti covering the concrete wing walls. Densely layered with different colored signature tags, these surfaces offer a riotous record of individual mark-making. All of the names included are those of individuals who dedicated their lives to social change by resisting oppression, among them Lapu-Lapu, who defended the Philippines against Spanish colonization; [Antonio] Maceo, a key leader of the Cuban army of independence; and Geronimo, both the famed Apache medicine man who fought against the US military invasion of tribal land, as well as Geronimo Ji-Jaga Pratt, the activist Black Panther leader.

Will the anticipated gathering serve as a tribute to these individuals, and if so, who will attend? The artist's parenthetical title for the piece, "but some of us are brave," is intentionally open-ended: are the brave ones those whose names are emblazoned on the walls, or perhaps those who will gather to celebrate them and potentially carry on their legacies?

The scene takes place against a seemingly empty expanse of gold, a vast backdrop suggestive of some other realm, an existence



outside of time and space. One might connect the gilded expanse to any number of religious precedents in which gold is used to mark planes of the spiritual and sublime. However, cordova's golden span is marked by drips and smudges of paint, greasy stains, and footprints—both across the gold's surface and showing through from beneath. The artist has frequently noted his interest in alchemy and transformation. Each mark here reveals his presence and, importantly, his process. Refusing to be precious with the gold's glimmering surface, he instead allows both gleam and grit to coexist and become something new. Infused with the marks of work, the gold expanse becomes not a realm beyond conflict, but a reminder of the ongoing effort undertaken to get there.



Angela Fraleigh

UNITED STATES, BORN 1976

These things are your becoming

2014

Oil, 23k gold leaf, metal leaf, and galkyd on canvas
67 × 90 in.

Courtesy of the artist

In Angela Fraleigh's dynamic, large-scale paintings, female subjects culled from earlier images take on new lives in dreamlike scenes. Throughout history, women have often been painted as objects for the male gaze. In Fraleigh's work, they converse, engage, and share—existing for themselves and each other rather than for any viewer.

Here, Fraleigh reimagines French artist Simon Vouet's 1633 painting *Lot and His Daughters*. The biblical story recounts that when two angels came to visit Lot, the townsmen demanded he turn them over for their sexual pleasure. Instead, Lot offered up his daughters. The citizens refused the substitution, after which the angels destroyed the town. Believing no one else survived and determined to preserve humanity, the daughters

intoxicated their father and slept with him to conceive children. Making him the unwitting subject of their sexual demands, their violation returned the fate he would have had for them.

Although interpreted by some scholars as a tale of both sacrifice and justice on the part of the daughters, painters historically exploited its erotic potential. Vouet represented Lot not as a passive victim, but an active seducer. Fraleigh has thought about how the story and its visual celebrations might also be perceived as a sort of “apologist tale for incest . . . a centuries-old way of normalizing something abhorrent.”¹ In her interpretation, Lot is largely deleted, leaving the female figures to look not at him, but at each other. What little remains of the father—his hand cupping a daughter’s breast—now becomes ambiguous. The disembodied hand could belong to the woman herself or to some unknown character. Instead of directing her gaze toward her breast, the woman looks at her sister cradling the jug of wine. The two float in an idyllic world of their own, freed from their horrific narrative, and instead framed and supported by a tangle of gilded flowers and leaves.

Fraleigh took the floral design from the textile work of pioneering American artist Candace Wheeler, an advocate for women’s professional careers in the late nineteenth century and the founder of the all-female design firm Associated Artists. Fraleigh has re-created the thistle-pattern from a silk and metallic thread damask fabric that Wheeler produced with the Tiffany Company in about 1881,² executing the pattern with gold leaf applied to appear tattered and worn, broken but



Simon Vouet, *Lot and His Daughters*, 1633. Oil on canvas, 63 × 51 in. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Strasbourg

still splendid. Underscored by the title *These things are your becoming*, this gilded element honors both Wheeler and Lot’s daughters—and by extension the countless women who have taken control of their own fate—whether to excel or simply survive.

NOTES

1. Angela Fraleigh, email correspondence with the author, January 21, 2022.
2. The Metropolitan Museum of Art online collection catalogue, accession number 28.70.3.



Candace Wheeler, *Untitled* (sample), about 1881. Designed for Tiffany & Co., likely manufactured by Cheney Brothers. Silk and

metal threads, damask, woven; 26¼ × 24½ in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Mrs. Boudinot Keith



Gajin Fujita

UNITED STATES, BORN 1972

Invincible Kings of This Mad Mad World

2017

Spray paint, paint markers, Mean Streak, 24k gold leaf, 12k white gold leaf, platinum leaf, and gloss finish on panel

Four parts, 96 × 48 in. each

Courtesy of the artist and L.A. Louver, Venice, California

So-called high and low art deliberately collide in the work of Gajin Fujita. As the child of a Japanese father who was an abstract landscape painter and a Japanese mother who worked as a conservator, Fujita frequently turns to iconic Japanese artworks as one source of imagery. However, as a native of Los Angeles and a former graffiti artist, he is also just as likely to lift images from American street culture, and regularly incorporates the signature tags of

other such artists along with layers of popular commercial symbols.

Here, he invited eleven friends to add their tags across a four-paneled painting so large that it feels like the side of a building. The beginning of its title, “Invincible Kings,” is a nod to Fujita’s early days of art-making with those friends, who called themselves the KGB, Kings of Graffiti Bombing. Often, he recalls, they would refer to themselves with words such as *invincible* in

order to “sound bigger” than other crews. One night, they even painted the word on a wall near a local farmer’s market, though it proved all too mortal when whitewashed by authorities within a day. Recalling those youthful claims to might and grandeur, in this painting from 2017, Fujita includes the image of a lion—king of the jungle—plus two ornate crowns and the word *KINGS* lifted from the logo of the city’s professional hockey team.

The painting’s opulent gold-leafed surface underscores these notions of personal grandeur. Fujita has shared that he was thinking about the gilded walls of a receiving room at Nijo Castle in Kyoto, the seventeenth-century home of the Japanese emperor’s military leader, and a space designed to demonstrate power. Also informing Fujita’s use of gold leaf was the iconic gilded screen *Wind God and Thunder God*. Fujita has re-created Fujin, the revered god of wind, with his vibrantly hued skin, wild hair, and billowing sash, but instead of depicting him in the sky, he has brought him to earth and surrounded him with oversized peonies and a lion on a chain. This abundance of natural elements—wind, flora, and fauna—speaks to the artist’s concern for the environment, and his frustration with the human hubris that disregards it: “I painted this work in hopes that it would send a clear message that nature rules over all of us on this planet.”¹ That we so often fail to honor it makes our current culture, as the artist notes in the second half of his title, a “mad, mad world.”



