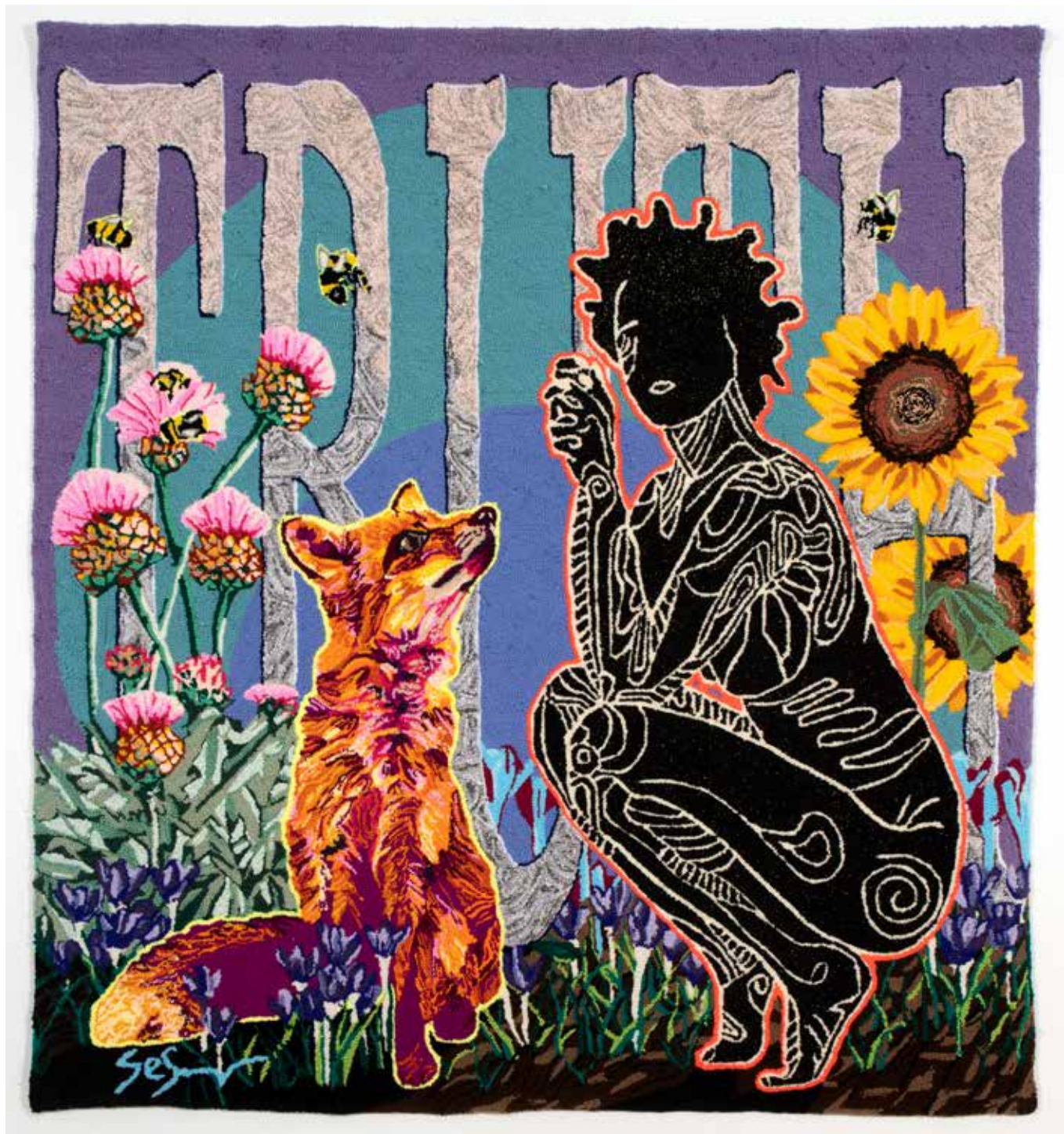


'One History, Two Versions' at the Spencer Museum of Art

CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS EXPLORE THE BEAUTY OF BLACKNESS IN THE FACE OF DEPRAVITY



Simone Saunders, "She Reveals (Truth)" (2022), hand-tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn

COURTESY OF THE BILL AND CHRISTY GAUTREUX COLLECTION, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

BY HAROLD SMITH

In war, things of beauty are reduced to chaos, their aesthetic and cultural benefit taken from us forever, leaving only memories of what was and a void where there once sat hope for the future.

