

# **FLOOR 3**

# **GRIEF AND GRIEVANCE**

## Jean-Michel Basquiat

b. 1960, Brooklyn, NY; d. 1988, New York, NY

### *Procession*, 1986

Acrylic on wood

Private Collection

Jean-Michel Basquiat was a self-taught artist who rose to rapid fame in the 1970s and '80s. Known both for his graffiti work (signed as his alter ego, SAMO) as well as his immersion in hip-hop and new wave music scenes, Basquiat created vivid line drawings and paintings incorporating words, numbers, diagrams, logos, and accidental marks. In Basquiat's work, both abstraction and figuration function as overt and coded social commentary, making use of bold formal gestures to address concepts of colonialism, class struggle, state authority, and police violence.

Basquiat created several works reliant on the invocation of the grief caused by the historically disproportionate use of police force against Black communities, including the painting *Untitled* (1983), also widely known as *The Death of Michael Stewart* or *Defacement*. Stewart, a young Black artist, was attacked and murdered by police that year for allegedly tagging a wall of a downtown New York subway station. Distraught over Stewart's death, Basquiat reflected: "It could have been me. It could have been me."

Basquiat's reflection on mourning also extends to histories of the Black Atlantic. *Procession* (1986) depicts four Black silhouetted figures facing a figure painted in red, white, and blue and carrying a skull—a symbol repeated in many of his other works. Part of a body of work relating to the American South and the artist's Haitian-Puerto Rican heritage, *Procession* calls to mind both the deep psychological pain of slavery in the region and the spiritual terrain of traditional jazz funerals, during which processions of mourners follow the remains of the deceased.

—Mlondolozzi Zondi

## Kevin Beasley

b. 1985, Lynchburg, VA

### ***Strange Fruit (Pair 1)*, 2015**

Nike Air Jordan 1 shoes, polyurethane resin, polyurethane foam, tube socks, shoelaces, rope, speakers, hypercardioid and contact microphones, amplifiers, patch cables, and effects processors, with unannounced performance

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York

Commissioned with funds contributed by the Young Collectors Council with additional funds contributed by Josh Elkes, Younghee Kim-Wait, and Julia and Jamal Nusseibeh, 2014

In a body of work that spans sculpture and musical performance, Kevin Beasley explores the physical materiality and cultural connotations of both objects and sound. His sculptures typically incorporate everyday items like clothing and studio debris, bound together using foam, resin, or other materials. *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)* also contains embedded audio equipment that warps and amplifies the ambient tones of its surroundings. Within the open sonic environment of a museum, the work offers a potential experience of intimacy, absorbing and reflecting the sound of the crowd and condensing it into a human scaled object. *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)* embodies this spirit of dialogue in its two-part structure—at its core are two Nike Air Jordan shoes, each paired with a microphone. Suspending these objects in space, Beasley compounds their technological interchange with additional layers of meaning, bringing to mind shoes hanging from overhead wires or poles (itself an open-ended form of communication). At the same time the work's title refers to the history of lynchings in the American South memorialized by Bronx schoolteacher Abel Meeropol in the 1937 protest song "Strange Fruit." Through these associations, the hanging forms of Beasley's sculpture resonate not only with his body, which molded the work by hand, or with the bodies moving through the museum, but also with those inscribed in the deplorable history of race and class in the United States.

In past presentations, *Strange Fruit (Pair 1)* has been intermittently activated by invited musicians and other performers, but safeguards against COVID-19 have restricted this possibility. Rather than a simple absence, this adjustment can be understood as an enriching act of care that mirrors current social-distancing measures. In the midst of a pandemic that has disproportionately impacted communities of color, this emphasis on protecting others deepens the work's engagement with the body and race.

**Melvin Edwards**

b. 1937, Houston, TX

Opposite wall, right to left:

***Texcali, 1965***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

***Kikongo si, 1992***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Floor 3

***Haitian September, 1994***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

***Before the Bar, 1996***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

***Year by Year, 1994***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

***No Rem, 2012***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

***Equal Rites, 1987***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

***A Symptom of, 1999***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Left to right:

***Memory of Winter, 1996***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

***WTC NYC, 2001***

Welded steel

Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, and  
Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Throughout his prolific career, Melvin Edwards has used sculpture to test the boundary between abstraction and figuration. Born in Houston, Edwards moved to Los Angeles in 1955, where he studied art at the University of Southern California. There he began to develop his *Lynch Fragments*, a series of small-scale reliefs that he made until 1967, resurrected in the 1970s, and continued to develop throughout the 2000s. The first African-American sculptor to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum, Edwards probes the convergences and antagonisms between American modernism and racial politics.

