

# THE HOW AND THE WHY: THE BLOCK'S COLLECTION

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Context matters. What does it mean to be Northwestern University's art museum? A major research university, Northwestern foregrounds interdisciplinary study, global perspectives, and personal discovery as key tenets of its identity. Its curriculum merges theory and practice across twelve schools. From within Northwestern, The Block Museum of Art provides opportunities for exploring how art and visual culture operate in complex ways within human society. The Block's exhibitions, publications, and growing collection each contribute to the museum as a forum where people from across cultures, backgrounds, experiences, and generations can experience works of art. We serve as an extended classroom for teaching and learning; a think tank for developing and sharing ideas; a laboratory for collaborative experimentation; and a workshop where graduate and undergraduate students from across fields of study are empowered by experiences that have impact beyond the classroom.

*Who Says, Who Shows, What Counts* showcases artworks that have been acquired by the museum as part of a three-year collecting initiative that was organized around the nuanced and resonant theme of "Thinking about History." The initiative resulted in wide-ranging acquisitions that have enriched The Block's ability to meet its core mission. These works invite us to question whose histories get told, who recites and interprets these histories, and which histories become archived through the museum's collection. The reach of this theme is manifested, for instance, by Catherine Opie's *Skeeter* (1993)

1 Rikki Byrd, 2020–21 Block Interdisciplinary Graduate Fellow, in front of *Behold, Be Held*, an outdoor exhibition she curated from the collection during the COVID-19 pandemic.

from her *Portraits* series, in which the artist applies the structures of European Old Master portrait painting to photographic portrayals of her LGBTQ friends in Los Angeles [PAGE 95]; Shan Goshorn's *Cherokee Burden Basket: A Song for Balance* (2012), which pulls from archival documents, including those related to the forced enrollment of Native American youth in abusive residential boarding schools as the medium for weaving a traditional basket form [PAGE 139]; and Emmanuel Bakary Daou's *Le temps Ebola (Ebola Times)* (2015), a series of six photographs that dramatize an imagined Ebola epidemic in Bamako, Mali [PAGE 137]. These works, and the many others that have come to The Block through this collecting initiative, provide unique points of entry for multidimensional and empathetic thinking.

### THE BLOCK'S COLLECTING STRATEGY

The collecting initiative celebrated by this publication emerges from significant changes that have unfolded at The Block over the past decade. In 2012 The Block's mission was revised to place art at the center of our engagement with the issues and ideas of our time, to approach these questions from global and interdisciplinary perspectives, and to support the curriculum and research strengths of Northwestern University. These changes likewise required a new collecting strategy, one that is necessarily forward looking, while also developed in reference to the past. As explored by The Block's Academic Curator Corinne Granof in this book, from its earliest acquisitions The Block's collection was tied to teaching and grounded in the conviction that students, faculty, staff, and community benefit from direct experiences with works of art. Works on paper, including prints, drawings, photography, and collage formed the foundation of The Block's collection. Problematically, though not surprisingly for a museum collection formed in the twentieth century, Euro-American perspectives and specifically the work of white, male artists predominated. Using a twenty-first-century lens to examine the biases and limitations that underlie such collecting decisions was important in recognizing how The Block's collection needed to be reshaped in order to represent wider and more diverse points of view.

The Block's new collecting strategy reflects a mindful decentering of any one perspective and a deeper integration into the breadth of the university. It also encompasses a more capacious concept of what art is and what it does. In order to achieve this critical shift, Block curators actively follow contemporary trends by meeting with artists, visiting galleries and museums, attending conferences, and engaging with art as it is activated in communities. They also converse with faculty and students from across campus to learn about their diverse areas of interest and explore how art can intersect with



