Four Points of View
Alumni Making Art
Four Points of View: Alumni Making Art

Shameika Black ’11
Harold Buchanan ’69
Leandre Jackson ’75
May Thomas ’76

June 2020
Presented by the Black Cultural Center and List Gallery, Swarthmore College
This catalog celebrates the art of four alumni – Harold Buchanan ’69, Leandre Jackson ’75, May Thomas ’76, and Shameika Black ’11 – who have contributed to the vitality of the Black Cultural Center (BCC) at Swarthmore College. As we complete a year-long series of events celebrating the 50th anniversary of the BCC, we not only honor this storied institution, but also recognize the way art enables us to interpret history, transform culture, and strengthen community.

When I began directing the BCC in December 2014, one of the first artworks I encountered was an image of students posing on the front porch on a beautiful spring day. This photograph was part of the Black Liberation 1969 exhibition installed at McCabe Library in conjunction with Professor Allison Dorsey’s course Black Liberation in 1969: Black Studies in History, Theory, and Praxis. The course was designed to challenge Black student activism at Swarthmore College in the 1960s. The image was created by Leandre Jackson, who served as the BCC’s first director after graduating in 1975. This wonderful photograph, shown below, captures a close-knit community of relaxed and confident students. They appear self-possessed, interconnected, and at home. The image hangs at the entrance to the BCC, where it welcomes everyone and reminds us that many people united to develop this resource. Each spring for the last five years, I have invited students to create an updated version of this image. We assemble on the front porch, reflecting on the past, savoring the present, and looking to our united future.

Such images remind us that representations matter: they can obscure or reveal, deflate or inspire. Throughout my career in higher education, my appreciation for art has consistently grown, providing a way to build community and advocate for social justice. So, in May 2019, as I was planning a year-long series of events to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the BCC, I naturally thought that an art exhibition would appropriately honor this organization’s history and continuing relevance. I proposed this idea to List Gallery Director Andrea Packard, and she immediately agreed to organize an exhibition of works by Black alumni in the List Gallery from late-May to mid-June 2020. I selected the four artists, and Syd Carpenter curated their images; her essay on the following pages provides insight into their works. Of course, we did not anticipate that a pandemic would interrupt our plans, but when the College closed its campus to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, we agreed that this publication would serve in its place, as a virtual exhibition.

The BCC would not have come into being without the passion and activism of individuals such as Harold Buchanan ’69. I met Harold in early 2015, shortly after I began working at Swarthmore. As a student activist, he advocated for Black students, paving the way for the establishment of the BCC. In 1969, he was one of a group of students who conducted a peaceful protest, taking over the Admissions office in order to bring issues in Black culture to the forefront and highlight the unique challenges confronting Black students. The recent book, Seven Sisters and a Brother, describes his involvement in that event. He was a founding member of the Swarthmore Black Alumni Network (SBAN), and continues to strengthen the Black community at Swarthmore.

Leandre Jackson ’75, a prolific photographer for more than 50 years, has played a key role in the BCC. After his first year as a student, he became an active supporter of the Swarthmore African-American Student Society (SASS). He strongly believed that Black students needed to develop a legacy that would last beyond their physical presence on campus and put his beliefs into action as the BCC’s first director. Over the years, he has mounted exhibitions of his photographs at the BCC and elsewhere, including a recent exhibition at Swarthmore’s McCabe Library.

Another participant in this project, May Thomas ’76, describes the BCC as a home base and sanctuary, not only as a student, but also as an alumna. While pursuing a biology major at Swarthmore, she worked in the library, studied, and socialized at the BCC. She was an active member of SASS and served on the committee that hired Janet Dickerson, the first Black dean at Swarthmore. Subsequently, she became a member of SBAN. After graduating from Swarthmore, May developed her artistic practice while also pursuing a career in medicine and working on the frontlines during the AIDS epidemic. She views her paintings as a form of interconnection.

Similarly, Shameka Black ’11 did not study art at Swarthmore – she pursued a special major in Africana Studies – and the BCC was integral to her education here. She was a BCC intern all four years, organizing events, installing the curtains in the living room, and completing countless projects, large and small. After she graduated, she became a member of the SBAN, and served on the SBAN Advisory Committee before a more formal board structure was adopted.

This publication provides the capstone for our year-long celebration of the BCC’s 50th anniversary, and I applaud Swarthmore College for its continuing support of the center. Together with the Black Studies Program and other initiatives that strengthen our diverse community, the BCC provides physical space, a sense of sanctuary, and intellectual resources for students who identify as Black. The BCC empowers us to pursue important conversations about the experience of being Black in America and the role that visual representations play in shaping our experience.

