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ART REVIEW

The Much-Vaunted American Melting Pot, Cracks and All

Columbus, the Middle Passage, the Mayflower. A thought-provoking exhibition, “Arrivals,” grapples with the myths and origin stories of how everyone set foot in this country.



Titus Kaphar's "Columbus Day Painting" (2014), from the exhibition "Arrivals" at the Katonah Museum of Art. In a bit of revisionism, he replaces Columbus and his colonialists with blank, bunched canvas, muting the notion of heroism. Titus Kaphar

By Jillian Steinhauer

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The United States has a vexed relationship with immigration. A core narrative of our country is that it is a melting pot, even though our government has excluded different groups of migrants for centuries. The much-vaunted nickname “nation of immigrants” leaves out those who were here before colonization (Native peoples) and those who were brought here against their will (enslaved Africans). There’s a gap, in other words, between the romantic image of America many of us learn about as children and its grittier realities. “Arrivals,” a thought-provoking exhibition at the Katonah Museum of Art, uses historical and contemporary art to probe that gap.

Curated by the art historian Heather Ewing, the show considers how newcomers to this land have shaped it and been received. Notably, the exhibition dispenses with the word “immigration” in favor of something more capacious: “Arrivals” includes those who may not fit official terminology. In its own way, the show still upholds the idea of the United States as a rare melting pot of peoples and ideas — except it’s not starry-eyed about it.



N.C. Wyeth's "Columbus Discovers America (The Royal Standard of Spain)," 1942.
Brandywine River Museum of Art

The exhibition begins with a timeline of U.S. policies on immigration and citizenship. It’s a grim read — mostly a chronicle of exclusion that sets up Ewing’s argument: xenophobia is as foundational an aspect of American life as migration. Ewing punctuates the timeline with reproductions of contemporaneous political cartoons and personal commentary by some of the show’s participants, who include Edward Hicks, Alfred Stieglitz, Kara Walker, and Cannupa Hanska Luger. The additions have the effect of making artists seem like faithful keepers of our national moral conscience, but for every cartoon shown skewering an anti-immigrant faction, I wondered how many were also published applauding one.

The exhibition is built around seven “arrival moments” in U.S. history. These start out specific, with Columbus’s 1492 landing in the Bahamas and its effect on the Native peoples there, and become progressively broader, ending with the dissatisfyingly vague category “Today.”

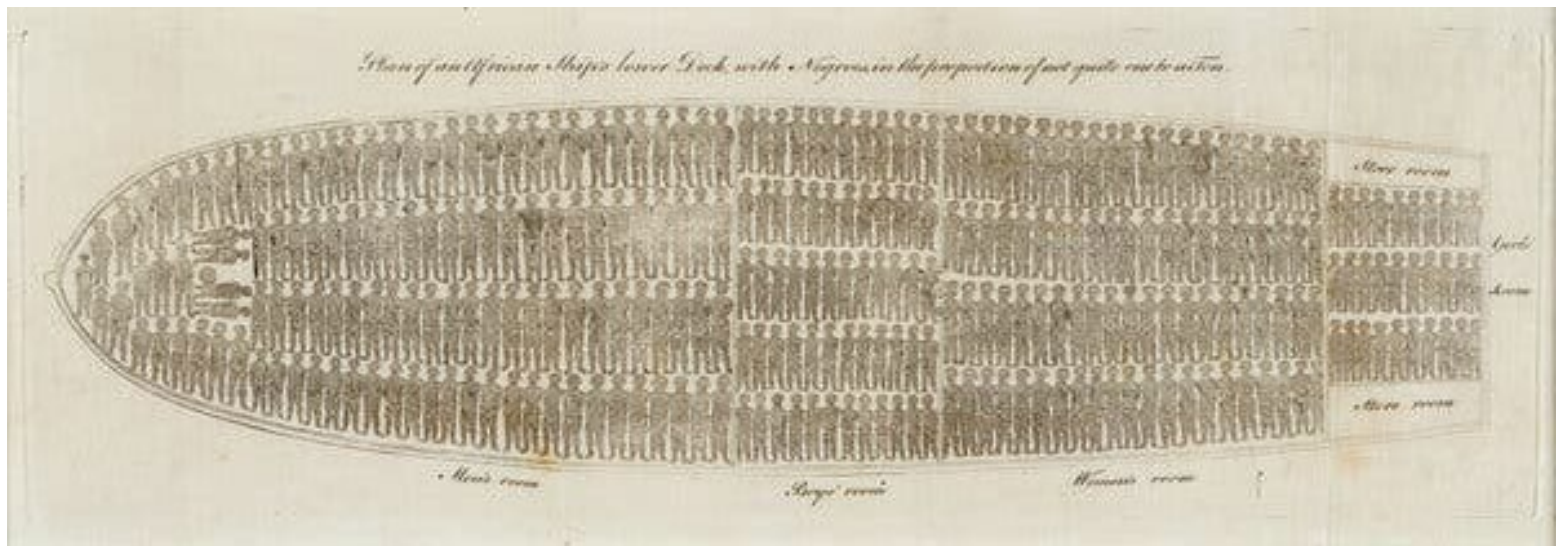
Although the show moves chronologically, the moments serve as more than subject matter; they’re also themes. In the first section, artworks mythologizing the famous explorer’s “discovery” of America share space with ones critiquing the destruction that he brought. N.C. Wyeth’s painting “Columbus Discovers America (The Royal Standard of Spain)” (1942) features an emotional Columbus closing his eyes as he touches his sword to the earth and hugs his flag. The Wyeth looks like a riff on John Vanderlyn’s monumental painting “Landing of Columbus” (1846) for the U.S. Capitol rotunda, which is represented in Katonah by a black-and-white engraving from 1856 by H.B. Hall.