*Texcali* (1965) is part of the first series of *Lynch Fragments*, which Edwards began in 1963, a pivotal year in U.S. history. By directly referencing lynching, he inserted the works into a conversation about the country's enduring history of racist brutality, just as the civil rights movement was forcing similar issues to the forefront of public discourse. Rather than contribute to a proliferation of imagery of violence against Black people, these abstract steel sculptures evoke that violence through process, iconography, and display. Welding is highly physical, and Edwards implicates his own laboring body through the making of the work. The chains, hooks, gears, and other mechanical objects that comprise the *Lynch Fragments* imply a person at once in and freed from bondage. Edwards's mandate that the works be installed at eye level further emphasizes their human scale. These fragments stand in for the disregarded remains of Black bodies destroyed by lynching, yet their abstract forms allow mourning and elation to coexist in one artistic experience.

—MH

## Theaster Gates

b. 1973, Chicago, IL

### ***Gone are the Days of Shelter and Martyr, 2014***

Video, sound, color; 6:31 min

Courtesy the artist and Regen Projects, Los Angeles

Raised on the West Side of Chicago and trained as an urban planner and ceramicist, Theaster Gates is fiercely committed to reimagining the social and architectural fabric of his city. Gates's wide-ranging body of work consists of architectural rehabilitation, institution building, assemblage, archiving, and performance. These disparate modalities of making are united by a preoccupation with Black space—how it is produced through economic dispossession, maintained through racist stereotypes, and reimagined by the creative potential of everyday people.

Gates's childhood experiences in the Black church were fundamental to his thinking about racial imagination in spatial terms. In the gospel choir, Gates found a community that emphasized possibility and restoration, but the creativity embodied in the choir's call and response contrasted profoundly with the abandoned buildings that filled his neighborhood. These two experiences of racialized space—of presence and absence, regeneration and decline—haunt the artist's video *Gone Are the Days of Shelter and Martyr* (2014). Filmed at the now-demolished Roman Catholic Church of St. Laurence on the South Side, the video features Gates's frequent collaborators, the Black Monks of Mississippi, an ensemble inspired by the musical traditions of the Black South and the asceticism of Eastern monasticism. The Monks' performance reanimates the abandoned church, harnessing its dormant creative potential and resurrecting its social function. The repetitive slamming of two wooden doors, long separated from their hinges, acts as a metronome keeping musical time or a heartbeat attesting to the persistence of spiritual life. The piece, with its melding of music and architecture, challenges the racist tendency to equate the physical state of the South Side with racial inferiority by instead emphasizing resilience, vitality, and possibility.

—MH

**Ellen Gallagher**

b. 1965, Providence, RI

***Aquajujidsu*, 2017**

Oil, acrylic, ink and paper on canvas

Kirby Kulkin Family Collection

Left to right:

***Dew Breaker*, 2015**

Pigment, ink, oil, graphite and paper on canvas

Collection Marc Leder

***Dew Breaker*, 2015**

Pigment, ink, oil, graphite and paper on canvas

Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth

***Dew Breaker*, 2015**

Pigment, ink, oil, graphite and paper on canvas

Private collection

The paintings, works on paper, and projections that comprise Ellen Gallagher's *Dew Breaker* series (2015) are emblematic of the artist's intertwined approach to material and race. Since the 1990s, she has engaged with questions of transformation, using processes of accumulation and excavation to build layered works that, by challenging principles of order, rethink the aesthetic and historical contours of Blackness.

The *Dew Breaker* series (2015) is inspired by the Afro-futurist myth of Drexciya. Originally conceived by the eponymous Detroit electronic music duo in the 1990s, Drexciya is an underwater world populated by the unborn children of pregnant slaves thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. Cutting into the surfaces of her paintings, Gallagher reveals collaged elements, abstract textures, and topographic features that come to constitute her phantasmagoric subjects, which break apart the structure imposed by the paintings' gridded blue backgrounds. Hovering between figuration and abstraction, these works underscore the violent liminality of the Middle Passage, the stage of the slave trade in which captured Africans began their transformation from subjects into objects. The central figure in *Aquajujidsu* (2017), for instance, is neither fully anthropomorphic nor aquatic. Its shattered form, unencumbered by normative anatomies of race and gender, coheres and disassembles out of corporeal legibility. In the work, Gallagher reimagines the trauma of the journey from Africa to the New World, offering an alternative vision of a Black feminist future rooted in mutability and change.

