

Lavett  
Ballard

The  
People  
Who  
Could  
*Fly*

ROWAN UNIVERSITY  
ART GALLERY & MUSEUM



In her work, Lavett Ballard offers a visual narrative that draws deeply from African folklore, history, and cultural traditions. This exhibition explores the stories and experiences of people of African descent, with a particular focus on their resilience, strength, and legacy.

Ballard's art seeks to amplify tribal stories and African American history, presenting these to honor the rich and diverse cultural heritage of African diasporic communities. Drawing from themes of flight, freedom, and ancestral connection, *The People Who Could Fly* references the African American folklore of the same name, which tells the story of enslaved individuals

who were believed to have the ability to fly, symbolizing a deep spiritual connection to freedom and transcendence. Through her work, Ballard re-imagines these powerful narratives, creating a visual language that honors both the past and the ongoing struggles for liberation.

This exhibition also digs into the importance of storytelling in African cultures, where oral traditions and art have long played an essential role in preserving heritage and communicating across generations. Ballard's works invite viewers to consider the ways in which these stories and symbols shape identity, resistance, and belonging in both historical and contemporary contexts.

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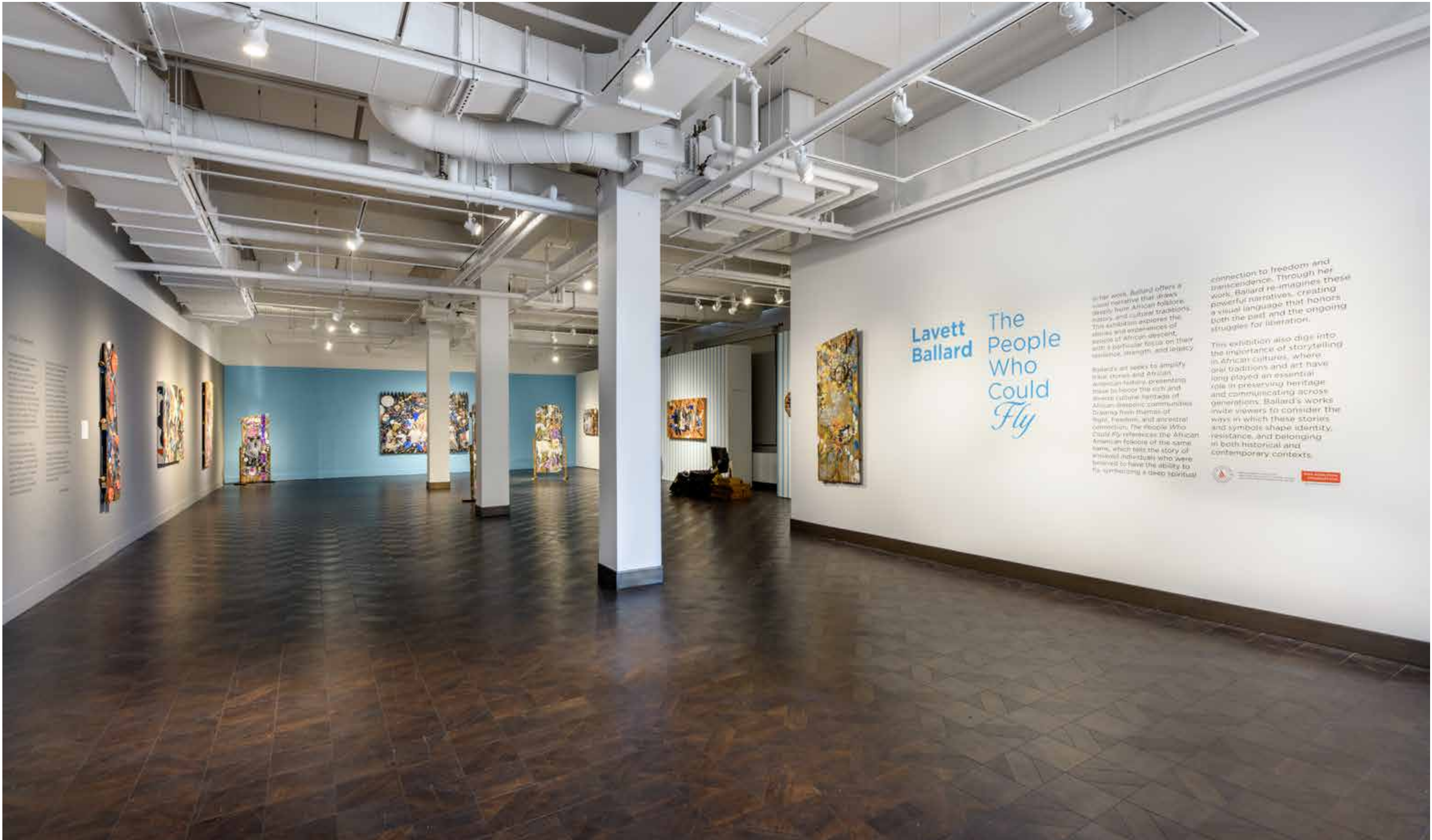
*301 High Street West, Glassboro, NJ*

