



Burchfield Penney Art Center

LEROI

LIVING IN COLOR

CONTENTS

| | |
|----------------|--|
| 6 | Acknowledgments |
| 8 | LEROI: Living in Color |
| 12 | Coloring Beyond the Lines |
| Artwork | |
| 20 | Colored People |
| 34 | Brazil Period |
| 50 | Identity and Relationships |
| 68 | Black Lives Matter |
| 78 | Crack Series |
| 84 | Abstraction/Flowers |
| 94 | Geometric Period |
| 108 | LeRoi's Universe: A Transformative Collaboration |

About the Burchfield Penney Art Center

Established in 1966 on the campus of SUNY Buffalo State College, the Burchfield Penney Art Center is dedicated to the art and vision of renowned American artist Charles E. Burchfield (1893–1967) and the art and artists of Buffalo and our region. Through our affiliation with SUNY Buffalo State College, we encourage learning and celebrate our richly creative, diverse community. The Burchfield Penney, accredited by the American Alliance of Museums and a member of the Association of Art Museum Directors, is supported in part by public funds from Erie County and New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Kathy Hochul and the New York State Legislature. Additional support is provided by SUNY Buffalo State, the Charles E. Burchfield Foundation, the Elizabeth Elser Doolittle Trust, the Mary A.H. Rumsey Foundation, the James Carey Evans Endowment, and Burchfield Penney members and friends.

LEROI: Living In Color

On view November 11, 2022 - March 26, 2023 | Cover Image: *My Life as an Artist*, 2022

Tullis Johnson Art Photography | Khalil Lewis Publication Design

Acknowledgments

LeRoi: Living in Color, celebrating the work of LeRoi Johnson, represents the highest level of excellence of the work that museums do within our communities. As the significant work of curator Tiffany Gaines demonstrates, LeRoi is an artist with a lifetime of delving into conversations on topics of national and global importance. His work takes many forms in social, legal, and artistic practices. These are true in his paintings and how the Burchfield Penney Art Center staff have approached our work. Breaking from traditional museum models and employing a lens of inclusivity, our curatorial work incorporates multiple voices to develop a new framework for representation. Beginning with input from our partners, the curatorial team set out to work beyond our walls and spread our engagement with organizations and students throughout Buffalo, NY. Incorporated in our work and the curatorial process, we amplified the position and ideas of the artist, community leaders, arts organizations, and students. Staff and students from our partner arts programs worked from concept to realization. Their work and vision shaped this project. Sharing their names and recognizing their efforts is essential to provide understanding. Based on LeRoi's work and conversations with the artist and curator Gaines, students responded and created artwork. Led by Robin Jordan, students at Just Buffalo Literary Center created poems and prose. At Buffalo Center for Arts and Technology, Kevin Kline guided students through the process of conceptualizing multimedia collages, video installations, and the creation of a digital catalog to celebrate all the student artists in their respects. A summer program of Buffalo Public School students taught by Jay Hawkins, Sr., directed by Fatima Morrell, Ed.D., and Benjamin Willis, was graciously hosted at Northland Workforce Training Center, where students made sculptures. And at Squeaky Wheel Film & Media Art Center, the team of Kaitlyn Lowe, Mark Longolucco, Martina LaVallo, and Teen Council members Anika Khanam, Immaculate Irakoze, Jolie Criscione, Laviba Akther, and Raymarri Hugh led the creation of a collaborative video projection installation that animates LeRoi's major themes into a form. In addition to the work by student artists, the loans of artwork to enhance the exhibition were made possible by generous sharing from private collectors and Canisius College.



We rarely make space within our projects to think beyond traditional publications adding to the scholarship within the arts. For *LeRoi: Living in Color*, we were fortunate to partner with Mustard Seed World Group in the creation of a documentary about the life and work of LeRoi. For this tireless effort, we are indebted to Sandy White, producer and director, Kyle Toth, director of photography and video editor, as well as the interviewees who helped bring LeRoi's story to life: Albert Michaels, Elisa Larkin Nascimento, and Willie Hutch Jones. In addition to the many financial supporters recognized in this publication, it would have been impossible to accomplish our work without the tireless advocacy of SUNY Trustee Eunice A. Lewin, Exhibition Liaison. Before creating a curatorial position for this project, Lewin laid the foundation for support across our community, inspired by her desire to make sure issues of social justice and inclusion are at the forefront of discourse. In projects of this scale and all their work, the outstanding and brilliant staff of the Burchfield Penney did what they do better than anyone, elevating the voices of creatives. Considering all possibilities, they measured what was best and echoed the artistic vision in their practice.

Scott Propeack Acting Director

LEROI: Living in Color is made possible through the generous support of our presenting sponsor,

M&T Bank

For their additional support, we gratefully acknowledge:

Erie County Legislator April N. M. Baskin
Mayor Byron W. Brown & the City of Buffalo

Buffalo Common Council Members:

Bryan Bollman
Joel P. Feroletto
Joseph Golombek, Jr.
Mitch Nowakowski
Darius G. Pridgen
David A. Rivera
Christopher Scanlon
Ulysees O. Wingo, Sr.
Rasheed Wyatt

Cameron & Jane Baird Foundation
City of Buffalo
Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo
The John R. Oishei Foundation
Assemblymember Crystal D. Peoples-Stokes
Senator Sean M. Ryan
Tower Family Fund
The Margaret L. Wendt Foundation

As well as support from:

Wayne & Mary Bacon
A. Laurie Brosnahan
Gary & Willow Brost
Ilene & Peter Fleischmann
John J. & Maureen O. Hurley
Independent Health
Pamela Jacobs Vogt
Senator Timothy M. Kennedy
Cindy & Francis Letro
Lipsitz Greene Scime Cambria LLP
Beverly & Frank LoTempio
Anthony & Kate Masiello
Kevin W. Spitler

Special thanks to:

The Center would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to SUNY Trustee Eunice A Lewin, Exhibition Liaison, for her tireless commitment and dedication to our fundraising efforts. Our sincere gratitude also goes out to Buffalo State College and our generous Burchfield Penney Members.

LEROI: LIVING IN COLOR

The breadth of LeRoi Johnson's prolific career is one that spans decades and continents. His body of work is comprised of over 1500 paintings and counting, with LeRoi often working on multiple compositions at any given time. Describing his work as "electric primitive," his vibrant renditions are intuitive, abstracted reflections on the personal experiences of a man that lives many different lives. These lives include an internationally celebrated art career, a successful law practice, and a lifelong dedication to uplifting youth in the communities of his native Buffalo. Pulling from the deeply personal, LeRoi's paintings fuse lived experience with the imaginative; influences of African, Caribbean, and South American cultures are central to his depictions of dreams, visions, and various otherworldly elements. The range of styles utilized in his work point to a theme prevalent in his life and artistic career – multiplicity. Rarely do his paintings focus entirely on a single, monolithic subject. More often than not, the subjects of LeRoi's compositions are engaged with another, whether another person, animal, thing, or another version of themselves. Recurring motifs of split faces and geometric repetitions of colorful, androgynous figures signal the underlying presence of multiple layers, narratives, and sides to the story. Embracing his own unique viewpoint, he engages with multiple perspectives to explore identity, history, social justice, and spirituality, blurring the lines between the real and surreal.

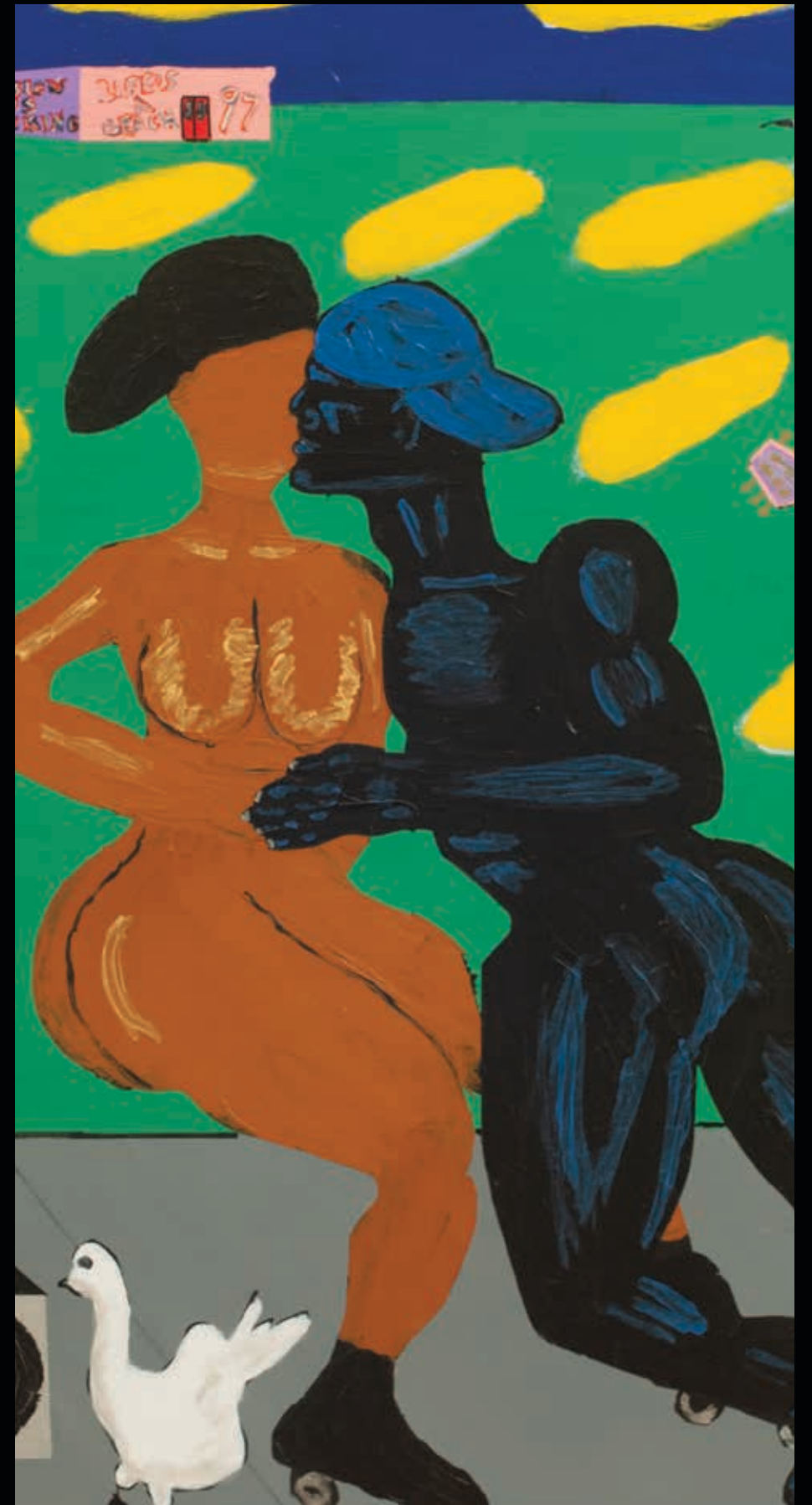
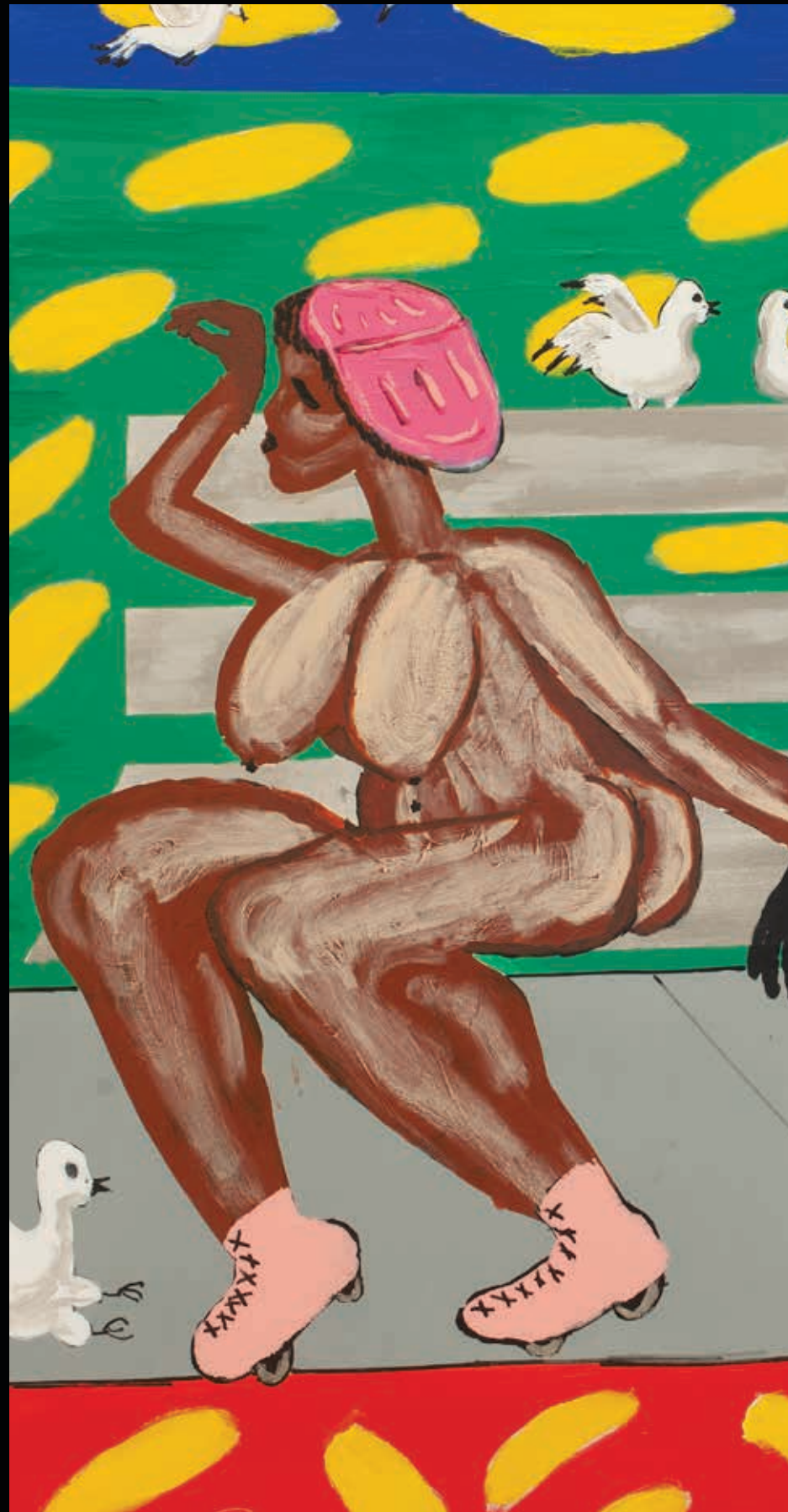