2 Walid Raad, *Appendix 137\_048*, 2018. Inkjet print mounted on Sintra. Norton S. Walbridge Fund purchase, 2021.1.1.

teaching, learning, and research beyond the traditional focuses of art history and artistic practice. Works on paper are still a primary area of collecting at The Block, though the museum also acquires painting, sculpture, mixed media, and time-based media on a case-by-case basis. This last category intersects with the museum's Block Cinema program, allowing us to showcase moving picture work across multiple contexts from auditorium to gallery. We collect primarily modern and contemporary works, eyeing a period that extends from the second half of the nineteenth century—with its accelerated introduction of technologies, such as electricity and photography, and global structures, such as colonialism and capitalism, that have changed the way we see—to the present day. Two prints by multimedia conceptual artist Walid Raad from his *Appendix 137* series, for instance, reference the history of twentieth-century war and colonialism, global modernism, and the slippery reliability of the archive [FIG 2]. We also selectively add to the museum's collection of early modern prints and drawings, such as the mid-seventeenth century *Head of a Bearded Man* recently acquired through a gift from the Gray Collection Trust, placing them in dialogue with more recent work. We look for ways to expand categories and blur boundaries that compartmentalize visual aesthetic practices, such as the recent addition of 223 vernacular photographs that were given to the museum by Peter Cohen in 2019 [FIG 3] or the appliquéd and embroidered textile



3 Unknown photographer, Untitled (museum staircase at the Louvre, Paris, with two soldiers), mid-twentieth century. Gelatin silver print. Gift of Peter J. Cohen, 2019.17.32.

*16 June 1976 Youth Day* by Rose Kgoete (1999/2007) [PAGE 145]. In addition to considering what kinds of stories the collection will tell from the long view, the artworks that we acquire must also resonate with teaching and research that is undertaken by Northwestern University faculty, students, programs, and research centers. Realizing this commitment in a new way, a recent course taught collaboratively by Associate Professor of Art History Hannah Feldman and Essi Rönkkö and Kate Hadley Toftness from The Block invited students to think critically about how museums make acquisitions and empowered them to select a work for purchase by The Block [PAGE 167]. This approach to student-led collecting is documented in the final section of this book.

We also look for ways to build the museum's collection in dialogue with other Northwestern collections, particularly those of the Northwestern University Libraries. The Herskovits Library of African Studies, for instance, holds a collection of over 900 photographs from the African continent, many of them mounted in photo albums and scrapbooks that date from the 1860s through the 1960s. This collection provides an important context for The Block's acquisition of contemporary photographs by artists based on the African continent, such as the twenty-two photographs and accompanying notecards that make up the installation work *1972* (2017) by Admire Kamudzengerere and Rachel Monosov, which casts a critical eye on the archival impulse of colonialism and its legacies today [PAGE 143]. Other works in The Block's collection resonate with library holdings as

diverse as the Charlotte Moorman Archive, 1968 Democratic National Convention Archive, Arabic manuscripts from West Africa, and the Michael McDowell Death Collection. In this way, The Block's collection is nested within an ecosystem of written, auditory, and physical documents that provide a rich environment for integrative learning. Northwestern's archives and collections—including The Block's collection—offer direct experiences with primary sources that record, make tangible, and convey human thought and human experience. It is within this expanded definition of "art" that The Block does its work.

In 2016 The Block received a major gift of sixty-eight works of contemporary art from the collector, philanthropist, and software innovator Peter Norton that provided an important initial boost for reorienting the museum's collection. The Norton gift was crafted through dialogue between the Norton collection's curator and The Block's director and curatorial staff to expand connections with university curriculum and to support teaching and learning on campus. The gift includes significant works that have added to The Block collection's strengths, especially in prints and photographs, as well as new anchor works that have broadened our representation of media and of artists, thereby contributing to breaking down the collection's historic white Euro-American bias. The Norton gift included notable prints such as the American artist Fred Wilson's *Untitled (Venice Biennale)* (2003), a work related to his 2003 installation at the 50th Venice Biennale in which he highlighted the long history and the contributions of Africans to that city [PAGE 163]. The gift also challenged the conventional boundaries of prints and photography.



4 Felix Gonzalez-Torres, "Untitled" (For Parkett), 1994. Billboard on Appleton coated stock. Gift of Peter Norton, 2016.4.14.

For instance, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s “Untitled” (*For Parkett*) includes eight silkscreened panels that are intended to be pasted onto a billboard, or hung indoors using the same methods and materials [FIG 4]. With maximum dimensions of over twenty-two feet long and ten feet high when installed, it reveals a close-up photographic image of footprints in sand. Through this work Gonzalez-Torres presented a conundrum for museums that will one day be exciting to contemplate with students. While these panels sit unfulfilled within The Block’s storeroom, the work’s imagery of a shifting and unstable ground is held in stasis; however, once installed, the work will be exposed to the wear and tear of the elements and ultimately to destruction, as it is intended to be installed only once. By using photography to bring stillness to the ephemeral medium of sand and by interjecting precarity into the life of the artwork, “Untitled” (*For Parkett*) heightens our awareness of risk and constant change whether in the passage of time or the fleetingness of human life, a reality that Gonzalez-Torres experienced with the death of his partner from AIDS-related illness in 1991, as well as his own illness and ultimate death from the virus.