Ogata Korin, *Wind God and Thunder God*, early 18th century. Ink and color on gold-foiled paper, two parts, 5 ft. 5³/₈ in. × 6 ft. 1¹/₁₆ in. each. Tokyo National Museum

NOTES

1. Gajin Fujita, in conversation with the author, January 27, 2022.



Nicholas Galanin (Yéil Ya-Tseen)

UNITED STATES (TLINGIT/UNANGAꜜ), BORN 1979

What Have We Become? Gold

2017

Carved book with gold leaf

8½ × 5 × 4½ in.

Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina,
Greensboro

Nicholas Galanin is an artist of Tlingit and Unangaꜜ ancestry. Working across numerous practices—including wood carving, jewelry-making, photography, and performance—he is a maker of diverse artworks intended for a range of purposes: functional and spiritual, aesthetic and educational. These uses and practices are intertwined. As the artist explains, “Everything I create is a synthesis of my responsibility to my Indigenous and artistic

communities and the responsibilities we all share to build regenerative and sustainable futures.”¹

In *What Have We Become? Gold*, Galanin reflects on the legacy of non-Native anthropological access to, research on, and documentation of his culture. While he does not see anthropology in and of itself as negative, he critiques the limited capacity for outside scholars to fully understand and transmit Indigenous cultural knowledge, particularly

Let Them Enter Dancing and Showing Their Faces: Knowledge

2018

Monotype and gold leaf on paper
21 × 30 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Peter Blum Gallery, New York

during periods of forced cultural assimilation. The sculpture is part of a series in which Galanin uses copies of the Smithsonian's three-part publication *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*, published in 1972, which presents the 1940s and 1950s field work of non-Native anthropologist Frederica de Laguna. Galanin hand cut the pages of the book to produce three-dimensional models and reliefs of his face and Tlingit mask forms, thus transforming the anthropological texts into physical manifestations of himself and his culture. To this sculptural presence, he then applied gold leaf. Emphasizing the shaped pages, the metallic surface amplifies the artist's presence by adding literal weight to the contours of the sculpted version of his face. That emphasis is poignantly made with a material of great worth to so many White cultures, but of relatively little importance in Tlingit communities. Thus the artist speaks, as it were, with the non-Native language of gold in order to make known the value of his community understanding.

Gilding appears again in the artist's series of monoprints, which likewise depict faces and figures rooted in Tlingit culture, ceremony,



and storytelling. His title for the series, *Let Them Enter Dancing and Showing Their Faces*, references a way in which ceremonial dancers lower an arm to reveal their face from behind their button robes. In focusing on that gesture, Galanin underscores the notion of intentional presence, of choosing what is shown and what is not, and the power of self-determination. In this image, a female shaman's torso is marked by heavy curved bands of gold, while smaller gold marks appear to leap from her face in a spray of energy. Here the gilding is deployed less

for its capacity to speak to notions of value as understood in White culture and more for the ways in which its reflective surface creates a sense of motion, a visual pulse that represents Native culture as vibrant, rather than a frozen or fetishized idea or moment.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Galanin, email correspondence with the author, January 18, 2022.



Liz Glynn

UNITED STATES, BORN 1981

Untitled Chest (After the Medici Grand Ducal Furniture Workshop)

2014

Wood with casein paint, dye stain, and 23k gold leaf
24 × 59½ × 21½ in.

Courtesy of the artist, Vielmetter Los Angeles, and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

In her dynamic installations, Liz Glynn explores historic systems of valuation. The artist completed her MFA in 2008, just as the US housing bubble burst and the Great Recession began. The moment fueled her interest in notions of utility and worth and in broader questions about labor and the structure of economies. In addition to addressing concepts of labor as subject, Glynn engages in a labor-intensive process. She spends months reading about a

topic prior to spending equal time in the studio working to figure out how to make a physical object that will manifest that study.

For her project *Hold Nothing*, of which this chest is a part, Glynn re-created furniture once owned by Italy's historic Medici family during the height of its power and influence in fifteenth-century Florence. She focused specifically on cabinets and chests that had been crafted at scales intended to demonstrate prestige rather

than best serve a physical function. These grand containers, made from expensive woods such as ebony and inlaid with precious stones, signaled wealth and power irrespective of their contents.

Glynn's versions are dark and minimal, emphasizing mass rather than decorative details. This gilded chest is the sole exception: covered entirely in gold leaf, it resembles a giant gold bar—a form that harkens back to the first Egyptian ingots. The original chest was a *cassone*, a container used to carry a woman's dowry in a marriage ritual. That dowry would have been a negotiated transaction between the bride's father and the groom; it could have included jewelry, clothing, sums of money, or even promises of estates and other property. Glynn explains that she gilded her chest to make it literally appear "as currency," and to underscore the "performative aspect of the exchange."¹

In her exhibition of the works at Artpace in San Antonio, Glynn activated this chest and her other Medici furniture re-creations by having furniture movers carry and arrange them in the gallery space. The movers also opened their lids and doors to reveal their emptiness. During that activity, the artist herself read a text about the history of financial abstraction:

Before the era of abstract exchange, we moved stuff. Cargo moved on ships, ships came to port, and merchants purchased goods with money. Money was a thing, first



a coin, a standardized volume of metal with an intrinsic value. Coins were invented by the Lydians. Coins were heavy, coins took up too much space, but coins were real and had intrinsic value.²

The text goes on to describe the evolution from physical exchange of gold and other coins to record-keeping on paper. The Medici were bankers and the first to use double-entry bookkeeping, and Glynn's attention to this history is particularly poignant in a decade that has seen the birth and rise of cryptocurrency—the most extreme abstraction of finances to date.

Hold Nothing, 2014 (still).
Single-channel HD video with sound, 11 min., 10 sec. Edition of 3 + 1 AP. Courtesy of the artist, Vielmetter Los Angeles, and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

NOTES

1. Liz Glynn, email conversation with the author, April 6, 2022.

2. Liz Glynn, "Notes followed loosely by Liz Glynn in the performance of *Hold Nothing*," in *Liz Glynn: Objects and Actions*, ed. Susan Cross (North Adams, MA: MASS MoCA, 2019), 101.



