



LONGER THAN THE SKY: ART OF THE OBAMA YEARS

JULY 10 - OCTOBER 11, 2026

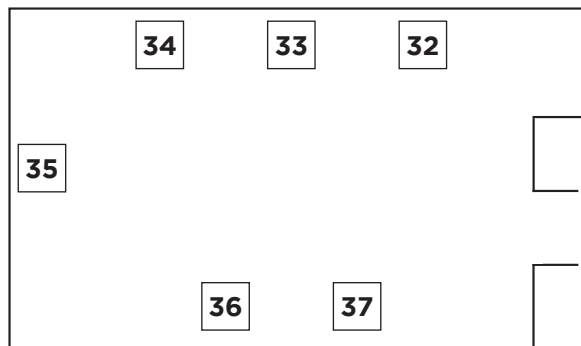
GALLERY GUIDE

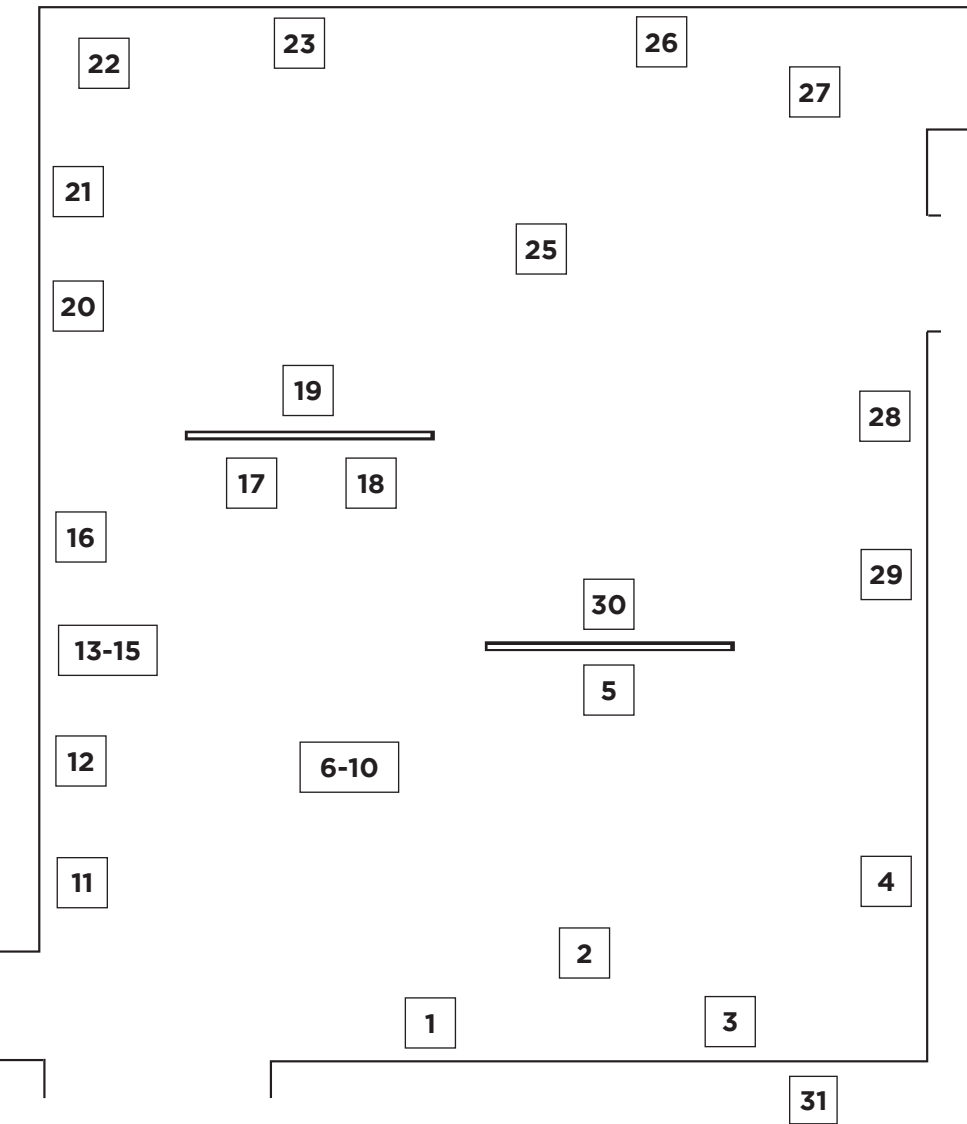
This exhibition charts a provisional history of art made during the years of the Obama presidency — a period marked as much by continuity as by change. Comprising nearly forty works by a multigenerational group of artists, it centers on artistic practices that gained relevance for the ways they engaged self-reflexively with their historical moment. Stylistically varied, these artworks have been assembled for the ways they offer distinct perspectives on the shared circumstances in which they were made. While some address specific political events, the majority evoke their political context more obliquely, highlighting a set of overlapping social, technological, and aesthetic concerns that shaped the art of this era.

The exhibition's title, *Longer Than the Sky*, comes from James Baldwin's 1957 short story, "Sonny's Blues," and evokes the intermingling of optimism and despair that defined the period between 2008 and 2016. The story concludes when the younger of two brothers performs a stirring rendition of the blues, an event that carries the fleeting glimmer of hopefulness, even freedom. "I was yet aware that this was only a moment," the narrator subsequently reflects, "that the world waited outside, as hungry as a tiger, and that trouble stretched above us, longer than the sky."