Art is the opposite of war.

In art, things of beauty are created from the chaos, transforming memories of what once was and hopes for the future into things of aesthetic and cultural benefit.

These transformations come to the fore in “One History, Two Versions,” a companion exhibition to the traveling exhibit, “Emmett Till and Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See,” at the Spencer Museum of Art. Featuring works by contemporary Black artists, the show “expands on themes in the traveling (Till) exhibition including Black life, Black love, media representation, and activism,” according to the museum website, and “draws on Emmett and Mamie’s legacies to explore both historical and contemporary events of racial violence and racial justice movements.”

The titular work in this exhibition, “One history, two versions (Bullet Points),” is a striking collage screen print from 2019 by Deborah Roberts, who uses the face of a Black doll, a grayscale image of Dr. Martin Luther King’s arm, and the American flag to reference struggle, hope, homage and the vulnerability of Blackness under the constant glare of the white gaze. By surrounding the subject with empty space, Roberts speaks to the constant inner sense of oppression experienced when living under this gaze. Her inclusion of the grayscale image of Dr. King’s arm from the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial speaks to the artist’s belief in paying homage to ancestors.

“Acts of Resistance IV,” an oil painting by Botswana-born painter Meleko Mokgosi, combines delicate hues and inventive composition to effectively portray those quiet acts of activism that tilt the needle of social justice.

Space and shading create a peaceful mood in his portrayal of a seated young woman looking at her cellphone. Above her hangs a

Black Madonna and child in a round frame, while footage of apartheid protestors in South Africa plays in black and white on a small television beside her. The unbossed and unbothered demeanor of the female subject speaks to the quiet and confident determination present in Black social activism.

“I wanted to examine both formal and informal forms of resistance, placing equal emphasis on both,” Mokgosi says in his statement. “In this context, I would define resistance as any instance where a subject rejects and refuses to give in to the oppression of her spirit. Where formal resistance takes aim at the state and institutional forces, informal resistance encompasses everyday acts, both unconscious and conscious.”

In “She Reveals (Truth),” textile artist Simone Saunders, a 2020 fiber arts graduate of Alberta University of the Arts in Calgary, Canada, uses hand-tufted velvet, acrylic and wool yarn on rug warp to present an energizing portrait of Black femininity. “When I envision a textile, storytelling is my foundation,” she says. “My inspiration stems from narratives that amplify Black womanhood, belonging, and ancestorship.”

Here, a young woman, presented as an entirely black form enlivened by electric white lines that create a sense of depth, gazes confidently into the sky as she crouches in a lush garden of large flowers, plants and bees. Beside her, a curious fox sits rapt at attention. Behind them, the word “Truth” in huge letters hovers in front of a sky constructed from purple and blue color fields. By presenting the subject in black and white, Saunders differentiates her from the environment, while her vulnerable pose and close proximity to the fox prove that she belongs. She is the truth . . . in black and white.

“Black Swan,” a 2006 inkjet print by the late Terry Adkins, presents a series of labels from jazz and blues records from the time of the Harlem Renaissance. It is named after Black Swan Records, which opened in



Deborah Roberts, “One history, two versions (Bullet Points)” (2019), screen print