Shan Goshorn

UNITED STATES (EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE INDIANS),
1957–2018

Color of Conflicting Values

2013

Arches watercolor paper printed with archival inks,
acrylic paint, and gold foil

14 × 14 × 13 in.

Collection of Edward J. Guarino, New York

As a member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and a multimedia artist, Shan Goshorn dedicated her career to “educating and inspiring honest dialogue between races.”¹ Among her broad range of artworks, she is best known for the double-weave baskets she made using ancient techniques and contemporary materials. Traditionally, Cherokee baskets are crafted from river cane or other locally sourced natural materials. Goshorn, however, used strips cut from digitally printed sheets of paper in order to embed historic photographs, maps, and documents into the baskets’ surfaces. Each vessel addresses an aspect of Native culture or history that is too often left out of mainstream historical teaching.

Color of Conflicting Values includes images of forest vegetation in the Great Smoky Mountains, the Cherokee ancestral homeland, and reproductions of the historic Indian Removal Act that tore them from it. Woven in among these images are strips of gold foil and a reproduction of Goshorn's own painting of a twenty-dollar bill featuring President Andrew Jackson. In 1830, it was Jackson who persuaded Congress to adopt the Indian Removal Act, which established a process for relocating southeastern tribes to so-called Indian Territory west of the Mississippi in order to make their homelands available for White settlers. Despite the Cherokee petitioning for their land rights and even securing a Supreme Court ruling in their favor, Jackson ultimately used executive power to have them forcibly removed. This "Trail of Tears" figures in Goshorn's own family history: the Cherokee were forced to abandon their mountain forests and walk more than four thousand miles to live in the arid grasslands of what is now Oklahoma.

In her basket, green becomes the primary color "of conflicting values," as it appears in

both the twenty-dollar bill and the foliage. In the artist's words, "It seems a bitter irony that US currency is the same color of the beautiful, lush mountain forests of my people's rightful homeland."² Secondary to this green is gold, which Goshorn adds in the form of actual gold foil. The precious metal is intricately tied to the fates of southeastern Native tribes. In 1828, the year Jackson was elected president, gold was discovered on Cherokee land in what is now Georgia. That discovery triggered a rush of White settlers eager to claim the land and mine the gold—a greed that fueled dubious treaties and outright militias that ousted Indians from their homes even before the Removal Act was passed.

The gold foil is not immediately obvious, appearing on the exterior in small bits—like the flecks spotted by a prospector—that emerge here and there among the images of the forest and the twenty-dollar bill. On the interior of the basket, however, a regular, dynamic, gold zigzag patterning gives off a distinct glow. That seductive lure draws viewers in, leading them to the decidedly darker element of the Removal Act text, woven in among the sparkle.

NOTES

1. Shan Goshorn, Artist Statement in *Intertwined: Stories of Splintered Pasts: Shan Goshorn & Sarah Sense*, ed. Heather Ahtone (Tulsa, OK: AHHA Tulsa, 2015).

2. Shan Goshorn, quoted by E.J. Guarino in "Woven Wonder: Shan Goshorn's Color of Conflicting Values," website post (Scottsdale, AZ: King Galleries, 2016), accessed online.



Sherin Guirguis

UNITED STATES, BORN EGYPT, 1974

Azbakeya (sun disk)

2018

Acrylic paint and gold leaf on hand-cut paper
28 × 74 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Artist Sherin Guirguis's work in sculpture, painting, and installations is fueled by historical research and a commitment to linking past and present, there and here. Of particular interest are the stories we seldom tell. Guirguis aims "to make the often-invisible work of historically underrecognized women visible once more through the visual language of craft and ornament, fields that themselves are dismissed by the contemporary art world."¹ In *Azbakeya (sun disk)* and *Larmes d'Isis II*, Guirguis focuses on the life of poet and activist Doria Shafik (1908–1975), who was a leader of Egypt's women's liberation movement in the 1940s and 1950s. Guirguis's research into Shafik's life has

been an ongoing project, involving sifting through archives and interviewing Shafik's daughters and members of the artist's own Egyptian family.

In *Azbakeya (sun disk)*, Guirguis made precise cuts in a sheet of paper to echo the ornate patterns of a fence outside Cairo's popular Azbakeya Gardens Theater. It was in front of these gates that a nineteen-year-old Shafik addressed the Egyptian Feminist Union, laying out a progressive philosophy that called for educating women and providing them the tools of self-reliance. Guirguis's re-creation not only recalls that pivotal moment and location, but also alludes to the symbolic potential of a gate as something that can keep people out or—as

Larmes d'Isis II

2019

Plywood, rope, acrylic paint, gold leaf, and adobe
Approximately 30 × 4 ft., installation dimensions
variable

Courtesy of the artist

Shafik advocated—swing wide to allow them in. Overlaying the pattern with a gilded orb, Guirguis honors Shafik's call for a new day for the country's women.

Larmes d'Isis II pays tribute to a poem Shafik wrote based on the Egyptian myth of Osiris, who was painstakingly reconstructed and revived by his wife, Isis, after his brother killed him and scattered his body along the Nile. Wooden teardrops (French *larmes*) descend along a nautical rope from ceiling to floor, suggesting both Isis's sorrow and the fragments of her husband's body. Each teardrop is partially covered in gold leaf, which reflects the surrounding light to create a gleam akin to light sparkling on water. In addition to creating this sense of motion, the gilding honors not only Shafik, but the larger notion of caring for and saving that which would otherwise be lost. The poet and activist called out Isis as an exemplar of love and its capacity to save and renew. That idea of revival as an underlying theme finds a parallel in Guirguis's artworks, which preserve and share the stories of women such as Shafik so that they might inform and inspire new leaders today.

NOTES

1. Shana Nys Dambrot, "Meet Storytelling Sculptor Sherin Guirguis," *LA Weekly*, November 15, 2021, accessed online.





Titus Kaphar

UNITED STATES, BORN 1976

(from left to right)

Jerome XLII

Jerome XLIII

Jerome XLVIII

Jerome XLIX

2015

Oil, gold leaf, and tar on wood panel
10 × 7¼ × 1⅞ in. each

Rennie Collection, Vancouver

Artist Titus Kaphar frequently mines art history as a means toward understanding and addressing racism and social injustice. His projects often involve appropriating historic paintings and manipulating the canvases to reveal those subjects they overlook—namely the Black men and women who labored for the White individuals who commissioned the artworks.

