



Marc Bernier

Highlights from Harlem

Hefty exhibit draws future path for African Diaspora museum

By Charles Desmarais

Kicking off all the hoopla of Fog Week, with its dueling art fairs and spate of opening parties for gallery exhibitions, San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora struck a serious note with its celebration of a colleague museum.

"Black Refractions: Highlights From the Studio Museum in Harlem," on view through April 14, is a remarkable show, with many examples of works by top artists from across the U.S. and beyond. It is also a record of artistic success in an environment that might not, at first, have seemed auspicious.

Unlike MoAD, which was born as the flashy byproduct of a political and real estate deal, the Studio Museum has its roots in a second-floor space next door to a garment workers' sweatshop. Last year, as it observed its 50th anniversary, it broke ground on a new



Ken Allen Studios / Jack Shainman Gallery, N.Y.

Top: Kehinde Wiley's untitled work is in the S.F. show. Above: Also featured is "Lawdy Mama" by Barkley L. Hendricks.

building, its \$175 million capital campaign substantially complete.

That financial maturity came along with a blossoming of the museum's efforts to support artists of African heritage and their audiences. Over those years, the Studio Museum has shown and collected the work of promising artists, often quite early in their careers. The happy result is that such major figures as Mark Bradford, Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas, Kehinde Wiley and the up-and-comer Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, are represented by key works — works of art, that is, that round out the story of their development and that today could not be easily afforded by even a large museum.

Bradford is represented by a large, pale abstraction incorporating myriad delicate leaves — the hair perm end papers he used in his job as a stylist before his meteoric rise as an artist.

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‘Black Refractions’ collection in S.F.

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Marshall’s 1986 painting “Silence Is Golden” is an early example of his signature depiction of extremely deep skin tones, which impart to his African American figures a magical combination of obsidian-solid presence and near-invisibility. Likewise, Thomas, Wiley, Yia-dom-Boakye and many others were brought into the collection — often at the same time they were artists in residence at the museum — when their work had just surpassed the cusp of maturity and they were fully on their way to positions of influence and a secure place in the history of art.

The size of MoAD’s galleries required a fair amount of trimming from a larger selection touring the U.S., but with 63 works by 51 artists, the show is a substantial survey of the New York museum’s collection. In addition to the art by mid-career stars, there are superb examples of sculpture and painting by long-established artists like Chakaia Booker, Beauford Delaney, Barkley L. Hendricks, Stanley Whitney, Jack Whitten and many others.

MoAD has made much of this presentation, with a public relations push and series of previews and tours for visiting curators and collec-