Opened in 2012 at the height of the Obama years, the Reva & David Logan Center for the Arts is part of this history. Through its exhibitions and programs, the Logan Center has played a key role in supporting artistic communities on the South Side of Chicago where Barack Obama launched his political career. In keeping with this context, *Longer Than the Sky* situates the work of several Chicago-based artists within broader conversations about global contemporary art.

GALLERY MAP





The artworks in this exhibition are organized into five groups, each of which has been titled after one of the artworks it features. For additional information on each artist's ties to the city of Chicago and to President Barack Obama, please see the accompanying biographies.

1-5

LATERAL SHIFT

The works in this section offer a view of political events at the outset of Barack Obama's presidency. Touching on themes of collectivity and historical change, they ask, how might art mark the conditions or evoke the feeling of a particular moment in time? Works by Jason Lazarus, Catherine Opie, and Gaylen Gerber reference the public events surrounding Obama's election: the Grant Park rally where he delivered his acceptance speech and the Inauguration ceremony that took place on the National Mall. Merging classical formats—mosaics, sculptural relief—with contemporary techniques of production—bar codes, vacuum forming, and date stamping—works by Jack Whitten and Seth Price mark the texture and events of the year 2008.

1

Jason Lazarus
Obama Election Night Rally, the Sky Above, November 4, 2008 (Grant Park, Chicago, IL), 2008
Archival inkjet print
Rogers Family Collection

2

Gaylen Gerber
Support, n.d.
Oil paint on concrete fragment found in Grant Park, Chicago, on November 4, 2008, on base
Courtesy of the artist and Layr, Vienna

3

Jack Whitten
Bar Code #2, Lateral Shift, 2008
Acrylic collage on canvas
Courtesy of the Estate of Jack Whitten

Whitten made this painting using a technique he developed around 1990 in which he carved up sheets of hardened acrylic paint into tesserae-like slabs and combined them into a single work. Evoking both ancient mosaics and digital pixelation, the work exemplifies his belief that abstraction could encapsulate history and technological change. His use of the term "lateral shift" in the painting's title, a direct reference to President Obama's election, derives from the work of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek who used it to describe a movement or change that takes place within an existing system without disrupting it. "I'm thinking, oh yeah, revolutionary," Whitten recalled of President Obama's election, "but this is still American politics....This shit's lateral." While he remained skeptical of the potential for radical political change, Whitten believed that the election of America's first Black President could have a significant impact on his work as an artist. "Abstraction can play a role in the political process," he wrote in the lead up to the election. "The time is ripe for a Black abstract artist to take the lead."

4

Seth Price

Untitled (Black bomber), 2008

Vacuum formed high impact polystyrene
Private Collection, Chicago

At the center of this work is the image of a vintage bomber jacket, a garment that has accrued a host of shifting associations and value over time. First developed during World War I as the protective garb for fighter pilots, the bomber jacket was subsequently embraced in non-utilitarian cultural contexts like Punk and other subcultures, before becoming the staple of luxury and mass-market fashion we know today. Price suspended its image through vacuum forming, a process typically used to streamline packaging of mass-produced goods that involves heating a sheet of high-impact Polystyrene (plastic) and suction-forming it around the garment-mold. Repurposed for the making of art, the technique fuses the malleability of plastic and cultural signifiers, freezing them at the height of the global financial crisis when value itself was completely adrift.

5

Catherine Opie,

Untitled #1 (Jan. 20th, 2009), 2009

C-print

Courtesy of the Artist and Regen Projects

6-10

AMERICAN EXPRESS

In Lin Manuel Miranda's widely acclaimed 2015 musical, *Hamilton*, the founding father who played a central role in establishing Wall Street and the U.S. military became an unlikely icon of democratic inclusion. The Broadway show tells the story of Hamilton's

rise from rags to riches, substituting his slave-owning past with a contemporary cast comprised primarily of artists of color. President Obama praised the musical for evoking "the vital, crazy, kinetic energy that's at the heart of America," and joked that it was the one thing on which he and Dick Cheney agreed. First Lady Michelle Obama called it the best art she had ever seen.

This case places the *Hamilton* playbill alongside other artistic forays into mainstream culture: glossy magazines, platinum credit cards, and hip-hop album covers. Made in the wake of economic recession, these objects suggest the prevalence of money-forward taste, the valorization of entrepreneurship, and the fine line between representation and commodification.

6

Vibe (November 2008) with cover photograph by Terry Richardson

7

Playbill for the Broadway musical, *Hamilton* (2015) by Lin Manuel Miranda

8

American Express platinum credit cards designed by Julie Mehretu (top) and Kehinde Wiley (bottom)

9

Cover for *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* (2009) by Kanye West with original art by George Condo

10

Cover for *808s & Heartbreak* (2010) by Kanye West with original cover designed by Virgil Abloh and Willo Perron

11-18

COLOR(ED) THEORY

For her series of *Color(ed) Theory* photographs, Amanda Williams repainted a group of eight condemned homes on the South Side of Chicago in hues drawn from commercial products historically marketed to Black communities. Combining modernist design principles, vernacular architecture, and local color, these works pose questions about the intermingling of racial disparity, aesthetics, and economic value. Named for powerful Black beauty brands, *Pink Oil Moisturizer* and *Ultrashreen* (on view in the adjacent gallery) suggest the legacy of respectability politics in the post-Civil Rights era.

In dialogue with Williams's series, this section considers how some Chicago-based artists have explored the tension between color's racial and aesthetic meanings. Works by Kerry James Marshall, Aliza Nisenbaum, and Cauleen Smith evoke the ways race is visually constructed, while those by Pope.L reflect and stymie our desire to stabilize markers of racial difference.

