

ARTS ENTERTAINMENT &gt; VISUAL ARTS

# 'Black Bodies, White Spaces' features some of the most important living Black artists

Ambitious Dallas exhibition announces the arrival of the Green Family Art Foundation.



Amy Sherald's "High Yella Masterpiece: We Ain't No Cotton Pickin' Negroes" is among the works in the "Black Bodies, White Spaces: Invisibility & Hypervisibility" exhibit, which is on view through Jan. 27 at the Green Family Art Foundation in Dallas. (© Amy Sherald. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.) (Kevin Todora)

By Darryl Ratcliff

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**"Black Bodies, White Spaces: Invisibility & Hypervisibility"** is a group show of contemporary Black artists unlike any that I've seen in a gallery space in Dallas.

Curated by London-based Aindrea Emelife at the Green Family Art Foundation, it's filled to the brim with large paintings by many of the most important living Black artists, including Nina Chanel Abney, Amy Sherald, Derek Fordjour, Jordan Casteel, Deborah Roberts, David Hammons and Dallas-based Jammie Holmes, among many others.

The works feature various iterations of the Black body. Visitors enter a kaleidoscope of painting styles and perspectives that is a master class of not just identity but also the variety of painterly techniques being deployed by artists across the world.

The exhibition title is inspired by the 1952 book *Black Skin, White Masks* by French philosopher Frantz Fanon. The book applies historical critique, psychoanalysis and personal experiences to the complex ways that identity is produced, particularly Blackness.

Fanon writes: "A normal Negro child, having grown up in a normal Negro family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact of the white world." In a way, this points at the perils and the promise of Black artists and the Black group show inside a white-owned or -managed institutional space, and even the more mainstream art world at large.



The "Black Bodies, White Spaces: Invisibility & Hypervisibility" exhibition draws together an impressive array of Black artists. (Kevin Todora / Green Family Art Foundation)

Black art is normal until viewed through the prism of whiteness, which makes it, whether it is the artists' intention or not, become political.

## A wealth of talent

For curator Emelife, the 1974 *Untitled* piece by Hammons is foundational to unlocking the rest of the show. Hammons pressed his own body on the paper and then covered it in pigment, creating a faded, almost haunted image of a sad clown ghost in star-spangled jeans that feels like the visual metaphor for the Sunken Place. Yet the paintings in the exhibition, most of them created since 2010 and many of them in the last few years, ripple with confidence and dignity — anxiety mixed with pride.

Joy Labinjo's 2021 *You can ask me all the questions and I'll tell you the truth about the boys in blue* depicts a Black man in a suit and tie, holding hands with his son while carrying his backpack and crossing a street while a British police officer watches them.

The father and son are locking eyes, with the son in particular looking happy and oblivious, the father, protective. This image of a Black father involved in his son's life is fraught with an everyday interaction with police. For many Black people, that's a difficult conversation instead of a banality.



For his 1974 piece "Untitled," artist David Hammons pressed his own body on the paper and then covered it in pigment, creating a faded, almost haunted image that feels like the visual metaphor for the Sunken Place. (© David Hammons) (Kevin Todora)

This notion of dignity as resilience is echoed in Sherald's 2011 *High Yella Masterpiece: We Ain't No Cotton Pickin' Negroes*, which features two Black men in white tuxes and aquamarine vests and ties, holding pink cotton candy on a yellow-orange background.



Joy Labinjo's 2021 painting "You can ask me all the questions and I'll tell you the truth about the boys in blue" depicts a Black man and his son crossing a street while a British police officer watches them. (© Joy Labinjo. Courtesy of the artist and Tiwani Contemporary.) (Kevin Todora)

The men, elegant in attire and demeanor, gaze defiantly at the viewer, as the artist invites us to think through colorism and the complicated legacies of slavery. On some plantations, lighter-skinned enslaved people, who were often children of rape, did housework, while darker-skinned slaves picked cotton in the fields. So the visual joke of cotton candy instead of cotton, and also an announcement of a break from the labor and mindset of slavery, is complicated, indeed.

It is impossible to write about every great painting in this show, but I particularly enjoyed Ludovic Nkoth's *Holding on to Hope* (2020). The nude's skin ripples and changes colors as if his body were a galaxy, which was also a feature on the face of the towering *Steve Mekoudja* (2019) by Amoako Boafo.

Barkley Hendricks' *Passion Dancehall #1* is a beautiful depiction of Black joy and passion, as two figures grind on each other, and the details of the woman's hair, jewelry and nails are stunning.

Finally, the epic painting *Ancestors of Ghenghis Khan with Black Man on horse* (2015-17) by Henry Taylor is just as much about the vibe as it is the narrative. With some figures obscured, some sketched, it includes a Black Jesus figure in the middle, along with horses, a prison, cotton and a graduation cap. There is so much movement in the piece that it's like a dream sequence of Black anxiety and history.



The epic painting "Ancestors of Ghenghis Khan with Black Man on horse" (2015-17) by Henry Taylor is like a dream sequence of Black anxiety and history. (© Henry Taylor. Courtesy of the artist, Blum & Poe and Hauser & Wirth.) (Kevin Todora)

## The collection

These paintings all belong to the Green Family Collection, established by Eric and Debbie Green and now also overseen by their son Adam, who runs an art advisory business in New York.

The Green Family Collection, which was an invitation-only but incredibly well-organized and expansive private tour at the Greens' house in Dallas, is expanding to the greater public. Under the new initiative, the Green Family Art Foundation, there is a willingness to share these masterpieces with a wider audience.

What makes the foundation unique is its focus on Black artists, female artists and LGBTQIA+ artists, all underrepresented groups in our area museums and historically in our galleries as well.

There are two shows planned in the first half of 2022, one a group show of female artists from the collection and one a group show of queer artists from the collection. Then the group hopes to move to a permanent location.

In addition to these shows, the Green family runs a large and engaging [Instagram account](#). They are big believers in the power of social media to connect and democratize contemporary art. In fact, it is how they met and worked with Emelife to curate the show.

If this show is any indication of their future ambitions, Dallas is in for a treat, and other collecting families should take note of a new model of how their private collections can be used to have a positive public impact.

## Details

"Black Bodies, White Spaces: Invisibility & Hypervisibility" runs through Jan. 27 at the Green Family Art Foundation, 150 Manufacturing St., Dallas. 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday. Free. For more information, call 214-274-5656, visit [greenfamilyartfoundation.org](https://www.greenfamilyartfoundation.org) or email [info@greenfamilyartfoundation](mailto:info@greenfamilyartfoundation.org). For the foundation's Instagram page, visit [@greenfamilyartfoundation](https://www.instagram.com/greenfamilyartfoundation).