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**March 31 - May 24, 2025**





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This body of work is inspired by cherished storytime moments with my granddaughter, particularly our shared love for *The People Could Fly* by Virginia Hamilton. This powerful tale, rooted in an African American folktale, has also influenced one of my favorite authors, Toni Morrison, in *Song of Solomon*. These works serve as the foundation for my exploration of resilience, hope, and freedom throughout African American history.

The visual narrative I seek to convey traces a journey from Africa, through the harrowing Middle Passage, to enslavement, and ultimately to liberation and resilience. My goal is to guide viewers through this story, forging connections between the past and the present.

To bring this vision to life, I am creating art that intertwines folktale, history, and culture, incorporating reclaimed wood fencing and wooden substrates to craft wall-hung pieces and sculptural works. My techniques include mixed-media approaches and immersive installations designed to engage viewers in a dynamic interpretation of this bittersweet folktale—extending its meaning beyond enslavement to celebrate resilience and identity by blending both the past and the present day.

Through this exhibition, I hope to honor the enduring spirit of the African American experience and inspire reflection on the collective journey from oppression to empowerment.

—Lavett Ballard





In the introduction to Virginia Hamilton's *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*, Hamilton advises readers that the twenty-four stories in the book “were once a creative way for an oppressed people to express their fears and hopes to one another” (Hamilton xii). She provides a brief overview of the history of the Atlantic slave trade as a way to ground her audience with an understanding of Black American folklore as a necessary survival strategy for stolen people, as an artifact of a history that belongs to all of us, and as an art of its time. Lavett Ballard carries a similar creative impulse into her studio practice, and many of the resulting mixed media collages on view draw on the spirit and the substance of the legend of flying Africans. This inspiring and influential folktale of enslaved people who spontaneously used ancestral magic to fly home to Africa is one that passed from generation to generation among enslaved storytellers on plantations. Hamilton noted that some of the

earliest Black American folktales were recorded in the late nineteenth century, and while her 1985 text presents them in the form of a children’s book, anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston also recounted the story in her 1938 book *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*:

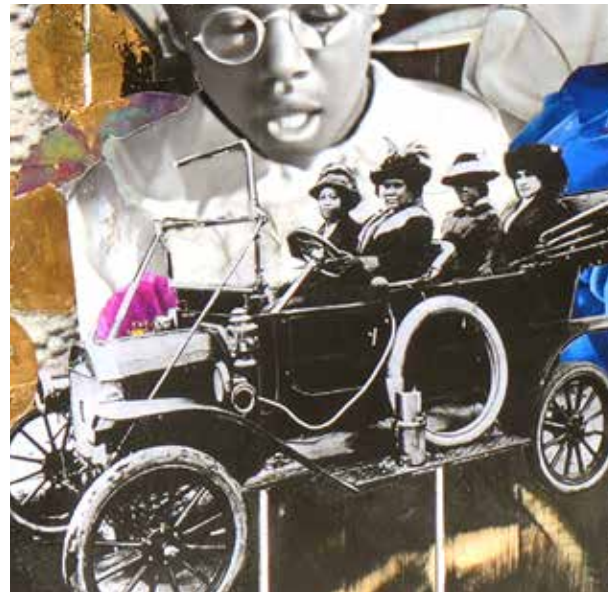
Once Africans could all fly because they never ate salt. Many of them were brought to Jamaica to be slaves, but they never were slaves. They flew back to Africa. Those who ate salt had to stay in Jamaica and be slaves, because they were too heavy to fly (Hurston, 62).