11

Aliza Nisenbaum
Untitled (Vero y Marissa), 2026
Gouache and watercolor on paper
Courtesy of the Artist and Anton Kern Gallery

Nisenbaum first met the subjects of this painting, Véronica and Marissa Ramírez, in 2012 through Immigrant Movement International (IMI), a project established by the Cuban artist Tania Bruguera with the goal of providing resources for immigrant communities based in Queens, New York. While teaching English language courses at

IMI, Nisenbaum set up a makeshift painting studio and began inviting her students to sit for portraits. The resulting paintings present skin as an amalgam of vibrant, shifting tones. "You have to pay close attention to the subtle nuance of every little character in their face," Nisenbaum has stated. "Color is something that is very contingent."

12

Amanda Williams
Color(ed) Theory: Pink Oil Moisturizer, 2014-16, printed 2017
Inkjet print
David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago. Purchase, Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions and Ann E. Ziegler

13-15

Cauleen Smith
Ivory Anthropologie #20, #14, #16 (L-R), 2010
White out, graphite and acrylic on magazine paper
University of Chicago Booth School of Business Art Collection

16

Kerry James Marshall
The Bride of Frankenstein, 2010
Hardground etching with aquatint on Somerset White Paper
Collection of John E Ellis MD

This work's central figure hovers on the threshold of visibility, engaging the viewer with her penetrating gaze while simultaneously threatening to disappear into a field of black pigment. To make it, Marshall merged the printmaking techniques of etching and aquatint; their combined effect produces subtle shifts in tone and texture that invite slow, close looking. The work extends Marshall's

longstanding project of redressing the absence of black bodies in canonical Western art and culture through its reference to the popular 1935 film that shares its title. With her afro and commanding stance, this bride forcefully defies Eurocentric ideals of feminine beauty, substituting, in Marhsall's words, a "stylized representation of a beauty that [is] unequivocally black."

17

Pope.L

Gray People Gas Flick, 2014

Oil and acrylic on advertising insert

Private collection

18

Pope.L

Head of State A, 2017-18

Plastic heads, dissected images of former U.S. President Barack Obama, plywood supports, speaker wall mounts, LED lights, cords, mdf, mylar

Courtesy of the Estate of Pope.L

19-24

ENTRYWAYS

Employing a range of aesthetic strategies—from narrative ambiguity and painterly opacity to bodily engagement and direct address—the works in this gallery yield distinct perspectives on contemporary spectacles of American violence. Some scramble our expectations about racial terror; others point to the proximity between institutions of art and policing. Together, these works suggest the many ways artists grappled with representation and image making in the wake of the violent events and historical circumstances that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement.

19

Jennifer Packer

Laquan (1), 2016-18

Oil on canvas

Collection of Marilyn and Larry Fields

In *Laquan*, Packer reimagines the traditional genre of still life painting towards the tender commemoration of loss. This delicate rendering of grassy fronds—a masterclass in depth and intensity of color—is named for Laquan McDonald, the Black teenager who was murdered in 2014 by a Chicago police officer.

20

Adrian Piper

Imagine [Trayvon Martin], 2013

Digital PNG formatted image, 300 DPI.

Available for free download using the following link:

<http://www.adrianpiper.com/Edinburgh/art/index.shtml>

Collection Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation. © Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation

21

Rachel Harrison

Untitled, 2011

Colored pencil on paper

Private Collection, Minneapolis

This drawing features caricatured depictions of the British Pop singer Amy Winehouse, who died from alcohol poisoning in the year it was made. While on display at the Wexner Center for the Arts at Ohio State University in 2015, the work was shot by a former security officer who vandalized the gallery with spray paint, a revolver, and a semi-automatic handgun before taking his own life. Harrison's decision to preserve the damage as part of the drawing underscores the social conditions the work explores and

asserts the artwork's direct participation in public life. In April 2016, she displayed the drawing at Greene Naftali Gallery as part of *More News: A Situation*, in an installation featuring piñatas resembling then presidential candidate Donald Trump.

22

Ralph Lemon

Wounded Rabbit, 2009

Single-channel video (color, sound)

Super 8 film cinematography: Luke Schantz

Videographer: Chelsea Lemon Fetzer

1 min. continuous loop

Courtesy of the Artist and Paula Cooper Gallery

23

Diamond Stingily

Entryways, 2016

Door with locks, bat

Collection of Eugene Fu

Inspired by her grandmother's use of a baseball bat to guard against home intruders, Diamond Stingily's *Entryways* presents a feminist view of matriarchal self-reliance. The work's readymade components invite contradictory impulses, simultaneously invoking entry and warning against it—a threshold and a blockade. “I think violence is a part of every day for a lot of people,” Stingily has stated. “To be non-violent I think is a very privileged thing. To not live in violence is a privilege.”

24

Hito Steyerl

Guards, 2012

Single channel high-definition digital video, sound, freestanding screen

20 min.

Protagonists: Ron Hicks, Martin Whitefield, Corey Buraque, Modesto Correa, Darrell Evans

Director of Photography: Kevan Jenson

Dolly Grip: Jordan Campagna

Produced by: Lisa Dorin, Ben Thorp Brown, Tracy Parker

Production Manager: Tracy Parker

Assistant Director: Ben Thorp Brown, Alwin Franke (Berlin)

Editing: Cristovao dos Reis (assisted by Maria Frycz)

Post production and compositing:

Christoph Manz

Original installation developed by Diogo Passarinho and Yulia Startsev for Studio Miessen

Produced by: Art Institute of Chicago

Security: Hito Steyerl

Courtesy of the Artist, Andrew Kreps Gallery, New York and Esther Schipper, Berlin/Paris/Seoul

Commissioned by and filmed at the Art Institute of Chicago, *Guards* features interviews with museum security staff. As they move through the Modern Wing galleries, they take turns describing how their approaches to securing the collection are informed by their backgrounds in the military and law enforcement. “We don’t train our officers to be peacemakers,” one remarks. Transposing their policing experience onto the gallery’s white walls, the video recasts terms like “sight lines” and “points of view” into a language of defense and surveillance and recontextualizes the hallowed halls of culture as a charged zone of conflict.