In 2011, the artist's research took a decidedly personal turn when he decided to look for the prison records of his father, from whom he had been estranged since high school. To his surprise, he found ninety-nine mugshots of different Black men with his father's name, Jerome, a name used frequently among African Americans.

That multiplicity of Jeromes fueled the artist's critical examination of the overrepresentation of Black men in the US prison system, who at that moment, were incarcerated at a rate roughly seven times that of White men.¹ This and other statistics spurred him to consider the impact of imprisonment on the lives of these individuals and their families and communities.

Taking cues from Byzantine icons, Kaphar created gilded portraits from the mugshots of the men who shared his father's name. After painting each face on a panel covered in gold leaf, he then dipped them to varying depths in a tank of tar. The contrast of the two materials is striking: the gold bears associations with value

and spiritual realms, while the tar is emphatically related to the ground and being trodden upon. In conjunction with the mugshots, the contrasting materials also foreground the notion of prominence and erasure. The gilding marks these men as subjects for our attention, the tar obscuring their faces alludes to the invisibility of lives spent within the prison system.

When Kaphar had the opportunity to ask his father why he had been called Jerome, his father explained that the name was given to him in honor of Saint Jerome, the theologian known for translating the bible into Latin. For Kaphar,

that backstory further underscored his notion of these gilded images as devotionals dedicated to the consideration of lives we might otherwise deem unworthy of attention. The artist does not dispute or negate the wrongs these men may have committed, but he questions whether the system deals with them “in a way that actually helps our society or in a way that actually causes more problems.” Nearly a decade after Kaphar began the Jerome project, the comparative rate of Black to White male imprisonment remains dramatically disproportionate, with Black men six times more likely to serve jail time.²

NOTES

1. E. Ann Carson and William J. Sobol, “Prisoners in 2011,” US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2012, NCJ 239808, accessed online.

2. E. Ann Carson, “Prisoners in 2020,” US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, December 2021, NCJ 302776, accessed online.



Hung Liu

UNITED STATES, BORN CHINA, 1948–2021

Olympia Triptych

2015

Composition gold leaf, digital transparencies, resin, and hand-painting with lithography ink on panel
Three parts, 41 × 15½, 41 × 60⅞, and 41 × 20 in.

Weatherspoon Art Museum, University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Born in China in 1948, Hung Liu's young adulthood was shaped by communist leader Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution—including four years of forced labor in a rice field and artistic training in the social realist style that fueled the movement's propaganda. After a series of denials from the Chinese government, in 1984 she was finally allowed a visa to travel to the United States to study in California, which became her new home. Throughout her career, Liu worked in modes that combined her realist training with expressive brushwork, incorporating images culled from archival photographs and motifs

gathered from traditional Chinese paintings. Through her combining of historical references and styles, Liu illuminated lives and stories that official histories often neglect.

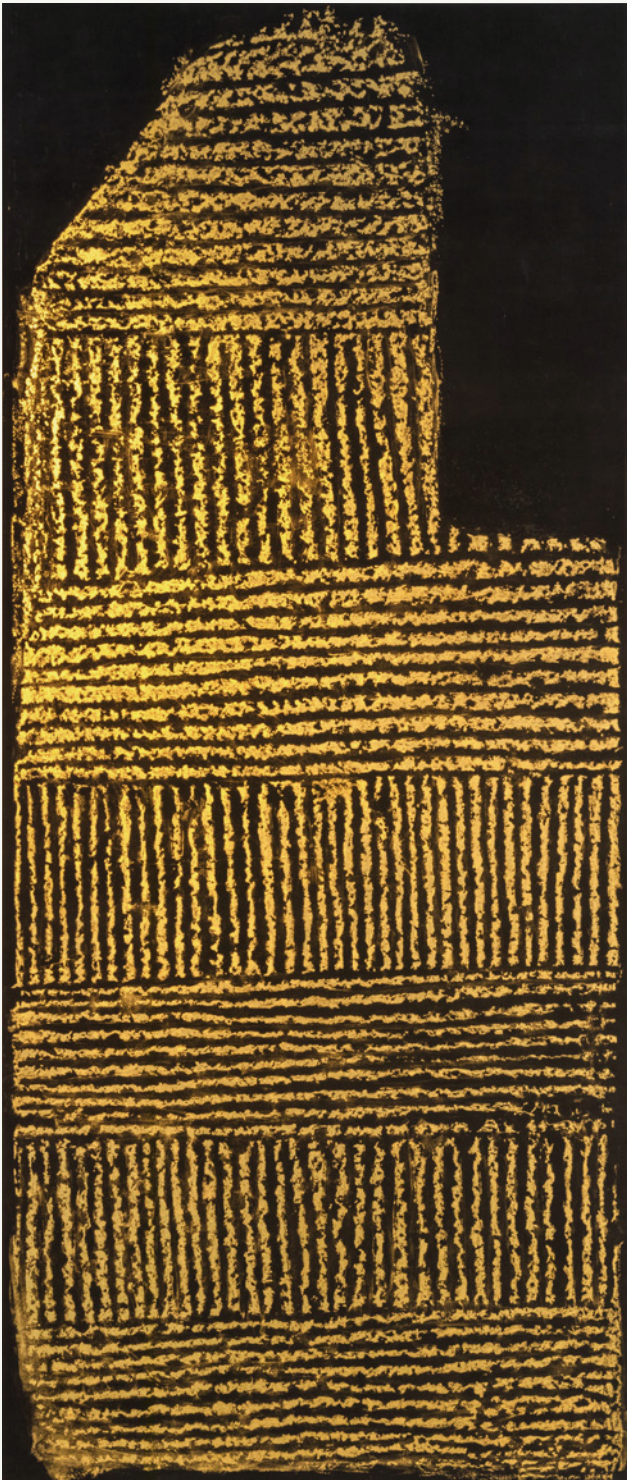
Including images of laborers and travelers, farmers, parents, revolutionaries, and immigrants, her work speaks to Chinese history specifically and humanitarian concerns broadly. Young Chinese prostitutes are a theme that Liu turned to after finding a collection of nineteenth-century vernacular photographs on one of her trips back to China. These historic pictures bear testimony to links between Asia

and Europe: photography was first disseminated in China by Western practitioners. Chinese photographers who took up the trade regularly blended Eastern and Western visual tropes. In this three-panel painting, the center section features a photograph of a prostitute posed according to the conventions of the odalisque, a Western painting theme based on imagined views of female slaves in Middle Eastern harems. The problematic subject raises questions about women's often disempowered social roles. Liu titled her painting for one of the most famous works in this tradition, French artist Edouard Manet's *Olympia*.

