

VISUAL ARTS

A HUNGER TO BREAK THROUGH

Art featured in Tang exhibit rooted

By William Jaeger

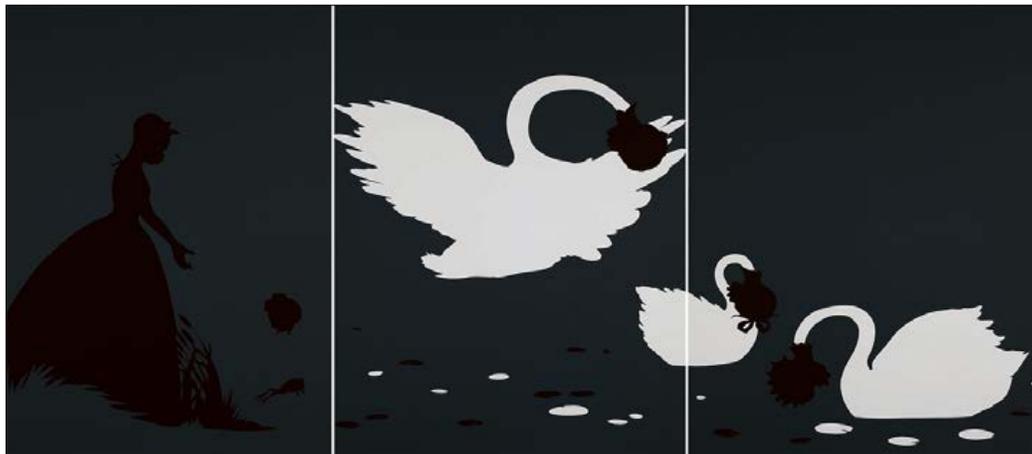
If you've never taken in a full blown installation of Kara Walker's silhouette dramas, you can now see a great approximation at the Tang. If you don't know Greg Ligon's powerful work on race and sexuality, or haven't seen Nan Goldin's photographs from "Ballad of Sexual Dependency" first hand, key examples are also here.

The first realization in "Beauty and Bite," a celebratory dig into the Tang's own collection, is that this is really strong work. So go see it, along with the other shows in the building (including the ongoing elevator series). But "Beauty and Bite" does more than survey some big names.

First, the show is about a kind of art that first crystallized in the 1970s and 1980s. This was an amazingly fertile period where the focus of the arts, at least in the U.S. and much of Europe, shifted from intellectual, formal, and pop art to earnest themes of identity and cultural meaning. Not everyone rejoiced in this, but this wave of new artists triumphed in making art less about art and more about life all around us.

Goldin is certainly one of the keys in this, and her heartfelt and personal photography has been a touchstone for many. Here we have 15 photographs from her breakthrough period where she photographed friends, with color film, in their punk-era bohemian existence. This intentional snapshot aesthetic makes for an authenticity that puts you there. The images are not masterpieces — if they were Goldin would likely be disappointed. They are instead successful at conveying a scene, starting in the late 1970s, and a point of view: hers. And they do this with resilient candor.

Back then, Goldin was ahead of her time talking openly about LGBTQ issues, and this year she has loudly protested the Sackler family's opioid-tainted museum



Kara Walker, panel from "The Emancipation Approximation," 1999-2000. Screen print on paper.

Photos courtesy the Tang

If you go:

"Beauty and Bite"

- **Where:** Tang Museum, Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs
- **When:** Through Jan. 19, 2020
- **Hours:** Tues-Sun Noon - 5 p.m., Thursday until 9 p.m.
- **Admission:** Free
- **Info:** <https://tang.skidmore.edu/exhibitions/259-beauty-and-bite> or 518-580-8080

The Tang's permanent collection online:

- <https://tang.skidmore.edu/collection/#browse>

donations. Her 40 years of questioning the old status quo had its beginnings in these richly personal snaps.

Nancy Grossman's figural sculptures featuring leather and wood have long toyed with issues of gender and identity. Here, the 1967 "Rust & Blue (Yuma)" is a vivid and complex assemblage based around leather saddle pieces and cast iron, with in-your-face anatomical references. As a complex wall hung sculpture it is bold, and yet its suggestive ambiguity keeps it churning under the surface.

Ligon's "Runaways" are a brilliant, trenchant and yet also sometimes funny investigation into racial presumption. The artist asked 10 friends to write descriptions of him, which he then associated with antebellum imagery of runaway slaves, turning the works into ironic wanted posters that show the absurdity and shame of the real things.

And Walker's work, a sprawling set of



Nancy Grossman, "Rust & Blue (Yuma)," detail, 1967. Leather, metal and wood assemblage. Photo by William Jaeger



Photos courtesy the Tang

Frank Moore, drawing for "Beehive," c. 1985-1987, marker on paper.

screenprints that dig into her iconography of racial stereotyping, is something to soak up in stages, piece by piece. The silhouetted figures hover and clash in

sometimes offensive or shocking ways, but the lack of specific information restrains them, codifies them, so that their punch becomes a message. And the obvious 18th and 19th century syntax is easily fast-forwarded to our own times.

The projected video by South African artist William Kentridge, "Tango for Page Turning," brings us literally to the 21st century. It's an extension of ideas he's detailed in drawings and hand-animated pages of an old book, splotches of paint and drawn figures appear and disappear in a fast, evasive narrative. A viewer eventually feels something about sadness and failure even as the figures sometimes dance with joy.

The experience, like the show taken whole, is quietly affecting.

► *William Jaeger is a frequent contributor to the Times Union.*