25-31

EXCERPT

These works present fragments culled from histories of art, science, design, and vernacular culture. Each begins with a found form—a gesture, artwork, garment, or text—and transforms or resituates it in the context of exhibition. The resulting objects excavate connections between the realm of art and systems of financialization, war, new media, and racial violence.

The group is titled for a neon sculpture by Glenn Ligon, who extracted its text from an earlier sculpture, *One Hundred Live and Die* (1984), by Bruce Nauman. *Excerpt* isolates two of the original artwork's one hundred phrases, highlighting and heightening its racial undertones by painting tubes of white neon black and programming them to flicker on and off.

25

Kevin Beasley
Untitled (Antique), 2016
Dresses and resin
Collection of Hans Reiser and Alan Taylor

26

Glenn Ligon
Excerpt, 2009
Neon and paint, in 2 parts
Collection of Hans Reiser and Alan Taylor

27

Martine Syms
Notes on Gesture, 2015
Video (color, sound)
10:30 min.
Copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago

Notes on Gesture takes its format from the seventeenth century text, *Chirologia: Or the Natural Language of the Hand* and reimagines it as a twenty-first-century inventory of Black gesture. It features Syms' collaborator Diamond Stingily whose micro actions and statements are edited into a series of glitchy, repetitive loops that recall the short-form media—YouTube, GIFs—that emerged in these years. By reducing Stingily's performance to excerpted units of speech, Syms mines the commodification of blackness as a form of expression. She titled the video after an essay by the philosopher Giorgio Agamben in which he describes gesture as a “means without end,” or, the exhibition of mediality itself.

28

Cameron Rowland
Payroll, 2016
4 laminate table tops, bases, hardware
University of Chicago Booth School of Business Art Collection

Public Surplus is a private auction system that sells government property to private buyers. These tables were bought at auction from Public Surplus. The tables were used by the New York City Office of Payroll Administration One Centre Street, Room 200N. Between 2013 and 2016 the number of full-time OPA employees decreased from 224 to 183. When the agency's offices were consolidated at another location in 2016, these tables and other equipment were sold via Public Surplus.

“The Office of Payroll Administration is responsible for: ensuring timely and accurate employee and retiree payrolls and providing responsive payee services; maintaining and enforcing uniform payroll policies and procedures; coordinating

payroll matters among central agencies including the Comptroller's Office, DCAS, OLR, OMB, Finance, and Law; ensuring the continued security, integrity, and effectiveness of the City's payroll systems; using technology to the greatest possible advantage in support of payroll operations; ensuring compliance with requirements of federal, state, and City taxing authorities; and managing and reconciling the City's payroll accounts." http://www.nyc.gov/html/opa/html/about/about_opa.shtml

29

Andrea Fraser

L'1% c'est moi, 2011

Text, print on vinyl

Courtesy of the Artist and Marian Goodman Gallery

This essay can be accessed in full through the exhibition website.

30

Louise Lawler

No Drones (adjusted to fit, distorted for the times), 2010/2011/2022

Adhesive wall material

Dimensions variable to match proportions of a given wall at any scale determined by exhibitor

Courtesy of the artist and Sprüth Magers

Printed on adhesive vinyl, this photographic mural was scaled to the precise proportions of the wall on which it appears. It pictures the distorted view of the 1964 painting, *Mustang Squadron*, by the German painter Gerhard Richter, who in turn based his painting on a photograph of Allied bombers over Germany. Lawler photographed Richter's painting while visiting an exhibition of his work in London in 2010. By presenting this thrice-mediated image—a photographic mural of a photograph of a painting of a photograph—

Lawler highlights the longstanding proximity of histories of militarism and its representation in art and invites reflection on our capacity to see or perceive what such images represent. The work's title and "adjusted to fit" format insist on war's continued presence in the here-and-now.

31

Dahn Vo

Pao Soft, 2010

Gold leaf on cardboard

University of Chicago Booth School of Business Art Collection

32-37

FACTORY OCCUPATION

This gallery brings together works that evoke the impacts of economic crisis and technological innovation on American politics at home and abroad. Marking the beginning of Barack Obama's first presidential term, a 2008 photograph by Allan Sekula documents a factory occupation by immigrant workers at Chicago's Republic Windows and Doors company—a dispute that garnered national attention when then-President-elect Obama spoke in favor of the strike, citing it as an example of the troubling impact of the financial crisis on American workers. Made at the end of Obama's second term in office, Josh Kline's video *Hope and Change* deploys early deep fake technology to reimagine the President's 2009 inaugural address as a call to action against corporate greed and government dysfunction. These works are installed in dialogue with others by Jenny Holzer, Jack Whitten, and Jacqueline Humphries that suggest the era's narrowcasting media, viral political movements, conspiracy theories, and algorithmic surveillance. Together, they

constitute harbingers of post-truth politics to come.