The pointed allusion to the canon of Western painting, however, is geographically balanced by the flanking panels, which feature chickens painted in an Eastern, distinctly Chinese, style. Around the world, chickens are ubiquitous symbols of both motherhood and prostitution. In the United States, we use the term "chicken" to refer to someone who is afraid, while in China, because the pronunciation of the word is the same as that for "luck," hens and roosters are considered auspicious. Added to this complex combination of references is one more

image—darker and fainter—embedded behind the reclining prostitute: eunuchs (castrated men employed to guard women's spaces at the royal palace) carry the Empress Dowager Cixi, once concubine to Emperor Xianfeng. After his death, Cixi went on to rule China for forty-seven years. In choosing these two images—girl and imperial procession—Liu notes that women can wield great control and men can be disempowered.

Liu's liberal use of gold leaf in the triptych invites multiple interpretations across a span of history. Filling the empty space behind the chickens with a warm glow, the gold is imbued with numerous references. The most direct are historic Japanese folding screens with their gilded backgrounds—iconic examples of Asian art first inspired by Chinese painting and then exerting their own influence on Western artists. In addition, gold as a symbol for wealth perhaps broadly underscores the chickens' association with good fortune. Thinking of gold as a form of currency prompts curiosity about the prices charged for the young prostitute. Finally, as a signifier of power, gold is the appropriate color to be deployed throughout the empress's royal palace.



James Nares

UNITED STATES, BORN UNITED KINGDOM, 1953

Greenwich I

2018

22k gold leaf on Evolon

132³/₄ × 55³/₄ in.

Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York

Since relocating to New York from London, James Nares has been a student of both the city's skylines and streets. The latter, the literal ground that millions of inhabitants and visitors walk daily, has particularly captured and sustained the artist's attention. "The surface of the city, it's just something that never goes away. It's a history of sorts. And it's less protected history, less cared for. . . . It's walked on. It's used. It wears its history on its face . . ."1

In her *Monuments* series, of which these two works are a part, Nares pays tribute to the artistry and craftsmanship of workers whose names have long been lost, or perhaps were never even known. The large-scale images were made from taking rubbings of New York's oldest surviving sidewalks, made more than a century

ago by immigrant masons. Giant slabs of granite were chiseled with improvisational marks to create an overall texture to keep pedestrians from slipping on the surfaces. Located in lower Manhattan where Nares first lived when she moved to the United States, these simultaneously artisanal and functional objects were part of her first impressions of her new home. Artistically returning to them nearly forty years later carries an element of reaching back into her own story, alongside a broader interest in the history of the city.

Like the original masons, the artist's process for making these works is emphatically physical. She and her assistants paint rolls of synthetic paper black, then take it down to the street and tape it over one of the sidewalk slabs. As Nares describes it, "we get down on our hands and knees and pay homage to our ancestors and rub it," with a transparent wax, in the same manner that one might make a brass rubbing or gravestone rubbing.² They roll up the paper and return to the studio, where they unroll it and gild the entire surface by hand. Once the gold leaf has been applied, the surface is brushed, and the gold breaks loose from the

Lafayette VII

2019

22k gold leaf on Evolon
149½ × 68½ in.

Courtesy of the artist and Kasmin Gallery, New York

unwaxed spaces to reveal the impression of the rubbed stone.

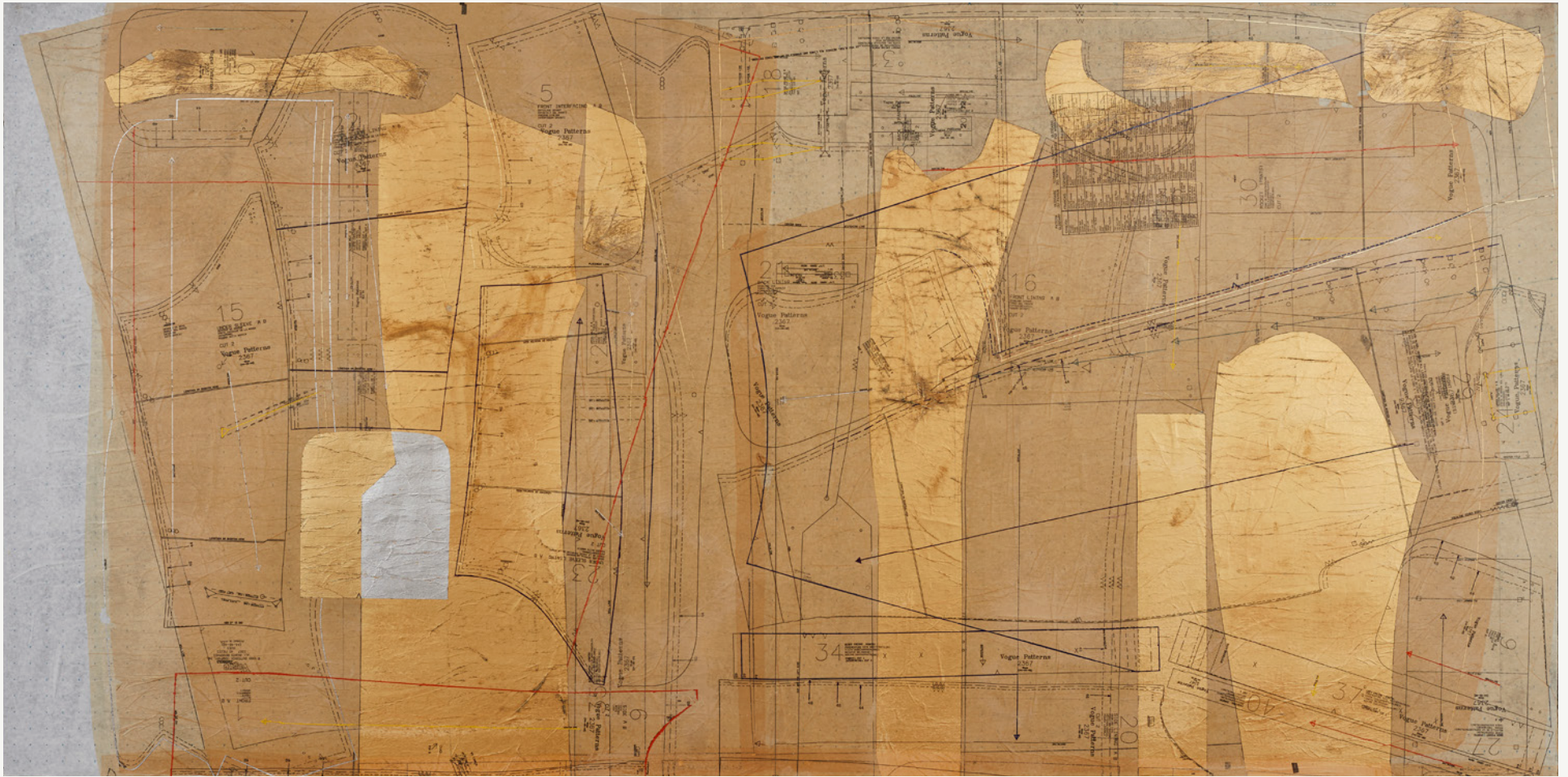
More than eleven feet high by five or more across, these gilded surfaces are—true to their collective title—monumental. Individually named for the streets on which the stones are found, they display the grandeur of a royal portrait or commemorative statue, albeit in minimal, abstract form. The metallic luster elevates these humble artworks and honors their anonymous makers. It also recalls that historic rumor of American streets "paved with gold," an allusion to the literal wealth that many immigrants thought to find here, and the value of the opportunities they hoped to secure.

