

LONNIE HOLLEY: *Supported by the Power*. Mixed media. New Orleans Museum of Art.

Defined by a Letter

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“New at NOMA 2021”
New Orleans Museum of Art
New Orleans

WE ARE WELL into the 21st century yet contemporary art of today could easily fit into the 20th or, in some cases, the 19th century. So, how does art of the 21st century distinguish itself from art that has come before, as art indicative of the times? Nomenclature. At least that is how the New Orleans Museum of Art introduces us to its second “New at NOMA,” by asserting that the museum

is “focusing on works by BIPOC, LGBTQIA+ and Female-identifying artists” in light of “museums across the country, including NOMA...,” having been “overwhelmingly white and male.” The museum-goer is further informed that NOMA has been working to buck that status quo and in 2020 purchased “over twenty works of art by BIPOC artists.” Of the 16 artists featured in “New at NOMA,” only two are outwardly White. They happen to be female, while the remaining census is 10 Black artists, 7 of whom are male and 3 who are female. This leaves 4 female artists, 3 Latino and one of Bosnian descent. For the most part, the artists’ sexual orientation is not broadcast, and ethnicities can change depending upon specificity.

To categorize the artists in this manner can have a dilute effect and make a viewer question from the get-go why these three



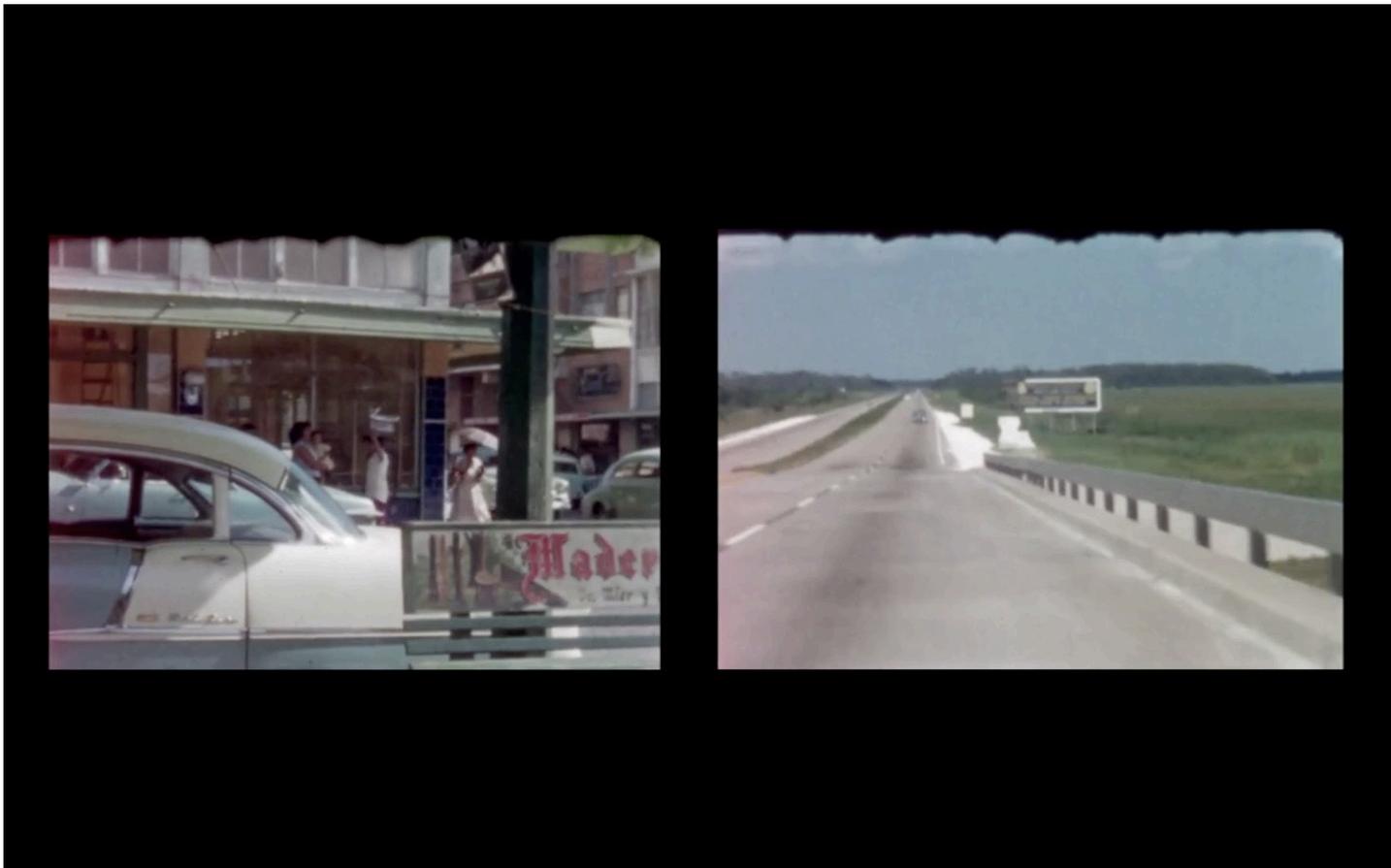
NORAH LOVELL: Reconnaissance: Battle of New Orleans (Wreck of Hermes; Inception: After Magafan; King of Barataria). 2015. Gouache on panels. New Orleans Museum of Art.

