

Post-film conversation with Halima Taha

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Emily Bauman:

Halima Taha is a committed arts advocate, nurturing the development, documentation, and acquisition of Black visual culture. Her professional practice spans curatorial, art, advisory, appraisal, and strategic planning's to serve corporate, academic, and civic programs and audiences. She is best known for her groundbreaking bestseller collecting African American art works on paper and canvas, which in 1998 validated collecting fine art by Americans of African descent as viable assets in the marketplace. Her work was the catalyst for ushering major museums to purchase collections of African American art within the 1st 2 decades of the 21st century. Aleem's research and professional career have brought her in connect Direct connection with artists from both the exhibitions. David Driscoll, icons of nature and history. And working together, the photographers of the Kamoinge workshop and it is my great privilege to welcome you tonight. Hi Halima.

Halima Taha:

Hello Emily, thank you so much. I want to thank you again as well as Nathaniel Stein for inviting me to participate in this evening's program. In conjunction with David Driskell, icons of Nature and History, and working together, the photography of the Kamoinge workshop.

Good evening everyone. I am so happy that you have decided to come out to participate in this discussion. After seeing black art in the absence of light. And I would like to just say that there are three things that I would like to contribute to the discourse presented in Black Art: In the absence of light. And the first is that I want to talk about the basis for the fundamental challenges American artists of African descent have had in being included in museum and private collections as well as auction houses and history books. I want to expand upon that a little bit more as well as talk about the legacy of necessity or the tradition of necessity. What that means when it comes to black visual culture and the marketplace. In addition to that, the last thing I'd like to address is the marketplace. Why there has been this increased interest in black visual culture. For some people, it seems like it just came out of nowhere and that is not the case, so I wanted to provide some clarification about that with the hope that it will continue to inspire you to learn new and exciting things about yourselves through art and culture worldwide.

So to begin with, the basis for the fundamental challenge is that American artists of African descent. Is stemmed in institutional racism? Oh the big R word, but historically from the beginning of time all human beings have had cultural biases and prejudices, and even tribalism has been a factor in the way that people have perceived. One group of people over another group of people. And yet people coexisted despite whatever the opinions may have been, or the assumptions of one group of people over another. But when you take those prejudices and biases and you combine them with power. To make those cultural biases and prejudices into policies and laws that discriminate against a particular group of people that are based on those biases and prejudices, it becomes institutional racism. And it sets up a thought process and that's perpetuated and reinforced by those policies and and laws that have been set in motion. So in the United States, when some of the people in the film talked about the difficulty of being exhibited or not seeing themselves in museums or not being shown and just doing their work on their own and not being concerned about what anybody else was thinking, that's fine.

So I was talking about the the justification. I was beginning to talk about the justification for enslaving Africans. Being that Africans were subhuman, unintelligent, only good for labor and breeding, and these ideas about people of African descent continued and also impacted the way that people perceived any sort of artistic creativity or or production as something that was childlike and it didn't recognize that art fundamentally is about ideas and complex ideas, and it didn't take into account that Africans and people of African descent benefit from cerebral hemispheric symmetry, like anyone else in terms of left and right brain function, and is as makers and artists, they think critically, and they divergent thinking is looking at the endless possibilities of an idea, a medium, a texture, and a possibility. So this view for imperception to justify enslaving Africans continue to shape the perception of whether or not people of African descent could be artists or not.

So in 1897, the New York Herald stated that the Negro seems to have an appreciation for art while manifestly unable to produce it. This statement of ability influenced the perception of worthlessness of black art to systematically diminish and marginalized the social and economic value of African American art and artists. So this is the. This is the the basis for the fundamental challenges that American artists of African descent had throughout the 18th and the 19th and the 20th century, and why much of the work was not making it to the market or to the museums or in major collections. So I thought that this was an important point to raise, with a little bit more clarity. Then you know then had been presented in the film.