32

Allan Sekula

Factory Occupation. Chicago, December 2008, 2008

Archival inkjet print

Courtesy of the Allan Sekla Studio

33

Jenny Holzer

Blue Benghazi, 2018

Graphite and watercolor on paper

Courtesy of the Artist and Hauser & Wirth

By referencing the 2012 terrorist attacks on the American embassy in Libya, *Blue Benghazi* considers one of the most contentious national security events of the Obama administration, a controversy that became synonymous with government transparency and online conspiracy theory. The work stems from Holzer's series of *Redaction Paintings*, in which she reproduced declassified and heavily redacted government documents released through the Freedom of Information Act. Holzer made *Blue Benghazi* on the paper matrix she had used to transfer such documents to canvas, obscuring much of its graphite text in blue watercolor. In the resulting composition, geometric contours and gridded lines are overtaken by the unruly properties of water-based pigment, which leaks and bleeds in every direction.

34

Amanda Williams

Color(ed) Theory: Ultrasheen, 2014-16, printed 2017

Inkjet print

David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago. Purchase, Paul and Miriam Kirkley Fund for Acquisitions and Ann E. Ziegler

35

Josh Kline

Hope and Change, 2015

HD video (color, sound)

17:10 min.

Courtesy of the Artist and 47 Canal

Hope and Change was first exhibited within a room-scale installation designed to evoke the architectural setting of Zuccotti Park, the headquarters of the 2011 Occupy Wall Street encampments. The video presents an alternative history in the spirit of such populist political movements, rewriting Barack Obama's 2009 inaugural address as a call to collective action in the tradition of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. In Kline's political fantasy, the perpetrators of the 2008 financial crisis are held accountable for their crimes and the President vows to protect American workers. "Our nation's greatness is not predestined," the speech concludes. "It is renewed generation by generation and day by day with blood on battlefields, sweat on factory floors, ingenuity in laboratories, and innovation in our universities."

36

Jacqueline Humphries

Untitled, 2015

Oil on linen

Private Collection

37

Jack Whitten

Looking for Bin Laden #8 (Second Set), 2008

Toner and collage on rice paper

Collection of Hans Reiser and Alan Taylor

ONLINE VIDEOS

Viewable online through October 11 at
loganexhibitions.uchicago.edu/obama-years-online-videos

Darren Bader
The Vagrant (OSS)
Video
13 min, 34 secs

Our Literal Speed
NEVERMADE, 2014
Black and white live filmed performance
26 min, 43 secs
Directed by Casey Smallwood, featuring
Abbey Shaine Dubin and Marilyn Volkman
Soundtrack by The Size Queens

Along with *Emergency* (2014) and *God's Hotel* (2015), *NEVERMADE* is part of *The Late Obama Trilogy*.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Written by Avivit Ashman, B.A. '27

Darren Bader (b. 1978)

With a penchant for irony, cuteness, and deadpan humor characteristic of the mid-2010s, Darren Bader's work examines the role of objects, technology, mass culture, and art historical tradition in the 21st century. Bader's "sans/trans-medium" practice includes video, GIFs, photography, augmented reality apps, and assemblages of everyday objects, from Amazon delivery totes to the front page of a 2016 New York Post. His work often involves interactive performances and situations that underscore the farcical financialization of the art world: a "sculpture" requiring its owner to purchase every item in a designated eBay seller's shop, or an artwork that consists solely of money itself raised at an auction. His *Pavement Piece #2*, installed until recently in the Booth School of Business' summer garden, consists of a slab made of bananas, clam chowder, and concrete that blended into the tiles of the courtyard.

Kevin Beasley (b. 1985)

Kevin Beasley is a Virginia-born, New York-based artist who works across sculpture, performance, and sound. The beginning of his career in the early 2010s coincided with the growing presence of ephemeral media in the art museum. In his sculptural works, found objects and materials like Air Jordans, military uniforms, and raw Virginia cotton become conduits for explorations of land, race, and embodiment in the American South and beyond. For example, his contribution to the Renaissance Society's *Between the*

Ticks of the Watch—a 2016 group exhibition that considered “doubt as both state of mind and pragmatic tool” at the end of the Obama presidency—reinterpreted objects of state violence through its use of police equipment like megaphones and gas masks.

Andrea Fraser (b. 1965)

Since the 1980s, Andrea Fraser’s manipulations of museum language—including tongue-in-cheek subversions of the forms of the gallery talk, wall label, and press release—have made her a core practitioner of Institutional Critique, a term she claims to have coined. Her art considers how museums and galleries shape the interpretation and economic value of artworks. Her performances, videos, and writing probe the increasing financialization of the art world and the feedback loops of money and taste that render it increasingly privatized. One of her most recent projects, *2016 in Museums, Money, and Politics*, tracks the art market’s messy entanglements with electoral politics, especially in the years following the 2008 Recession.

Gaylen Gerber (b. 1955)

Gaylen Gerber makes objects and surfaces with a sense of expansive possibility. In his *Backdrop* paintings, Gerber created paintings at the scale of gallery walls in a custom gray paint, using it as a backdrop for works by other artists. Gerber forged his career in Chicago. He is a graduate of the School of the Art Institute where he has taught since 1987. His work was the subject of a solo show at the Renaissance Society in 1992. His 2013 exhibition at the MCA Chicago featured his *Supports*, in which he painted over a vast array of objects, including ancient Moche pottery, reliefs by artist Lucio Fontana, props from Quentin Tarantino films, and a concrete

slab found on election night in 2008. By painting all the objects in gray and white, Gerber places them on a level playing field and allows them to take on a new depth of meaning outside of interpretive frameworks imposed by museums or value assigned by the art market.