Hurston reported this legend in the context of Caribbean spiritual practice, and in doing so she confirmed the geographic spread of the story beyond the United States for many of her readers. The story’s power to endure over time and





*The Wind beneath Our Wings* (detail), 2025  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood fencing  
72 x 96 inches



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across several countries can be attributed to the importance of folklore as an oral tradition as much as it can to the allure of the tale itself.

Old and young who were called slaves and could fly joined hands. Say like they would ring-sing. But they didn't shuffle in a circle. They didn't sing. They rose on the air. They flew in a flock that was black against the heavenly blue. Black crows or black shadows. It didn't matter, they went so high. Way above the plantation, way over the slavery land. Say they flew away to *Free-dom*. And the old man, old Toby, flew behind them, takin care of them. He wasn't cryin. He wasn't laughin. He was the seer (Hamilton, 171).

Materially loaded and rich with references, Ballard's mixed media artworks weave folklore, literature, family history and the history of the hemisphere together like a patchwork quilt. She mines the past in ways that are political, art historical, and personal, occasionally occupying

the role of the seer as she makes visual and familial connections across space and time. For *The People Who Could Fly*, the gallery is installed with works of art that engage a version of time and timelines that riff on linearity and historic cycles. In the center of the gallery, *The Wind beneath Our Wings* (2025) is a collage constructed on a reclaimed fence that measures six by eight feet, hung on a heavenly blue wall. It appears between the free-standing *Wade in the Water* (2023) and the wall-mounted *Promises* (2025), serving as a point of narrative transition between the two. The surface is stained and covered with several of Ballard's signature artistic flourishes, including floral imagery and swirling circles that increase in size as they reappear across the surface. An array of Black historical figures adorn the fence. Henrietta Lacks (1920-1951) is the first face seen on the upper left. Lacks was a Virginia woman whose cervical cancer cells were harvested without her knowledge in 1951 and those cells became the first immortal human cell line and the basis for decades of important scientific research. Research using the "HeLa" cells

contributed to increased understanding of and treatment for polio and cancer, but the woman behind these developments was largely unknown to the public before 2010, when science researcher Rebecca Skloot published *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Ballard incorporates her within *The Wind beneath Our Wings* with her face partially adorned, partially obscured by bright gold. In the lower left there is a clipped black and white image of Madam C.J. Walker (1867-1919), a philanthropist and entrepreneur whose hair care and cosmetics business made her one of the first self-made female millionaires in the nation. The image of Walker driving her niece and two colleagues in her Ford Model T (a luxury in a time where Jim Crow laws would have required her to ride on segregated train cars for cross country travel) may be recognizable to history buffs who might also spot an image featuring the "I Am A Man" sign carried by marchers during the 1968 Memphis Sanitation workers strike that brought Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) to the city for what would be his last speech. Near the upper right corner is an image of Bessie Coleman

(1892-1926), the nation's first Black American and Native American woman to hold a pilot's license; an image of Recy Taylor (1919-2017), a woman whose 1944 kidnapping and assault was not prosecuted by her home state of Alabama despite the men's confessions, an injustice that galvanized community activism that later resulted in the success of the Montgomery bus boycott; and Civil Rights activist Gloria Richardson (1922-2021), who can be seen in a clip of 1963 photo of her pushing a National Guardsman's bayonet out of her way as she moved to disperse a demonstrating crowd of protestors in Cambridge, Maryland. There are figures that aren't quite as identifiable to casual viewers, including images of Ballard's mother, grandmother, and great grandmother. The array of Black people connected by struggle and achievement and the mix of recognizably famous historical figures alongside those lesser known (and not yet named) underscore the continuing need for oral tradition and for the value of noting Black people who might need to be remembered at some future point.





*The Wind beneath Our Wings* (detail), 2025  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood fencing  
72 x 96 inches

Without wiping away the tears, taking a deep breath, or even bending his knees--he leaped....For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrendered to the air, you could *ride* it (Morrison, 337).