—MH

**Simone Leigh**

b. 1967, Chicago, IL

***Sentinel IV*, 2020**

Bronze

Collection of Sascha Steven Bauer, New York

Simone Leigh combines premodern and contemporary materials and techniques to engage with histories of Black emancipation, feminism, and Pan-African cultural legacies. Her work spans sculpture, ceramics, social practice, installation, and video. The artist is also devoted to creating communal spaces and has staged several participatory environments in which histories and traditions of care for Black women are presented as alternatives to discriminatory practices in the United States.

In her sculpture *Sentinel IV* (2020), Leigh looks to the ceremonial ladles in Dan communities of Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These oversized wooden spoons were carved to reflect various stylistic elements of masks and figurines and presented to women as tokens of gratitude. Leigh's engagement with the ceremonial spoon also recalls Alberto Giacometti's *Spoon Woman (Femme cuillère)* (1926–27), wherein he likens the concave bowl of the Dan spoon to the womb of a woman. Combining figuration and abstraction, Leigh's figure indirectly points to a century-long debate around issues of appropriation of African culture by the European historical avant-gardes, raising questions around notions of exoticism and originality, ownership and restitution. As in her other sculptures, the facial features are simplified, and the eyes appear to be closed or reduced. And yet Leigh's sculptures are not blind: instead, their gazes look inward. This gesture recalls Édouard Glissant's notion of opacity, which posits that a subject and their identity are irreducible and can be known fully only to themselves. The result is a powerful statement of individual celebration and memorialization of Black women's labor.

—Molly Superfine

**Kerry James Marshall**

b. 1955, Birmingham, AL

***Untitled (policeman)*, 2015**

Acrylic on PVC panel with plexiglass frame

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Gift of Mimi Haas in honor of Marie-Josée Kravis

***Memento #5*, 2003**

Acrylic and glitter on unstretched canvas banner

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri

Purchase: acquired through the generosity of the William T. Kemper Foundation – Commerce Bank, Trustee

***Souvenir II*, 1997**

Acrylic, collage, and glitter on unstretched canvas banner

Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, Andover, Massachusetts, purchased as the gift of the Addison

Advisory Council in honor of John (“Jock”) M. Reynolds’s directorship of the Addison Gallery of American Art,

1989–1998

***Souvenir IV*, 1998**

Acrylic, collage, and glitter on unstretched canvas banner

Whitney Museum of American Art. Purchase, with funds from the Painting and Sculpture Committee

Kerry James Marshall’s work explores the limitations and possibilities of Eurocentric painting traditions. Trained at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he studied with the legendary African-American artist Charles White, Marshall highlights the exclusionary standards of beauty and humanity perpetuated by Western painting and elevates quotidian Black experience to the idealized realm of the grand manner.

By painting his subjects entirely in shades of black, Marshall literalizes the way in which race can homogenize and overdetermine identity. The realism of his works lies in the materiality of Blackness, expressed as pure, unmodulated color. His *Souvenir* and *Memento* series, which pay homage to the civil rights movement, incorporate glitter, commemorative posters, and domestic kitsch, adding visual and emotional texture to one of the most mythologized eras in the history of the United States. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert and John F. Kennedy watch over the central figures in both *Souvenir II* (1997) and *Memento #5* (2003). In the former, this figure is adorned with glittering wings; in the latter, she grips onto cascading strips that function simultaneously as curtains, cell bars, and markers of the decade’s passing years. In *Untitled (policeman)* (2015), a relatively sparse painting of a solitary Black police officer, the subject’s three-quarter pose infuses him with gravitas and ambivalence. Through a command of painting techniques, genres, and language, Marshall emphasizes the humanity of his anonymous figures, transforming their Blackness from a tool of objectification into a marker of compassion and dignity.

—Maya Harakawa



## Okwui Okpokwasili

b. 1972, New York, NY

### *Poor People's TV Room (Solo)*, 2017

Performance and installation with wood, plastic, raffia, motor, video projection, and light

Courtesy the artist

Performer, choreographer, and writer Okwui Okpokwasili is known for her interdisciplinary approach to questions of identity, globalized culture, and gender, which she expresses in incantatory and virtuosic performance pieces. The title of *Poor People's TV Room (Solo)* (2017)—a collaboration with designer and director Peter Born—is borrowed from Nigerian writer Okey Ndibe's novel *Foreign Gods, Inc.* (2014) and refers to an air-conditioned room in the home of a wealthy, corrupt politician, which he reserves for the poor to watch old basketball reruns on TV—his perceived form of philanthropy. In this work, Okpokwasili brings together music, dance, video, and text. During the performances that periodically activate the piece, the elevated enclosure leaves Okpokwasili only partially visible while lighting and video footage create dramatic shadows, raising questions about seeing and not being seen.