NOTES

1. James Nares, quoted in Max Lakin, "James Nares, an Artist Known for Mapping New York's Changing Landscape, Is Now Navigating a Deeply Personal Transition of His Own," *Artnet News*, July 15, 2019., accessed online.

2. James Nares in video interview, "James Nares: Monuments," produced by Kasmin Gallery, October 1, 2021, accessed online via YouTube.





Ronny Quevedo

UNITED STATES, BORN ECUADOR, 1981

Zoot Suit Riot at Qoricancha

2017

Pattern paper, enamel, and gold and silver leaf on panel
48 × 96 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York

In his artwork, Ronny Quevedo draws on both his family's relocation to the United States and his thoughtful study of immigration and cultural encounters more broadly. As a child, Quevedo moved from Ecuador to New York. That experience of being displaced and then working to fit in resonates throughout his work. At first glance purely geometric, his abstract images reveal their origins in maps, blueprints,

diagrams, and other objects and systems that provide direction and demarcate space.

Here, he uses a dressmaker's pattern for a zoot suit, with its high-waisted, wide-legged, and tight-cuffed pants that were well adapted to dancing. Originating in urban African American communities in the 1930s, the suit became popular with Mexican Americans, Italian Americans, and Filipino Americans in the 1940s.

As the trend spread, it became a flashpoint for racism—called out against these minority groups by affluent Whites as a marker of delinquency. During World War II, that animosity escalated: some deemed the suit unpatriotic because it required large amounts of fabric during a time of rationing. In 1943, outbreaks of violence by White servicemen against Mexican American youth in Los Angeles became known as the Zoot Suit Riots.

This conflict between the suit as positive dancehall attire and subject of racist attack is the sort of tension that Quevedo consistently turns to in his work. He notes that, “Identity categories can provide recognition and a sense of belonging; however, they can also limit how others perceive you. My work visually explores this bind.”¹ Here, he spreads parts of a zoot suit sewing pattern across a broad panel, allowing the directional lines for seams and cuts to suggest a geographic map and indications of human movement. Those notations, however, become dense and difficult to read in the layering of the pattern paper. It is hard to discern which segments fit together.

The artist further complicates any clear reading by filling in sections of the composition with silver and gold leaf—referencing precious metals associated with Latin America, but also with European colonialism in pursuit of treasure. The location named in the artwork’s title, *Qoricancha*, was the “Golden Temple” of the Inka Empire in Peru, which was largely destroyed by Spanish conquistadors during the sixteenth century. In addition to their geographical and historical references, Quevedo also considers



Unidentified photographer, *Buck and Bubbles Dance Team*, 1931. Gelatin silver print, 10 × 8½ in. Everett Collection Historical

silver and gold’s associations with honor and esteem. Here, they constitute a tribute to those who wore the zoot suit and the tailors and seamstresses who made them.

NOTES

1. Ronny Quevedo in “Making Space: Ronny Quevedo Interviewed by Louis Bury,” *Bomb*, April 22, 2019, accessed online.



Unidentified photographer, *Frank Tellez Models a Zoot Suit*, Los Angeles, June 11, 1943. Gelatin silver print, 12 × 9 in. Everett Collection Historical



Shinji Turner-Yamamoto

UNITED STATES, BORN JAPAN, 1965

Pentimenti #120

2020

Gypsum plaster mold of a 400-million-year-old coral fossil bed, 24k gold leaf, gesso, clay bole, animal glue, and natural resin

21⁵/₈ × 13¹/₄ × 4 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Sapar Contemporary, New York

Collecting debris from abandoned places—deconsecrated churches, defunct mines, archaeological sites, and fossil beds—Shinji Turner-Yamamoto works a deliberate alchemy to transform these neglected remnants into jewellike objects worthy of a viewer's attention. In some cases, the artist first makes a mold from his found element, then casts replicas on which he grows layers of salt crystals. In other cases, he grows the crystals directly on the reclaimed fragments. These sparkling facets, which develop in ways that defy his total control, suggest the passage of time. On one hand, the artist hopes his work will remind viewers to notice the world around us as it is now, for it will inevitably change. And yet, over parts of the crystals, he applies gold leaf—a protective or

restorative act that reminds us to preserve what we have and honor what has passed.