Rachel Harrison (b. 1966)

New York-based artist Rachel Harrison combines images from politics, pop culture, and high art—a Dick Cheney mask, Leonardo DiCaprio photos, Picasso sketches—into idiosyncratic assemblages. Mixing sensibilities of major postwar American art movements such as Neo-Dada, Minimalism, and Pop (critic and art historian Hal Foster called her the love child of Andy Warhol and Eva Hesse), Harrison’s drawings and sculptures reconsider the art historical canon and cult figures of contemporary life. Since the 1990s, Harrison has imbued her explorations of celebrity culture and myth-making with both humor and a dark awareness of the social violence they facilitate.

Jenny Holzer (b. 1950)

Jenny Holzer is best known for the text-based art she has made in public spaces since the late 1970s. Holzer turns the idioms of advertising and government records against themselves, examining how language itself is used as a tool of power and violence. A former student at the University of Chicago, Holzer has created several site-specific works in Chicago throughout her career, including projections for the Museum of Contemporary Art’s 2008–09 exhibition *PROTECT PROTECT*, bronze plaques for the Logan Center’s 2012 exhibition *Wall Text*, and an augmented reality app and LED trucks under the title *YOU BE MY ALLY*, commissioned by the University of Chicago in 2020. In the wake of the US invasion of

Iraq, Holzer in 2004 started working with declassified military documents from the NSA and FBI archives, prompting reflection on the intersections of war, technology, and mass media. Her painting *Freedom Riders*, using FBI files on civil rights activists in the 1960s as a material, was recently created for the Obama Presidential Center.

Jacqueline Humphries (b. 1960)

Jacqueline Humphries's paintings blend reflections on the history of abstract painting with contemporary languages of digital and cinematic screens. Turning emojis, CAPTCHAs, and coding scripts into painted marks, Humphries's works engage new ways of relating, self-identifying, and looking that emerged as a consequence of contemporary technological developments. Humphries's first major solo show took place in the mid-2010s amidst a diffusion of internet culture into daily life. By bridging digital and painterly idioms, Humphries's work attests to the continued relevance of painting in the 21st century.

Josh Kline (b. 1979)

3D-printing, short-form content, deepfake videos, productivity drugs, and genetically modified diseases—such uncanny technologies of the 21st century are the materials of Josh Kline's artwork. His installations, videos, and sculptures explore the workings of class, labor, politics, and subjecthood in the context of climate change, automation, and global epidemics. Kline presents visions of a world in dysbiosis, a term he has used to describe the inequities and imbalances of the New York art world where he forged his career.

Louise Lawler (b. 1947)

Louise Lawler mines the instability of the photograph and the gallery space. Lawler began her career in the late 1970s alongside artists of the Pictures Generation,

an informal group whose photographs interrogated the social coding underlying mass media images. She is perhaps best known for her photographs of artworks by other artists, which are often taken in storage or installed in private homes, subverting the ability of the appropriated motifs to function as commodified images. In 2011, Lawler began making her "adjusted to fit" works, which manipulate the aspect ratio of digital files according to the dimensions of particular gallery walls. Her work in this period contends with the persistence of war and the militarization of American life.

Jason Lazarus (b. 1975)

Despite grappling with leftist failure, disenchantment, and apathy during and after the Obama administration, Jason Lazarus makes work that remains resolutely hopeful. He creates a "live archive" of the present, assembling iPhone photographs, Twitter GIFs, and Occupy protest signs to propose reconsiderations of politics and protest movements. Lazarus has deep ties to Chicago: after graduating from DePaul University and Columbia College Chicago, he went on to teach at Columbia College Chicago and the School of the Art Institute and co-founded the Chicago Artist Writers collective.

Ralph Lemon (b. 1952)

Best known for his work in dance and performance, Ralph Lemon's practice also extends to film, video, photography, and installation. Inspired by a generation of postmodern and conceptually-minded choreographers, such as Merce Cunningham and Meredith Monk, Lemon's work emerged just as art museums increasingly endeavored to incorporate such practices into their curatorial programs. His art often uses movement to explore themes of loss,

intergenerational memory, and histories of anti-Black violence in the US. Lemon's practice involves collective creation among members of the now-disbanded Ralph Lemon Dance Company, as well as with artists like Kevin Beasley and scholars like Saidiya Hartman. He was awarded the National Medal of Arts by President Obama in 2016.

Glenn Ligon (b. 1960)

Glenn Ligon's work questions both abstraction and figuration as viable modes for interrogating race, language, and representation. Ligon began experimenting with text-based works in the late 1980s, often incorporating found text from writers like James Baldwin, Zora Neale Hurston, and Jean Genet, and began rendering them in neon around 2005. His first neon sculpture, *Warm Broad Glow*, illuminated the words "negro sunshine" from a Gertrude Stein text and was exhibited in the Renaissance Society's 2008 exhibition, *Black Is, Black Ain't*. Ligon was one of President Obama's favorite artists, and his painting *Untitled (Black Like Me #2)* was exhibited in the White House from 2009 to 2013.

Kerry James Marshall (b. 1955)

Kerry James Marshall's paintings are material and conceptual confrontations with the exclusion of Black life from the art historical canon. Born in Birmingham and raised in Los Angeles, Marshall has been based in Chicago since 1987. Marshall's work spans mediums and scales, ranging from the intimacy of printmaking to the monumentalism of mural painting. His largest work, *Rushmore*, was commissioned in 2017 for the exterior wall of the Chicago Cultural Center and assembles a pantheon of twenty women who have defined Chicago culture. Marshall's work became increasingly celebrated in and beyond

Chicago during the Obama years. He was appointed to the President's Committee on the Arts and Humanities in 2013, and was given his first major solo retrospective, *Mastry*, at the MCA Chicago in 2016, an exhibition which subsequently traveled to the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

Aliza Nisenbaum (b. 1977)

Aliza Nisenbaum's vibrant paintings are deeply embedded in the communities they represent. Building on the legacy of the 20th-century Mexican muralist tradition, Nisenbaum sees art as a necessarily public practice and civic duty. Born in Mexico City, Nisenbaum moved to Chicago at age 20 to study at the School of the Art Institute, first for her BFA and later for an MFA. From 2005 to 2006, she spent a year teaching in the University of Chicago's Department of Visual Arts, where she worked alongside the Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera. When she relocated to New York City (where she is currently based), Nisenbaum became active in Bruguera's Immigrant Movement International, a space for public art and community programming in Corona, Queens. Nisenbaum was commissioned to create a large-scale mural, *Reading Circles/Weaving Dreams/Seeding Futures*, for the Chicago Public Library branch located on the Obama Presidential Center campus.

