

Gilcrease brings landmark African-American art collection to Tulsa

By James D. Watts Jr. Tulsa World
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Claude Clark's "Self Determination" is part of an exhibit at Gilcrease. COURTESY/Reis Birdwhistle

Over the past 35 years, Kerry and C. Betty Davis have worked to fill their Atlanta home with more than 400 works by African-American artists.

The couple's collection includes pieces by such well-known artists as Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence and Elizabeth Catlett, alongside paintings and sculptures by up-and-coming young artists.

Now, an exhibit drawn from the Davis collection will go on display for the first time, as Gilcrease Museum hosts "Memories & Inspiration: The Kerry and C. Betty Davis Collection of African American Art."

The exhibit will feature 62 works from the couple's collection, which cover about a century of artistic expression, from the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s to the present day. It was organized by International Arts & Artists, Washington, D.C.

"We have worked with this company in the past, and this exhibit first caught our eye about two and a half years ago," said Laura Fry, senior curator and curator of art at Gilcrease Museum.

"The Gilcrease collection has only a small number of works by African-American artists, although we do have a good deal of archival material dealing with African-American history," she said. "But Gilcrease calls itself an institute of American art and history, and we cannot tell the full story without including the African-American story."

Fry said there was some consideration about bringing this show to Tulsa in conjunction with the centennial of the Tulsa Race Massacre, but the museum would likely be in the midst of a comprehensive renovation and expansion project through much of 2021.

"We decided, rather than focus on that tragic event, to use this exhibit as a way to celebrate the accomplishments and vitality of African-American art, history and culture," Fry said.

The Davises do not fit the common stereotype of "art collector." Kerry Davis is a retired postal worker, while Betty Davis is a former producer for TV news shows.

The couple focused their collecting on gathering and preserving a wide range of art that presents a highly diverse look at African-American art.

"Their collection covers at least 100 years, and a good number of the artists represented in their collection are still alive and working," Fry said.

She said Gilcrease wanted to find ways to connect the exhibit more directly to Tulsa audiences and asked Quraysh Ali Lansana, an award-winning poet and educator and a current Tulsa Artist Fellow, to serve as guest curator.

“I had been meeting with the people at Gilcrease to discuss some programming ideas that might help attract more African-Americans to the museum,” he said. “Laura brought this exhibit to my attention, and I immediately agreed to take part.”

Lansana, along with members of a creative ensemble he helped to establish called the Tri-City Collective, wrote the texts for the information panels that will be on display with the art.

“We worked to create the themes that are used to help determine how best to arrange the art for display,” he said.

The group also created a series of texts called “Gateways to Tulsa,” which take certain images in the exhibition as a starting point to discuss issues dealing with aspects of Tulsa’s deeply troubled history.

“It’s about the thoughts that a particular work of art might trigger and making a connection between that work’s subject matter, or period of creation, and something that relates more directly to Tulsa,” Lansana said.

For example, Lansana said, a work by James McMillan titled “Old Jessie’s Legacy” prompted a piece about African-American slavery among the American Indian tribes relocated to Oklahoma, while Calvin Burnett’s “Race Riot” is paired with a text explaining that one reason the 1921 north Tulsa conflagration was termed a “riot” was so that insurance companies could deny reimbursement to any whose property was destroyed.

Lansana said “Memories & Inspiration” is a landmark exhibit for Tulsa and Gilcrease Museum for several reasons.

“I believe this is the first major show of African-American art that Gilcrease had ever presented,” he said. “And that is significant because Gilcrease is the city’s museum, and it is located in Gilcrease Hills, which is a predominantly African-American neighborhood.

“I’m grateful Gilcrease had the foresight to bring this exhibit to town, so that the black community of Tulsa can have the experience of seeing themselves represented in the art on the walls of this city’s museum,” Lansana said. “That representation is vitally important for our children, our elders, for people of all ages.”

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Exhibit

"Memories & Inspiration: The Kerry and C. Betty Davis Collection of African American Art"

Friday, Jan. 24, through July 26, at Gilcrease Museum, 1400 N. Gilcrease Museum Road

Admission: \$8. 918-596-2700, gilcrease.org.

Collector's talk

Gilcrease Museum will host Kerry Davis, who with his wife C. Betty Davis amassed the works of that are part of the exhibit "Memories & Inspiration: The Kerry and C. Betty Davis Collection of African American Art," in a special discussion titled "Black Collectors: For, By and About Us," about how black collectors shape the way that African American art is appreciated, understood and valued.

The event will be 11 a.m. Saturday, Jan. 25 at the museum, and is free with regular museum admission.

A meet-and-greet session with the speakers will begin at 10:30 a.m., and light breakfast fare and refreshments will be provided.

Joining Davis in the discussion will be Amalia Amaki, an artist, curator and writer; and Quraysh Ali Lansana, a poet, educator and Tulsa Artist Fellow who served as guest curator for the exhibit.

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