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By Duante Beddingfield

## MOCAD's powerful summer exhibitions signal a bold new era for Midtown Detroit institution

MOCAD, The Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, recently opened four spectacular new summer exhibitions as it continues its recent evolution under new directors.

“MOCAD is a very special place,” said Jova Lynne, who serves as co-director alongside Marie Madison-Patton. “It’s a place that fosters strong relationships, strong networks, and strong connections to community. And I think these shows we’re presenting this season demonstrate those connections, and having local artists, nationally known artists and international artists all together at once, singing a similar song (but) with very different artwork is what I love about what we’re able to do here.”

### Honoring local masters

Chief in importance among the new exhibitions is *Kinship: The Legacy of Gallery 7*, a show celebrating the art and personalities of one of the first art venues in Detroit dedicated to the work of Black artists. Founded by the late Charles McGee, it operated for a decade starting in 1969.



*Kinship: The Legacy of Gallery 7*, a tribute to late Detroit artist Charles McGee’s groundbreaking art space from 1969-1979, is one of this summer’s major exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit (MOCAD). Provided by Timothy Johnson, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

In 1969, McGee was approached by Detroit Artists Market director Gloria Whelan, who asked him to curate a show highlighting Black artists, who were scarcely being showcased regionally at the time. The exhibition, *Seven Black Artists*, featured work by James Dudley Strickland, Lester Johnson, James King Jr., Robert Murray, James Lee, Harold Neal, Robert J. Stull and McGee himself. *Seven Black Artists*, the first gallery exhibition of its kind in Detroit, received wide acclaim, inspiring McGee to open Gallery 7, which represented a new generation of Black artists.

The MOCAD exhibition presents the works of Lester Johnson, Gilda Snowden, Allie McGhee, Charles McGee, Harold Neal, Robert Stull, Elizabeth Youngblood, and Naomi Dickerson.

Lester Johnson, 86, said the exhibition brought back great memories. He continues to work and maintain an active schedule.

“These days,” he said, “I’m working on a new show, which is going to be at the University of Michigan Dearborn from September until December. The idea of the show is to actually include both recent work and some historical work at the same time, give you some kind of perspective on how the work I’m doing now was informed by earlier works.”

Elizabeth Youngblood, another artist in the exhibition, said it’s “wonderful” being acknowledged and seeing her work hanging among other legends’ as part of the Gallery 7 legacy.

“I’m still drinking it all in,” she said. “I was a youngster at Cranbrook — and that was back in the days where there were (only) two Black people. McArthur Binion had just graduated, and Robert Murray was still there. When I came to Cranbrook, Robert Murray took me and introduced me to Gallery 7 people. They were a little bit older than I was, but I would just kind of show up and they’d let me hang around, and I got to see that there was a way that you could be a (professional) artist.

“I learned from the Gallery 7 people, especially Charles McGee, that you do your work, follow your heart and your sensibilities — have the courage to do that, even though maybe it doesn’t look like it’s enough, or maybe (your work) doesn’t look like other stuff that’s out there. My work is minimal, and I worry that it’s not narrative, it’s not figurative. But it’s what it needs to be.”

Like Johnson, Youngblood’s work is also receiving a separate special exhibition in the region; a retrospective titled Elizabeth Youngblood: Syntax is on display until Aug. 3 at the University of Michigan’s Stamps Gallery in Ann Arbor.

MOCAD’s Gallery 7 tribute was assembled by associate curator Abel González Fernández. He said the Gallery 7 artists are individual, but share a fortune, and shared a future during their time creating together.

“It was one of the first actual venues that fostered, promoted and incubated Black abstraction,” he said. “Not only that, but it was also very important as a bridge to Pan-Africanism. Charles McGee used to have African artifacts and a sculpture and mask dealer, and they put all these artists in contact with the legacy of African art.