Catherine Opie (b. 1961)

Catherine Opie makes photographs that probe the boundaries between personal identity and collective belonging, between private and public space. Her works often explore communal experiences of culture, history, and citizenship. Produced in the 1990s, the series *Being and Having* explored queer subcultures of Los Angeles. More recently, Opie produced photographs

documenting President Obama's first inauguration ceremony. Opie's photographs of Chicago architecture were part of the 2006 MCA Chicago exhibition *Catherine Opie: Chicago (American Cities)*, and her series of images of Lake Michigan across the seasons hung in the Obama White House.

Our Literal Speed (since 2006)

The collective Our Literal Speed (OLS) is difficult to pin down: it has described itself alternately as a "media opera/textual archive," a "discursive laboratory," an "administrative Gesamtkunstwerk," and a "live theory installation." For OLS, discussion and critique are acts of aesthetic creation. Comprised of art historian-artists, the collective intends to dissolve the line between art, education, and politics in the vein of 1960s radicalism and the tradition of Happenings and Fluxus events. Their 2014-15 *Late Obama Trilogy*, for example, a series of videos about the politics of exhibition-making under neoliberalism, is at once a performance, a political debate, and an academic discussion. Chicago has been a key location for OLS activities. They have organized conferences and events at the University of Illinois Chicago, the Art Institute, the Renaissance Society, and Northwestern and DePaul Universities, with contributions from major figures in the Chicago art community, including Tania Bruguera, Zach Cahill, Darby English, Theaster Gates, Matthew Jesse Jackson, Christine Mehring, and WJT Mitchell.

Jennifer Packer (b. 1984)

Known for her virtuosic paintings of Black subjects, interiors, and still lifes, Jennifer Packer describes her practice as "completely political." Packer's portraits are intimate works that radically revise past modes of representation of Black subjects. Through a broad range of painterly

techniques, Packer's portraits deliver complex views that evoke psychological depth and encourage slow looking rather than surface glances. Packer is also known for her floral still lifes, a series she began painting in the wake of Trayvon Martin's murder in 2012. Intended to evoke funerary floral arrangements, Packer subsequently painted further works in tribute to other victims of anti-Black state violence, including Sandra Bland, Laquan McDonald, and Breonna Taylor. Many of these paintings were shown in her first solo show at the Renaissance Society in 2017.

Adrian Piper (b. 1948)

Known for her performances confronting gender, race, and otherness, Adrian Piper is a pivotal figure in American Conceptual Art, an approach that foregrounded an artwork's ideas over its physical execution. In her *Mythic Being* performances begun in 1973, for example, she assumed an alternate identity as a "third world, working class, overly hostile male," in her words, implicating the public in their identity-based expectations and fantasies. Piper is also an accomplished analytic philosopher and was the first Black woman in the U.S. to achieve tenure in philosophy in 1987. As a self-identified refugee from American racism, Piper has been living in Berlin since 2005, a decision that followed her growing disillusionment with the post-9/11 political climate, a series of attacks on her home, and the termination of her professorship following her placement on the TSA Suspicious Traveler Watchlist.

Pope.L (1955-2023)

Pope.L's sculptures, photographs, paintings, and performances are trenchant, vulnerable, and often absurd dissections of race, consumerism, attention, and language. His art aims to "politicize disenfranchisement, to make it neut, to

reinvent what's beneath us," in his own words. Pope.L's work destabilizes the desire for stable understandings of identity and cultural icons—leaving an American flag to be destroyed by industrial fans in his 2015 MOCA Geffen show, for example, or whitening out the eyes of a mask of President Obama in 2023. Pope.L lived in Chicago for over a decade, teaching in the University of Chicago's Department of Visual Arts from 2010 until his death in 2023. The campus has hosted several prominent exhibitions of his work, including *Forlesen* (2013) at the Renaissance Society, *Brown People Are the Wrens in the Parking Lot* (2017) at the Logan Center, and *My Kingdom for a Title* (2021) at the Neubauer Collegium. For the 2012–13 exhibition *Wall Text*, Pope.L produced *Cliff*, a site-specific work that remains on view in the Logan Center tower's windows.

Seth Price (b. 1973)

Seth Price is a polymath artist whose work spans painting, sculpture, video, web design, and noise music. His art deals with the financialization of everyday life, the intersection of fashion trends and military expansion, and the emptiness of digital technologies. Price uses modes of internet engagement—appropriation, piracy, distraction—to fuse formal experiments in digital media with larger questions about 21st century culture. His ongoing video project *Redistribution*, started in 2007, examines how digital networks create new modes of commodifying art, especially in the wake of the 2008 Recession.

Cameron Rowland (b. 1988)

At once an artist, a historian, a legal scholar, and an investigative journalist, Cameron Rowland is interested in the materials of history. Their practice consists of the radical recontextualization of NYPD radios, legal documents outlining the terms of

a restrictive covenant, and scythes used by Black sharecroppers as weapons of resistance—objects that call attention to the logic and legacy of slavery, mass incarceration, real estate, and economic inequality in the U.S.