LeRoi's paintings express the myriad connections and contemplations one feels among, within, and surrounded by communities of all different kinds. As his first major retrospective exhibition in his hometown, LEROI: Living in Color brings the international attention given to his work into a localized context. The exhibition features paintings that span LeRoi's career, organized into distinctive thematic periods that resonate throughout his life and reflect the sites, scenes, and cultures that have inspired him most.



LeRoi Johnson, Colored People II, 2016 (detail)

Fostering a spirit of connection-building, this exhibition creates a dialogue across communities with the incorporation of an innovative collaboration between LeRoi, the Burchfield Penney Art Center, and several local community organizations. In the months leading up to the exhibition opening, students in youth programs at Buffalo Center for Arts and Technology, Squeaky Wheel Film and Media Art Center, Just Buffalo Literary Center, and the Buffalo Public Schools engaged with LeRoi's work. Participating in a series of workshops, students learned about his artistic practice and experiences in the art world and had meaningful conversations about the subject matter of his paintings. This launched an exploration of their own interests and lived experiences through artistic and creative expression, nurtured through each organization's educational curriculum. The responsive multimedia artworks created by each cohort of students range from mapped video projections to digital collages, three-dimensional installations, poetry, and prose, and are included in the exhibition to enhance its central themes. Extending the artistic universe of LeRoi's practice to an imaginative real-world application, this collaboration has energized the next generation of young artists and art enthusiasts, mobilizing the students from passive observers to active participants in shaping the exhibition. Much like LeRoi's work, the project transforms the ways we think about community and encourages the agency of all viewers to cultivate their own meanings and connections through art.



LeRoi Johnson, *Butt Naked on Sunset*, c. 1996 (detail)

COLORING BEYOND THE LINES

The dynamic, layered, and sometimes contradictory interrelations between ourselves and the world around us are central themes within LeRoi Johnson’s artistic practice. Recognition of his robust body of work through the Living in Color exhibition is a timely reminder that the Western art canon continues to expand, reflecting a more globalized understanding of how ideas and influences have long intermingled across cultures. Paul Gilroy’s concept of the Black Atlantic is a constructive foundation for a counterculture to Eurocentric visions of modernity that “argues against essentialist versions of racial identity and racial nationalisms, in favor of a shared, though heterogeneous, culture, that joins diverse communities in North and South America, the Caribbean, Europe, and Africa.”¹ Gilroy’s thesis re-frames the Middle Passage and the unfathomable journeys taken across it as foundational to a legacy of cross-cultural exchange and fusion for artists and intellectuals across the African diaspora.² Drawing on his own connections to African, Caribbean, and Latin American cultures, this concept resonates throughout LeRoi’s work, and the work of many other Black and Brown artists who have until now, gone largely overlooked within the mainstream canon. International exhibitions such as Afro Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic³ and Afro-Atlantic Histories⁴ enlarge our knowledge of these artists throughout the diaspora, whose narratives contribute to the development of modern and contemporary art. LeRoi’s career fits within a unique niche of garnering an international reputation while also maintaining a distinct connection to Western New York. His paintings have been exhibited throughout the world and he is represented in the permanent collections of the Museu de Arte Negra (the Museum of Black Arts) in Brazil, Canisius College, and the Burchfield Penney Art Center. Locally, his work is in context with a rich history of cultural production, particularly the efforts of Black and Brown artists to mobilize for social change and bring new concepts and expressions of their cultural identities to the region.

¹Barson, Tanya, “Introduction: Modernism and the Black Atlantic,” Afro-Modern: Journeys through the Black Atlantic, edited by Tanya Barson & Peter Gorschlüter, Tate Liverpool, 2010, 9.

²Ibid.

³Inspired by Gilroy’s book The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness, the exhibition was “the first to trace in depth the impact of Black Atlantic culture on Modernism and [revealed] how black artists and intellectuals have played a central role in the formation of Modernism from the early twentieth century to today.” The exhibition was mounted at the Tate Liverpool in January 2010. See <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/afro-modern-journeys-through-black-atlantic>

⁴Originally presented as Histórias Afro-Atlânticas in 2018 by the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and the Instituto Tomie Ohtake in Brazil, the exhibition “takes an in-depth look at the historical experiences and cultural formations of Black and African people since the 17th century.” The exhibition was presented as Afro-Atlantic Histories at the Museum of Fine Arts Houston in October 2021 and the National Gallery of Art in April 2022. See <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2022/afro-atlantic-histories.html>

The notion of an expansive worldview is one that emerged in LeRoi’s life from a young age. He spent his early years immersed in the city’s diverse communities moving through several public housing projects throughout Buffalo. Surrounded by a supportive network of friends, elders, and family, this instilled in LeRoi a strong sense of identity, deepening his connection to his familial legacy and ancestral heritage. This community at home differed greatly from the isolation of attending predominantly white academic institutions at the height of demands for civil rights and social equity. Always interested in a perspective of the world beyond himself and his native Buffalo, LeRoi’s trajectory would take him through notable experiences like attending Canisius College, then Georgetown University Law School and establishing a successful law practice, touring the world for 10 years as manager for his brother, musician Rick James, and building a reputation as an internationally recognized visual artist. These have all broadened his perspective and depictions of his world in his art extensively.



Throughout these periods of his life art remained a steady constant, even in stints where he was not actively painting. He credits a childhood accident – one that left him bedridden for years – as the start of his artistic journey. Needing something to do to pass the long hours, drawing became an early escape. He would draw scenes of the people and things seen from his bedridden perspective, spawning an intuitive formal practice that has persisted through the present. The use of warped, manipulated perspectives manifested in LeRoi’s early career explorations of geometric abstraction. Geo Man (1970, re-finished 1996), the earliest dated work in the exhibition, contains a singular, white figure playing the guitar against a diamond lattice backdrop. A manipulated perspective by emphasizing the flatness of the composition reflects an interest in cubist conventions and their formative role in the development of his early style. Read Between the Lines (1985), Twisted City (1997), and Geometric Not (1980) contain similar visual motifs of rectangular forms and protruding three-dimensional blocks. A recurring visual reference throughout LeRoi’s work, the blocks highlight an interest in structures and his desire to reform and reimagine them. These geometric references have endured as his compositions have grown in scale and subject matter. Later works such as Diamonds (2010), and Unification Series III (2011) are a continuation of these fundamental interests in geometric abstraction infused with motifs such as split-face, colorful figures that have become emblematic of LeRoi’s visual style.



The growth of LeRoi’s visual language to encompass representative figures, and large-scale robust, dreamy compositions are all the inner workings of his subconscious. Combining imagery of spaces real and imagined, many of the artist’s paintings find their beginning in visions of things seen and not yet seen.

He takes a neo-expressionist approach to each composition that is reminiscent of Basquiat and allows each piece to develop on its own terms. The 1999 painting *Ladies in Waiting I* is an example of LeRoi's venture into his signature figurative style, and an early use of circular motifs to compose repetitions of faces and to draw attention to the anatomical features of each of his subjects. *The Choir* (2004) and *The Conversation* (2004) bring this into conversation with his geometric motifs and incorporate rich primary colors and imagery of lush landscapes, bodies of water, and animals. These conventions speak to an instinctive desire for connection to LeRoi's ancestral legacy through the natural landscape and its juxtaposition to the urban environment from which he comes. Paintings like *Voodoo Woman* (2012) visualize a spiritual presence with the inclusion of a haunting, figure cloaked in all-white smoking prominently in the foreground, and the concurrence of a running body of water and high-rise suggestive of Buffalo's housing projects in the background. *Sun Goddesses* (2005) alludes to a divine presence and its manifestation in the natural world in more subtle ways. LeRoi's paintings intuit a link to a dynamic range of African cultures, ethnicities, and religions through the figurative style of his recurring characters, and an emphasis on natural and spiritual subject matter. However, this did not become explicitly apparent to him until a moment of epiphany. Having long been inspired by Brazil's music and culture, it was during a trip to Rio de Janeiro that LeRoi looked out the window and realized the imagery he had visualized and strived to translate into his paintings was reflected right in front of him. This epiphany and the point of sacral connection that Brazil offered to the legacy of African cultures would be the impetus for his deep dive into these ideas, recognized in the exhibition as the Brazil period.