sectors were lumped together in one exhibit, rather than dedicating an entire exhibit for each. By placing emphasis on the artists' individual identities, the expectation is a show that exploits sexual and societal orientations unique to each group. Instead, we get only a whisper of "New at NOMA's" theme along with a lingering question: do the 16 artists in the current "New at NOMA" seek to have their work identified via individual orientation the way NOMA's theme implies? Careful reading of the artists' statements posted alongside each work gives little clue to the individual make-up of the artist. Rather, their statements make us focus on a shared, heartfelt point of view, and their work comes across as all-inclusive, speaking to us as a whole, across the lines of diversity, which bodes well for individual scrutiny in an art review.

Thankfully, as we continue mulling over "New at NOMA's" theme, some relief comes a few lines down in the shows' description. NOMA reveals its "ongoing commitment to make the art on the walls more reflective of the community it serves...".

Thus, we are freed to savor a very cohesive show, one that perhaps portends future identity, orientation, and gender-based exhibitions. Something to look forward to! Until then, this review will proceed with utmost respect for all of the artists and the groups they represent. Pronouns and other descriptive terms will be ones that best fit the artists' statements and this reviewer's learning curve with regard to proper terminology amid the ever-evolving classification of the marginalized and misrepresented.

"New at NOMA" is a very cohesive show, due in part perhaps to the artists' statements as well as their pervasive prediction for exploring the human story through figurative narration, most often conveyed by way of a picture plane. Mind you, figurative imagery is not always blatantly forthcoming, oftentimes it is thoroughly cloaked in conundrum as seen in the two sculptures on view, *Supported by the Power*, by Lonnie Holley, and *Lore*, by Lorna Williams, both Black artists, and Indigenous Ana Hernandez's wall-based assemblage *A Sense of Memory*.



GABRIELLE GARCIA STEIB: *The Past is a Foreign Country*:(Still). 2020. Super 8 film and archival photographs. New Orleans Museum of Art.

One of the more established artists, Holley is also a successful musician whose early years in Alabama were fraught with turbulence and upheaval, living in foster care and having a generally unsettling start in life. The free-standing, mixed media *Supported by the Power* is on first-glance undecipherable. What is this vertical improv of tangled wire and detritus? Shadows on the wall hint at faces in profile, leading us back into Holley's sculpture which now takes on a tree shape whose foliage of faces call out. Says Holley, "...If we are going to do something different, there aren't always teachers to teach us." While Holley is one of the older artists in "New at NOMA," the majority fall into Gen X and Gen Y age range. Among the latter is New Orleans native Williams, whose wall-supported *Lore* is even less associative. Constructed from a discordant alliteration of plaster teeth, vines, plumbing hardware, *Lore* resembles a windmill mounted to the wall, uttering and spilling to the floor its litany of twisted vines. The artist states the focus of her work is "...—letting go in order to reinvent..." The New Orleans-based Hernandez's *A Sense of Memory* evokes the alchemic arrangements of Renee Stout. Subdued by a dark palette, *A Sense of Memory* is fashioned from a

vast mix of found media that becomes one of stark declaration. The hodgepodge of cast metal, found glass, found wood, found nails, steel wire, steel wool, and oil pastel is quietly consumed by the wood-stained panel of found wood. All we get is an inset of a small cast of a brain and stem shape placed diagonally opposite the fabricated nazar. Of the piece Hernandez says "Thoughts that come to mind whenever I work with wood are: cosmology, concentric circles, contour lines...time and place...site and sight."