The other area that's important to recognize is the legacy of necessity. What does that mean? Well? I'd like to start with James Porter in 1943 he wrote modern Negro art. It was his master's thesis at New York University. There was a need to write a book about the history of Black American artists because when he was a student and a younger artist, he later would continue to be an artist and a curator and a scholar, and he was a professor at Howard

University where David Driskell was a student of his and. He was told as a young artist that when he asked why weren't the artists from the Harlem Renaissance celebrated, or why wasn't there any critical acclaim and he was told it was because black people do not have a history where they have been in this country long enough. So this was the catalyst. And and for the research for him to write the book *Modern Negro Art* in 1943 and say yes, we do have a history and this book is the is the foundation for the field of African American art history. David Driskell's are two centuries of Black American art, the exhibition and and the the publication and the film took place in 1976 and in 1976, this is now 33 years after Porter's book, and he's and he is continuing in the tradition of necessity of Porter. And saying yes, we have a history. But not only do we have a history, we have been here for 200 years. And the recognition that if Black people in the United States do not write their own history and document their successes and the triumphs and also their any aspect of their history. It won't be written, and if it is written, it will be written through the lens of disparity and disdain and not an honest view or assessment of the cultural achievements because again, in American history books the the books teach that. You know, black Americans began with slavery when they did not there. Their descendants of enslaved Africans who came from very, very sophisticated civilizations where making was an integral part of the of the society in the culture.

Continuing this tradition of necessity. 19 come. 1930 a year later, in 1978, Doctor Samella Lewis wrote the first African American art history book as the first Black Scholar with a PhD in art history and and this was a major cornerstone to the work of James Porter and David Driskell, and she received her degree in 1955. Prior to that, there had not been. A person of African descent, or a woman who studied and had earned a PhD in our history. 19 years later we have Doctor Richard Powell who wrote *Black art and culture in the 20th century* in 1997 and again, this particular book was the first book to talk about black art from an interdisciplinary perspective. Within the context of black culture and looking at the literary performing and the visual arts and how they interacted with one another and and supported the culture. And this Seminole work also comes out of the legacy of necessity to tell the stories to expose the history and the truth and to provoke thought and to also show the intellectual diversity in the styles and the ideas behind the art that makes up black visual culture.

Continuing in this tradition of necessity, we have the National Black Fine art show that took place also the same year that. Doctor Richard Powell's book was published in 1997 and the National Black Fine Art Show was created by a man by the name of Jocelyn Wainwright and Jocelyn Wainwright felt that there should be an art fair that represented artists from throughout the African diaspora, and this was a major event that took place from 1997 to 2008 in New York City at the Puck building on Lafayette St, and it was a major major event. People ascended to New York City every year, every year, few days before Super Bowl weekend to come to the National Black Fine Art show. Because under one roof it was the first time you had the opportunity to see work local regional National International works by major

artists of African descent. People were interacting with art dealers and curators, and collectors and students and other artists, and it was a major event and the same kind of disdain and criticism based or not understanding that there is a historic linear aesthetic pedigree within black visual culture, but also one that all artists share when they are looking at art from all over the world. The same criticism that Holland Kottler gave 2 centuries of Black American art that was discussed in the film briefly when. When David Driscoll was speaking with Tom Brokaw. They really had bad things to say about the show and they. They minimize the the value of the work. They diminish the value of the work and didn't look at the work in the context as they would other work that or were at other art figures, and this. This continued. But again, this this need to create an exhibition that would be for sale of works was also a part of the tradition of necessity.

And my work comes out of this tradition of necessity to collecting African American art came out. A year, a year after. Year after Rick Powell's book, but the same in a year after the National Black Fine Art show, and this book came about after having an art gallery in the 1980s in Gramercy Park. And much of the 1970s in the 80s was spent educating people about black visual culture. There were only about five books at the time about African American artists, whereas now here we are in the 1st 22 years of the 21st century, and there are thousands of. Artist monographs and African American art history books and art history books about the African diaspora, but at that time. Coming out of this tradition, what I was trying to say was yes, we have a history. What do we do with this wonderful history? Let's look at historical materialism and let's collect it. And and it represents the visual conscience of the time in which the artists live, no different than the art that has been left behind by the people of the lost city of Pompeii or pharaonic Egyptians. And or you know? Or the Mayans and the Aztecs. We have this cultural legacy that is available to be collected and written about.

So this is this is also part a very important part of how we got to this century and what you're seeing in the marketplace there wouldn't. There would be no black art in the absence of light film had it not been for the work of David Driskell. Had it not been for the work. Of James Porter, had it not been for the work of Semele Lewis or for Richard Powell and the marketplace certainly would not be where it is, had it not been for the National Black Fine art show and a publication in educational programs. In conjunction with the art show that allowed for people to learn about black visual culture, how to make connections, how to collect, how to care for the work, and then of course, because of the national. The National Black Fine Art Show and the success of collecting African American art prior to all the social media being the way it is today, it was astounding that such a book that after Six year eight I'm sorry. Eight years of being told that black people don't buy art white people don't buy art by black people and black people don't collect art by major art publishers. It took that long to be able to publish the book because again, the base, the fundamental basis for perception of value, or the lack of value I should say of black visual culture was very strong and prevalent at the end of the 20th century.

