Exhibition Review: "A Selection of African American Art and Artists' Books" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Watson Library

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Ongoing attempts to redress critical omissions and gaps in collections can feel superficial in relation to the brutal histories of cultural heritage institutions. Nevertheless, efforts to rectify the record and identify key artists, particularly those from African American communities, are necessary steps towards reparative and liberatory collection practices. Such collection efforts encompass publications that highlight African American art and artists. These publications are a rich, vital component of the ecosystem that operated independently of dominant galleries and museums, creating a unique record of African American artists and cultivating space for the celebration of works that would otherwise have been missed.

Following the murder of George Floyd at the hands of police officers in May 2020, as well as ongoing police brutality that targets African American communities, major institutions like The Metropolitan Museum of Art committed time and resources to enhance their collections and specifically uplift the work of African American art and artists. Recognizing and amplifying pieces by individuals historically and intentionally marginalized is an ongoing process that won't end with the acquisition of eight hundred publications that highlight their work—but it's a much-needed start. "A Selection of African American Art and Artists' Books" is a digital record of the exhibition that was on display at The Met's Watson Library between October 1, 2021 through April 30, 2022. Featuring monographs, exhibition catalogs, periodicals, zines, and artists' books by and about African American art and artists, the online exhibit is related to and critically links to the Index of African American Artists (IAAA), a database of over 600 African American artists featured in the museum's collections from the 17th century to the present.

Both the IAAA and the digital exhibition are excellent sources for any researcher seeking to get acquainted with the breadth of African American arts via the Met's collections. Scrolling down the exhibit web page or toggling between objects that can be selected for a closer look, the site itself is easy to navigate. It is also a visual delight, with covers of these publications as a welcome entry point for future inquiry. Whether it's intricately patterned quilts by Rosie Lee Tompkins, portraiture by Benny Andrews, figure drawings and paintings by Laylah Ali, or sculptural works by Nick Cave, viewers can preview covers of books about these artists and

subsequently use that information as a starting point for further research. Clicking on an image yields a pop-up window that showcases the object and a descriptive label. Using the "View Full Object Record" feature leads to a more comprehensive details regarding the object's provenance and accession number. Researchers using the digital exhibit and the museum's online index—which gather works from the museum's collections that are by and about artists of African descent who either lived, worked, or studied in the United States, Mexico, Canada, and the Caribbean—can get a fuller understanding and appreciation of the ways these artists might have been in conversation with each other, whether in the same era or across generations.

Due to restrictions in gaining access to rare or limited edition African American artists' books, some images featured in the digital exhibit are small and cannot be enlarged due to copyright regulations. For instance, the rich colors of the book *Tenderness* by Khari Johnson-Ricks are visible online, but not much else is known about the book through the label and thus, the thumbnail image of the book is a tantalizing invitation. In such instances, it would be helpful to link to other online resources, especially if the artist is active and alive. Opportunities to link contemporary artists' books acquired by the museum with resources from other booksellers and/or art spaces might be an area of development for future iterations of this exhibit.

African American bibliographic description is a generative area for thinking about and beyond the parameters of artistic creation that has been canonically limited. Access to histories about a wider variety of creators and agents allows us all to better understand, critique, and consider ways to transform systems that have upheld singular stories about who makes and frames art in America. For this review, I chose to feature the cover of Delita Martin's *Conjure*. It is a catalog from a 2021 exhibition of Martin's that had the same name. The Met's label describes the book as filled with full color monoprints of Martin's that center Black women, depicting them as "powerful, mystical, and magical beings in an abstracted spirit realm." The cover print, now rendered as a jpeg file, captivates me, makes me wish I could see its texture on the page more closely—a great reason to make an appointment at the Met's reading room to see it for myself. While it would be glib to suggest that this online exhibit of artists' books alone is transformative, I want to consider more closely the possibilities that such assemblages of artists' books and their digital remnants could hold for us as we continue to learn about and appreciate the complexity of works by African American artists.
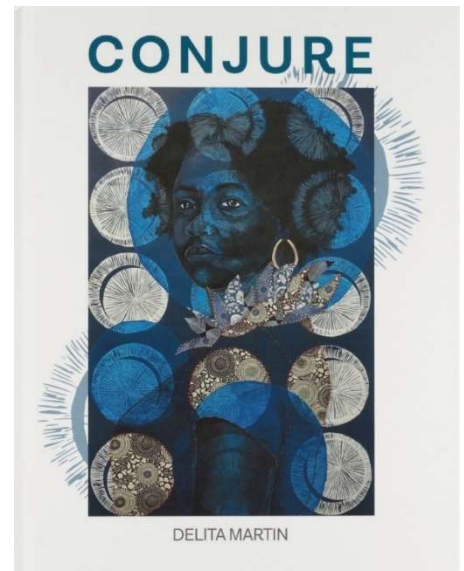
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