Meleko Mokgosi, “Acts of Resistance IV” (2018), oil, canvas

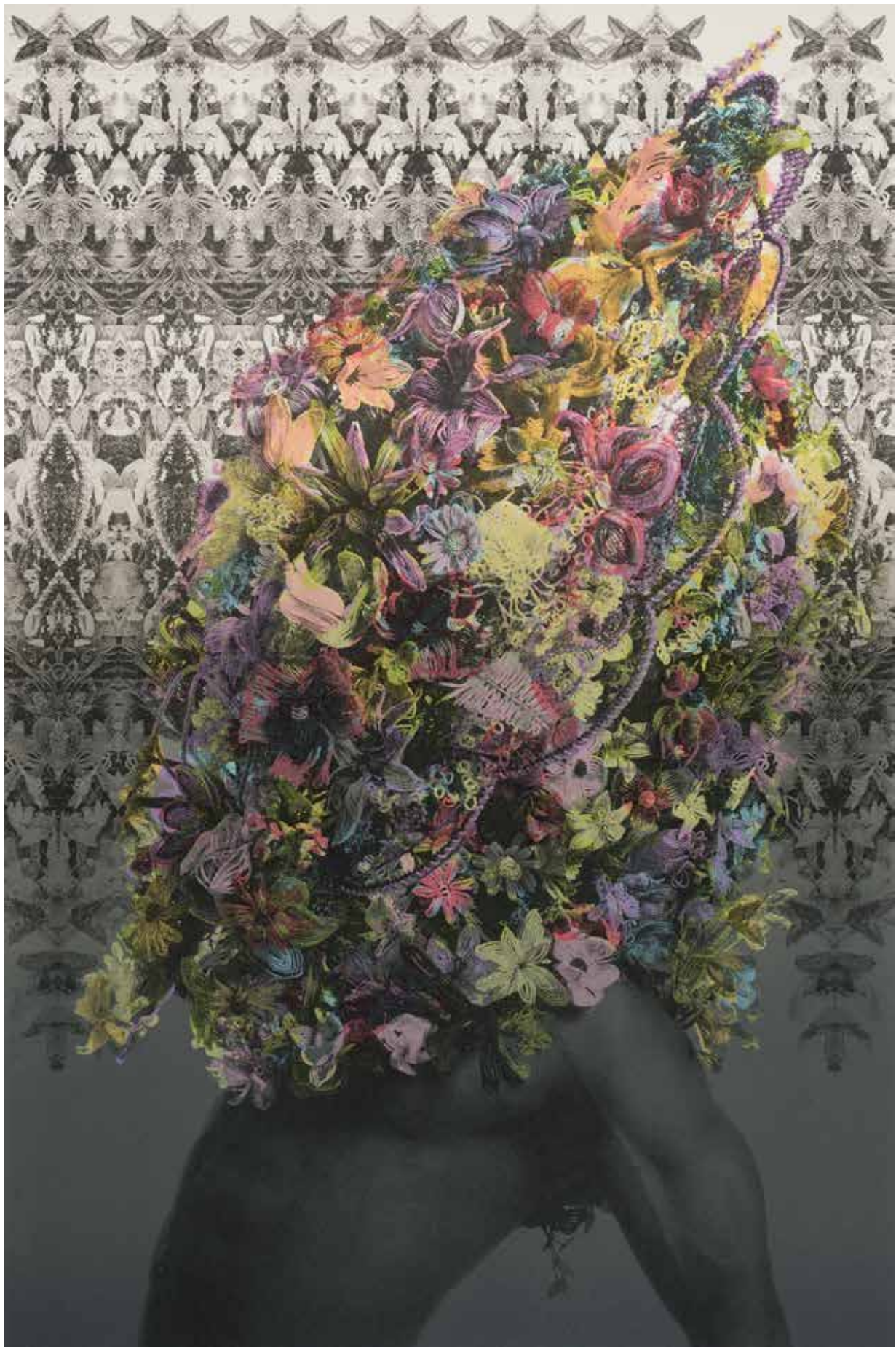


TJ Reynolds, “Emmett Till” (2022), acrylic, paper

COURTESY OF THE BILL AND CHRISTY GAUTREAUX COLLECTION, KANSAS CITY, MISSOURI

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COURTESY OF THE CHILDREN’S MUSEUM OF INDIANAPOLIS



MUSEUM PURCHASE: PETER T. BOHAN ART ACQUISITION FUND, 2020.0048, IMAGE COURTESY OF THE SPENCER MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

Nick Cave and Bob Faust, "Head Dressed" (2019), color lithograph

'Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See'

EXHIBIT AT THE SPENCER MUSEUM REVISITS THE MURDER AND ITS AFTERMATH

1921 as the first Black-owned record label. This work speaks to the existence of Black self-determination during the time of the Emmett Till murder and the rich cultural environment of Black Chicago that Till was raised in.

