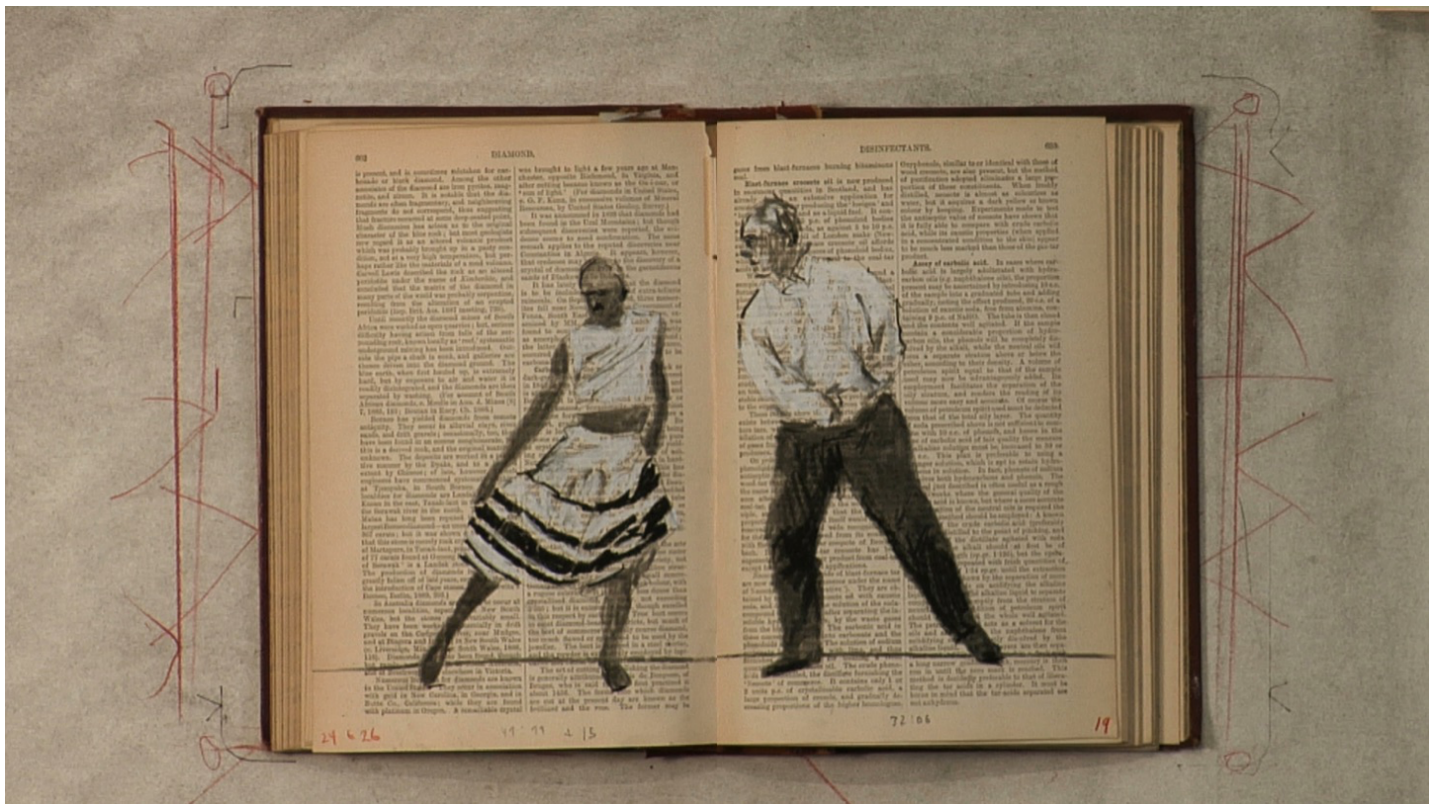


HYPERALLERGIC

Refreshing Stories Told Through the Collection of a Regional Museum

The Tang Teaching Museum attempts to make itself new through an exhibition that employs a variety of ways to elaborate and convey narratives.

[Seph Rodney](#) November 1, 2019



William Kentridge, "Tango for Page Turning" (2012–2013) HD video, 2 minutes, 48 seconds; music by Philip Miller, voice by Joanna Dudley, editing by Snezana Marovic (all images courtesy the Tang Museum)

SARATOGA SPRINGS, New York — The *Beauty and Bite* exhibition at the Tang Teaching Museum (located on the campus of Skidmore College in Saratoga Springs) reminds me of some museum shows I've seen in the last few years in that it constitutes an attempt to refresh their collection — or more to the point, refresh their audiences' appreciation of it. The formula works this way, I think: take work that the Tang acquired some time ago and match it with newly acquired work, so that like finally filling in a jigsaw puzzle with the last straggler pieces, a complete picture emerges from what had been a collection of piecemeal vistas that hadn't thematically cohered in this way previously.

The museum, through its press release, tells us that most of these works have not been shown before. In addition to the elaboration of a comprehensible theme, the draw is exactly that — what’s new. “Make it new” was once the quintessential modernist injunction, popularized by the poet Ezra Pound, but [actually derived from a book of ancient, Confucian moral philosophy](#), which a French sinologist James Legge translated as “If you can one day renovate yourself, do so from day to day. Yea, let there be daily renovation.” In life and in art this is a worthwhile dictum to follow. *Beauty and Bite* presents work that relies on the long-established strategy of narrative exposition but refreshes it by showing a variety of ways narrative may be elaborated and how personal objects in their very making suggest stories.

