

# Spencer Museum celebrates the 40th anniversary of History of Black Writing research center with 'Black Writing' exhibit

RIVETING ARTWORKS EXPLORE THE MANY FACETS OF TEXTS BY BLACK WRITERS

*"The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of reeducation and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front."*

— Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," *New Statesman*



COURTESY OF THE ARTIST; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Paul Stephen Benjamin, "Black is Beautiful" (2020–2023), black vinyl, black paint, performance

BY HAROLD SMITH

When I first viewed the "Black Writing" exhibition at the Spencer Museum of Art, I thought of a quote by renowned Black author Alice Walker: "Deliver me from writers who say the way they live doesn't matter. I'm not sure a bad person can write a good book."

"Black Writing" celebrates the 40th anniversary of History of Black Writing (HBW), a research center and African American studies initiative at KU that specializes in the recovery and preservation of texts by Black writers. The HBW also digitizes works by Black authors, creates curriculums on Black writing, and presents programming. HBW has promoted inclusion in higher education

for 40 years. Founded at the University of Mississippi in 1983, it was launched at the University of Kansas in 1998.

Curated by Ayesha Hardison, director of HBW and associate professor of English and Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Joey Orr, Mellon Curator for Research at the Spencer, "Black Writing" is a gripping and thought-provoking exhibition that utilizes varied forms of art to spotlight the many facets of Black writing.

"I definitely wanted to avoid an exhibit that was all text-based visual artworks," Orr said. "There are certainly some examples of that. But the exhibition really tries to include a broader spectrum of things like song lyrics, family lore, AI generation, cultural coding and methods of erasure."

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"In thinking about the broad history of Black writing, the exhibit nods toward HBW's use of digital tools and the potential evolution of writing," Hardison adds.

The selected works mesh in a way that is complementary through contrast in mediums, materials, visual aesthetic, sizes and shape.

"Black is Beautiful," by Paul Stephen Benjamin, an Atlanta-based conceptual artist and 2019 Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters and Sculptors Grant recipient, is a standout. Consisting of two large black walls with black text, the work resonates with a complex simplicity. During the pandemic, the artist engaged in a daily practice of typing "Black Is Beautiful" over and over with "stream-of-consciousness" thoughts "bleeding" into words. Turned into a graphic under the artist's direction, the words "Black Is Beautiful" appear over and over with references to Nicodemus, Western University, Wilt Chamberlain and other Kansas connections embedded into the text.

The dark black text upon a flat black surface is visually seductive. It reaches out from the surface and pulls the viewer into an ocean of black text teeming with the vibrant life of Black history, significance, power and purpose. One particular series of words, "Tell the Board of Education," stands out as both a reminder of civil rights victories won and a warning of wars on the horizon that will have to be fought.

Four works are from Bethany Collins, a multidisciplinary artist and 2022 Joan Mitchell Foundation fellow, whose conceptually driven work is fueled by a critical exploration of how race and language interact.

Her "Find" (1982), is composed of shredded American Masters paper and Pink Pearl eraser. There is a visceral physicality to this work, as well as to Collins' other works in this exhibit. All of them speak to the issues of temporality, permanence, fragility and strength of literature. The materials upon which writing is recorded are temporal and fragile, but the writing itself has a permanence and strength that transcends its materiality. Books can be banned, shredded and burned, but the message of those books is permanently etched in minds and memories. This is of particular significance to Black writing, especially when we consider the current move to ban certain books by Black authors and relating to the Black experience. It soberly reminds us why The History of Black Writing and other initiatives like it are necessary.

"Parable of the Sower: Oya's Dream," by Atlanta-based artist Fahamu Pecou, is an acrylic painting commissioned by the Spencer Museum as the KU Common Work of Art for the 2023-2024 academic year.

COURTESY OF DR. FAHAMU PECOU; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS



Fahamu Pecou, "Parable of the Sower: Oya's Dream" (2023), acrylic on canvas

With a bright yellow background, it depicts a pregnant Black woman lying on a blanket in the grass reading a copy of Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower." A statuette of the "orisha" goddess Oya is balanced on her hip.

Pecou states, "Oya, the orisha of change and transformation, serves as a powerful symbol in Ifá cosmology. Through the character of Lauren, we witness the importance of mentally, spiritually and physically preparing for the storms of life. Oya teaches us that change is not something to be feared, but rather a catalyst for growth and evolution."

The many noteworthy artworks in this exhibition include "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to Be Free," a riveting screenprint by Dread Scott, and "Not The Only One V1. Beta (N'TOO)," an assemblage by Stephanie Dinkins which includes glass, USB hubs, a speaker and wire, among other items.

Taken in its entirety, this forward-looking exhibition provokes deeper thinking upon Black writing, its importance, its impact, and the necessity of its immortality.

An additional gallery includes works from the Spencer's permanent collection by Aaron Douglas, Glenn Ligon, Adrian Piper and Betye Saar. Upcoming programming includes a marathon reading of Octavia Butler's "Parable of the Sower" and an artist talk by Fahamu Pecou. □

"Black Writing" continues at the Spencer Museum of Art on the campus of the University of Kansas in Lawrence through Jan. 7. Hours are 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday; 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. Thursday; and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Admission is free. For more information 785.864.4710 or [www.spencerart.ku.edu](http://www.spencerart.ku.edu).