Allan Sekula (1951–2013)

Allan Sekula's body of work stages Marxist critiques of globalization, economic imperialism, and the US military. Best known as a photographer, Sekula also worked as a writer, filmmaker, and theorist, and began his career in the early 1970s staging anti-war performances. His 2009 exhibition, *Polonia and Other Fables*, at the Renaissance Society, documented the Polish diaspora in Chicago and its histories of migration, nationalism, and labor. During a visit to Chicago made in preparation for the exhibition, Sekula documented the historic six-day strike and sit-in by the workers of Republic Windows and Doors Factory on Goose Island in 2008.

Cauleen Smith (b. 1967)

Cauleen Smith's work explores Black futurity, technology, and collective imagination. Drawing from Afrofuturist literature, American avant-garde film of the 1960s and 1970s, and jazz history, Smith works across film, video, performance, and installation. Although now based in Los Angeles, Smith lived in Chicago during most of the Obama presidency. She was a resident at the Black Metropolis Research Consortium, Experimental Sound Studio, and the University of Chicago Arts Incubator. Influential Chicago jazz composer, poet, and philosopher Sun Ra has featured centrally in Smith's work. Her 2012 MCA Chicago exhibition *A Star Is a Seed* drew from extensive research on the musician, and her screen-printed wallpaper *17* at the Hyde Park Arts Center was based on his writings and music.

Hito Steyerl (b. 1966)

Berlin-based artist, filmmaker, and theoretician Hito Steyerl is a self-proclaimed “post-Internet artist,” interested in the circulation of images in a late-capitalist digitalized world. Her polemical, often humorous works merge documentary and essay forms with new technologies like augmented reality and artificial intelligence. They critique mass surveillance and data infrastructures, liquidity-driven capitalism, European and American authoritarianism, and the art world’s dependence on military expansion and the extraction of labor from the Global South. Her 2012 video *Guards*, commissioned for an exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago, responds to a University of Chicago professor’s suggestion to increase armed museum security; interviewing museum guards with military and police experience, Steyerl’s film explores the “museum as battlefield,” intertwined with state structures of violence.

Diamond Stingily (b. 1990)

Diamond Stingily creates personal archives of objects and architectural spaces, often drawing on memories from her childhood in West Chicago. Using everyday objects like security cameras, sports trophies, bedroom doors, jump ropes, and baseball bats, Stingily’s installations propose intimate reflections on the intersections of race, class, privacy, and domesticity. For her first major project, *Forever in Our Hearts* (2014), exhibited at the project space Egg in Chicago, Stingily staged her own death by writing an obituary and mounting a funeral.

Martine Syms (b. 1988)

Martine Syms has described herself as a “conceptual entrepreneur,” making an institution of herself in defiance of the conservative, “money laundering” activities

of traditional art institutions. With a distinct sense of humor and command of contemporary technology, her work explores Blackness, femininity, pop culture, and self-presentation. Syms’s work often bridges film, video, photography, performance, installation, and graphic design. After graduating from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007, Syms opened Golden Age: a bookshop, gallery, and music venue that operated from 2007 to 2011, first in Pilsen and subsequently in the West Loop. In conjunction with her studio practice, she runs the publishing house Dominica, which prints books that center Blackness “as a topic, reference marker, and audience in visual culture.”

Jack Whitten (1939–2018)

Jack Whitten spent his career developing a resolutely political mode of abstract painting in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. Growing up in the Jim Crow South, Whitten met Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X at an early age, encounters that later inspired his artistic practice. He deployed a wide variety of materials and devices to make his paintings, including Afro picks, squeegees, Xerox printing, stones, and sheet metal. The resulting works are complex meditations on race, technology, war, and memory. Whitten produced several works related to President Obama’s election, such as his 2011 painting *Apps for Obama*, and was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2015.

Amanda Williams (b. 1974)

Amanda Williams’s spatial interventions draw on histories of modern design and vernacular color to provoke reflection on race, citizenship, and urban life. Growing up in Chicago and attending the University of Chicago Lab Schools, Williams made her career on the South Side. For her project *Color(ed) Theory* (2014–16), which

featured in her first solo show at the MCA Chicago in 2017, Williams repainted eight condemned houses in Englewood in colors drawn from commercial products that were marketed to Black consumers, including Harold's Chicken, Pink Oil hair moisturizer, and Newport cigarettes. Her 2022 project *Redefining Redlining* was a communal effort to plant over 100,000 red tulips in Washington Park. Trained as an architect and a former faculty member at Illinois Institute of Technology's College of Architecture, Williams was chosen in 2017 to be part of the Obama Presidential Center's exhibition design team.

Danh Vo (b. 1975)

Danh Vo's sculptures and installations question icons and myths of nationhood and war. Born in Vietnam and raised in Denmark, Vo is currently based in Berlin and Mexico City. Many of his works deal with American histories of military violence, financialization, and cultural imperialism. *Autoerotic Asphyxiation* (2010), Vo's first solo exhibition in the US, presented an archive of photos of young Asian men taken by an American RAND Corporation worker in the 1960s and 1970s; his show *Mother Tongue* (2013) assembled the personal belongings of Robert McNamara, the US Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War. As part of Vo's 2012 exhibition *Uterus* at the Renaissance Society, fragments of his 2010–12 project *We the People*, in which the artist recreated the Statue of Liberty, were exhibited across the University of Chicago campus, including at the Law School, Booth School of Business, and Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (ISAC).

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