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Published on November 26, 2019

## Have you seen them? “Men of Change” at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

written by Jessica Hammie



*“Have you seen them?”*

*You see them.*

*Bold. Powerful.*

*Tragic. Beautiful.*

*And true.*

*They are icons with warrior roots. They are trees of knowledge.*

*Legends of the past. Inspiration for the future. The fierce energy of now.”*

The introductory text to “Men of Change: Power. Triumph. Truth.” paints a picture of what you can expect within the two rooms containing the ambitious exhibition. “Men of

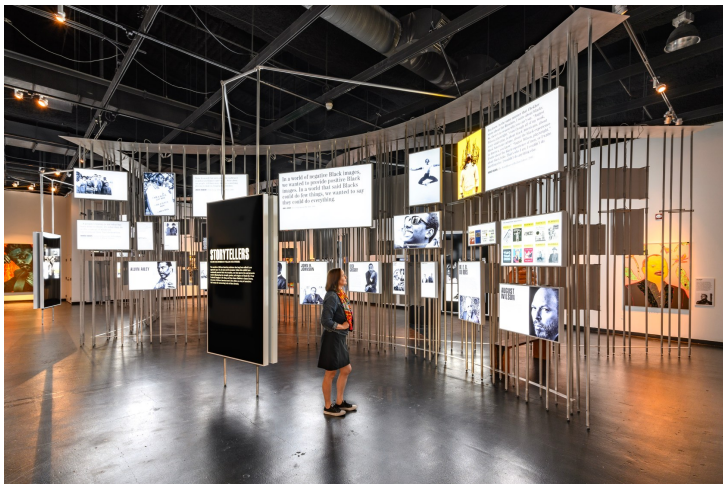
Change” highlights the accomplishments and legacies of black American men through text, photography, and artwork from twenty-five American artists. The changemakers — some long gone, many still alive — were paired with artists who made artwork related to, about, or honoring them.

The exhibition is organized by the Smithsonian Institute Traveling Exhibitions Services (SITES), and will travel to ten locations over the next three years. It debuted at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, and is on view until December 1, after which it will head to the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, Washington. WeShouldDoItAll (WSDIA), a Brooklyn-based design studio responsible for the “Making A Way” gallery at the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., Nike’s New York headquarters, and the Pandora Media Offices, among plenty of other projects, was responsible for the exhibition design and installation. An advisory panel made up of artists, scholars, businesspeople, and writers was established to help further develop the concepts, themes, and intellectual framework of the exhibition.

Together, they imagined “Men of Change” as an opportunity to tell a story about black men that countered the pervasive negative narrative seen in media and the atrocities committed by racist and classist systems of government and society. According to Marquette Folley, SITES project director for “Men of Change,” the Smithsonian regularly takes up very important, hard, and national questions in the exhibitions they mount, and given the current state of race and class relations in the United States, it felt like now was the time to celebrate the contributions of black men in America.

“Men of Change” is organized into seven themes: Catalysts, Myth Breakers, Storytellers, Community, Fathering, Imagining, Loving. There are twenty-five contemporary artists in the exhibition, and about the same number of featured changemakers (Duke Ellington, John Coltrane, Miles Davis, and Louis Armstrong are paired as a single group in the exhibit). The changemakers range from writer and civil rights activist W.E.B. DuBois to professional athlete LeBron James, lawyer Charles Hamilton Houston to director and producer Ryan Coogler. Many more men are acknowledged in the exhibition in a long list of names on architectural columns within the gallery space. The point is clear that there are a lot of men who have helped shape our society and culture, and the list is ever expanding.

During a panel discussion featuring Marquette Folley of SITES, Jonathan Jackson of WSDIA, and advisory board member Dr. Hasan Kwame Jeffries, they talked about the conception of the exhibition, noting that the selection of changemakers hinged upon how each man’s contributions improved the experiences of black people collectively. They spoke to the ways in which no man is singularly responsible for his own successes, and that though the exhibition is about individual men, they cannot be fully disconnected from the people, communities, and institutions that support(ed) them.



*Image: Installation view of Men of Change. The installation made of metal poles is in the middle of the room. Light boxes of various sizes featuring photos and text are hung on the metal poles. A large display box in front of the installation features a poster that reads STORYTELLERS. Along the walls of the room are paintings and other artworks, most of which are obscured by the metal pole installation in the middle of the room. A woman stands in*

*front of the light box installation, looking at the installation. Photo by Phil Armstrong. Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.*

There are two components to the powerful, complex, and dynamic exhibit: the artwork made by the twenty-five contemporary artists, and the text and photo installation designed by WSDIA. Knowing that it would travel and need to be installed in different spaces, the modular system designed by WSDIA features slender, vertical metal poles arranged at varying intervals upon which light boxes holding text and photographs could be displayed. Because each new venue has a unique space, “Men of Change” won’t be installed the same way at each stop on its 10-city tour.

