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At the Studio Museum in Harlem, 4 Shows Engage a Cultural Conversation

BY MARTHA SCHWENDENER JANUARY 7, 2016

For nearly five decades, the Studio Museum in Harlem has served as a cultural repository, reflecting the ruptures, shifts and spectrum of experiences for artists of African descent. Its current grouping of shows, culled mostly from the museum’s permanent collection, echoes this landscape, looking backward and forward. The main exhibition, “A Constellation,” includes the work of 26 artists and focuses on themes of abstraction, the figure and the history of the African diaspora. “Black: Color, Material, Concept” continues the conversation around blackness initiated by Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of the museum, who introduced the term “post-black” into the cultural conversation almost 15 years ago with the exhibition “Freestyle.” In the basement, a sculptural installation by Marc Andre Robinson weaves together formalism with black cultural history, while another, “Lorraine O’Grady: Art Is ... ” offers a fantastic exhibition of photographs documenting Ms. Grady’s performance piece during the 1983 African-American Day Parade, in which she skillfully weaves together art, activism and participation.

Two of the first works in “A Constellation,” organized by Amanda Hunt, an assistant curator at the Studio Museum, are a geometrically abstract painting by Al Loving, “Variations on a Six-Sided Object” (1967), and a figurative sculpture, “Mother and Child” (1993), by Elizabeth Catlett. These two poles of 20th-century American art — abstraction and figuration — also signify the African-American perspective on the movements, as articulated by these two revered (now deceased) artists. They raise questions like, Is there such a thing as black abstraction? (An issue also addressed in an exhibition of Stanley Whitney’s paintings at the Studio Museum last year and in an Alma Thomas retrospective opening at the Tang Museum upstate next month.) They also ask, What does it mean in art to represent bodies that have been marked as property and by racist violence?