

GRAY

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ARTFORUM

BEST OF 2022

Sampada Aranke on “Citing Black Geographies”



Dawoud Bey, *Untitled #4 (Leaves and Porch)*, 2017, mounted gelatin silver print, 48 x 59".

A VITAL REFLECTION of deep research, citations are meant to acknowledge an intellectual tradition or to credit scholarly expertise. They're a way of placing oneself in conversation with a community. Citational engagements are collective in form, engendering a sense that an author is not a singular authority but rather part of a transhistorical network. This kind of approach underscores the processual modes of theorizing that are at their best enlivened by the various agreements and disagreements that emerge from thinking together. This citational spirit is brilliantly mobilized in "Citing Black Geographies," curated by Dr. Romi Crawford. Crawford's skillful attention to the aesthetic nuances of Black cultural production is nothing short of graceful.



Carrie Mae Weems, *The Shape of Things (Male)*, 2022, ink-jet print, 30 x 30".

The show—which debuted this past September at GRAY Chicago and is currently on view at GRAY New York—is jam-packed with some of the most celebrated Black contemporary artists: from McArthur Binion to Nick Cave to Carrie Mae Weems. Indeed, Crawford’s predictive eye seems to have beckoned the MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” selectors’ intuition, as two 2022 awardees, Tavares Strachan and Amanda Williams, have work in the show. Three additional contributions are of particular note for me, their presence on the roster speaking to Crawford’s acute attention to expanding the sensory and disciplinary boundaries of visual art into other terrains: the Staples Jr. Singers’ brand-new EP, *When Do We Get Paid (In Full)*; a dance and movement course led by Darlene Blackburn, a faculty member of the Black Arts Movement School Modality; and a floor-to-ceiling scroll featuring Amiri Baraka’s 1970 poem “It’s Nation Time.” The practices of all the artists in the exhibition span strategies and materials, from sonic mobilizations to conceptual interventions in sculpture via the found object to meticulously handmade renderings on paper. Their works animate the question of space. As Crawford asserts, “There are some locations and territories that read obviously and overtly as ‘black space’—zones that have some connectivity to black peoples’ lives, history, and culture.” The exhibition dislocates Blackness from a kind of essential racial category that fixes Black life according to white-supremacist expectations and at the same time elucidates circumstances under which Blackness becomes the atmospheric ground that forms and informs Black and non-Black everyday life.



View of “Citing Black Geographies,” 2022. From top: Coco Fusco, *Sightings 3*, 2004; Coco Fusco, *Sightings 4*, 2004

Viewers were asked to think on multiple scales—from that of the construction of a building’s interior, to that of the making of a city, to that of the dynamics of the historical as such.

When I saw the show’s Chicago iteration, I was struck, for example, by the interplay among Dawoud Bey’s, Coco Fusco’s, and Weems’s photographs. In *Untitled #4 (Leaves and Porch)*, 2017, Bey investigates a location along the Underground Railroad. The photograph allows the viewer to reflect on the anonymity and banality of place that was required of these routes to freedom, thus troubling medium-specific expectations that a photograph offer a discernible, identifiable subject. Similarly, Fusco’s *Sightings 3*, and *Sightings 4*, both 2004, call attention to the inextricable connection between state violence and racial fixation, staging the FBI’s surveillance of ordinary Black people misidentified as Angela Y. Davis during the government’s 1970 hunt for the Black radical. Place became a currency for state actors, while their frantic search for Davis put many Black people at risk in cities nationwide. Imagine if these white-supremacist misidentifications resulted in the kinds of brutal police violence Davis herself had to endure. Black space in these images occupies the underground as it relates to the historical precedent Bey cites, an underground that is everyday in its fugitivity. Weems’s *The Shape of Things (Female)* and *The Shape of Things (Male)*, both 2022, offer a touch of humor in their observation of Malian architectural shapes as anatomical if not sensual in their inhabiting of space, while photographs from her iconic “Kitchen Table Series,” 1990, take the viewer indoors to intimate scenes of Black life otherwise kept beyond the reach of the voyeuristic eye.