When I visited “Men of Change” at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, I heard a few people say that they thought the metal poles looked like bars in a jail cell. There’s some truth to that — jail cells are indeed often composed of metal bars arranged at close intervals, or, at least that’s what I’ve been taught from television and movies. I think it speaks more to our visual literacy that the practical effects of the installation in this exhibition about black men leads one to think of incarceration, and this is the exact type of narrative “Men of Change” works to subvert.

I prefer to think of these poles as scaffolding. They serve as both actual and symbolic supports. They are literally holding up light boxes with critical information about the exhibition, the men who are featured, and their legacies. They hold the conceptual framework of the entire exhibition. With the light boxes, the poles provide the temporary support to visitors who are interested in conceptually climbing the structures in front of them — and there is plenty to be discovered at those heights.



*Image: Nina Chanel Abney, “Untitled,” 2018. A portrait of politician Andrew Young. Young is pictured in three-quarters view looking to the left. He wears a black suit and bright blue tie. An orange heart is on the lapel. He is surrounded by brightly colored flat shapes, including hands, a cross, a heart, and the number 32. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, the artist, and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.*

I’d be remiss if I didn’t also call attention to Isaac Perry, the Chicago-based writer and storyteller responsible for all of the text in the exhibition. “Men of Change” centers text and

storyteller responsible for all of the text in the exhibition. *Men of Change* centers text and information just as much as it does images. The text is beautifully written and informative. It helps paint the picture and weave the narrative that connects all of the components. It's no easy task to create succinct, informative exhibition text, and Perry delivers the narrative thoughtfully. His words give enough information to lead but not overwhelm the viewer, to allow people to use the scaffolding to find more information, more details, more histories.

WSDIA's design is ambitious and different from anything you'd see in a traditional fine art or art museum setting. Because the content of the exhibition is multi-modal and dynamic, it allows for the white cube of the gallery space to be transformed into something less sterile. The placement of the scaffolding in the middle of the main room obfuscates the work on the opposite walls. You get glimpses of colors and shapes, but you need to move

around the space in order to see all of it. This was the most exciting aspect of the installation for me — the show could not be fully contextualized until you took in all of the pieces, all of the thematic groups, which is parallel to understanding the effects these men have had on culture and society. It's not just one act, one person, or one era — all of these things build upon each other to create the environment that can produce another generation that is ready to build successes of their own.

You enter the exhibition through two doors, and the space is more dimly lit than the room from which you came. The brightness from the light boxes is at first harsh and startling, but as your eyes adjust, the room becomes cozier, more inviting. During the panel discussion, Jackson explained the use of the light boxes, referencing Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man," and how in using the light boxes, WSDIA "wanted to be clear [with] those light boxes that you see us, that you see yourself." Dr. Jeffries underscored the importance of "illuminating black men," of "literally cast[ing] them in light." In the case of "Men of Change," the light boxes literally make it possible to see and read the text and images placed upon them, and the throw of that light further illuminates visitors.



*Image: Installation view of Men of Change. The installation made of metal poles is in the middle of the room. Light boxes of various sizes featuring photos and text are hung on the metal poles. Two large displays are in front of the poles: one says IMAGINING and the other says FATHERING. Two large, black architectural columns, one on the right of the image and one on the left of the image feature the names of men of color in alphabetical order. Photo by Phil Armstrong. Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.*

The artwork by the contemporary artists is along the walls, and in most cases placed facing the light box installations in the middle of the room. Almost all of the artwork in the exhibition is two-dimensional; there's a lot of painting, a good amount of photography, and a few video pieces. The artwork is spot lit, but the atmosphere invites you to move closer to the work, to see each piece more intimately. The wall labels next to each work of art contained the basics: artist, title, date, and also included the artist's own words about how they approached their piece formally and conceptually, and how they thought through their relationship to their changemaker.

The installation places the artwork in direct dialogue with the information held on the scaffolding structure, and though care was taken to try to align the contemporary works with their appropriate themes (Catalysts; Myth Breakers; Storytellers; Community; Fathering; Imagining, Loving), there is no hard edge to each area. As you move through the exhibition, it's almost as if you're crossing a street: You look left, you look right. You turn and face one way, you turn and face the other, repeat. I found myself trying to bridge the gap in the conversation between the pieces, to translate the tangible information in the text with the more abstract information presented by the images. In doing so, I felt myself performing in a way that completed the concept of the exhibition. As a visitor and viewer, I

became the catalyst for understanding the meaning, for tying the strings together.



