

Harlem, Coney Island, the Combat Zone, and beyond

By [Mark Feeney](#) Globe Staff, May 1, 2019, 3:11 p.m.



Lorraine O'Grady's "Art Is. . . (Metropolitan Baptist)," 1983/2009 (LORRAINE O'GRADY AND ALEXANDER GRAY ASSOCIATES, NEW YORK)

ANDOVER — There are places that owe as much to idea as actuality: Jerusalem, Timbuktu, Hollywood. They exist in the imagination no less than they do as GPS coordinates. Even today, as a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood in Manhattan, Harlem remains such a place. Throughout much of the 20th century, it was the cultural capital of black America, at once magnet, haven, and enclosure.

“Harlem: In Situ” honors both place and state of mind, documenting the one and evoking the other. An abundant, arms-spreading show, it runs through July 31 at the Addison Gallery of American Art, as do the three shows reviewed below. The Addison’s Stephanie Sparling Williams curated the exhibition.

There are famous names here, and with fine work on display. Some are expected: Aaron Siskind, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden. Some are not: Alice Neel, Arnold Newman. Organized in roughly chronological order, the show ranges in date from the Harlem Renaissance, with a 1924 James Van Der Zee photograph of a Marcus Garvey black-nationalist parade, to nearly the present, with Dawoud Bey’s photo essay “Harlem Redux,” the most recent selection being from 2016.

Also on display is a sampling from Bey’s “Harlem, USA,” from the late ’70s. That photo essay, in turn, faces photographs by Roy DeCarava from the ’50s and ’60s and a copy of his celebrated collaboration with Langston Hughes, “The Sweet Flypaper of Life” (1955). Such hanging bespeaks Williams’s attentiveness.

That so much of the show comes from the Addison’s permanent collection is a reminder of what a phenomenal resource it is, just 25 miles north of Boston. Among the exceptions are the nearly two-dozen photographs from Lorraine O’Grady’s “Art Is . . .” series. As much performance art as photography, they were taken at the 1983 African American Day Parade. Participants, passersby, and sites were photographed within the visual confines of an ornate gilt frame. Sense of place meets sense of energy meets sense of occasion (gilt frames will have that effect). There’s also a nicely subtle chiming with the image of the Garvey parade — more attentiveness.

Music is a motif throughout. Siskind offers a view of a performer at the Apollo Theatre, Harlem’s most enduring landmark. Lucien Aigner presents chorus girls in rehearsal. Both are from the ’30s. William H. Johnson’s two oil paintings on plywood, “Jitterbugs,” outdo O’Grady in sense of

energy. To underscore the importance of music, recordings play in one of the galleries: Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald with Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, and Count Basie. The Basie track is “One O’Clock Jump.” Wouldn’t [“Jumpin’ at the Woodside,”](#) named for a hotel at Seventh Avenue and 142nd Street, be better? There’s in situ, and there’s *in situ*.

“Harlem Heroes,” consisting of 27 portraits by Carl Van Vechten, serves as pendant to “Harlem: In Situ.” During his lifetime, Van Vechten (1880-1964) was best known as a novelist. His enduring work is as a photographer. Fascinated by African-American culture, he displayed a self-congratulatory tolerance that was patronizing as well as supportive. The cool objectivity of his camera split the difference.

The subjects of “Harlem Heroes” range from pillars of the Harlem Renaissance, like the poet Countee Cullen and philosopher Alain Locke, to the tennis champion Althea Gibson (wearing evening gown and white gloves) and Sarah Victor, a pastry chef at New York’s Algonquin Hotel. At least two of the portraits, of Langston Hughes and the novelist Zora Neale Hurston, are canonical.

Van Vechten shows Mahalia Jackson, the greatest of gospel singers, with eyes averted and hands clasped, as if in prayer. Such artifice is an exception. Recognizing how often he’s in the presence of greatness, he rarely calls attention to his own artistry. Van Vechten may have been contradictory; he wasn’t foolish. More than just Harlem heroes, James Baldwin and Paul Robeson and Marian Anderson are human heroes.

Coney Island is another of those idea/actuality places: a Brooklyn neighborhood, the longtime home of a legendary amusement park, a byword for urban excitement and leisure. Lawrence Ferlinghetti knew what he was doing when he gave the title “A Coney Island of the Mind” to what would turn out to be his most famous poem.

“Coney Island,” the show, isn’t listed on the Addison website (neither is the Van Vechten). That’s the website’s loss. There are 19 works, by artists including Walker Evans, Reginald Marsh,

Weegee, Bruce Davidson, and Robert Frank, who has a nocturnal view of Coney on the Fourth of July that's literally pyrotechnic.

John Goodman is best known for his photographs of the Combat Zone, the adult-entertainment district of the '60s, '70s, and '80s. There are a few views of the Zone in "John Goodman: not recent color," but part of the very considerable pleasure the show has to offer is how far and wide it ranges: from West Virginia to Fenway Park, from 1973 to 1992. The exhibition has been curated by the Addison's estimable Allison Kemmerer.

Many of the prints, which were made from Kodachrome and Ektachrome slides, have never been exhibited. Why? They're terrific. Some are nearly 2 feet by 3 feet, and the scale feels right. This is remarkable, because so many of the photographs are about detail rather than context. Detail comes naturally to a master of framing. It's not just the way Goodman uses the car window in "Woman Driver/South Boston." It's how the curlers she's wearing become themselves a set of frames. Even more, it's the look on the woman's face, a thousand-yard stare directed ever so slightly away from the camera.

Many of these photos were taken as color was coming to be accepted in serious photography. One can feel Goodman's pleasure in experimenting with it — and see how successful those experiments were. In "Red, Tremont Street," from 1975, the dueling redness of a Marlboro sign, in the background, and that of a splotch of blood (or is it paint?), on the sidewalk, manage to seem both bravura and utterly matter of fact. That pairing is neat trick to pull off. Goodman does it often.

There is much here to revel in: the deadpan "Statehouse," from 1975 (Goodman's framing chops off a man's head in a way that's hilarious and spooky), the hey-look-at-me horizontality of the Cadillac in "Siegel Eggs/Haymarket," from 1973, the absolute centeredness of that bowling shoe in "7-10 Split," from 1980. In its own class is "General Cinema/Framingham, Mass.," from 1985. It looks a little William Eggleston. It looks a little more David Lynch. Most of all, it looks completely John Goodman.

HARLEM: IN SITU

HARLEM HEROES. Photographs by Carl Van Vechten

CONEY ISLAND

JOHN GOODMAN: not recent color

At Addison Gallery of American Art, Phillips Academy, 180 Main St., Andover, through July 31.
addison.andover.edu, 978-749-4015

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