H.B. Hall’s engraving “The Landing of Columbus,” 1856 (from 1846 painting by John Vanderlyn). via Katonah Museum of Art

The inclusion of Hall’s copy, although it’s small, helps you appreciate Titus Kaphar’s large “Columbus Day Painting” (2014) nearby. The piece borrows Vanderlyn’s imagery but replaces the Spanish figures with blank canvas; bunched and wrapped, the canvas mutes their heroism and hints at their spreading of disease. Kaphar is famous for such art historical revisions, and they can sometimes feel gimmicky or overly clever. Seeing this one alongside the originals gives it a rebellious force.

At its best, “Arrivals” offers the feeling of witnessing arguments or conversations between artists across place and time — and it makes you understand the stakes of those conversations. One of the strongest examples is the section devoted to the Middle Passage, the horrific voyage of enslaved Africans to this land between 1619 and 1808. As with the Columbus section, a small, black-and-white engraving serves as a visual anchor: Made by Mathew Carey in 1789, it’s a diagram of the inhuman crowding on the lower deck of a slave ship, an American version of the more famous British image disseminated by abolitionists.



“Plan of an African Ship’s Lower Deck, with Negroes, in the Proportion of Not Quite One to a Ton” (1789), a black and white engraving by Mathew Carey. Colonial Williamsburg Foundation

Carey’s print is sobering, but its importance is also symbolic: The image of the slave ship becomes a through line, an icon of history with which African American artists contend. In “Stowage” (1997), Willie Cole transforms it into the imprints of irons, insinuating a connection between enslavement and contemporary domestic labor. Keith Morrison makes us feel it more viscerally with a brooding painting, “Middle Passage II” (2010), that places the viewer in the position of a captive looking up from down below. In Vanessa German’s sculpture, “2 ships passing in the night, or I take my soul with me everywhere i go, thank you” (2014), two Black girls created from found objects carry model ships on their heads. Rather than appearing weighted down, they glide on a skateboard. It seems that the Middle Passage has evolved from solely a burden into an essential part of who they are.

“Arrivals” is, at heart, about identity, which is on trend for today’s art world. What makes it refreshing is that it uses a historical framework to take up a familiar subject. The show isn’t about race, ethnicity, or gender, though it touches on all those things. It’s about how artists can help bolster, complicate, or puncture national myths through their own stories and observations.



Vanessa German's "2 ships passing in the night, or i take my soul with me everywhere i go, thank you" (2014), in which two Black girls created from found objects carry model ships on their heads. Vanessa German and Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art

One way they do so is by challenging the state's power to document and confer identity. In the second gallery, which covers the 20th and 21st centuries, I was mesmerized by [Stephanie Syjuco's](#) small but resolute "Applicants (Migrants) #1, #2, #3" (2018), which consists of three sets of passport-size photos with the sitters' faces hidden by patterned fabrics. Annie Lopez made her brash, funny piece, "Show Me Your Papers and I'll Show You Mine" (2012), in response to Arizona's law allowing police to demand the papers of anyone they think may be undocumented; she took personal documents like her birth certificate and childhood awards and printed them on tamale paper, which she shaped into underwear. Despite their contrasting strategies (concealing vs. revealing), both artists playfully defy a system that wants to catalog and control them.

Ultimately, "Arrivals" left me grappling with a question that is also the title

of a timely Jaune Quick-to-See Smith print from 2001–03: “What is an American?”. Smith’s work features a headless Native figure in casual stride, while a kind of red, white and blue rainbow spouts from a stigmata mark on its hand. It seems to suggest that the original inhabitants of this land were sacrificed for the sins of the new nation. Nearby, a photograph by Dorothea Lange just after the attack on Pearl Harbor tries to answer Smith’s ever-relevant query: It shows a Japanese American grocery with a sign in the window reading, “I am an American.” This claim to belonging was futile; the store was closed and its owner imprisoned in an internment camp.



Jaune Quick-to-See Smith’s print “What is an American?” 2001–03, which features a Native figure in casual stride, while a kind of red, white and blue rainbow spouts from a stigmata mark on its hand. Jaune Quick-to-See Smith

Smith’s title asks “what” is an American, not “who.” For me, this drives home the artificiality of Americanness — it’s something you become, a product of invention. The lesson comes through in one of the show’s most piercing works, Edward Grazda’s “I Remember Grandma, Ellis Island” (1988). The photograph within a photograph features a hand holding up to a window an image of a woman wearing a feathered headdress. The surrounding text reads, “My grandmother arrived at Ellis Island in 1912 from Poland. She had her picture taken as an American Indian.”

This is, I dare say, what it means to be American: arrive here and reimagine yourself, often at the expense of someone else.

Arrivals

Through Jan. 23, 2022. Katonah Museum of Art, 134 Jay Street — Route 22, Katonah, N.Y., (914) 232-9555; katonahmuseum.org.