The Norton gift included nearly one dozen mixed-media installations, video, and sound works. Among these pivotal works are *Happiness (finally) after 35,000 Years of Civilization (after Henry Darger and Charles Fourier)*, the first major artwork by the activist, writer, and publisher Paul Chan [FIG 5] and *Ritual and Revolution*, a room-sized installation by the photographer Carrie Mae Weems [FIG 6]. Within The Block’s collection, Weems’s work widens the notion of what photography can be. Sepia-toned photographs, some borrowed from books and others taken by the photographer, are silk-screened onto long diaphanous cloth panels. These are hung in a semi-architectural configuration, with an image of Weems herself in the guise of a classical caryatid, a female figure carved into a pillar, at center. The visitor weaves through the panels while listening to Weems recite a poetic text that draws attention to the human struggle for equality



5 Paul Chan, *Happiness (finally) after 35,000 Years of Civilization (after Henry Darger and Charles Fourier)*, 2000–2003. Single-channel digital animation on mini-PC and screen, color, sound, 17:20 minutes, loop. Gift of Peter Norton, 2016.4.8.



6 Carrie Mae Weems, *Ritual and Revolution*, 1998 (installed at The Block Museum of Art in 2017). Digital photographs on muslin, with audio. Gift of Peter Norton, 2016.4.61.

and justice, the lines of which read in part, “I was with you when you stormed the Bastille & the Winter Palace. And I was with you for that great and hideous mise-en-scène they call the middle passage.” These works provided a starting point for The Block to acquire in these exciting arenas of contemporary practice. In 2020 the museum purchased the two-channel video work *Cloudless Blue Egress of Summer* (2019) by Sky Hopinka [PAGE 119]. Hopinka’s work interweaves histories from the Castillo de San Marcos, also known as Fort Marion, in St. Augustine, Florida, evoking its use as a prison that held Native Americans in the 1830s and 1880s; its association with Brigadier General Richard Pratt, who developed plans for the assimilation of Native American children through the system of residential boarding schools during his time there; and its use today as a historic site and museum. Also in 2020 the museum co-purchased with the National Portrait Gallery and The Hammer Museum the three channel video installation *The Giverny Suite* (2019) by Ja’Tovia Gary, which combines archival and artist-produced footage with installation props such as empty picture frames, a broken-legged settee, and fresh fruit. The installation, which responds to the murders of Black men at the hands of the police, offers a moving meditation on themes including safety and precarity, isolation and respite, and love and loss. As we expand The Block’s collection with acquisitions like these, we are committed to building upon its foundations in ways that widen its breadth and reorient its priorities while also recognizing its legacy.



7 Mona Hatoum, *Birds of a Feather*, 1997. Chromogenic print. Gift of Neal Meltzer, 2015.8.9.

## THE BLOCK'S STRATEGY AT WORK

Northwestern University's commitment to interdisciplinary study, global perspectives, and personal discovery provides rich terrain in which to anchor The Block's approach to collecting. Interdisciplinary thinking entails joining diverse sets of knowledge and methodologies across fields of study while global perspectives and personal discovery establish a decentralized basis for this work, breaking down assumptions about point of view. Multifaceted inquiry is a common thread that runs between these approaches, a quality that is especially important at The Block. Works of art are themselves complex, combining visual, material, and conceptual elements that are experienced simultaneously and are open to multiple interpretations. Each object that enters The Block's collection is examined for its capacity to be experienced through a range of lenses.