This period marked a deep, sustained engagement with Brazil through extended stays and, most notably, an influential friendship between LeRoi and the Brazilian politician, artist, and civil rights leader Abdias Nascimento. Born in 1914, Nascimento was a staunch advocate for the rights of Black Brazilians, observing the racial hierarchy left behind after the country's abolition of slavery in 1888. Nascimento's artwork and political activism expressed a desire to recognize and celebrate the significance of African influence throughout Brazilian culture. He founded the Black Experimental Theatre in Rio de Janeiro in 1944 as well as the Museum of Black Arts, which collected the work of Black artists who at the time were underrepresented in museums and art galleries.⁵ Going into self-imposed exile in 1968 following a military coup d'état, Nascimento taught at universities around the United States including the University at Buffalo, as well as in Nigeria. It was around this time that he began to paint. His compositions are a blend of modernist abstraction and African figuration, forging a new visual language to express the inextricable link between spiritual freedom and social liberation.⁶ Embedded within this language are references to deities, gods, and spirits. A series of paintings in the 1990s incorporate several Adinkra symbols, which are "ideograms originating in Ghana that communicated various philosophical ideas."⁷ Featured works in the exhibition include Nascimento's *Omnipotent and Immortal n. 2: Asante Adinkra* (1992), from this series, which contains GYE NYAME in the center, symbolizing the supremacy of God, and NKYINKYIM on either side, symbolic of dynamism, and versatility.⁸ The 1971 painting *Yao of Yemanja* includes a reoriented OSRAM NE NSOROMMA in the top right corner, which symbolizes the moon and the star, indicative of love, harmony, and the bond between man and woman.⁹ In the foreground is the bust of a contemplative figure with its eyes closed, decorated with several circular forms across its face. The title suggests the work as representative of Yemanjá, the Orisha of water and spirit from the Yoruba religion, and the mother of all Orishas.¹⁰



LeRoi Johnson, Ode to Samo, 2021 (detail)

⁵Oliver Basciano, "Abdias Nascimento: Spiritual Liberation and Social Freedom," *ArtReview*, September 14, 2022.
⁶Ibid.
⁷Ibid.
⁸"West African Wisdom: Adinkra Symbols & Meanings," *adinkra.org*.
⁹Ibid.
¹⁰Canson, P. E., "Yemonja." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, August 15, 2014. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Yemonja>.

In Afro-Brazilian religions, She is the patron spirit of the oceans. Nascimento's other works include similar visual and titular references to Afro-Brazilian deities and spirits, incorporating the use of abstracted, amalgamized religious symbols and figurative representations.¹¹ The symbolism embedded in Nascimento's paintings unlocks the memories of Brazil's colonial history and was part of his strategy to reconnect Black Brazilians to their cultural and ancestral memories.¹² By calling upon these influences, it speaks to the ways in which different African religious traditions have persisted, evolved, and fused with others through the legacy of slavery and become a point of reconnection to the past.



It wasn't until professor and art collector Dr. Albert Michaels pointed out the visual parallels between LeRoi and Nascimento's work that the two crossed paths. They met in Brazil at Nascimento's house in the late 1990s and immediately connected not as artists, but as humans that shared a similar outlook on life. Nascimento quickly became a mentor and close friend. Through their friendship, the connection between LeRoi's visual style and the prominence of Brazilian culture as a vessel for understanding the widespread heritage of African spirituality became clear. The conventions of Nascimento's use of symbolism to recall spiritual tradition and cultural connection give language and specificity to the work happening inherently in LeRoi's work. The recurring imagery of alligators, such as in *Alligator Walk I* (2003), and the fantastical bull-like figure (which LeRoi has named the Bullis) included in *The Conversation*, *Voodoo Woman*, and several other paintings recall the prominent symbolism of animals reimagined with their own specific meaning within LeRoi's visual lexicon. The alligator is a derivative of the spiritual significance of the African crocodile. Represented by the DENKYEM Adinkra symbol, it is the symbol of adaptability. Being the alligator is native to the Americas, the reworking of this motif as an alligator puts this spiritual symbolism of adaptability and duality in direct conversation with LeRoi's Black American identity. The image of the Bullis is reminiscent of Apis, the Egyptian sacred bull. However, LeRoi's depictions combine the male and female bull forms to create new meaning, pointing to themes of androgyny and universality that are a major point of return for his work. The *Colored People* series are a selection of his distinctive compositions of split faces and vibrant figures made up of circular forms that expand upon these themes. These slight variations on an intentionally ambiguous figure suggest the universality of human experience, intended to look beyond the outward masks we wear and blur the lines of differences based on gender, sexuality, and race.



While Nascimento incorporated symbols pulled directly from religions they recall, LeRoi constructs his own symbolism that puts this influence in the context of his experiences as a Black American. The *Black Lives Matter* and *Identity and Relationships* thematic sections of the exhibition highlight his exploration of these ideas more pointedly. These works move away from abstract representations of subjects to utilize instead a more realist figurative style. Central to many of these works is the use of irony and the inclusion of double meaning, evocative of W.E.B. DuBois's concept of double consciousness in describing the Black American experience.¹³



LeRoi Johnson, Voodoo Woman, 2012 (detail)

¹¹Basciano, "Abdias Nascimento."

¹²Ibid.

¹³ See, DuBois, W.E.B., "Strivings of the Negro People," *The Atlantic*, August 1897, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1897/08/strivings-of-the-negro-people/305446/>



LeRoi Johnson, Welcome to America, 1996 (detail)

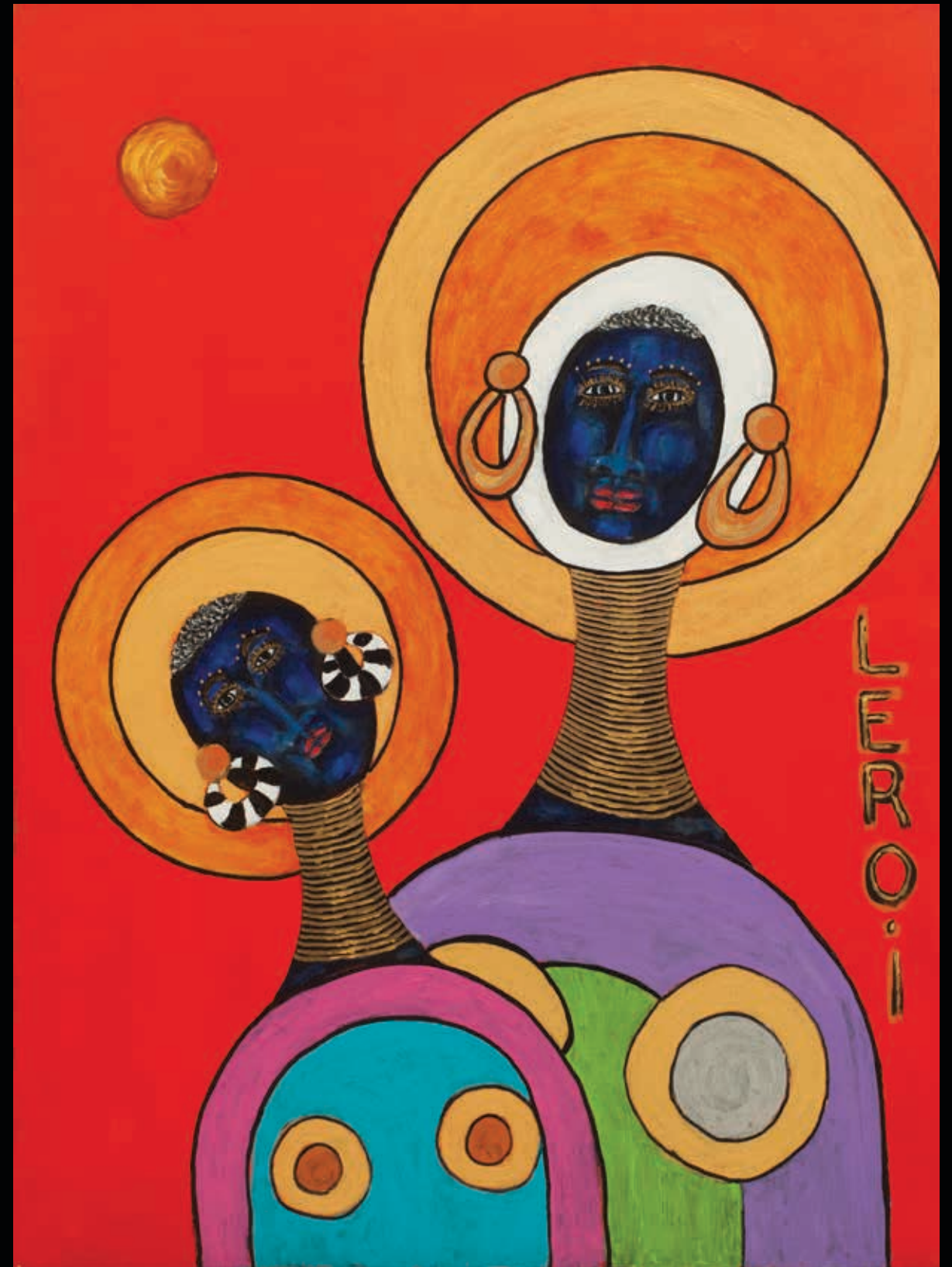
¹⁴ For additional context see, "100 Years Later, What's the Legacy of 'Birth of a Nation'?" NPR Code Switch, February 8, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2015/02/08/383279630/100-years-later-whats-the-legacy-of-birth-of-a-nation>.

Birth of a Nation (1996) is one such example. Its title references the historic 1915 film, which propelled the film industry as we know it with its racist glorification of the Ku Klux Klan.¹⁴ LeRoi's painting, however, creates a completely different narrative, juxtaposing the fraught connotation of race relations in America implied by the title with possibilities of freedom and of a new world imagined. The painting is composed of a silhouetted brown-skin male and female figure in an embrace. The man stands behind the woman, visibly pregnant, as they look out to an idyllic landscape as sunlight fills the scene. Welcome to America (1996) and The Arrival I (2012) contain a similar double consciousness, visualizing the history of the Black American experience and the possibilities for freedom and liberation despite it. Both paintings allude to the incomprehensible journeys of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade with the depiction of its subjects in transport on ships and as they disembark onto a lush terrain. Noticeably absent in The Arrival I, however, are chains, overseers, plantations, or any direct references to enslavement. The work reimagines the possibility of the arrival to a new world, and a future in which on the other side of the journey is not bondage, but rather freedom. LeRoi's signature split face motif is utilized in The Lover II (c. 2010), bringing this double-conscious experience to an individual and interpersonal level. Paintings that vary in subject matter, from the playful triptych of Venice Beach, Butt Naked on Sunset (c. 1996), to the sobering meditation on witnessing the crack epidemic in Crack Series (c. 2010, 2020), all hold space for the nuance of lived reality. Rather than positioning his blackness and his identity within the realm of positive or negative experiences, these depictions color the muddled waters of life and the possibilities and potential that exist within, something that the artist refers to as the "is" of life. The representative nature of these works functions as a means of broadening the representation of black life in the visual realm and articulating blackness as it matters to LeRoi. Freedom Is (2019), Black Lives Matter (2019), and (R)evolution (2013) include motifs like raised fists and familiar images of protest to point more directly to a legacy of demands for the space to exist in all these forms, a demand that continues to persist today.



