

# The Boston Globe

## MUSEUMS

### A director confronts ‘glaring statistics’ in her museum’s collection

By **Diane Bair and Pamela Wright** Globe Correspondent, Updated December 18, 2020, 2:53 p.m.



Min Jung Kim is director and CEO of Connecticut's New Britain Museum of American Art. G. L. KOHUTH/COURTESY NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Min Jung Kim, director and CEO of Connecticut’s New Britain Museum of American Art, is a first-generation immigrant, born and raised in Seoul. She came to the United States to attend Wheaton College and later worked with institutions including the Guggenheim and the Louvre. She served as deputy director of the Eli and Edythe Broad Art Museum at Michigan State University before joining the New Britain Museum of American Art five years ago. We caught up with Kim at the museum last month to talk about her views on American art, the museum’s new 2020/20+ Women initiative, and her overall vision for the institution — established in 1903, NBMAA was the first museum in the country dedicated solely to American art.

**Q.** How do you think your background influences your work at the museum?

**A.** I have come to understand and embrace the American dream, one that I could scarcely have imagined growing up in Korea amid social and political unrest of the 1970s. I know what a privileged and rare position I hold. According to demographic surveys of US art museum staff conducted by the Mellon Foundation and the Association of Art Museum Directors in 2019, people of color represent less than 12 percent of museum leadership in this country. I am part of the 3 percent of American museum leaders who are Asian.

We unfortunately see these racial and ethnic disparities in the scarce numbers of artists of color represented in most museum collections and exhibitions as well. Knowing this, for an institution like the New Britain Museum of American Art, I believe there is an obligation to reflect the full breadth of diverse American voices, perspectives, and experiences — not only because they signify a truer representation of America through the changing demographic shifts of our country, but also as a more accurate reflection of the very communities in which we live and for whom we serve.

**Q.** How would you define American art?

**A.** In many ways, American art defies a succinct definition. Rather it can be messy, complicated, and is certainly ever-evolving. Though demographic shifts continue to change the face of this nation, we have yet to reflect these trends in the art that is being shown and collected in our museums. A continuous recalibration is needed as we present the narrative of American art and our national identity. At the end of the day, this museum is a reflection and sum of innumerable cultural identities, as one that is best told by the inclusion of more artists who are Native American, Latin American, African-American, Asian-American, and Arab-American. Or, simply put, All-American.

**Q.** NBMAA recently launched the yearlong 2020/20+ Women initiative to address the underrepresentation of women in the art industry. Tell us about it.

**A.** In many ways, we launched the 2020/20+ Women initiative to face, head on, these glaring statistics including in our own collection. Included among the roughly 8,700 artworks in the NBMAA collection are great works by Mary Cassatt, Georgia O’Keeffe, Kay Sage, and Cindy Sherman, among others. But in the final tabulation, only 17 percent of the works are by female-

identifying artists, of which less than 1 percent are by Black women, and even fewer by Native American, Latin American, and Asian-American women.



Kara Walker's "Alabama Loyalists Greeting the Federal Gun-Boats," from the 15-print series "Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)." KARA WALKER (CUSTOM CREDIT)/COURTESY NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Now and going forward, our objective is to invest in, and celebrate, the value of our diverse community as a major focus and priority through collection development, exhibitions, and programming, with a greater emphasis on subjects of race, gender, and justice. We are committed to acquiring more works by women artists. That process has already begun. The acquisition of Kara Walker's [15-print series] "Harper's Pictorial History of the Civil War (Annotated)," helped launch the first exhibition of the 2020/20+ Women series. Ms. Walker's work explores the power of art to address racism, violence, memory, and historical trauma. In the next few weeks, months, and years to come, more work by women artists will be added to the NBMAA collection.

## **NEW BRITAIN MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART**

The museum remains open. Tickets must be purchased online in advance. 56 Lexington St., New Britain, Conn.

Kara Walker's 15-print series can be viewed online at [www.nbmaa.org](http://www.nbmaa.org).