As indicated by the works of the three aforementioned artists, the overriding sentiment of "New at NOMA" relates to humanness in general. Included below every artist's statement are NOMA's explanations. While these are indeed informative, this reviewer has opted to let the artist's work and words be the guide. The only artist with a statement openly referencing sexuality is Philadelphia-based Jonathan Lyndon Chase. His artist's statement is a poem describing a Queer encounter of Black males in the back seat of a car. Chase's painting, *They got a crush on him*, is executed in the unpretentious media of spray paint, acrylic, marker, oil, and glitter on muslin, and conjures predecessors as



JONATHAN LYNDON CHASE: *They got a crush on him*. New Orleans Museum of Art.



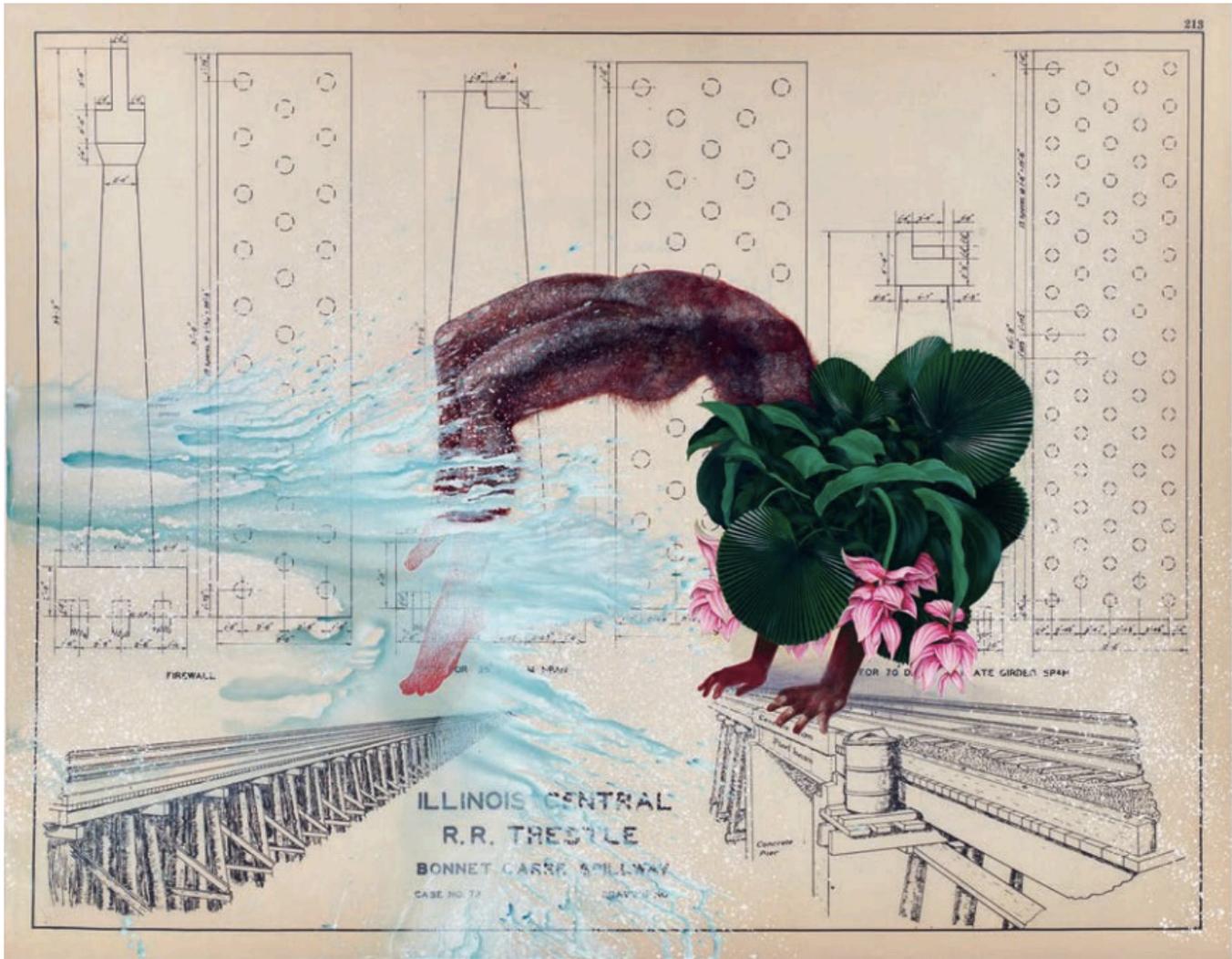
RADCLIFFE BAILEY: *Covered*. New Orleans Museum of Art.