Take for instance the enigmatic photograph *Birds of a Feather*, a work by Mona Hatoum that juxtaposes a small wooden bird on an interior windowsill with a much larger seagull on the window's exterior frame [FIG 7]. The work's title, which conjures things that are alike, underscores the strangeness of these two very different birds coming together in a chance encounter. The scene, intentionally shot slightly out of focus and at just enough of an angle to be disorienting, looks onto a nondescript suburban subdivision. A mountain range can be seen low on the horizon, while the majority of the remaining picture plane is filled by a vast, sun-saturated blue sky. What kinds of discussions can be had about this object? Materially, there is the medium of the photograph itself, and the artist's decision

to overexpose and poorly focus it. There is also the representation of wood, glass, feathers, and atmosphere. Visually, there is the ordinariness of the scene and its setting, the oddness of its haphazard staging, and the absurdity of the two birds, an absurdity heightened by the work's title. Conceptually, Hatoum, who was born in Lebanon to a Palestinian family and now resides in London, has created an image that invokes binaries: real and fake, inside and outside, same and different, near and far, home and away, freedom and confinement. These are ideas that are familiar to many within our global society and easily connect with experiences of travel, migration, cultural hybridity, and, today, with the experiences of a global pandemic.

*Anti-Retro*, a screenprint by Andrea Carlson, a Chicago-based artist who works more frequently in drawing and painting, is an equally thought-provoking object [FIG 8]. The image is at once symmetrical and chaotic, raising an expectation of a logic that is quickly understood as self-defeating. The artist's rendering has a cinematographic grandeur, and like cinema the image requires a suspension of disbelief. We see linear renderings of horses and cowboys, large tree trunks, mountains, a body of water, and a sun that is rising or setting. The words "Anti-Retro" are rendered across the lower center of the print in a serif font. Raised in Minnesota, Carlson is an Anishinaabe artist whose work addresses recurring themes including place, the continuing power dynamics of American settler colonialism, the role of institutions in perpetuating stereotypes, and the dynamics of



**8** Andrea Carlson, *Anti-Retro*, 2018. Screenprint on paper. Purchase funds donated by Julie and Lawrence Bernstein Family Art Acquisition Fund, Press Collection Endowment Fund, and Block Museum Special Projects Fund, 2020.2.

storytelling, whether through history, lore, or film. The words “Mondo Cane” (Doggish World) in the lower right of the print refer to an Italian documentary film released in 1962 that was intended to shock its Western viewers through a series of salacious glimpses into other societies, while “Anti-Retro” is a reference to an interview with the French theorist Michel Foucault in which he discusses the power of film to rewrite history.<sup>1</sup> Almost as if a projectionist has hit rewind on a classic Hollywood Western, with extended looking Carlson’s work invites reflection on the violent erasure of Native American history and its substitution with an invented, romanticized, and warped idea of masculinity and the American West.

A third example of a recent acquisition that rewards close scrutiny of its complex material and technical and conceptual elements is a portfolio of prints by multimedia artist Dario Robleto entitled *The First Time, The Heart (A Portrait of Life 1854–1913)*. These delicate works on paper are part of an ongoing research project that has led the artist to formulate a painstaking technique inspired by the work of the mid-nineteenth-century physiologist Karl von Vierordt, who developed the first technology for making visible the pulse waves of the human heart. Each of the fifty prints in the portfolio is a *memento mori*, consisting of a single delicate light-colored line that is traced across paper darkened with candle soot, corresponding to an actual recorded pulse wave from the past. For instance, *Young boy, dreaming, 1877*, is part of Robleto’s quest to find the earliest recordings of this



9 Dario Robleto, *Young boy, dreaming, 1877*, plate 37 from the portfolio *The First Time, The Heart (A Portrait of Life, 1854–1913)*, 2017. Photolithograph with transparent base ink on hand-flamed and sooted paper, brushed with lithotine and lifted from soot, fused with shellac and denatured alcohol. Gift of Northwestern Engineering, 2018.6.37.



10 Vardi Kahana, *The Art of Social Distancing #10, Jeff Koons at the TLV Museum*, 2020. Pigment inkjet print. Purchase funds provided by Lisa Munster Tananbaum and Steven Tananbaum, 2021.5.1.

kind [FIG 9]. Robleto's portfolio is part of a larger project that reflects on the human capacity to love and the technical and ethical challenges of capturing that phenomenon. It emerged in part from conversations that have unfolded during the artist's visits to Northwestern, where he has been an artist-at-large in the McCormick School of Engineering since 2018. Robleto's endless curiosity has involved him in dialogues and collaborations with experts across Northwestern's Evanston and Chicago campuses in fields including astrophysics, cardiology, and neuroscience.

