30 Americans
New Britain Museum of American Art • New Britain, CT • nbmaa.org • Through October 30, 2022

Installed for aesthetic impact and engagement under 16' ceilings and throughout three connected galleries, 30 Americans at the New Britain Museum of American Art (NBMAA), presents artwork by contemporary Black makers from the collection of the Rubell Museum in Miami, Florida. The NBMAA exhibit is curated by university-affiliated scholars, who also self-identify as of African descent.

This major exhibit includes Jean-Michel Basquiat, Mickalene Thomas, Kara Walker, Hank Willis Thomas, Kehinde Wiley, and the figurative expressionist Robert Colescott, whose dazzling, eroticized painting parodies America's racial fault line.


Kehinde Wiley's monumental 9 x 9' Equestrian Portrait of the Count Duke Olivares is modeled after an iconic Diego Velazquez hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Wiley's re-make presents a youthful Black subject assuming the role of military general atop a white steed. He is dressed in khakis, sneakers, and a red hoodie, depicting a baseball player for the Negro Leagues. A three-quarter profile emphasizes the youth's backward glance, as if Wiley's subject is asking, "What's up with you?"

Hank Willis Thomas' digital C-print Branded Head chillingly re-contextualizes Nike's universally recognizable swish logo, from fashion brand coveted by celebrities to the history of Black enslavement, and "branding" as a sign of ownership.

Artworks in the third gallery include a wall-length Kara Walker, Camptown Ladies, the artist's black silhouettes recounting the ambiguities of antebellum life, and two Nick Cave Soundsuits, one glowing with beads and flowers and the other resembling a tropical songbird. Both acknowledge traditions of adornment in African-inspired cultures.

“This sculptural form,” Cave writes, “creates a camouflage, masking and forming a second skin that also conceals race, gender, and class, forcing one to look without judgment.” As an embodiment of the best of what we can be, Cave’s unique artwork transcends these boundaries in celebration of the creative impulse.

—Susan Rand Brown