Since 2010, Turner-Yamamoto has been engaged in his series *Pentimenti*, which takes its name from the Italian term for the visible traces of an earlier painting beneath the apparent composition on a canvas. The project also draws on the Japanese tradition of *suiseki*—the art of collecting and appreciating stones for the subtle details of their surfaces, which both provide traces of their formation and suggest imaginary landscapes. Turner-Yamamoto explains, “I’m interested in the idea of seeing a landscape in a small stone, though what I’m looking for is not a literal miniature landscape as in *suiseki*, but a sense of place or time evoked by the fragmentation of things.”¹

Pentimenti #120 is made from the imprint of a nearly 400-million-year-old Devonian coral fossil that the artist found in a creek bed in Kentucky’s Bernheim Research Forest. From a mold of the fossil, Turner-Yamamoto cast an arched form, then covered its top portion in gold leaf. He explains that the shape and color were inspired by a visit to a basilica, where “the interior at dusk was so dark

I could only make out the black arch that defined the apse and the constellation of gold created by its mosaic tiles.”² The resulting artwork links two disparate experiences, tactile and optical, while also joining references to earthly and spiritual realms, and honoring them both.

For *Gilded*, Turner-Yamamoto has made new *Pentimenti* works from clay fragments found at the location of a former brickyard here in Greensboro, North Carolina. In the mid-1800s, the land belonged to Zephaniah L. Mitchell, a free Black man who found agency as a brick mason in the rapidly growing city. Mitchell acquired such prominence through his business that, after the Civil War and the ratification of the 13th and 14th Amendments, he was elected to the county Board of Commissioners—the first person of color to hold any elected position in the county.³ Today, his land is part of Bennett College, a historically Black liberal arts school for women. Rich with these associations, the brick fragments in Turner-Yamamoto’s new work have been transformed into gilded relics, testaments to the powers of labor, education, and Greensboro’s African American heritage.

NOTES

1. Shinji Turner-Yamamoto in Becky Huff Hunter, “Traces of Probable Loss: A Conversation with Shinji Turner-Yamamoto,” *Sculpture*, June 19, 2019, accessed online.

2. Shinji Turner-Yamamoto, email correspondence with the author, March 28, 2022.

3. Benjamin Briggs, “Early Black Families Held Influential Roles in Greensboro, Part I,” *Preservation Greensboro* blog, September 20, 2021.



Pentimenti #122

2022

Seagrove, North Carolina, wild clay; argillaceous limestone; 24k gold leaf; crystals grown on 19th-century Greensboro, North Carolina, brick fragment; Mixtion; gesso; clay bole; animal glue; and natural resin

8 × 5 × 2 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Sapar Contemporary, New York



Danh Vo

GERMANY AND MEXICO, BORN VIETNAM, 1975

Fabulous Muscles / Take My Breath Away

2013

Gold leaf and ink on cardboard
107 × 89 in.

Collection of Sascha Steven Bauer, New York

Migration, globalization, and the fluidity of identity reverberate as themes throughout Danh Vo's work. Born in Vietnam, the artist fled as a young child with his family in 1979 amidst the chaos that ensued after the US military withdrawal. After they were rescued by a Danish freighter ship, he grew up in Copenhagen, and now lives in Berlin and Mexico City. Throughout his work, Vo calls upon this personal history of displacement, as well as his identity as a gay man, to create works of art that challenge singular narratives and encourage viewers to wrestle with the complexity of history and lived experience.

Here, he brings together three distinct materials—discarded cardboard boxes, gold leaf, and red ink—each with weighted

associations. The mass-produced boxes once held Budweiser beer, that quintessential, popular, and inexpensive American drink. The artist has negated their function as shipping containers by flattening the boxes, and transformed their association with a low-budget consumable item through the application of gold leaf. The gilding was done by artisans in Thailand, where gold leaf is regularly applied to sacred Buddhist paintings and temple architecture. Finally, over the gilded cardboard surfaces, texts have been ornately scripted with red ink by the artist's father, who originally learned the craft in Vietnam. The texts, which also constitute the work's title, come from the 1986 song "Take My Breath Away" (from the film *Top Gun*) and the 2004 homoerotic ballad "Fabulous Muscles," by the band Xiu Xiu.

Fabulous Muscles / Take My Breath Away is a densely layered mix of elements alluding to manufacture and handwork, global trade

and colonization, the profane and the sacred, and the physicality of desire—among myriad other themes. Complexity is a goal as well as a characteristic. As the artist explains, "I don't really believe in my own story, not as a singular thing anyway. It weaves in and out of other people's private stories of local history and geopolitical history. I see myself, like any other person, as a container that has inherited these infinite traces of history without inheriting any direction."¹

Counterbalancing that lack of direction and chaos of disparate themes are the piece's formal stability and monumental scale. The flattened boxes assembled edge to edge create a visually solid grid, suggestive of stacked bricks. The gilded sections run at even intervals across this mass, forming a pattern of strong vertical lines—like so many golden columns across an architectural facade announcing the value of what lies within.

NOTES

1. Danh Vo, quoted in Francesca Pagliuca, "No Way Out: An Interview with Danh Vo," *Mousse*, January 2, 2009), accessed online.



Stacy Lynn Waddell

UNITED STATES, BORN 1966

Untitled (Floral Relief 1640)

2022

22k gold leaf and acrylic medium on paper
30 × 22 in.

Courtesy of the artist and Candice Madey Gallery, New York

Stacy Lynn Waddell has made gold leaf a mainstay of her artistic practice, turning to the medium time and again in works that explore American history as it relates specifically to her identity as a Black woman living in the South. From seascapes of ships carrying cotton to a portrait of acclaimed author Octavia Butler, Waddell has deployed the precious metal and used its luminous surface to connote honor and worthiness. Inspired by her rigorous study of art history, Waddell also frequently culls images by earlier artists, noting through-lines between the past and our present moment. In 2021, she began a series of works based on seventeenth-century Dutch flower paintings, works of art that symbolically captured the wealth and abundance of the region's so-called "Golden Age."

These still lifes reflected the urbanization of Dutch and Flemish society and an increasing emphasis—among those of means—on commerce, trade, learning, and domestic material possessions. Floral paintings were particularly popular and touched on all these areas of interest. Arrangements frequently depicted blooms from multiple geographic locations that would have flowered in different seasons. Impossible to assemble in real life, they were imaginatively combined based on specimens from carefully tended gardens and studiously amassed libraries of botanical books and prints. Those gardens and books, and the vast realm of imported goods of which they were a part, were a direct result of the expanding Dutch trade. The country’s global colonies brought great benefits, but relied on the exploitation of both human and natural resources. Scholars of Dutch still-life paintings take under consideration the darker historical contexts that underlie the sumptuous images.