“These were highly educated artists from the Black community that went to art school and were leaning into the Black Power and civil rights movements. They had this hunger for learning more about (the African diaspora) but also social politics, contemporary art ... all these things combined and Charles McGee ended up creating this space that had very strong impact in the city in terms of education. Many of these artists ended up being professors in the most important schools in this city.”

### **Feeding the culture**

Detroit artist LaKela Brown makes her MOCAD debut with *From Scratch: Seeding Adornment*, an exploration of nourishment practices across the African diaspora used to cement Black culture as a conduit of liberation. It honors how Black ancestral and cultural legacies have continued across generations despite incredible odds. The exhibition depicts plants, food and jewelry in three-dimensional still life fashion that highlight their importance in the formation of Black identity.

Brown, a College for Creative Studies alum, said she draws inspiration from her environment and culture, using plaster, foam, resin, paper, handmade paper and even paint to create her works. Her work is currently on display at New York’s prestigious Marianne Boesky Gallery, and will also be displayed in an Akili Tommasino-curated group show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in November.

“I’m an ‘80s, ‘90s hip-hop kid in Detroit, and I’m Black American,” she said. “So I have two bodies of work here to have two entry points. The first gallery is ethno-botany work, about culturally significant plants and how people use plants in our culture. Then there’s a second gallery centered around adornment, how we decorate our bodies, and these are all informed by our culture as well.”

## American history, re-examined

Zones of Non-Being, a powerful exhibition of recent works by U.S.-based, Botswana-born artist and educator Meleko Mokgosi, is anchored by a group of 15 large-scale canvas works titled Spaces of Subjections: Zones of Nonbeing, which uses imagery from a 1911 children's picture book to tell a story in new context.



Images from Meleko Mokgosi's Spaces of Subjections: Zones of Nonbeing, part of Detroit's MOCAD summer show. Provided By Timothy Johnson, Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit.

The book is Sara Cone Bryant's "Epaminondas and his Auntie," which relies heavily on racist tropes reminiscent of turn-of-the-century minstrel shows. In this tale, small, Black Epaminondas is a foolish, Amelia Bedelia type, prone to taking everything he's told very literally, to what supposedly comic effect. But the harmful imagery and painfully stereotypical quotes in slave dialect mire the book in America's very ugly history, blown up bigger than life on MOCAD's walls.

Mokgosi's brilliant stroke with these images takes the words of James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Frederick Douglass, Maya Angelou and other Black scholars and scrawls them in handwriting all around the edges and negative space of the book's pages to recontextualize what's being seen. By doing so, Mokgosi draws critical reflection on how such imagery contributes to the generation — and, often, subjugation and condemnation — of Black identity or subjects.

"A children's book is a way that you socialize a child into the world," Mokgosi said. "How we are socialized into becoming who we are. So I wanted to kind of bring in these real-life, historical figures and see what kind of questions will come out for people, and how they will engage with these histories."

## A new era

Group show Word of Mouth, on display in Mike Kelley's Mobile Homestead — a separate, sister space behind MOCAD — is also on display, organized collaboratively by staff from across the museum and representing a diverse range of mediums, levels of experience and points of exploration.

Together, these four exhibitions make a seismic statement about MOCAD's new era and commitment to barrier-busting, world-class art in Detroit, and it is not to be ignored. Earlier this year, the museum's new leadership made the potentially risky decision to close the doors for four months to regroup, refocus, and prepare for these summer shows.

"We took four months to just focus on programming for a little bit," Lynne said. "I really wanted to take our time to think about how we welcome people into our space and how MOCAD can be more of a visitor center. So, it wasn't just about waiting on the shows — it was about what people you'll notice when you come in the door. There's a new admissions area, you're greeted, you get a family activity guide. If you come with little ones, you get an introduction to what the museum is.

“That might seem small, but it’s a really big deal, and we wanted to put the same care in that our community gives back to us by doing it right. So we took our time.”

*MOCAD is located at 4454 Woodward Ave., Detroit, and is open Wednesday through Sunday with later hours Thursday and Friday. Visit [mocadetroit.org](http://mocadetroit.org) for more information.*