I am grateful to Andrea Packard ’85 for overseeing this project, conducting research, and editing this publication; Syd Carpenter, for her curatorial essay and expertise; Tess Wei ’17 for her design; and the four participating artists. Despite busy schedules and a global pandemic, we have come together, not only to reflect on past accomplishments, but also to celebrate ongoing creativity and new ways of thinking.
Leandre has sustained his art as a professional photographer, creating iconic portraits of both the famous and the anonymous. The photographs selected for this catalog demonstrate his ability to evoke the inner spirituality of his subjects, their empathy, their awareness. His images are indeed alive with color and cinematic lighting. No details can be overlooked as you scan each meticulously composed image.

As curator, it is my pleasure to unite these four alumni artists in a virtual exhibition documenting the inventiveness and persistence of the artists in the Swarthmore community. I also wish to express my gratitude to Dion Lewis, associate dean and director of the Black Cultural Center; Andrea Packard ’85, director of the List Gallery; and Tess Wei ’17, List Gallery assistant, for their support, creativity, and guidance in making this exhibition possible.

Professor of Art Syd Carpenter teaches in the Black Studies Program and the Department of Art and Art History at Swarthmore College. Recipient of numerous awards, including a Pew Fellowship in the Arts, her ceramic sculptures have been collected by distinguished institutions, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; the Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute; Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, Jingdezhen China; and The Tang Teaching Museum, Skidmore College.

Leandre Jackson received a B.A. from Swarthmore in 1975, serving as director of the Black Cultural Center immediately after graduation. In 2015, he exhibited his series, Proof of Black Life, in McCabe Library. Professor Dorsey said of the exhibition, “Jackson’s photographs stand as evidence of the rich community life Black students created for themselves. These images capture Black students engaged in the academic, social, and sport life of the College. The photographs also reveal intimate moments of connection among Black students as they studied together, ate together, created dance and music together.”
Boa Constrictor in Jungle, 2019, Peru, digital photograph

Chestnut-mandibled Toucan, 2012, Costa Rica, digital photograph
Violet-tailed Sylph in Flight, 2016, Ecuador, digital photograph

Andean Emerald Hummingbird Approaching Flower, 2016, Ecuador, digital photograph
Leandre Jackson

Unless noted, all images were printed from film negatives on archival inkjet paper. Dimensions vary.


Clockwise from top left: Bob Marley, 1978; Rosa Parks, 1985; Ralph Ellison, 1987; and Amiri Baraka, 1986
All Day Sunday, multiple exposure with negatives from 1990's

7th Ave. Hip Hop, 1999, Nikon digital image, archival inkjet print
Reconnecting through Art Amid the 2020 Pandemic
by Andrea Packard ’85, List Gallery director

In September 2019, when we began planning Four Points of View: Alumni Making Art, none of us imagined that the College campus would need to close in March to mitigate the transmission of the COVID-19 virus. Although List Gallery exhibitions were paused and Alumni Weekend was cancelled, we decided to create this catalog instead—a virtual exhibition of sorts. While confronting the myriad uncertainties and hardships caused by the pandemic, I feel especially fortunate to be able to collaborate with dedicated colleagues, such as Dion Lewis, Syd Carpenter, and Tess Wei, and sage alumni, such as Harold Buchanan ’69, Leandre Jackson ’75, May Thomas ’76, and Shameika Black ’11.

In ways unique to each of us, art helps us become more discerning and empathetic. Although physical presentations of art and in-person gatherings remain essential—and we can’t wait for them to return—the current conditions of quarantine and social distancing remind us of the important role art plays in our lives and communities. During this historic crisis, visual art, music, film, and literature can broaden our perspectives, connect us more closely, and highlight what is best in humanity.

Although the four artists featured in this publication pursue distinct goals and provide different viewpoints, they have much in common with each other and many other Swarthmore alumni: wide-ranging intellectual curiosity, an interest in seeing the world from different perspectives, and a concern for both social justice and the environment. Each year, viewing works by newly practicing artists together with seasoned professionals reminds us that we all have the ability to create and share art.

Just as this catalog offers just a small sampling of each artist’s more varied practice, it also provides a reminder of a much larger community of alumni, such as Njideka Ayunili Crosby ’04, H’19 and Jake Beckman ’04, who model new ways of thinking. Whether alumni exhibitions take place in the beautiful light-filled rooms of the List Gallery or in the pages of a carefully-designed catalog, they allow us to appreciate the way Swarthmore provided us with much more than fixed skill sets or rigid notions of excellence. We leave the College ready for a lifetime of learning, outside-the-box creativity, and new beginnings.