View of “Citing Black Geographies,” 2022. Floor, from left: Tony Lewis, *Untitled 4 (2015–ongoing)*, 2022; Theaster Gates, *black seam on city infrastructure*, 2022.

This uptake of the relationship between interior and exterior space—between Blackness and what surrounds it—was explored in profound ways throughout the gallery in Chicago. Rashid Johnson's *Black and Blue*, 2021, flickered between inside and out in a mesmerizing filmic investigation of the artist's relationship to family, Black artistic canons, and the white scenic surrounds of the Hamptons. The question of histories and the objects that hold them threads together contributions by Theaster Gates, Tony Lewis, Jina Valentine, and Williams. In a poetic gesture, Williams lined the edges of the gallery's front walls with gold-leaf casts of tulip bulbs, a reference to the waves of speculation that seeded the transatlantic slave trade and capitalism more broadly and that continue to fuel the ongoing redlining and segregationist practices of the city of Chicago. Viewers were asked to look down, at the edges of their field of vision, to think on multiple scales—from that of the construction of a building's interior, to that of the making of a city, to that of the dynamics of the historical as such. These kinds of considerations were also at play in Valentine's update of W. E. B. Du Bois's 1900 infographics, which translate the quantitative study of Black life at the turn of the century into aesthetic objects of study. Valentine uses 2020 census data in her works, thus drawing a continuum between the infrastructural elements that affected Du Bois's world and those that shape ours today. Meanwhile, Strachan's multimedia installation *Six Thousand Years*, 2018, held pride of place—it was in almost every line of sight throughout the show. The question of knowledge as a form of infrastructure is of central concern in this work. Strachan intervenes upon the conceit of objectivity implicit in the notion of an encyclopedia, covering the walls with more than fifteen thousand entries on subjects rarely included in reference libraries.



Rashid Johnson, *Black and Blue*, 2021, 35 mm transferred to 4K video, color, sound, 7 minutes 50 seconds.

The viewer's path was impeded by two works, Gates's *black seam on city infrastructure*, 2022, and Lewis's *Untitled 4, (2015–ongoing)*, 2022. Gates's steel beam from a decommissioned Chicago Transit Authority structure would make Robert Morris blush. Materially and conceptually engaging the histories of segregation and industry on Chicago's South Side, the work puts the racialized protocols of the city literally at our feet. Lewis's floor drawing emerged from the need to protect the artist's studio from loose graphite powder. This object, with its implicitly anthropomorphic horizontality, coupled with its visible scuffs and rips, is an accumulated body that archives the residues and marks of a given place over time. Crawford's poetic placement of Gates's and Lewis's works together, juxtaposing steel and paper, gave rise to a series of infrastructural associations. The curator invited us to think through the connections between *site* (the materials needed to build a city, like a beam) and *cite* (the materials needed to construct a written sentence, like paper and graphite). She did not stop there, however, but also asked viewers to find paths between physical elements, necessarily adjusting their movements through the space to navigate around these two monumental bodies.



Jan Tichy, *Murals in 1230 N. Burling*, 2011, digital slide show. Installation view.

Let's end where the show began: with a presentation of murals from the now demolished Cabrini–Green Homes, photographed by Jan Tichy and presented as a digital slideshow. Walls projected on a wall, these crisp and complex images embodied the range of aesthetic traditions housed in Cabrini-Green's once vibrant community. Guided by Crawford's clues to the viewer to look in unconventional places, to scale her body to the objects that surround her, I craned my neck to look up and around, only to notice a stunning detail: Graffiti covered the gallery's windows, peeking into the exterior from within. Here, the outside came in, and those unnamed artists undeniably, but quietly, became participants in the show. They structured and cited the very artists, histories, and structures that compose the Black radical aesthetic traditions active in "Citing Black Geographies."

On view through December 23 at GRAY New York.

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