So before I move on to just briefly talking about the marketplace, I also want to point out that. The you know in this wonderful these two exhibitions, David Driskell, icons of nature and history and working together the photographs of the Kamoinge workshop. David Driskell was many different things. In addition to an artist, as many of you are aware you know he was a scholar. He was a curator. He was a historian. He was a teacher. He was a mentor. It was an incredible artist. He was a writer and a researcher and so. See you know out of a need to continue the work of David Driskell and the impact that he's had on the field. The David Driskell Center for the Study of African American Art and the African diaspora located at the University of Maryland. Excuse me. Is a very very important resource for those of you in the audience who are artists and scholars and students and collectors, and they have many of the archives online that you can access. But if you have a chance, you should visit it. Visit the center. Because there is there are letters between David Driskell and all of the artists that you saw in this film, and many of the artists who were a part of the Harlem Renaissance and throughout the 60s and the 70s and the 80s to the present. There are films and audio recordings and books, and also there is a collection of work from the 19th century to the present. That you have access to to to learn more about black visual culture. But again, the necessity for an institution like this where this kind of focus exists is why the David Driskell Center is here and they are committed to collecting, documenting and presenting African American art as well as replenishing and expanding the field.

Kamoinge, as a group, also emerged out of necessity because. Black photographers since 1963. Did not have a support system whatsoever within the world of photography, so they created their own support system and worked together and shared resources and had critiques of each other's work and pulled together as as a group. The Kamoinge exhibition clearly represents a particular hit period in the history. It's Kamoinge is 60 years old, but Kamoinge is still an active group. It's the oldest. Photography not for profit photography group in the United States and it's the only black American photography group in the United States. So Kamoinge's mission is to honor, document, preserve and represent the history and culture of the African diaspora. With integrity and respect for humanity through the lens of black photographers. So for those of you who would be interested in learning more about Kamoinge and many of the photographers who are members who are not in this exhibition you can go to Kamoinge, KAMOINGE.com to learn more.

Today black artists are looking at new ways of thinking about contemporary themes. How are they doing this? They're addressing issues of gender, sex, sexuality, immigration and trade, identity and beauty, politics and race, social justice and technology, and African American artists are combining a diverse blend of aesthetic traditions from Africa, Europe, Asia, the Caribbean, North, South and Central America, and consequently. They're attracting. A. You know a international audience of collectors who confirm that American art by artists of African descent is aesthetically and historically relevant, and they are also worthy assets and commodities.

This is what's happening now in the 21st century, but what? Why is this work so hot? There are a couple of variables, has a lot to do with curatorial themes. It has to do with what's happening in Africa. Europe, the United States. It also has to do with globalism and transnationalism and the impact of the Internet so briefly. What's going on in Africa that's affecting the market is the expansion of African cities. That's leading to an interest in Urbana T decolonisation. The rise of the middle class? There's a creative economy that's expanded as well as political stability and new museums, temporary platforms, and gallery's along with economic prosperity are are certainly cultivating a great interest in African DS Burkart, particularly in in. Nigeria in Ghana, in South Africa and in Morocco in Europe, Europe is confronting their colonial histories via African American African art and there's right wing politics and there's a crisis with their ethnographic collections. In the United States, we are dealing with. We have woke culture and the rise of a renewed black consciousness. Black lives matter. We are dealing with right wing politics, a crisis. In museology there's a tremendous amount of data sessioning of white male art masterworks from different museums where they have multiples of a particular artist so that they can try to fill their historic and aesthetic gaps in their collections. And it's important for museums because of the fact that they will not be relevant. Without works that represent the people in the United States that come from all different ethnic backgrounds, which makes up the United States and so relevant in the sense that people want to see and hear narratives that they can relate to. In addition to the aesthetics and the beauty of painting and sculpture. And there's this drive to diversify the collections and the staff, and this is the first time in history where there have been art professionals of African descent. Who were coming out of art history and curatorial programs and backgrounds, and who grew up with fine art by African American artists because their parents were. Many of the collectors that were buying work from the National Black Fine Art Show, or who were started collecting in the 1980s. At that, you know, at that time when many people had a lot of more disposable income.