Waddell translates the historical images’ intense variety of colors and rich array of implied textures into a monochrome field of

gold and a singular, physical presence of line. She first covers her paper with a base coat of acrylic medium, then uses more of this base material to create her images in relief—a process known as *pastiglia*. Relying on line rather than color, she leaves the blooms looking like dried rather than fresh flowers—a shift that suggests contemporary concerns with ecological fragility in the face of a warming planet. She then gilds the image so that the reflective layer of gold leaf makes the blooms even more difficult to see. These artworks demand viewers’ time, patience, and physical shifts to capture their totality from multiple points of view. By requiring that investment of attention, Waddell slows us down to think through the numerous associations of each pictorial and material element. When talking about them, she returns frequently to the gold leaf, noting not just its associations with wealth and power, but also its role as a symbol of desire, which is always twofold: desire, if pursued blindly, can lead to actions that hurt others or the world, but desire can also, as Waddell puts it, “create the capacity to change circumstances for the better.”¹



Rachel Ruysch, *Still Life with Flowers on a Marble Tabletop*, 1716. Oil on canvas, 19 $\frac{1}{16}$ × 15 $\frac{9}{16}$ in. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Purchased with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt

NOTES

1. Stacy Lynn Waddell, conversation with the author, July 7, 2020.



Untitled (Floral Relief 1828)

2022

22k gold leaf and acrylic medium on paper
30 × 22 in.

Collection of Andrew and Tim Pirrie-Franks, London



Summer Wheat

UNITED STATES, BORN 1977

Blue Puddles (left)

2021

Acrylic, gouache, and gold leaf on aluminum mesh
68 × 141 in.

Courtesy of the artist

Throughout her work, Summer Wheat addresses themes of labor and its values, most often through dynamic tableaux of female figures in productive motion: sweeping, hunting, planting, hauling, weaving. Visually inspired by a range of art-historical precedents from ancient Greek pottery and medieval tapestries to the paintings of Pablo Picasso and paper cutouts of Henri Matisse, her work is conceptually informed

by an equal breadth of folklore, mythology, and a careful attention to current events.

Wheat's process is just as laborious as the scenes she creates. She begins by painting the back of a large sheet of aluminum mesh, allowing the colors to press through the holes and form a dense texture on the front. With the aid of studio assistants, she then enriches that surface with additional paint and the meticulous application

of gold leaf. Initially in her work, she applied the gilding liberally to emphasize the value of physical human labor—hard tasks often carried out in the face of difficulties presented by nature. In her most recent body of work, however, Wheat inverts her focus by turning attention to the value of mental labor and the fragility of nature. In tune with this new message, she now restrains and restricts her gold leaf to draw attention to small details that might otherwise be overlooked.

Wheat considers our present moment to be especially “in need of reflection.”¹ Across the monumental canvas *Blue Puddles (left)*, her female figures peer into puddles to see themselves, resulting in a cacophony of mirrored images.² The mirror is historically associated with rich symbolism and loaded with cultural weight. For example, in the myth of Narcissus or the fairy tale of Snow White, reflections serve to highlight the ills of vanity. In Lewis Carroll’s stories of

Alice, the young girl traveled through a looking glass to a wonderland where logic is reversed and nothing is quite as it seems. Alice’s memorable encounter with talking flowers seems an apt point of reference for Wheat’s figures surrounded by a vast array of blooms and caught in a whirlwind of up and down, above and below, terrestrial and seemingly cosmic. Within the chaos, it is the tiny centers of simple wildflowers, the bodies of bees, and the abstracted forms of seeds and blades of grass that Wheat honors and uplifts with gold leaf.

In a period of overwhelming pressures—political fracture, a global pandemic, accelerating climate change—Wheat seems to suggest that perhaps we can make our way not by attempting to tackle it all, but by taking a critical look at ourselves and planting some seeds for personal growth, or simply appreciating the beauty and resiliency of nature and literally planting seeds to aid its renewal.

NOTES

1. Summer Wheat, conversation with the author, October 29, 2021.

2. The artist has also created a *Blue Puddles (right)*, which can be shown with this painting to make the riot of images even more vast and add yet another mirroring element.





ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Joshua Bennett is Professor of English and Creative Writing at Dartmouth. He is the author of five books of poetry, criticism, and narrative nonfiction: *The Sobbing School* (Penguin, 2016)—winner of the National Poetry Series and a finalist for an NAACP Image Award—as well as *Being Property Once Myself* (Harvard University Press, 2020), *Owed* (Penguin, 2020), *The Study of Human Life* (Penguin, 2022), and *Spoken Word: A Cultural History* (Knopf, 2023). In 2021, he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in American Literature and a Whiting Award for Poetry and Nonfiction. Bennett earned his PhD in English from Princeton University, and his MA in Theatre and Performance Studies from the University of Warwick.

Emily Stamey is Curator and Head of Exhibitions at the Weatherspoon Art Museum at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Her recent projects include *Dread & Delight: Fairy Tales in an Anxious World* (2018) and *To the Hoop: Basketball and Contemporary Art* (2020), along with solo exhibitions of work by Sanford Biggers (2017), Xaviera Simmons (2021), and Angela Fraleigh (2021). Stamey has held curatorial positions at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art in Arizona and the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University in Kansas. Her research focuses on the social histories of modern and contemporary art in the United States. She earned her PhD and MA in Art History from the University of Kansas and her BA in Art History from Grinnell College in Iowa.

Rebecca Zorach is Mary Jane Crowe Professor in Art and Art History at Northwestern University. Her recent publications include *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance* (University of Chicago Press, 2005); *The Passionate Triangle* (University of Chicago Press, 2011); *Gold: Nature and Culture* with Michael W. Phillips, Jr. (Reaktion Books, 2016), and *Art for People's Sake: Artists and Community in Black Chicago, 1965–1975* (Duke University Press, 2019). Zorach teaches and writes on early modern European art, contemporary activist art, and art of the 1960s and 1970s. She earned her PhD and MA in Art History from the University of Chicago and her BA in History and Literature from Harvard University.

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