## MOVING FORWARD

As I write this in the summer of 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage with devastating effect across local and global spheres. In the United States we cannot yet know what permanent changes the virus will instigate, but the phrase "a new normal" has become a familiar mantra that signals the expectation that such change is inevitable, including in museums, as evoked by photographer Vardi Kahana's haunting image of a masked museum employee walking past a large Jeff Koons sculpture, an image that was taken inside the Tel Aviv Museum during Israel's 2020 COVID-19 lockdown [FIG 10]. One urgent reality that must not be ignored is the

pandemic's unequal impact on Black, Indigenous, and people of color, who are experiencing the highest rates of infection and mortality. Simultaneously, demands for social justice in the United States have accelerated. The situation has also stimulated kitchen table conversations and a flurry of statements of support posted by CEOs of businesses and directors of cultural institutions. Viewed from within the United States, the task of "thinking about history" that The Block posed for itself three years ago now resonates at an urgent pitch. We cannot responsibly undertake a project devoted to history without looking squarely and closely at the long legacy of systemic racism in the United States, its continuing impact on individual lives, and its embeddedness in the structures of institutions, including universities and museums. Edgar Heap of Birds's powerful triptych *Public Enemy Care for Youth (The Brutality Which Is America)*, from 1992, sets the terms in stark white words on a black background, declaring "THE BRUTALITY OF AMERICA/RAISES MAD DOGS/THAT WERE ONCE BEAUTIFUL CHILDREN," and below in smaller type, "PUBLIC/ENEMY/CARE FOR YOUTH" [PAGE 141]. While this work is almost thirty years old, Heap of Birds's words speak loudly to our present day situation. And yet, as Lois Biggs, a recent Northwestern graduate in comparative literature and art history, tells us in her exploration of the work, it also "suggests a parallel history, one in which our acts of care counteract this intergenerational trauma."<sup>2</sup> Artworks like this are powerful resources for thinking about and through our current engagement with the present and the past of race and racism in this country. A more recent work, *Lazy Equation* (2019), one of five inkjet prints by artist and educator Kameelah Janan Rasheed that were purchased by The Block in 2019, likewise asks us to think deeply about these issues [PAGE 151]. Like Heap of Birds's triptych, the work is rendered in white writing on a black page. Rasheed poses a seemingly simple mathematical equation—"1+1"=2—below which is the phrase "we already human!" However, a notation leads the eye to a small qualifying footnote near the bottom of the page that reads "not yet." This work takes the viewer on an emotional journey, moving from a mathematical fact, to the joy of its simple, irrefutable logic, to the crushing blow of the illogical but unarguable reality of racism. There is more work yet to be done in the world and at The Block to fulfill the promise of racial equity, and indeed of equity across all spheres.

Much is made of our current image-saturated global society, and how its technologies require individuals to develop new competencies. Visual literacy, the ability to interpret and glean meaning from visual cues across multiple contexts, is a core competency that is more important today than perhaps ever before. The practice of close looking and critical analysis of artworks is an effective way to develop skills that are vital to excelling in our changing world. However, the

role of a university art museum stretches far beyond that. Artworks are the culminating product of complex processes by artists who are researching, problem-solving, and responding to the world around them. Engaging with a work of art is equally complex, which is why encounters with artworks, like those by Edgar Heap of Birds and Kameelah Janan Rasheed, stimulate both outward and inward looking.

Art is among the most fundamental modes of human expression. It is for this reason that access to original works of art is essential to a truly interdisciplinary education. The Block offers a critical opportunity to experience art firsthand in its galleries, study center, and online through its recently launched collection database and associated resources. The works of art that are presented in *Who Says*, *Who Shows*, *What Counts* give us tools for thinking about the issues of our day. Each work that enters The Block's collection becomes part of an expanding resource, building forward in anticipation of new encounters by members of our community.

#### NOTES

- 1 Pascal Bonitzer and Serge Toubiana, "Anti-Retro: Michel Foucault in interview," trans. Annwyl Williams, *Cahiers du Cinema* 251-2 (July-August 1974), <https://onscenes.weebly.com/film/anti-retro-michel-foucault-in-interview>.
- 2 See page 140 of this volume.