ostensibly unlike as Guston, Lawrence and Basquiat. In fact, you get a potpourri of styles depending on the iconography deployed by Chase which ranges from body parts and fluids to male faces that appear masked and unmasked. This is one of Chase's more tame paintings.

Many of the paintings in "New at NOMA" can be compared according to their affinity to one another despite the artists' inspirations being otherwise unrelated. Warm tones and floating figures with muted features appear in both Los Angeles-based Heidi Hahn's oil on canvas *Burnout in Shredded Heaven* and the late Purvis Young's *Untitled (Reclining Angels and Houses)*, a rustic painting of oil on wood. The two paintings actually hang close to one another. While Hahn is White, the self-taught Purvis lived in Overtown, a Black neighborhood in Miami. Allusion to sexual tension between the two female figures in *Burnout* is expressed in a portion of Hahn's statement that reads "With the one figure reaching out, failing to really engage the other person, no concrete

intimacy occurs." Conversely, Young looks to another kind of energy, saying "I look up to heaven. It's a habit I got."

A quick glance at a grouping of paintings by New Orleansian Norah Lovell in one area and the singular canvas of the New York-based Firelei Báez from the Dominican Republic in another, sparks familiarity. Both artists favor a scattering of space emboldened by empty white amid notations of line, shape and color. The visual similarity ends there, however. Lovell's gouache on panel trio *Reconnaissance: Battle of New Orleans (Wreck of Hermes; Inception: After Magafan; King of Barataria)* favors a nonobjective stance in her tapestry of forms while Báez's *the trace, whether we are attending to it or not (a space for each other's breathing)* superimposes expressive, representational form against the ready-made of a large architectural diagram of the Illinois Central R. R. Trestle. Báez says of the tufted ciguapa's backward-arched body: "...She is quite literally bridging and forming space for communities to be able to carve out belonging and breathe." Painted in



FIRELEI BAEZ: *the trace, whether we are attending to it or not (a space for each other's breathing)* 2019. Acrylic, oil, and transfer on archival printed canvas. 90 x 114 $\frac{1}{2}$ w. New Orleans Museum of Art.

acrylic, oil and transfer on archival printed canvas, tropical flora garnish the ciguapa's upper torso, offering a seductive invitation to the piece.

While photographic media is not in the majority, there are a few examples in "New at NOMA" including an installation by New Orleans artist Gabrielle Garcia Steib and a wall hanging by Atlanta-based Radcliffe Bailey. A commonality of the two artists, despite being separated in age by many years, is that both traverse the annals of personal history, cogently fusing the past with the present. Bailey, known for incorporating old family photographs into many of his mixed media works, is represented with *Covered*, a quilt of found fabrics in earthen colors grommeted to the wall. An enlarged archival photograph of a seated Black gentleman is the focal point, emblematic of an era that still exists through heritage. In his artist's statement, Bailey says "Right before my grandmother died,...she gave me 400 photographs of family members. They were from around 1910. We didn't know a lot of them, but my grandmother wanted me to be the keeper of the photographs." Fittingly, *Covered* includes cardinal points. Likewise, a sense of

place with points of reference appears in Steib's multifaceted *The Past is a Foreign Country*. Intimately placed in a recessed portion of NOMA, *The Past is a Foreign Country* includes a display case of family post cards and archival photographs that come alive in the Super 8 film mounted on the wall. Taken from home movie footage of the artist's family in Mexico, Nicaragua and New Orleans, Steib kindles the scenes with flickering swatches of color. Lending a kaleidoscopic effect to our viewing, the technique makes the imagery tangible while simultaneously imparting distance. "I value the archive as subject matter...The power of the archive is that it proves existence and experience." Certainly, Steib's title implies a double entendre, that the origin of our past can be unknown. And ancestry for many resides in unfamiliar territory. It can easily be said that current times face a similar landscape, with terminology ever evolving to classify our identity. One thing is for certain, though. We are all defined by a letter or two. Or more. □