The piece references the 1929 Women's War in Nigeria and the more recent kidnappings of young Nigerian girls by Boko Haram. Okpokwasili's work attempts to rectify the elision of women who initiated the #BringBackOurGirls movement, after the viral hashtag became a tool of Western savior mentality. Similarly, noting that the Women's War—in which Nigerian women protested British colonial officials—had been suppressed in history books, Okpokwasili decided to recover the political struggles of Nigerian women and their role in anti-colonial resistance. These women would gather at a man's compound and perform disrespectful acts known as "sitting on a man"; song and physical action were part and parcel of their protest. This practice transgressed expectations that Nigerian women would be docile in the face of oppression. In *Poor People's TV Room (Solo)* Okpokwasili considers "how bodies can resonate in a space and leave a deep imprint," suggesting that dance and choreography can serve as their own kind of protest.

—MZ

## Howardena Pindell

b. 1943, Philadelphia, PA

### *Autobiography: Water (Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts)*, 1988

Acrylic and mixed mediums on canvas

Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT. The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund

Primarily known as an artist, Howardena Pindell is also a curator, educator, activist, and writer. Her artworks are inspired by Pan-African textiles and decorative arts, historical events, sociopolitical movements, and mathematics. In some of her most well-known works, Pindell cuts and sews strips of canvas together to create templates that are then collaged with thousands of amassed hole-punched chads, glitter, and other crafting remnants, a labor-intensive process that results in highly detailed abstract works.

*Autobiography: Water (Ancestors/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts)* (1988) tells a history of the transatlantic slave trade. Pindell has described this work as an effort to excavate the “guts of [her] own past,” as she recasts the story of one of her ancestors being blinded after a lashing by their enslaver. On the bottom left is a ghostly white rendition of the diagram of the British slave ship *Brookes*, which carried 609 enslaved people from Africa’s Gold Coast to Kingston, Jamaica in 1786. A red circle to the left of the body references a story Pindell has shared, to which she attributes her interest in the form of the circle: Once as a child, in either southern Ohio or northern Kentucky, Pindell and her father stopped at a root beer stand for refreshments. Indelible is the memory of the red circles on the bottoms of the mugs she and her father were given, which indicated that they were to be used by people of color only. The lower right quadrant of the piece has lines from a North Carolina slave law, under which Pindell quotes the edict “separate but equal” from the Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), in which the Court ruled that racial segregation laws were constitutional. *Autobiography: Water* is a testament to the legacy of slavery and its effects on black families, and a refusal to forget.

**Lorna Simpson**

b. 1960, Brooklyn, NY

***Night Light*, 2019**

Ink and screenprint on gessoed fiberglass

Private collection

Lorna Simpson's oeuvre spans photography, collage, performance, film, and, more recently, painting to dismantle traditional systems of representation. In her famous phototext works from the 1980s, Simpson merges the vocabularies of figuration and abstraction to problematize the status of the photograph as a direct document of reality.

*Night Light* (2019) was inspired by the story of Matthew Henson, an African-American explorer who discovered the geographic North Pole alongside the more famous white explorer, Robert Peary, in 1909. Her points of departure are vintage photographs of polar expeditions, landscapes, advertisements, and articles in *Ebony* magazine from the 1950s to the 1970s. Once the artist digitally enlarges these images, she screenprints and transfers them onto painting surfaces such as fiberglass and wood. She then collages portions of texts from various sources onto the images and paints over them with ink. In *Night Light*, Simpson interrupts the seductive vastness of the polar landscape with vertical strips of text. Simpson manipulates the opacity and iridescence of the hue, with some blues so deep they read as black or purple. This color has a specific "gravitational pull," as the artist phrases it, and she connects these works to historical blues: blue like indigo, which was harvested by enslaved people and whose profits outpaced those of sugar and cotton in the 1700s; blue like the musical blues; blue like the darkness washing over our country today; and blue like blue-black skin, what Richard Pryor called the "original black."