Over the course of his career, the scope and reach of LeRoi's artistic practice have grown expansively, broadening connections between past and present and blurring the lines between the real and surreal. Like his mentor Nascimento, LeRoi's paintings encapsulate a similar link between spiritual freedom and social liberation. The fusion of influences from his familial legacy, lived experiences, and cultural connections bring life to the Black Atlantic and our evolving understanding of the nuance of blackness. Like his signature, which has expanded from a meek, almost invisible element to a punchy, visual motif with its own presence in each of his paintings, LeRoi's identity is one that is upheld in its own terms and resists compartmentalization. His work is simultaneously reflective of a vibrant, transcendent spirit that runs throughout the diaspora, while also extracting the facets of the human experience that color beyond the lines and have the power to connect us rather than divide us.

**COLORED
PEOPLE**



LeRoi Johnson, *Colored People*, 2016

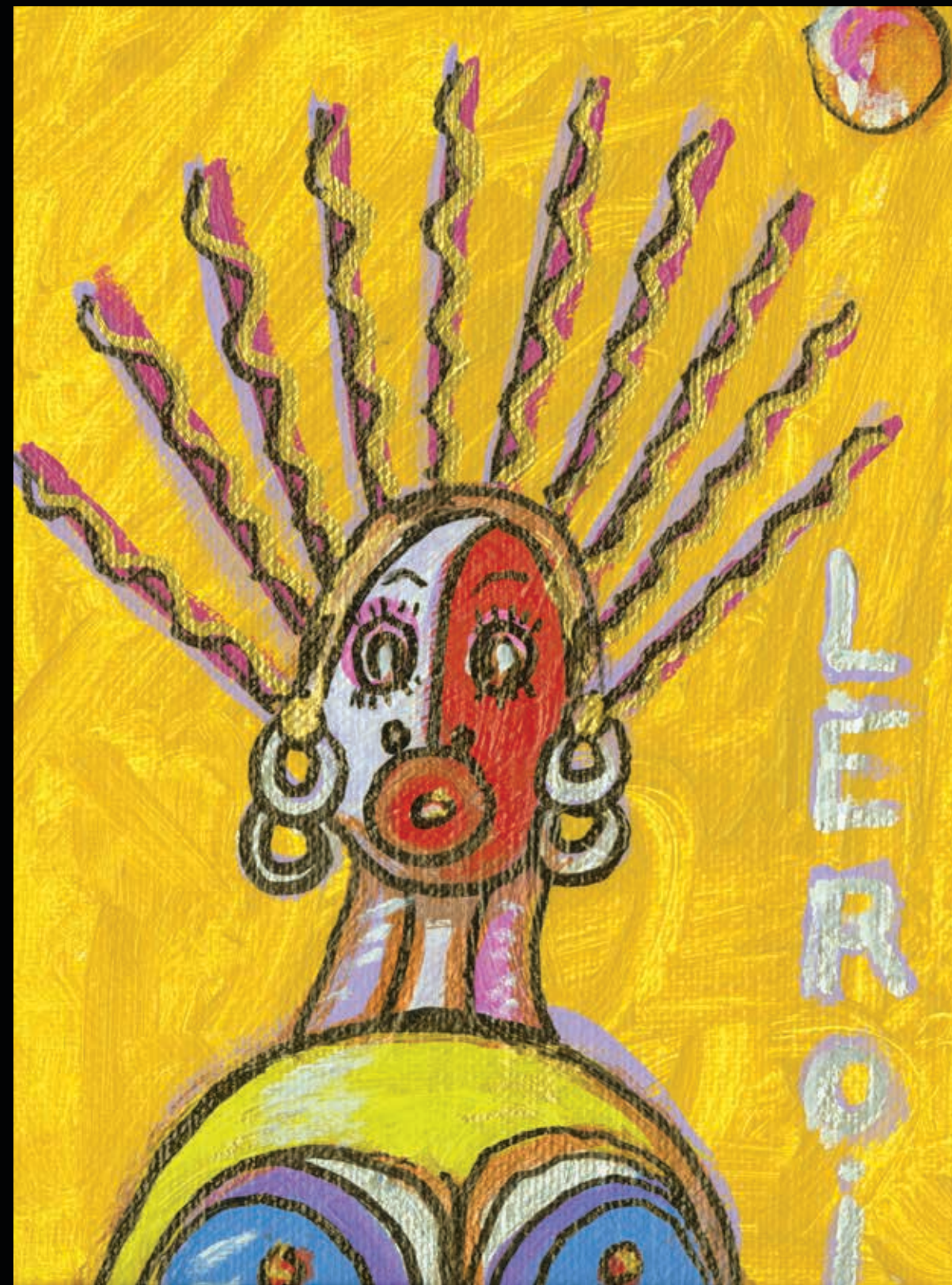


LeRoi Johnson, *Colored People II*, 2016



LeRoi Johnson, *Colored People III*, 2016

LEROI



LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018



LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018



LeRoi Johnson, *Colored People Series*, 2015



LeRoi Johnson, *Blue Guerrier (Blue Warrior)*, 2016



LeRoi Johnson, *Unification*, 2008,
Collection of Canisius College



LeRoi Johnson, *We Are Shepherds of the World*, 2010,
Collection of Canisius College

BRAZIL

PERIOD



Abdias Nascimento, Yao of Yemanja, Buffalo, 1971, Private Collection



Abdias Nascimento, Autumn at Penny's House, Buffalo (N.Y.) Junho, 1979 - Mont Vernon (N.H.) Outubro, 2000, Rio de Janeiro, 2000, Private Collection





LeRoi Johnson, *Gift from Bahia*, 2004



LeRoi Johnson, *Voodoo Woman*, 2012



LeRoi Johnson, *Alligator Walk I*, 2003



LeRoi Johnson, *The Choir*, 2004



LeRoi Johnson, *The Conversation*, 2004



LeRoi Johnson, *Sun Goddesses*, 2005



LeRoi Johnson, *Café Noir*, 2004



LeRoi Johnson, *Impatient for Your Love*, 2005



LeRoy Johnson, Ladies in Waiting 1, 1999

IDENTITY AND RELATIONSHIPS



LeRoi Johnson, *Untitled*, 2021



LeRoi Johnson, *The Gift I*, 2020



LeRoi Johnson, *The Lover II*, c. 2010



LeRoi Johnson, *Black Beauty*, 2020



LeRoi Johnson, Self Portrait at Basquiat Toronto, 2015



LeRoi Johnson, Rollers II, 2020



LeRoi Johnson, *Butt Naked on Sunset*, c. 1996



LeRoi Johnson, *Three Suns*, 2011



LeRoi Johnson, *Untitled*, 2019



LeRoi Johnson, *Noma Lisa*, 2018



LeRoi Johnson, *The Gift II*, 2020



LeRoi Johnson, *Birds of a Feather II*, 2019



Next page: LeRoi Johnson, *Rick James Superstar*, 2014



LaFoi Johnson, Soul Singers, 2016

**BLACK
LIVES
MATTER**



LeRoi Johnson, Black Lives Matter, 2019



LeRoi Johnson, Freedom Is, 2019



LeRoi Johnson, (R)evolution, 2013



LeRoi Johnson, Black Boy Roy, 2022



LeRoi Johnson, The Arrival I, 2012



LeRoi Johnson, Welcome to America, 1996



Next page: LeRoi Johnson, Birth of a Nation, 1996



WHITE HOUSE
Nat Turner
Crispus Attucks
Philadelphia
1619
Wilmington
Washington
Tulsa Race Riot
Anthony Crawford
ATG

Boston 1919
USA
Medgar Evers
Slave George
Norfolk MLK
Newberry Six
2020
Savannah
Joe Coe
Emmett Till
Thomas Jefferson
Clayo Woods
George Floyd
RIP President
Charleston

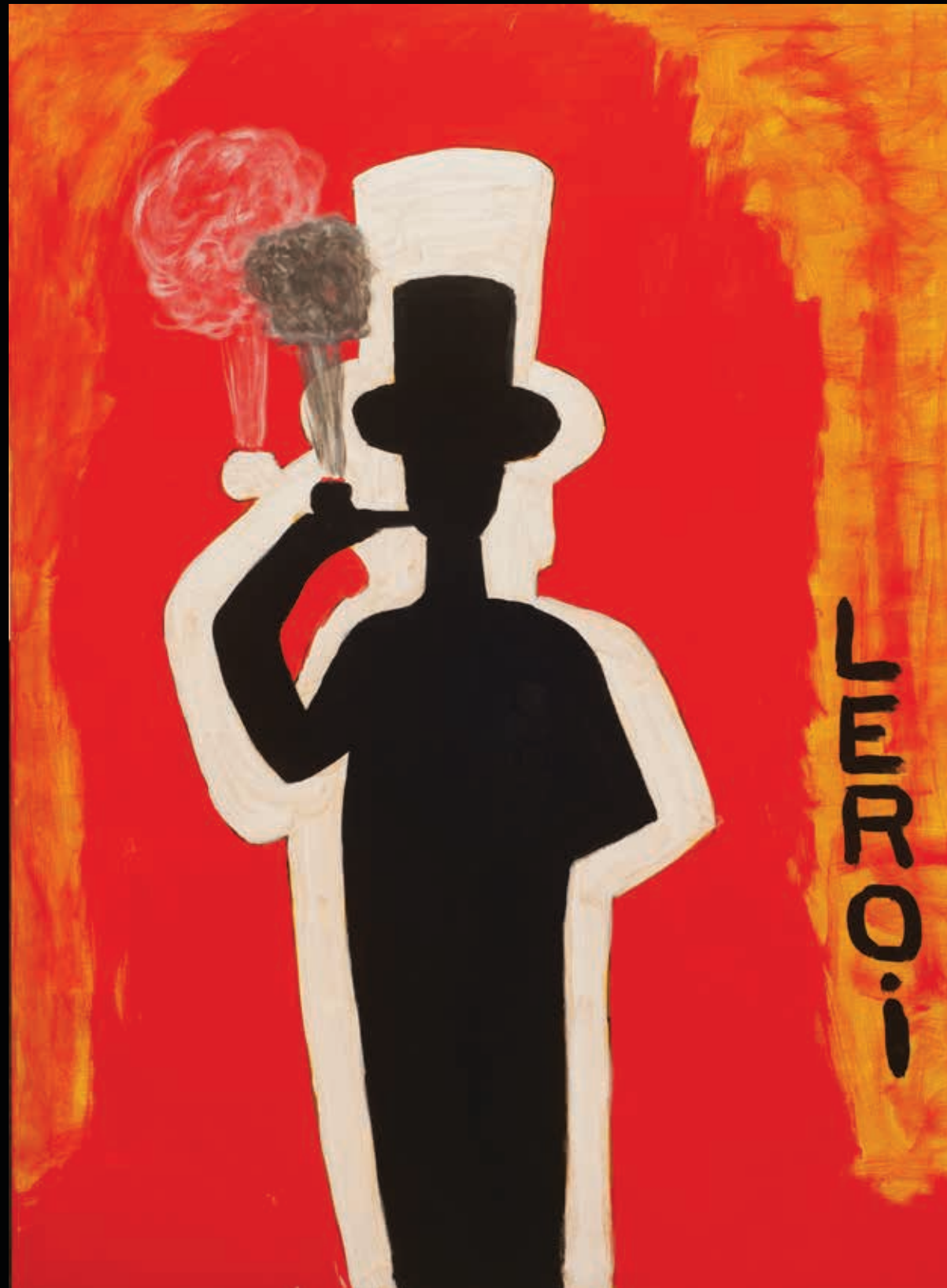
LIBERTY

Birmingham Church
New Haven
Thomas Shipp/Adam Smith
Baltimore
Paul Reed & Will Cato
N.Y.C.
Stephen Tappan John
1968
Michael Williams
Sam Hose