Image: Devan Shimoyama, "Kehinde," 2018. Portrait of artist Kehinde Wiley. A single male figure is pictured from the chest up. The face is painted yellow, and he wears a black shirt and jacket. In the place of the eyes are colorful, glittery jewels. Behind him are seven leaves and flowers on a background that fades from red at the bottom to blue at the top. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and the artist.

As might be expected, "Men of Change" includes plenty of contemporary portraiture, and the collection of so many portraits underscored the complexity and diversity of that particular genre. Artists known for painted or drawn portraiture — Alfred Conteh, Patrick Earl Hammie, Jas Knight, Robert Pruitt, and Devan Shimoyama — produced portraits that were so different from each other that it was a master class on the possibilities within a genre and a medium.

Devan Shimoyama's portrait of contemporary painter Kehinde Wiley was done in what has become Shimoyama's signature aesthetic of highly saturated, neon colors, glitter, and elements of two-dimensional and three-dimensional collage. Surely it's a humbling, if not also nerve-wracking, endeavor to make a work about an artist who is not only alive but whose practice has undoubtedly influenced your own. Shimoyama engages with Wiley's aesthetic impulses while unequivocally being his own work. Wiley is known for his use of decorative elements in the background of his paintings, intricate flora and patterns that interweave with the figure. As a nod to this, Shimoyama used flora in the background of his portrait, but instead of an extensive elaborate pattern, used seven larger leaves and flowers

and handled them with a similar sense of delicacy and intricacy he used for the gems decorating Wiley's eyes. The sensuality of Wiley's work is echoed in Shimoyama's treatment of the face, and the ghostly, delicate rendering of Wiley's facial features.



*Image: Patrick Earl Hammie, "Romare Bearden," 2018. Portrait of Romare Bearden. A single male figure is pictured from the neck up. The top of the face appears older, and the bottom of the face appears younger. The man looks out at the viewer. He wears a newsboy cap. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and the artist.*

Patrick Earl Hammie's portrait of Romare Bearden, on the other hand, is monumental. (Yes, we are married.) It's a lot larger than Shimoyama's portrait, and it has a visceral

materiality that lures you in close. The paint performs in just about all the ways paint can: it's abstract, it's figurative; it's thin and washed on, it's caked on and thick; it's dripped, it's slathered. It's collaged. It's clear that there are multiple faces: You can see layers of faces peeking out at different spots on the painting; there are several ears, for instance, and the bottom half of the face appears younger than the top half of the face. These collaged Bearden's point to his work of the 1970s and 1980s. Bearden had a long career and was very dedicated to supporting his community as an activist, painter, and collage artist. Like any other artist, his work evolved over time. Hammie's portrait presents formal elements that conceptually tap into Bearden's longevity and earned wisdom. As a viewer, I felt the enormity of Bearden's life experiences in the eyes and facial expression.



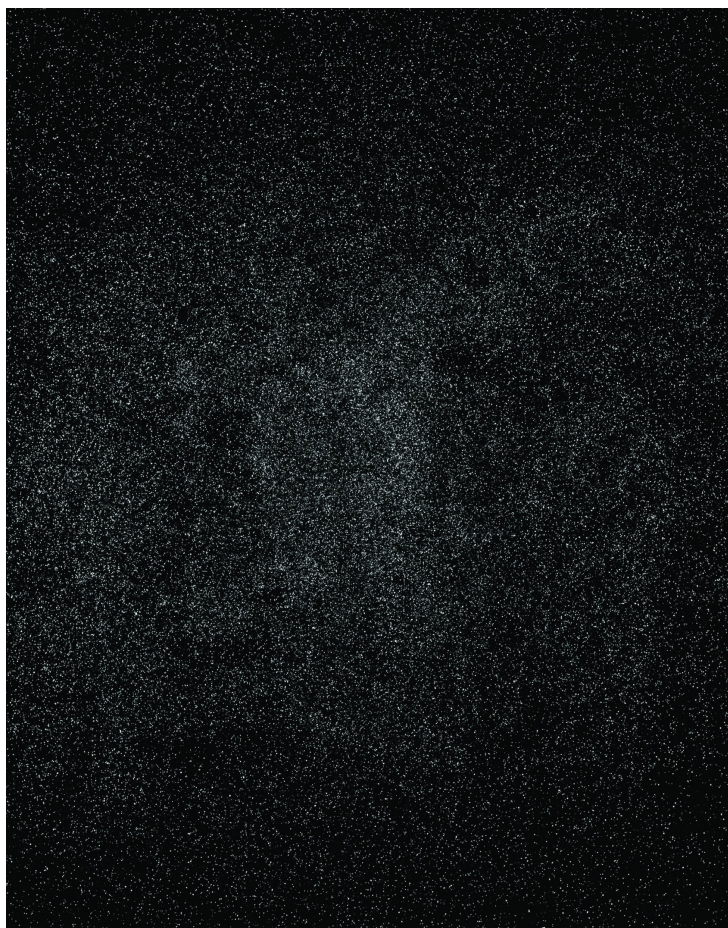
*Image: Nate Lewis, "Sankofa," 2018. A photo collage. A family is seated and looks out at the viewer. A woman is on the left, a man on the right, and a child in the middle. The image is black and white. The paper is textured to create patterns in the place of their clothes. In the background, three arms that are delicately textured and patterned reach up toward the top of the image. Image courtesy of Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and the artist.*