—MS

**Diamond Stingily**

b. 1990, Chicago, IL

Left to right:

***Entryways*, 2016**

Door with locks, bat

Collection Adam Sherman, New York

***Entryways*, 2016**

Door with locks, bat

Collection Dr. Gerardo Capo

***Entryways*, 2019**

Door with locks, bat

Collection Gabe Schulman

Diamond Stingily draws on her childhood memories to connect the specifics of her family history to larger themes of race and class. Raised on the West Side of Chicago, Stingily brings everyday objects from her community into the rarefied spaces of galleries and museums. Her sculptural works challenge misconceptions of the Black working class by attending to the strength, joy, and agency often denied to Black women.

Stingily's *Entryways* are composed of baseball bats propped up against wooden doors. The *Entryways* were inspired by Stingily's memories of her paternal grandmother, Estelle, who would keep a baseball bat at her front door for protection against would-be intruders. Because of this relationship to her grandmother, Stingily has described the *Entryways* series as a symbol for matriarchy and an emblem of female power. While the works necessarily foreground the reality of violence in some urban communities of color, by connecting multiple generations of Black women and attesting to their strength and self-reliance, they reject stereotypical narratives of racial violence that cast Black women as victims. Thus, these works are unabashedly feminist, not because of content or form but because of the deeply personal motivations that undergird their politics.

—MH

## Hank Willis Thomas

b. 1976, Plainfield, NJ

### **14,719, 2019**

Embroidered stars on polyester fabric

Courtesy the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

In his early work, Hank Willis Thomas explored photography's use alongside text in advertising, which he views as a form of propaganda. Inspired by figures such as Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava, Thomas draws from historical and personal archives. Thomas harnesses the rhetoric of branding and commodification to reflect how narratives of colonialism and slavery are at once suppressed and reproduced in contemporary popular culture. The artist now works across photography, installation, sculpture, social practice, and film to examine the exploitative relationships between capitalism, consumerism, and racism.

While Thomas's earlier textile works have utilized decommissioned prison uniforms and sports jerseys, in *14,719* (2019) he harnesses the iconography and materiality of the American flag. Each of the 14,719 stars represents a death caused by gunshots in 2018. Black men in the US are more likely to die from gun violence than by other means, and this reality has affected Thomas's loved ones, as it has so many other Black Americans. Thomas's cousin and best friend, Songha Willis, with whom he was living at the time in New York, was shot and murdered in Philadelphia in 2000. The evocation of the flag and its iconic stars brings into sharp view a critique of a patriotism that allows Americans to wield guns against fellow citizens. Setting the stage for an encounter akin to mourning in a place of worship or in front of a war memorial, *14,719* honors and grieves the thousands of lives lost to the wholly American epidemic of gun violence.

—Molly Superfine

## Kara Walker

b. 1969, Stockton, CA

### ***Book of Hours (ICBM's for HBCU's), 2020***

Graphite, ink, watercolor and gouache on paper; 10 parts  
 Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

### ***Book of Hours, 2020***

Watercolor, Sumi ink, white ink, pencil, Gofun and collage on paper; 15 parts  
 Courtesy the artist and Sikkema Jenkins & Co., New York

Since the early 1990s, Kara Walker has investigated the violent history of slavery in North America, exploring the emotional and physical trauma of the antebellum period as it continues to resonate in contemporary life. She has produced drawings, paintings, and films, as well her signature large, cut-paper silhouettes installed directly onto the wall, which surround and implicate the viewer in their horrifying narrative tableaux. Although Walker's work has often referenced the specific characters, costumes and landscapes of a particular moment in American history, her work also speaks to more universal themes of forced migration and exploitation, political and social violence, and the ways in which the historical past constantly shapes the present.

In contrast to the precision and labor-intensive nature of her cut-paper works, Walker's drawings on paper are characterized by a loose, gestural style and expressive use of diverse materials. Walker's drawings vary in size, with some appearing as studies for larger works in a variety of mediums and others as visceral responses to current events. For this exhibition, Walker has produced two new series of drawings both of which she has imagined as versions of a medieval Book of Hours. These small, personalized prayer books were common during the Middle Ages and were characterized by their intricate painted decorations. The works in these two series are enigmatic images that appear to traverse a range of time periods, from scenes of biblical and mythological origins to images of historical violence to others that suggest more recent political strife. Walker has spoken of these drawings as her own way of responding to the bombardment of contemporary media by turning towards a process of quiet, internal reflection. The highly personal nature of these images, akin to the individual collection of spiritual texts in a traditional Book of Hours, capture Walker's own response to the intersection of past and present in understanding our contemporary political moment and serve as in, her words, "an attempt to transmit, nonverbally, an experience of being."