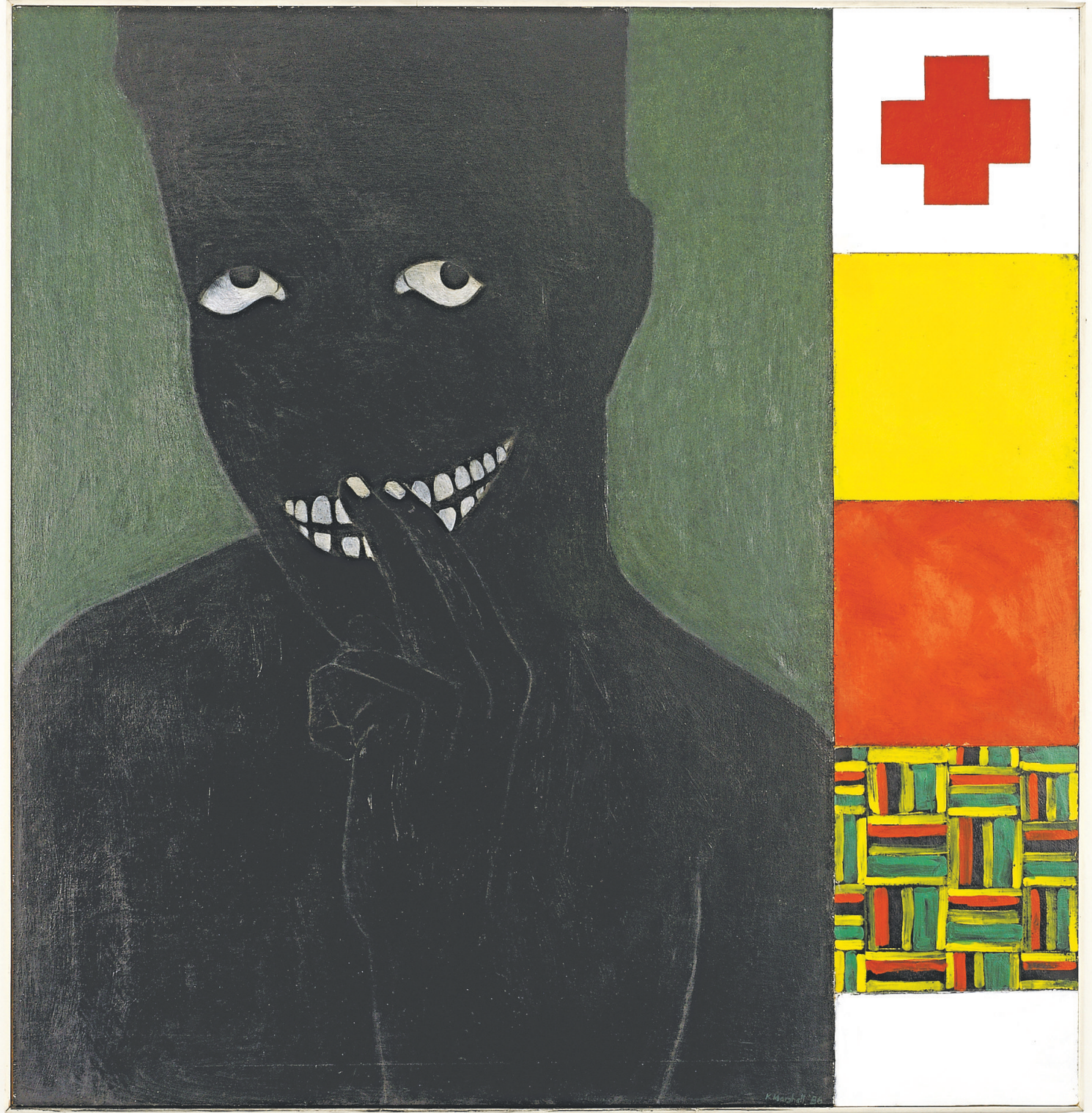
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tors. That is appropriate, as the show is a major effort with a solid catalog, and the museum is the first of six venues nationally to host this collection.

One might hope that it also signals the San Francisco museum’s aspirations, at a crucial moment in its own history. While “Black Refractions” is hardly MoAD’s first weighty artistic exercise — there have been many fine exhibitions in recent years — the museum has contented itself to be primarily a shell, a hall for presenting the work of other institutions. With a staff of just 12, that is understandable (comparisons are difficult, as there are different models of management, but the Studio Museum apparently has five times that number).

It’s not only a question of scale, however, but of program. Regardless of their relative size, the Studio Museum is the *kind* of institution MoAD must one day eventually become if it is to take a leadership role in the Bay Area and beyond.

That means setting a unique agenda, not just following someone else’s outline. It means original research and bold curatorial choices. It



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Kerry James Marshall’s “Silence Is Golden” is among the Studio Museum pieces showing at Museum of the African Diaspora.



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Zalika Azim

The exhibit includes Beauford Delaney’s “Portrait of a Young Musician” (1970), left, and “Panthera” (2002) by Mickalene Thomas, above.

“Black Refractions: Highlights From the Studio Museum in Harlem”: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Wednesday-Saturday; 12-5 p.m. Sunday. Through April 14. Museum of the African Diaspora, 685 Mission St., S.F. 415-358-7200. www.moadsf.org

means establishing the deep ties to artists and community that the Studio Museum created by programs like its

artist-in-residence program. It means defining the kind of long-term vision that is symbolized and made concrete by, say, commitment to a permanent collection.

The present moment is a challenging one for MoAD, as it seeks a new director to extend the success of the energetic Linda Harrison, who has moved on to the much larger Newark Museum. It is also, though, a

time of exciting opportunity. The field of African American curators and administrators with strong art credentials and leadership talents has never been so robust, and the mission of culture-specific museums never so widely respected.

The world doesn’t need another Studio Museum, and couldn’t replicate that solidly grounded institution in any case. But the Bay Area can

very much benefit from a vigorous and engaged Museum of the African Diaspora, and this exhibition and its accompanying catalog can help to show the way.

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