Adkins, a 1979 MFA recipient from the University of Kentucky, grew up in a musical home and played the saxophone and guitar. His work was influenced by jazz and blues luminaries such as John Coltrane and Nina Simone. Adkins also played in a free jazz band led by Yahya Abdul-Majid of the Sun Ra Arkestra. According to the artist, "My quest has been to find a way to make music as physical as sculpture might be and sculpture as ethereal as music is."

In addition to being a feast for the eyes, the exhibition is thought-provoking on a level that encourages further study. One work, a quilt by NedRa Bonds titled "A Kiss from the Ancestors," speaks to the development of jazz, with its African rhythms and European melody. This quilt took Bonds more than two years to create. Said Bonds, "I created these little beaded masks that were an inch square, and after I'd created about 40 of them, I decided to put them all together into a face."

While war reduces beauty to ashes, art turns ashes into beauty. The murder of Emmett Till and the racial climate surrounding it is stomach-turning in its depravity. However, this exhibition reminds us of the beauty of Blackness in the face of such depravity.

It brings forth beauty from ashes. □

"One History, Two Versions" continues at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas through June 16. 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. For more information, 785.864.4710 or www.spencerart.ku.edu.



Installation view of "Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See" at the Spencer Museum of Art

The murder of Emmett Till and its aftermath, a watershed moment in American history, is revisited in a moving, educational and hope-inspiring traveling exhibition at the Spencer Museum of Art, "Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See."

In recent years the light has been shed on Mamie Till-Mobley's brave actions in the wake of her son's murder — she insisted on an open casket so the world could see what was done to her son — and how those actions contributed to the civil rights movement. More attention is also being paid to the life of Emmett Till prior to his murder, introducing us to the bright, friendly 14-year-old whose life ended too soon.

"Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See," made possible in part by the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Maddox Foundation, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, and the Historic Preservation Fund, is not just another restating of the tragic facts.

Here, we have the story of a young American mother and her son whose lives were thrust into the national spotlight and how that young mother's protective nature led her to force the world to see what could happen to their children. Her bravery in her most vulnerable moment has inspired those who speak truth to power.

A section titled "Growing Up In Chicago" details Emmett's early years. A highlighted

text: "Fun-loving Emmett could barely wait for his Mississippi adventure," is surrounded by photographs of a smiling Emmett and Mamie, quotes about Emmett's childhood, and easy-to-read information boxes containing both well-known and not so well-known information.

A large purple sign marking the site where Emmett's body was found is also included. Vandalized with four bullet holes in 2018, it

replaced a sign riddled with dozens of bullet holes in 2016, which replaced the original marker after it was stolen. At first, a road sign among the exhibition's plethora of photographs, videos and text seems out of place. However, it serves as a clarion call, reminding us that the same hateful forces that cost Emmett his life still exist in America.

There is some very strong imagery, both visual and literary, in the exhibition, which is recommended for ages 10 and up. The iconic photograph of Emmett in his casket is available for viewing by pulling out a display card. Graphic descriptions of racial violence, along with courtroom photographs of Till's assailants celebrating their acquittal, are juxtaposed with images of his grieving family.

It is often said, "those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it." This exhibition and others like it are our first line of defense in making sure we do not make that grave mistake. — Harold Smith

"Emmett Till & Mamie Till-Mobley: Let the World See" continues at the Spencer Museum of Art at the University of Kansas through May 19. 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. For more information, 785.864.4710 or www.spencerart.ku.edu. Visit the exhibition website <https://emmetttilllexhibit.org/> to find guides for both parents and children, lesson plans for educators, reading lists and more.