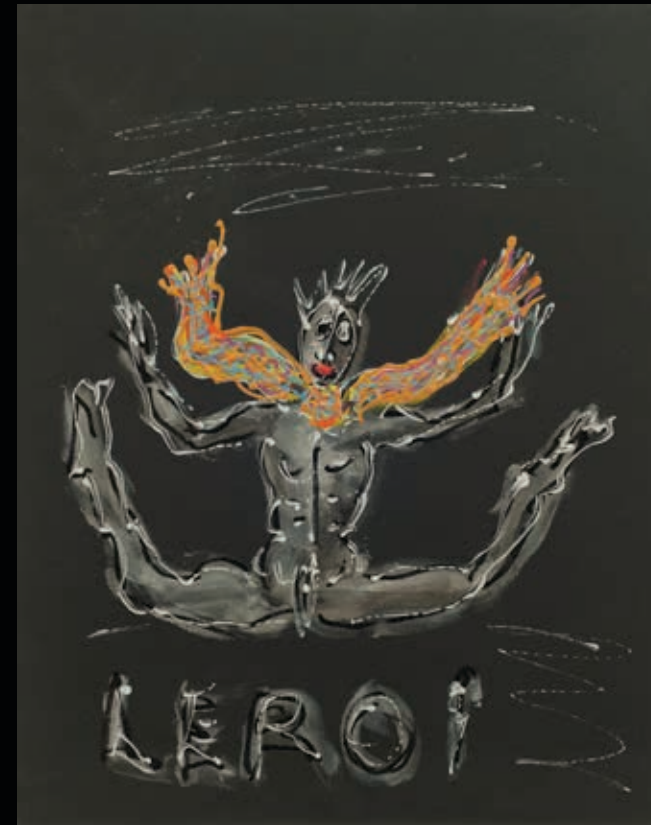
ENGLAND SPAIN PORTUGAL HOLLAND FRANCE

LeFol, Johnson, Evolution of American History, 2020

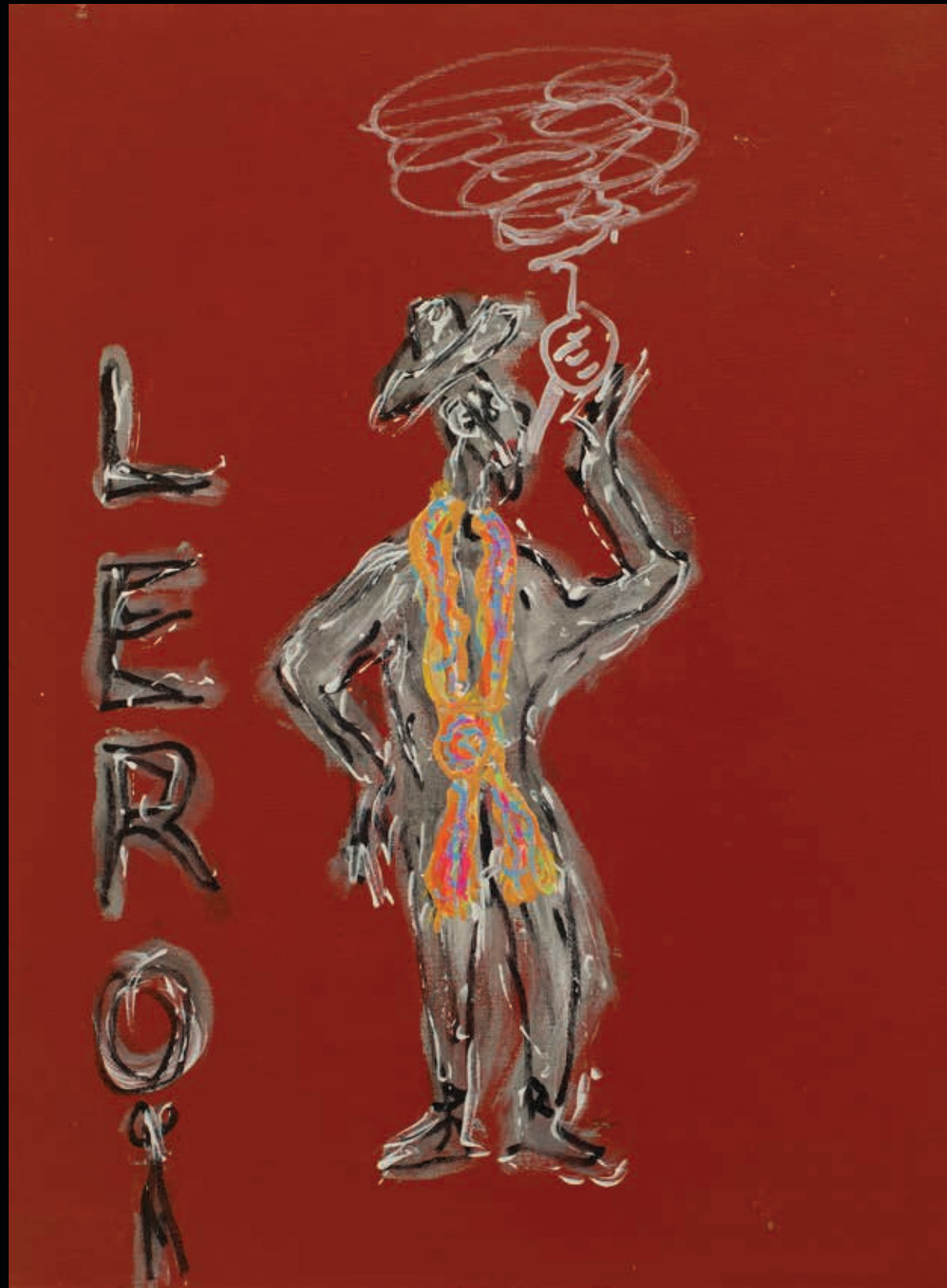
CRACK SERIES



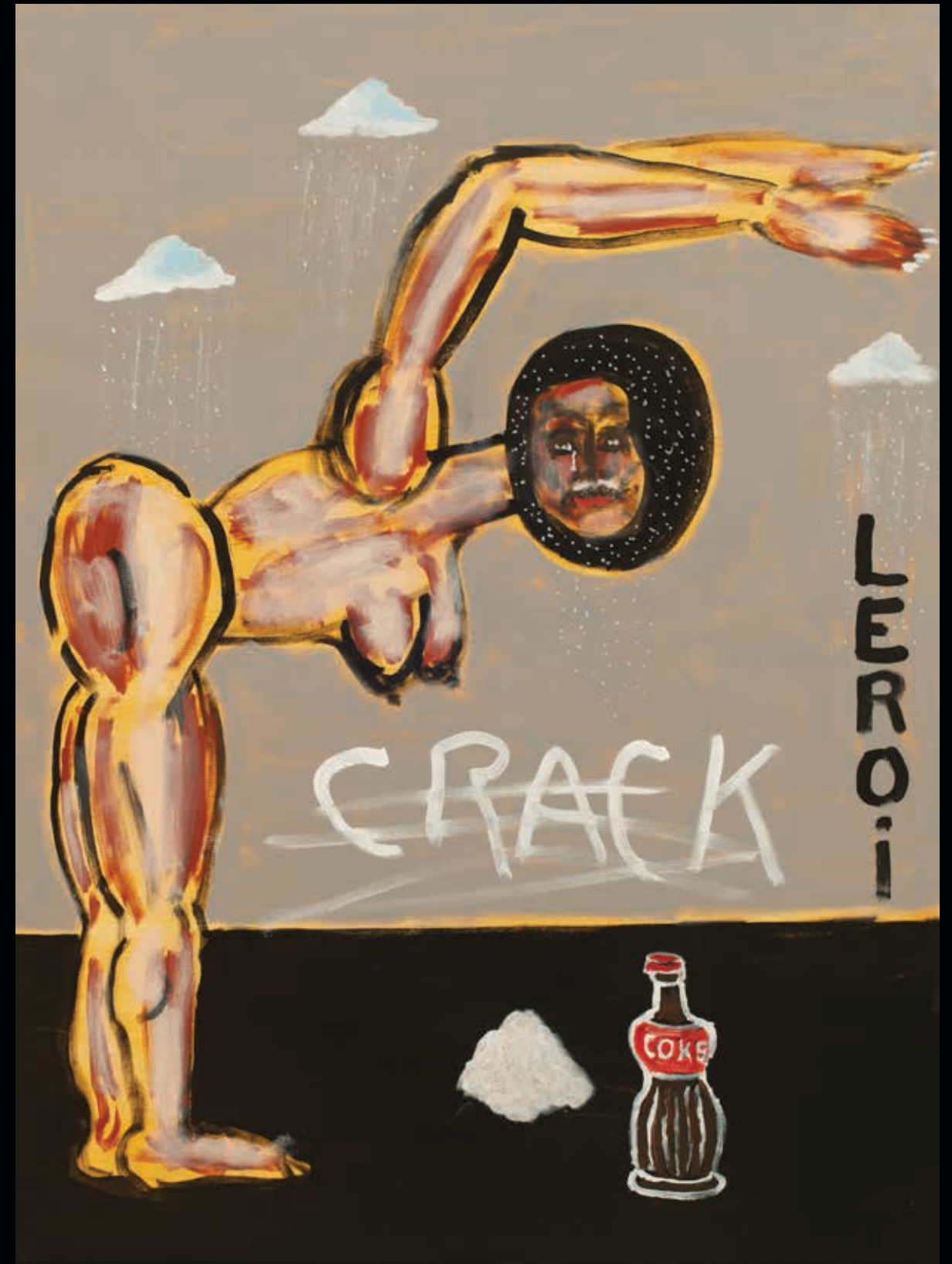
LeRoi Johnson, *Smoke*, 2021



LeRoi Johnson, *Crack Series*, c. 2010



LeRoi Johnson, Crack Series, c. 2010



LeRoi Johnson, Crack Series, 2020

ABSTRACTION /FLOWERS

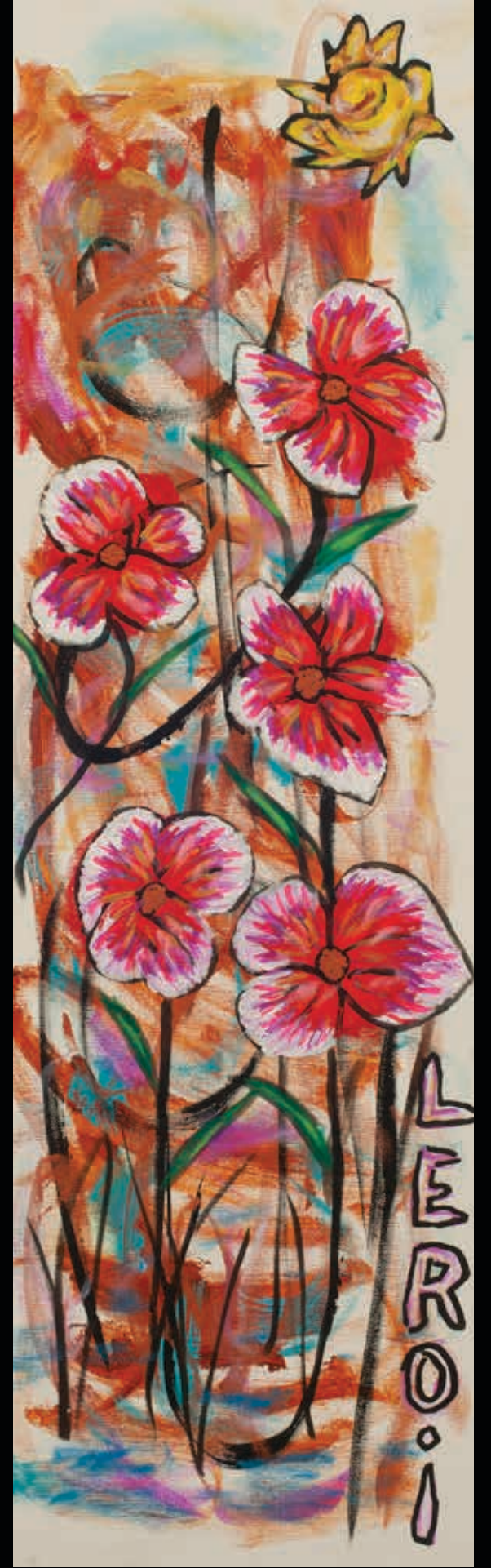


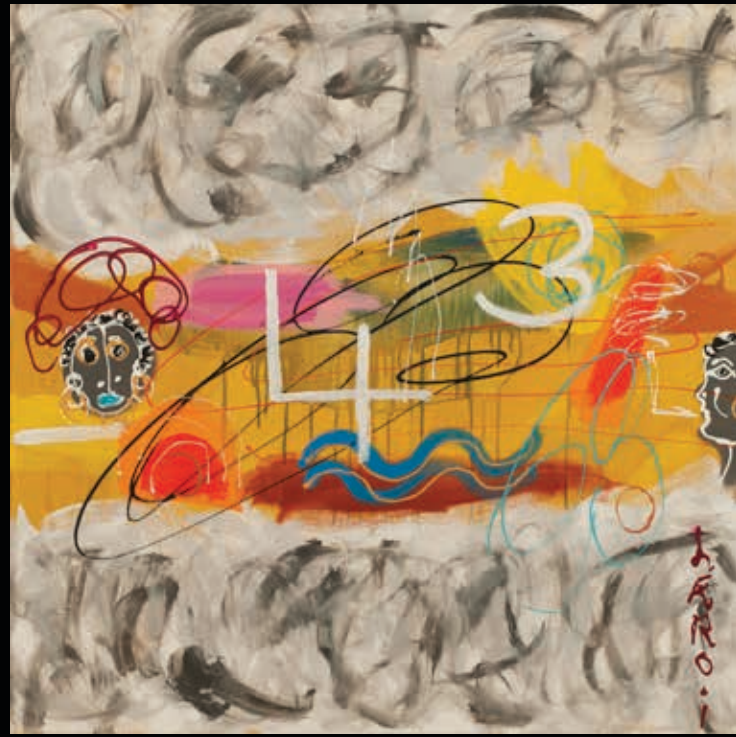


LeRoi Johnson, Floral Series, 2021



LeRoi Johnson, Floral Series, 2019





LeRoi Johnson, *Beneath the Clouds*, 2019



LeRoi Johnson, *Colored People*, 2021

GEOOMETRIC PERIOD