Among the most affecting works for me are the still images from Nan Goldin’s series: *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1979–1986), which I’ve seen before presented as timed slides that leaf through the relationships, brutal, loving and confounding that Goldin documented with her friends and lovers in New York throughout the late 1970s and the ‘80s. Here, the images are static, but they still relay both the bodily and the emotional presence of these people in a way that becomes deeply palpable. The work has real staying power because it demonstrates that intimacy is both the best and worst of what happens to us.



Nan Goldin, “Trixie on the cot, New York City” (1979) from *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* Cibachrome, 16 1/4 x 20 1/4 x 1 in. (framed)

These images are hung opposite a small gallery in which William Kentridge's video "Tango for Page Turning" (2012–2013) plays. Kentridge picks up the theme of intimate human relations and represents them in his understated, self-conscious way. In the video, the pages of a book turn while drawings made on facing pages conduct a poignant *pas de deux*. A woman dancing in her long skirt, which rises and falls, morphs into calligraphy. A man shaped like Kentridge runs to catch up with someone or something, becomes a chair, is replaced by a horse, and all the while a lilting, delicate classical music accompaniment fills that gallery and the rest of the show, thus making apparent the futility of the phrases that appear here and there in the video: "Undo; Unsay; Unremember; Unhappen." Everything in this show relates to documenting and reconsidering that which can't be forgotten.

Kentridge's video and Goldin's photography give me purchase with the work of Nayland Blake which appears at the start of the exhibition. Their pieces "Versace Hood" (1992); "Headlight" (1993), "The Little One" (1994) are displayed on top of white platforms and seem like home furnishings and personal clothing (the hood might be an ultra-fashionable nightcap) owned by very strange people. The use of a simplified symbol that is reminiscent of the Iron Cross start to raise the hairs on the back of my neck — a vague anxiety that becomes outright disturbance when I see references to the Klu Klux Klan's notorious white hoods in the piece "Scarecrow" (1995). Yet, the objects also convey intimacy, as if the person who would make and keep these takes comfort in them somehow. This too is part of our collective humanity, and it won't unhappen. Having been primed to see this after digesting the work of Goldin and Kentridge made me think that show would have been stronger if the curator, Rebecca McNamara, had led with either of those artists. (She also included a piece by Nancy Grossman, which does not add to or extend the theme of the show in meaningful ways; it feels like it's present only for a name check.)



Installation view, *Beauty and Bite*, Frances Young Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery at Skidmore College, July 20 through January 19, 2020 (photograph by Jeremy Lawson)

Storytelling becomes humorous in the hands of Glenn Ligon. His “Runaways” (1993) lithographs consist of accounts given by friends who describe him for the benefit of others. He has placed these accounts in the form of a “runaway slave” notice and they play off both his agency (to make such a piece) against the historical circumstance of the notices, which meant the life and death of actual people. They are difficult to assimilate, but do elicit laughter at the contradictions. After all, the descriptions are odd: “mild-mannered, very warm and sincere” sounds like an alien’s approximation of a real human being and show how the very structure of the story form can distort and skew the characters being depicted.



RAN AWAY, Glenn. Medium height, 5'8", male. Closely-cut hair, almost shaved. Mild looking, with oval shaped, black-rimmed glasses that are somewhat conservative. Thinly-striped black-and-white short-sleeved T-shirt, blue jeans. Silver watch and African-looking bracelet on arm. His face is somewhat wider on bottom near the jaw. Full-lipped. He's black. Very warm and sincere, mild-mannered and laughs often.

pp 3/3

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Kara Walker's 27-screenprint series *The Emancipation Approximation* (1999–2000) takes a very different tack in relating the stories that winnow out from the history of the ownership of Black bodies in the United States. The silhouetted images are all about the interrelation of sex, desire, violence, and dehumanization that was endemic to the system of slavery. Using the figures of swans, angels, severed heads and just-birther babies raises the horror in the series to the point where it becomes almost exultant, which is always the stumbling block for me with Walker's work. It revels too much in the violence it depicts.



Kara Walker, *The Emancipation Approximation* (1999–2000) Ed. ap 5/5; 27 screen prints on Somerest 500g paper 44 x 34 in. (paper size, each); 44 7/8 x 34 3/4 x 2 in. (frame size, each)

But the show ends on a buoyant note with drawings from an archive of Frank Moore's drawings associated with the ballet and film he made more than 30 years ago with the dancer Jim Self: *Beehive*. The work is playful and even silly, imagining what it would look like if humans merged with bees into a new species. Here the narrative weaves itself together through drawings of costumes, set designs and cartoony flights of fancy. It's wonderful in evoking how stories actually don't require a beginning, middle, and end to be compelling tales.



Beauty and Bite is exemplary of what regional collecting institutions that have smaller audiences than the museums in large city centers need to do, especially if they lack the budget to purchase large traveling shows. In these kinds of institutions and in these types of shows curators should make so bold as to take greater risks, and be wildly thematic. (A good example is a show running concurrently [*Serious Sparkle*](#), which gives me a glimpse of how contemporary artists are using glitter to plumb questions of female, feminine, and queer representation, curated by Molly Channon.) It's a dictum still worth following: Renovate yourself from day to day.

Editor's Note: Expenses for travel and overnight accommodations was provided to the author by the Tang Teaching Museum.

The [Beauty and Bite](#) exhibition continues at the [Tang Teaching Museum](#) (815 North Broadway Saratoga Springs, NY, on the campus of Skidmore College) through January