

# Museum talks art, race on Martin Luther King Jr. Day

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Currier Museum of Art docent Jim Townsend invited a man named Bob to look into a black, ornate, mirror-like artwork Saturday, asking him what he saw.

Bob put his nose almost on the center oval of grey-black murano glass, peering deep into Fred Wilson's 2013 piece, *Iago's Desdemona*. As Townsend explained the Shakespearian characters Othello, Iago and Desdemona and the racial dynamics among them, Bob stared at his familiar, though much darker, reflection.

"Our self-image, thanks to this artwork provoking us and pushing us, has made our skin tone darker," Townsend said. He added of the artist, Wilson: "He's celebrating blackness – he's wanting us to maybe think why we're so uptight about skin color."

Thinking about skin color, identity and art is the idea behind "Art and Race," a focused tour series at the Currier. The first 45-minute tour was held Saturday in anticipation of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, and another is being held today at 11:30 a.m.

One more tour will be presented on Feb. 11 at 11:30 a.m. in honor of Black History Month.

Though the Currier often holds focus tours around holidays or certain times of year, this is the first year in recent memory the Currier has had an event to coincide with the civil rights-focused holiday.

But tour and volunteer manager Megan McIntyre said the museum is always looking to create dialogue, and its growing contemporary art collection is widening those topics of conversation.

"We don't have a lot of African-Americans represented in the collection, but that is something that's changing," she said. "Contemporary art is really a place that reflects the change in our country and internationally."

Saturday's "Art and Race" focused tour took place largely in the museum's Zachos Contemporary Gallery. After gazing into the darkened mirror of *Iago's Desdemona*, Townsend, the docent, led a half-dozen participants over to *And One*.

The photograph, created by Hank Willis Thomas in 2011, depicts two black men jumping up to dunk a basketball. To the left of the image, a noose hangs down. The Currier just acquired the work this year.

Townsend contrasted the two elements of identity that the image represented. The “love and even worship” that comes with being a sports star, and then the history of being black in America.

“Utter violence,” Townsend said. “There are (recorded) lynchings in every state in America.”

“It’s okay to be horrified by it,” he said.

McIntyre said the Currier hopes to create a space to have tough conversations about challenging topics, such as racism.

“We have to kind of see where our audience wants to take it,” she said. “We’re trying to open them up and not always have them be safe.”

Docents usually take the temperature of their tour participants to guide the conversation. Townsend did this at the beginning of his tour when he led his audience into a small corner in front of Jacob Lawrence’s *Playroom*.

The 1957 egg tempera painting depicts a playroom in fractured, flat shapes and limited colors. Given the kaleidoscope-like quality of the piece, Townsend invited interpretations from his audience.

“Look and see what the artist has to tell us,” he said.

People saw shadows, children playing, even a doll that resembled a toy from one woman’s childhood that was half white-skinned, half brown-skinned.

The woman said her parents were moving from Concord, N.H., to Athens, Ga., at the time.

“They didn’t want me to be afraid of the black culture,” she said.

Another aspect of the dolls in Lawrence’s painting looked familiar – one was missing a head. McIntyre noted that any child who played with a Barbie doll probably had this experience, too, but the painting takes on additional meaning.

“Here it takes a really poignant message – the dolls start to play out the racial tension,” she said.

Not all the artworks in Saturday’s tour were so somber. Townsend led the group to a 2005 work called *Rotunda Unwound*, by Sam Gilliam. It consisted of a massive piece fabric draped across the wall, brightly colored with acrylic paint on muslin cloth.

One tour participant thought it might be a rainbow flag. Townsend suggested the shape resembled a happy face.

McIntyre said the ambiguity of contemporary art is what makes it so great for creating open dialogue among museumgoers. Thinking of the ideas evoked by *Rotunda Unwound*, McIntyre later said, "It's a great weekend to celebrate the idea of acceptance and the vision of the future Dr. King had, right now."

## **Interpreting community**

In addition to expanding its collection to represent a wider set of identities, McIntyre said the Currier is trying to create a space where the whole New Hampshire community – people of all races, ethnicities, ages and socioeconomic backgrounds – feel welcome.

Saturday's "Art and Race" tour participants were noticeably from just one race demographic, but McIntyre said she works in the museum with 7,000 students each year from Concord, Manchester and Nashua, introducing art to a diverse range of students.

"I love seeing kids who are representing Manchester today say what they have to say about art," she said.

McIntyre said by doing these school programs, the Currier aims to make fine art feel accessible as a resource to all.

"New Hampshire is a changing state – I think we're really trying to reflect that in our collection and in our programs," she said.

McIntyre said this inclusion goes beyond race. All of the art pieces discussed Saturday pushed viewers to contemplate identity, including a new, emerging facet: our digital footprint.

Townsend ended the "Art and Race" tour in front of Rafael Lozano-Hemmer's digital shadowbox called *1984x1984*. When audience members stood in front of the large screen on the wall, their forms were caught by a surveillance camera and then outlined in "1984" on the screen.

A random scattering of other numbers – Google Earth photographs of people's home addresses – surrounded them.

"We are all willing to put ourselves out online," McIntyre noted for the crowd. "It becomes this additional layer of identity."

She later added, "We use the chance every day for art to be a place where we talk about things." McIntyre said the Currier endeavors to be a place where more timely topics are represented and discussed.

"I think this is an ongoing conversation," she said.

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