LeFoi Johnson, My Life as an Artist, 2022



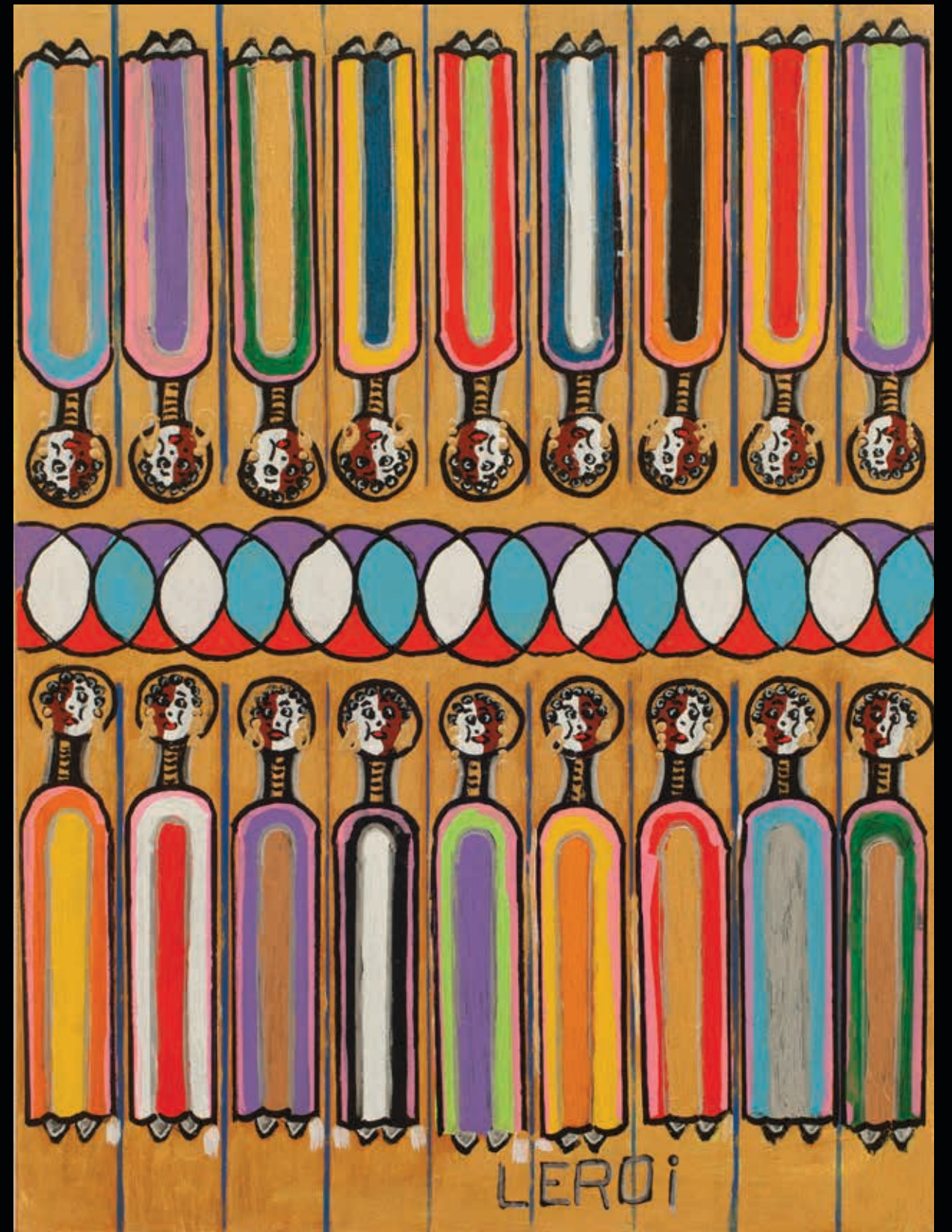
LeRoi Johnson, Untitled, 2010 - 13



LeRoi Johnson, Geo Man, 1970, refinished 1996



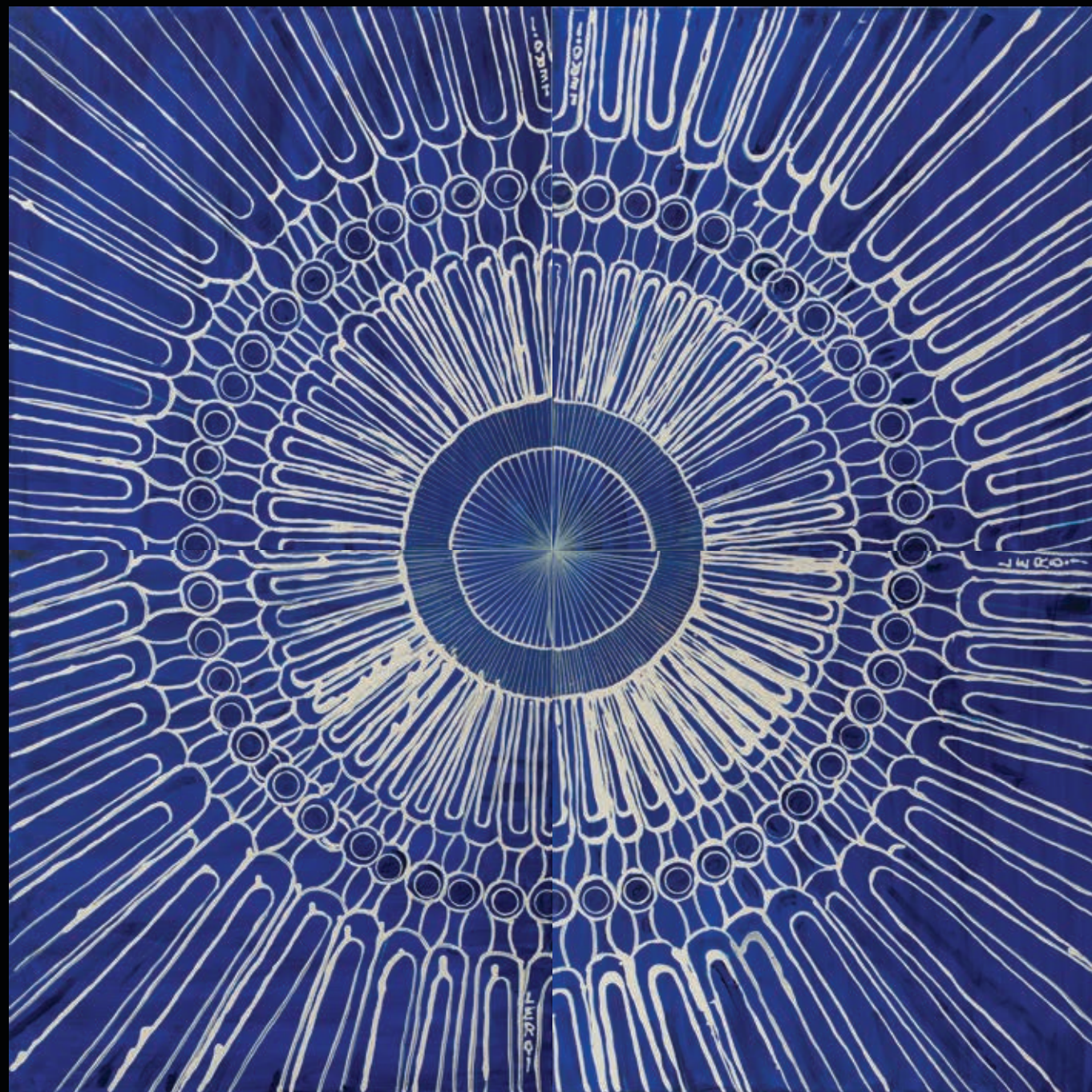
LeRoi Johnson, *Untitled*, c. 2010



LeRoi Johnson, *Colored People Series*, 2020



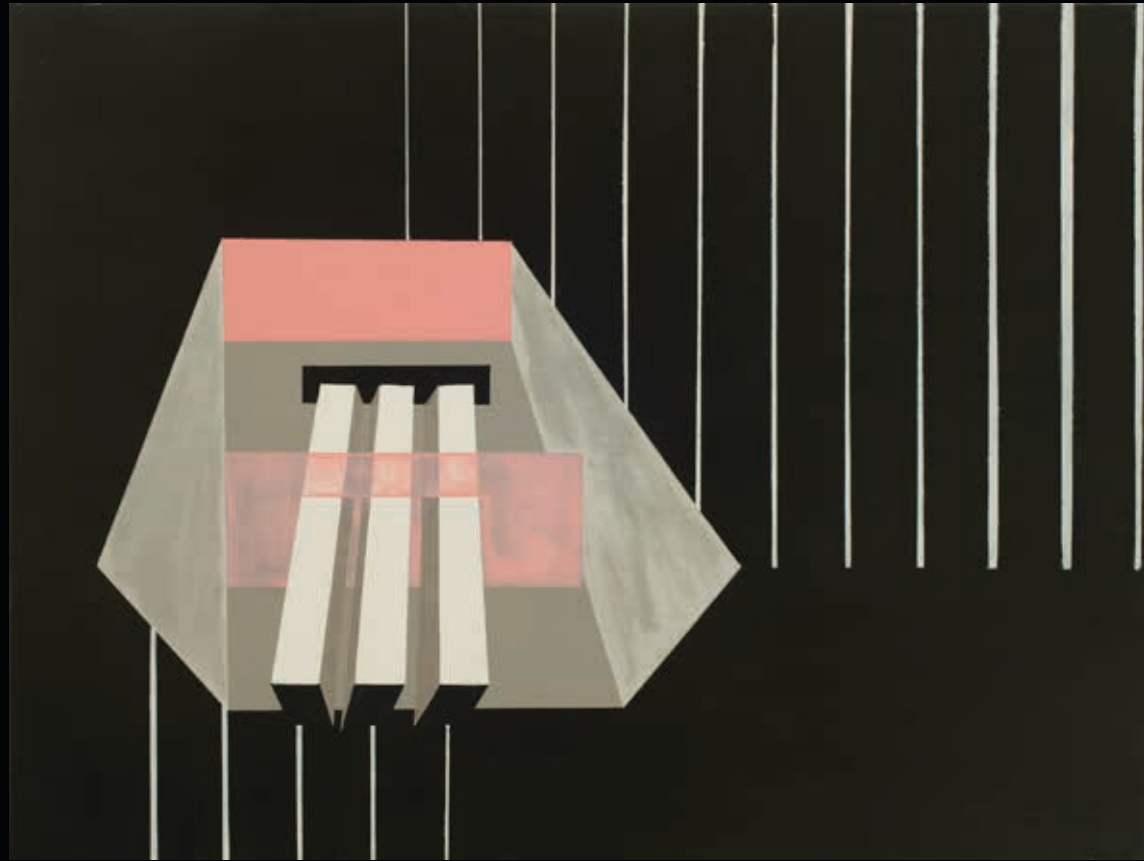
LeRoi Johnson, Naked to The World, 1999



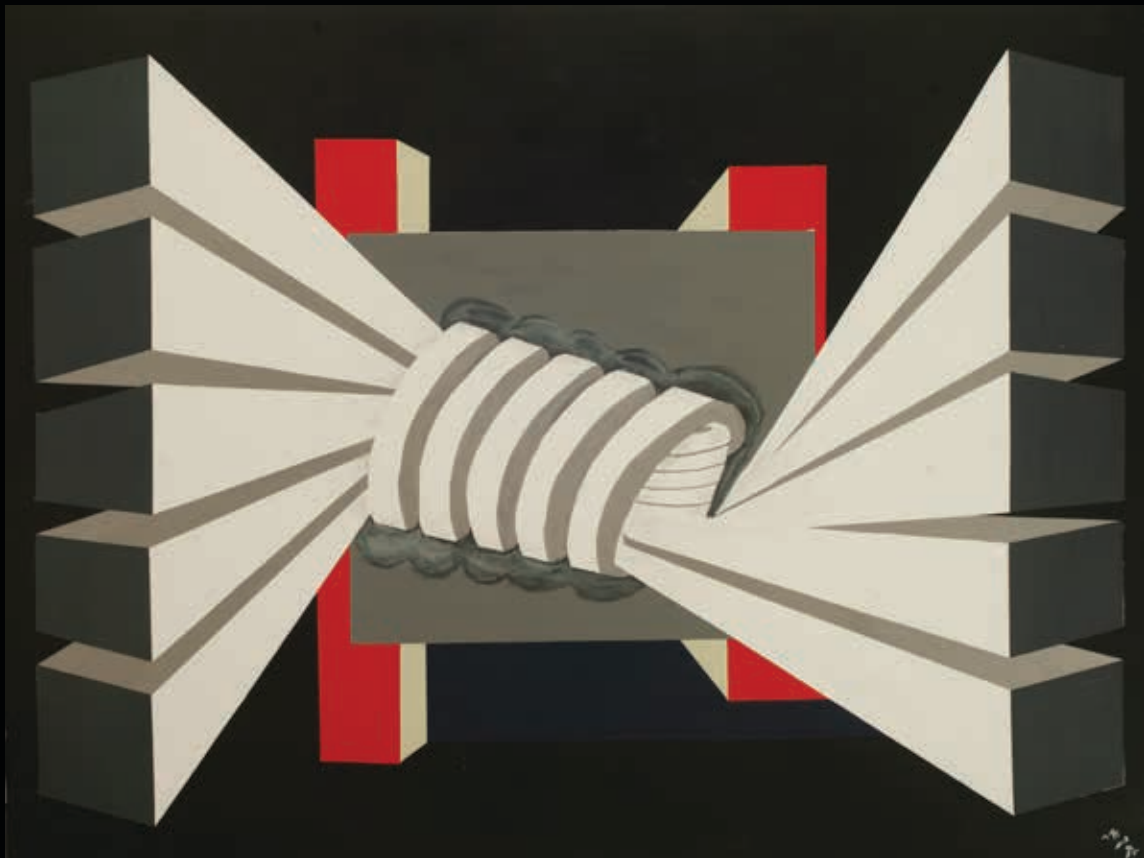
LeRoi Johnson, DNA I, 2013



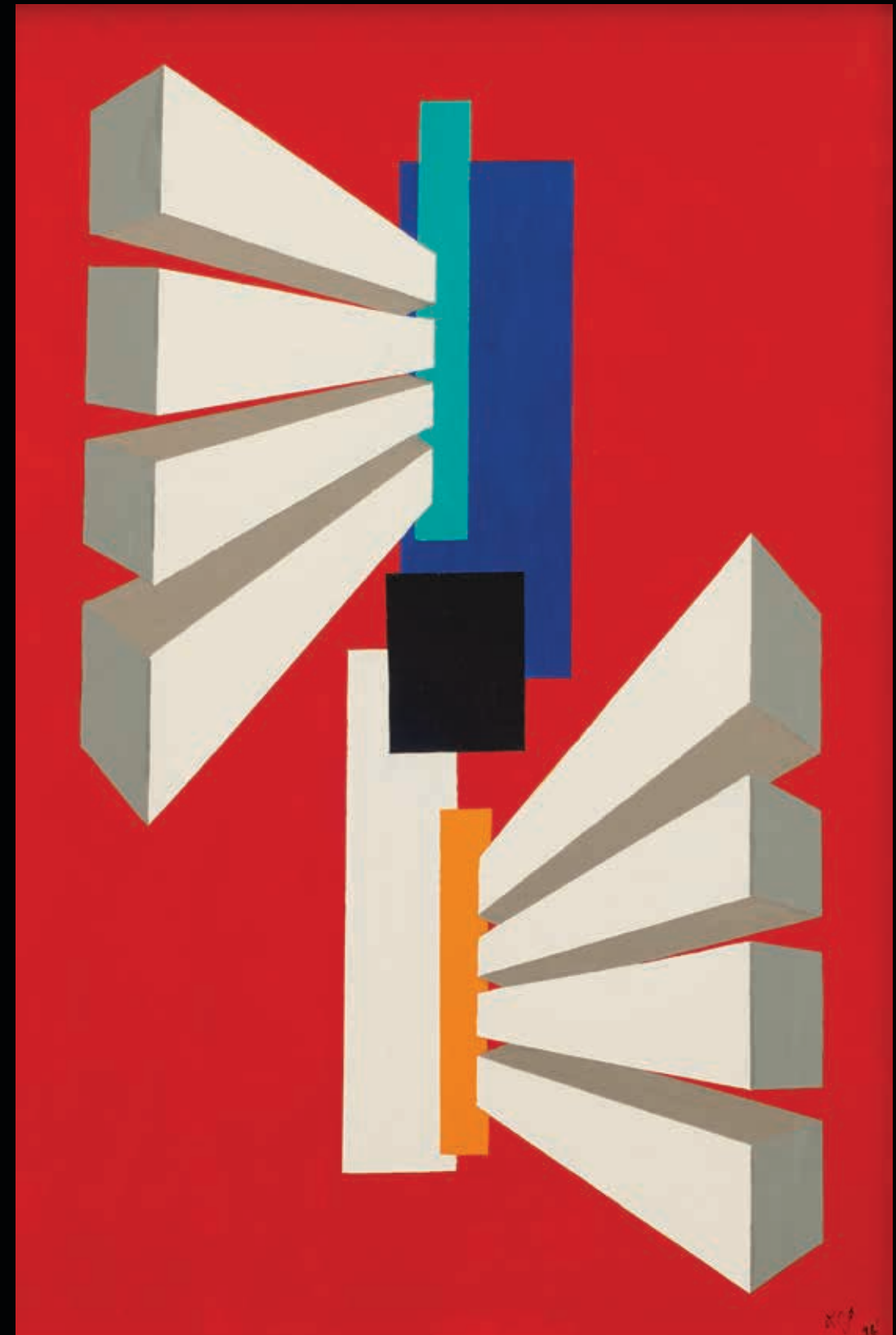
*LeRoi Johnson, Unification Series III, 2011, Burchfield
Penney Art Center, Gift of the artist*



LeRoi Johnson, Read Between the Lines, 1985, Collection of Canisius College



LeRoi Johnson, Twisted City, 1997m Collection of Canisius College



LeRoi Johnson, Geometric Not, 1980



LEROI'S UNIVERSE: A TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATION

The spirit of connection, creative exchange, and sparking dialogue across communities is at the core of LeRoi Johnson's artistic process. His compositions incorporate cultural, aesthetic, and spiritual elements that transcend borders, unpacking deeply personal and diverse realities of the artist's life through surreal, dreamlike sequences. Rather than dictating a singular theme or message, each work has a life of its own, calling on the viewer to contemplate their own experiences.