There's also global shifts that are affecting this marketplace. There's the rise of the creative economy worldwide art. Is it is an asset class? There's a heightened interest in contemporary art. It auctions 19th century and old masters, or smaller segments, and there's fixation with the contemporary art by museums and the marketplace. We also need can look at globalization, transnationalism. The explosion of these art fairs and being ALS has had a tremendous impact in that sense, art has gone mainstream. Art is being used now to market cities and and and their appearing to deal with political issues and locations where cities are created around art fairs by urban planners. Art is amplifying the challenges and exploits and it's it's a product of globalism. There's an increase in this concept of border lessness and and and it's and globalization is exposing people to cultures other than their own as well as there's a demand. A democratized, a democratizing of art where anyone can see it at a museum or an art fair.

Transnational is another component to what's going on in the market and why you're also seeing more artists of African descent, and particularly many of the artists that are in the in the

film tonight. It's a result of people leaving their countries of origin and settling and working between multiple cities. It's a result of globalism, there are multiple now. There are multiple identities and allegiances that people have. There's a sense of a knowledge connectedness to different countries and cities. And there's cultural political challenges that. Collectors and artists are all impacted by, and the main thing is the challenge of the idea of a monolithic identity. This is becoming an anomaly. It's you know that people are no longer having these monolithic identities because of our transnationalism and of course we can't ignore the impact that the Internet has had on the market of the art market at large, and in particular for black visual culture. You know, social media platforms. You know, and the Internet are visually driven and are very appealing to collectors and they you know the exposure to art is possible without travel. You know even this program you know people will be able to tune in and hear this conversation. People can go on to come. Art dealer websites and museum websites and see virtual exhibitions as if they're walking through the galleries. Of course, it's nothing like seeing the work in person, but it's still for people who know what they're looking at. It's a it. It is very exciting.

There's a spread of social and political movements through the Internet. It implodes or advances racism, feminism, LGBT. I QA LGBTQIA rights. All of these are connected to the interest expressed in art and then of course with the Internet there's an emergent and immersion in virtual worlds that's increasing the drive for real experiences. Value for things that cannot be digitally generated.

So with all of this going on. How does this manifest in the curatorial themes from within the African diaspora of artists? Well, the curatorial themes revolve around identity and fashioning new of subjectivities on social issues and black consciousness. They include attaining freedom from the structures of class, gender, race, and history. They they are addressing colonial legacies and geography space in place. They're also addressing post independence and democracy and. Art specific subjects and aesthetic movements. All of these variables, combined with the excitement of work that has virtually been untapped and also being able to look at the work and make connections to other collections where you're able to fill the historic and aesthetic gaps in existing institutional and private collections is very, very exciting, and these are the variables that are important. And contrary to some of the articles that have been published, that in the last three years where there are questions like where are all the black art dealers like, they never existed. And like the you know, these major dealers who have picked up many of these artists are the same dealers and I was there to bear witness who did not show any of these artists. And when the artists would go, because you know, in the 1980s people sent slides. And they mailed their letters, and they picked up the telephone and had conversations and made appointments like that. It's nothing like the way we do Business Today, and when the artists would show up, they were told we don't show black art. Based on the color of their skin and many of these were abstract artists, and so the assumption that it was all figurative work and that black people only wanted to paint. Images of themselves, yet

the irony of this is that the marketplace is so heavily focused on the figure by black artists at this time, so you know.

But there were 43 black owned galleries in the United States in 1990. At the end of the 20th century, and there are still many in the United States that exist who were responsible for cultivating and developing the careers of many of the artists that people are just discovering. And many of the dealers in the 1980s who were on 57th St and Soho because there wasn't a Chelsea as there is now as a art district. They were not interested in showing the work they and if they showed the work it would be in some remote location or part of the city because they didn't want to be known as a gallery that showed that showed black artists. These you know this is this flip flop. Has everything to do with the fact that. The. 20th century midcareer. Many of the 20th century midcareer. Male artists, particularly and white male artists, because many of. Well, American women of European descent have also struggled in being able to be included in major museums and collections, but most of those men who have been celebrated and heralded their dead dying or the best work has already been collected. And you may notice that much of the work that people are looking at parallels. Those are those white male artists that I'm mentioning because these artists are in their 70s and 80s. And they are either. Dead or 1 foot in the grave and I hate to be so blunt but. You know the business of it is blunt and dumb, but at the same time. The artists have been very courageous in their commitment to themselves, and all artists are making art for themselves and strangers to to experience and to embrace and discover new and exciting or challenging things about themselves and the world in which they live.