Nate Lewis' changemaker was Carter G. Woodson, and he focused on Woodson's work around "caring for family units." Lewis' piece is a large photograph with the paper cut, scraped, collaged, or otherwise manipulated to create beautiful textures and patterns that recall lush textiles. The family he chose to depict is his actual family: his sister Leah Lewis, her partner and fellow artist Shaunté Gates (Gates also has work in the exhibition), and their son. The composition recalls the tradition of seated family portraits and artists picturing their contemporaries, but in the context of this exhibition, this work also speaks to the ways in which the Carter G. Woodson's legacy reverberates into the present. The

to the ways in which the Carter G. Woodson's legacy reverberates into the present. The family unit has been preserved, figuratively and literally.

There was lens-based work as well, with video pieces by Cary Fagan, Shaunté Gates, A.G. Rojas, and Hank Willis Thomas. Photographic collage work by Jelsen Lee Innocent, Nate Lewis, and Paul Anthony Smith all shared a similar formal approach: black and white works on paper with textural interventions. It was exciting to discover how each artist engaged with the vibe and legacy of each changemaker and to see how that manifested in the material approach to the work.

When I entered “Men of Change,” I was interested in finding that nuanced space between documenting oppression and celebrating perseverance where the potential for intricate, meaningful conversation can happen. “Men of Change” made an effort to engage working artists with the deep-rooted and complicated lineage and legacy of African American contributions to American society over the last century. It took the individual successes of people like Miles Davis, Romare Bearden, James Baldwin, W.E.B. DuBois, and Bayard Rustin to make space for Kehinde Wiley, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Kendrick Lamar, and LeBron James. Likewise, it’s those men who have made space for their contemporaries and the younger generation of artists who are featured in this exhibition. It’s exciting to see this group of twenty-five contemporary artists of color in a single exhibition. Walking through the space, I was reminded that there are indeed a lot of black and brown artists working today, despite the limited representation we see in major museum or gallery exhibitions and in art media.



*Image: Knowledge Bennett, “Black Excellence,” 2018. A large, black canvas appears to be covered in glitter or tiny white dots. It resembles a sky full of stars. Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service and the artist.*

Knowledge Bennett’s piece, “Black Excellence,” is a glittery black canvas. It’s the only piece in the exhibition that isn’t connected to a specific individual; instead it’s paired with the “Catalysts” category. The work is visually dynamic, especially as the light hits different spots on the canvas, but the obvious title both underscores and confronts an easy read of the

exhibition. It's an exhibition about black excellence, yes, but it's not black excellence trapped in time, because there are new examples of black excellence in conversation with the historic ones. It's black excellence not as individual achievement, but instead as a system of collective achievements. It's black excellence that begets black excellence.

"Men of Change" is not an exhibition exclusively about the changemakers or the art makers; it goes beyond the visual world. It is not simply an illustration of the men and their contributions. It gives space to the changemakers, and allows the contemporary artists to celebrate, unpack, and complicate the concepts, themes, and activities these men explored through their careers and life experiences. It brings together artists of color living and working today in disparate geographies and media, but around similar themes. Beyond the power of archiving these achievements, "Men of Change" offers a space to contemplate the future.

"Men of Change: Power. Triumph. Truth." is on view at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center through December 1. Artist pairings, artwork, and additional venues and dates are available on the "Men of Change" [website](#).

*Featured Image: Installation view of Men of Change. The installation made of metal poles is in the middle of the room. Light boxes of various sizes featuring photos and text are hung on the metal poles. A large display box in front of the installation features a poster that reads IMAGINING. Along the walls of the room are paintings and other artworks, most of which are obscured by the installation in the middle of the room. Photo by Phil Armstrong. Photo courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service.*



*Jessica Hammie is a writer based in Champaign, Illinois. She earned an MA in Art History from the University of Connecticut, where she studied hip-hop's influence on contemporary art practices. Jessica writes about how artists visualize identities, and how arts help us understand our interconnected public and private histories. In addition to writing for Sixty, she is Managing Editor and the Food & Drink Editor at Smile Politely, a Champaign-based culture magazine.*

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