Further expanding this contemplative spirit of creative expression and community engagement, students in youth programs at Buffalo Center for Arts and Technology (BCAT), Squeaky Wheel Film and Media Art Center, Buffalo Public Schools (BPS), and Just Buffalo Literary Center participated in workshops to engage with Johnson's art and practice. They engaged in interactive class sessions with LeRoi over the course of each program's respective schedules from the fall of 2021 through the summer of 2022. Students also participated in tours and art-making workshops, as well as a share session of their works in progress at the Center. They had meaningful conversations about the subject matter of LeRoi's work, as well as their own. These interactions resulted in the creation of a dynamic range of multimedia artworks that respond to and enhance the conversation around topics of identity, social justice, community, and the environment.

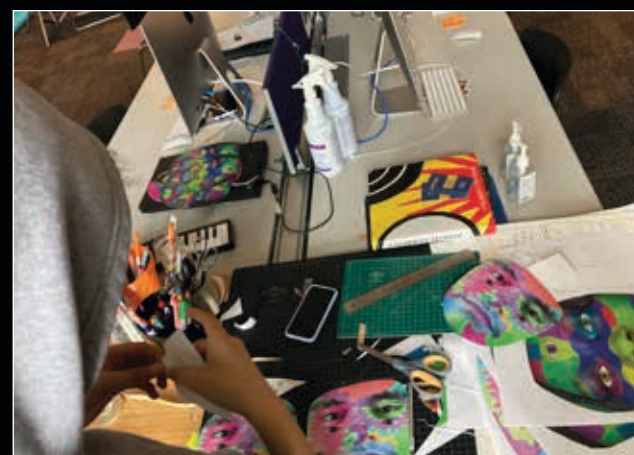


In celebration of the creativity, time, and dedication given by each of the student artists in this project, the collaborative multimedia publication *Eyes Tied Together* brings together all their work and recognizes the programs that support and nurture their creativity. As a significant undertaking in a dynamic curatorial approach that brings the work of the Burchfield Penney directly into the communities we serve, we hope to continue to encourage the agency of young viewers in cultivating meaning and connection through art.

Tiffany Gaines Curatorial Associate

Scan to view *Eyes Tied Together*:





Students at BCAT, Squeaky Wheel, Just Buffalo, and BPS conceptualized and created projects that include poetry, digital photographic collages, collaborative video installations, and three-dimensional sculptures. The cohorts of young artists are pictured throughout these workshops at various stages of discussion, inspiration, and creation.

To learn more about each of their works, scan the QR code on page 109.



EYES TIED TOGETHER



Photography by Jim Bush

ABOUT THE ARTIST

LeRoi Johnson is a Buffalo-based visual artist who works as a lawyer by day, and has established himself as an accomplished artist locally and internationally. He was born and raised in Buffalo and began drawing and painting at a young age. Art quickly became a needed distraction following an accident that left him hospitalized from ages ten to thirteen. Aside from taking a commercial art class at Hutchinson Technical High School, Johnson received very minimal formal training. Upon graduating high school, he attended Canisius College, then left Buffalo to attend Georgetown University Law School in Washington, DC in 1971.



LeRoi Johnson, *Ladies in Waiting I*, 1999 (detail)

The time Johnson spent living, working, and painting in Washington, DC, in the 1970s was integral in the evolution of his style and recurring artistic themes. He describes his work as “electric primitive,” exploring cubism and surrealism but incorporating bold, bright colors as well as African, Caribbean, and South American cultural influences. The majority of his works encompass visual depictions of dreams, visions, African ancestry, and various otherworldly elements. However, despite the primitive nature of his paintings, Johnson intentionally leaves grey areas in understanding his works. Johnson ultimately left Washington, DC to go on the road and manage his brother, singer Rick James. During this ten-year tour period, he was not painting. Despite the hiatus, he made it a point to still surround himself with art and notable artists. He was a regular in the elite Studio 54 nightclub, where he would mingle with artists like Michael Jackson, Andy Warhol, and Prince. He also immersed himself in art on the tour, and said, “Every city that we played in, I made sure that I went to every gallery. I’ve been to almost every important gallery and major museum in the major cities of all fifty states.”



Johnson eventually returned to painting and to Buffalo in 1989, where he has remained since. A close friend of the famous Brazilian artist, Abdias Nascimento, the two shared an interest in African-influenced art. Together they might be considered an afro-Brazilian-Western New York school of art. He quickly established himself within the city’s art community, exhibiting in local galleries and across the nation. He has also served on the boards of the Burchfield Penney Art Center and the Buffalo Society of Artists. In 2019 Johnson’s work was included in the London Biennial.

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Colored People Series

LeRoi Johnson, Untitled, 2017, oil and acrylic on canvas, 54 inches x 46 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People II, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 52 inches x 38 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People III, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 54 inches x 39 inches; Courtesy of the artist

Leroi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 8 inches x 6 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 8 inches x 6 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 8 inches x 6 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 8 inches x 6 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 8 inches x 6 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 8 inches x 6 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 8 inches x 6 inches; Courtesy of the artist

Leroi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 10 inches x 8 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Colored People Series, 2015, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 10 inches x 8 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Blu Guerrier (Blue Warrior), 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 71 inches x 52 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Unification, 2008, oil and acrylic on canvas, 45 inches x 35 inches; Collection of Canisius College

LeRoi Johnson, We Are Shephards of the World, 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 57½ inches x 43¾ inches; Collection of Canisius College

Brazil Period

Abdias Nascimento, Yao of Yemanja, Buffalo, 1971, acrylic on canvas, 28½ inches x 22 inches; Private Collection

Abdias Nascimento, Autumn at Penny's House, Buffalo (N.Y.) Junho, 1979 - Mont Vernon (N.H.) Outubro, 2000, Rio de Janeiro, 2000, acrylic on linen, 33¼ inches x 41 inches; Private Collection

Abdias Nascimento, Omnipotent and Immortal n. 2: Asante Adinkra, Rio de Janeiro, 1992, acrylic on canvas, 19 inches x 31½ inches; Private Collection

LeRoi Johnson, Gift from Bahia, 2004, oil and acrylic on canvas, 52 inches x 40 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Voodoo Woman, 2012, acrylic on canvas, 65 inches x 32 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Alligator Walk I, 2003, Oil and acrylic on canvas, 48½ inches X 38 inches, Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, The Choir, 2004, oil and acrylic on canvas, 45½ inches x 34½ inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, The Conversation, 2004, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 inches x 60 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Sun Goddesses, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 62 inches x 62 inches, Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Café Noir, 2004, oil and acrylic on canvas, 52½ inches x 35 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Impatient for Your Love, 2005, oil and acrylic on canvas, 45¾ inches x 38 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Ladies in Waiting I, 1999, oil on canvas, 36 inches x 48 inches; Courtesy of the artist

Identity and Relationships

LeRoi Johnson, Untitled, 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, The Gift I, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, The Lover II, c. 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Black Beauty, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 64½ inches x 46 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Self Portrait at Basquiat Toronto, 2015, oil, acrylic, pastel, pen, and ink on canvas 84 inches x 40 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Rollers II, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Butt Naked on Sunset, c. 1996, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 inches x 234 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Three Suns, 2011, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Untitled, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Noma Lisa, 2018, oil and acrylic on canvas, 39 inches x 24 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, The Gift II, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Birds of a Feather II, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Rick James Superstar, 2014, oil and acrylic on canvas, 93½ inches x 72½ inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Soul Singers, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 62 inches x 71 inches; Courtesy of the artist

Black Lives Matter

LeRoi Johnson, Black Lives Matter, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Freedom Is, 2019, acrylic on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, (R)evolution, 2013, Mixed media, paper, oil, and acrylic on canvas, 30 inches x 40 inches, Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, The Arrival I, 2012, oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 inches x 48 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Black Boy Roy, 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 20 inches x 20 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Welcome to America, 1996, acrylic on canvas, 11 inches x 14 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Birth of a Nation, 1996, oil and acrylic on canvas, 29 inches x 23 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, Evolution of American History, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 inches x 48 inches; Courtesy of the artist

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Crack Series

LeRoi Johnson, *Smoke*, 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Crack Series*, c. 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 20¼ inches x 16 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Crack Series*, c. 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 20¼ inches x 16 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Crack Series*, c. 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas board, 20¼ inches x 16 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Crack Series*, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

Abstraction/Flowers

LeRoi Johnson, *Floral Series*, c. 2006, oil and acrylic on canvas, 48 inches x 12 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Sunflowers II*, 2016, oil and acrylic on canvas, 50 inches x 14¾ inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Ode to Samo*, 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Floral Series*, 2019, oil and acrylic in canvas, 48 inches x 12 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Floral Series*, 2021, oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 inches x 12 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Beneath the Clouds*, 2019, oil and acrylic on canvas, 30 inches x 120 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Colored People*, 2021, spray paint and oil on canvas, 32 inches x 65 inches; Courtesy of the artist

Geometric Period

LeRoi Johnson, *My Life as an Artist*, 2022, oil and acrylic on canvas, 36 inches x 48 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Untitled*, 2010 - 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 60 inches x 36 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Geo Man*, 1970, refinished 1996, acrylic on canvas, 30 inches x 14 inches, Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Untitled*, c. 2010, oil and acrylic on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Colored People Series*, 2020, oil and acrylic on canvas, 24 inches x 18 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Diamonds*, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 24 inches x 18 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Naked to the World*, 1999, acrylic on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *DNA I*, 2013, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 inches X 72 inches; Courtesy of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Unification Series III*, 2011; acrylic on canvas, 36⅙ inches x 36⅙ inches;
Burchfield Penney Art Center, Gift of the artist

LeRoi Johnson, *Read Between the Lines*, 1985, oil and acrylic on canvas, 37 inches x 49 inches, Collection of Canisius College

LeRoi Johnson, *Twisted City*, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 54 inches X 71 inches, Collection of Canisius College

LeRoi Johnson, *Geometric Not*, 1980, acrylic on canvas, 36 inches x 23 inches; Courtesy of the artist

2022



Burchfield
Penney
Art Center
at Buffalo State College