Ballard's compositions are as abundant as her source material. There are traces of her art historical influences in them, from the way contemporary artists like Vanessa German (b. 1976), Ebony Patterson (b. 1981), and Mickalene Thomas (b. 1971) craft visual narratives through built-up surfaces that sometimes feel ready to burst at any time, to the crisp, determined lines in the two-dimensional work by artists like Romare Bearden (1911-1988) and Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012). In Ballard's work, wings are represented in fragmented images of birds, insects, and other creatures known to take flight. In *Jumping at the Sun* (2025) several figures on the composition appear to be nearing or completing a spontaneous takeoff, posed as if dancing and depicted with fabric for wings. *Great Migrations* (2025) represents another kind of flight. In the twentieth



*The Wind beneath Our Wings* (detail), 2025  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood fencing  
72 x 96 inches

century, six million African Americans moved out of the rural south to resettle primarily in the urban North, Midwest, and the West during two major waves of what is considered the Great Migration. This period between 1910 and 1970 is represented in *Great Migrations*, which features historic images of Black American travelers, archival print media references to places of note, and transportation modes and supplies that include vintage suitcases and a lined steamer trunk that contains what might be considered a three-dimensional syllabus for this exhibition. The Great Migration represented a mass movement in the direction of a kind of freedom dreaming that reminds us that *The People Could Fly* is a story that serves as a myth, an allegory, and an intergenerational reminder of travel as an exercise in freedom. If *The People Could Fly* affirms the power of collective imagination in freedom dreaming, Lavett Ballard's work affirms this urgently as she passes the story on.

—Brittany Webb







*Precious Beings, 2022*  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood  
69 x 29 inches



*Jumping at the Sun, 2025*  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood fencing  
71 x 14 inches





*HomeLand, 2025*  
Mixed media/collage on aged birchwood panel  
48 x 72 x 3 inches



*Beautiful & the Damned, 2022*  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood fencing  
68 x 48 inches





*Wade in the Water, 2023*  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood fencing  
70 x 25 inches

Lent by the Crystal & Stephon Barnes collection



*The Wind beneath Our Wings, 2025*  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood fencing  
72 x 96 inches





*The Griot*, 2021  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood/sculpture  
71 x 32 inches



*Gated Communities*, 2023  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wooden gate  
68 x 48 x 2.5 inches





*Promises, 2025*  
Mixed media/collage on reclaimed wood fencing  
32 x 46 inches



*Great Migrations, 2025*  
Mixed media/collage on birchwood panel  
36 x 72 inches





*I'll Fly Away, 2025*  
Mixed media wall installation  
variable measurements



*Building America, 2025*  
Mixed media wall installation  
17.75 inch diameter x 1 inch deep



*92%, 2025*  
Mixed media wall installation  
23.75 inch diameter x 1 inch deep



*Steal Away, 2025*  
Mixed media wall installation  
17.75 inch diameter x 1 inch deep



*The Middle Passage, 2025*  
Mixed media wall installation  
23.75 inch diameter x 1 inch deep



*Stronger than we Look, 2025*  
Mixed media wall installation  
17.75 inch diameter x 1 inch deep



*Who we Are, 2025*  
Mixed media wall installation  
23.75 inch diameter x 1 inch deep







**Lavett Ballard** is a mixed media visual artist, art historian, curator, and author. She holds a dual Bachelor's in Studio Art and Art History with a minor in Museum Studies from Rutgers University, and an MFA in Studio Art from the University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

Ballard's art has been commissioned as a cover twice for *Time* Magazine first in March 2020 for their special multi cover edition for the 100th anniversary of Women's Suffrage and in February 2023 for a cover and interior art for Pulitzer Prize winner Isabel Wilkerson's essay about her book *CASTE: The Origins of Our Discontent*. In 2024 her art was featured in the NAACP Image Award winning non-fiction book *The New Brownies' Book: A Love Letter to Black Families* by Karida L. Brown & Charly Palmer.

Her work has been included in both literary and film productions, and collected both nationally and internationally. Acquisitions include the Petrucci Family Foundation; the collection of Abena Busia, the Ghanaian Ambassador to Brazil; the collection of Grant and Tamia Hill; Francis M. Maguire Museum; African American Museum of Philadelphia; U.S. Art in the Embassies program; St. Joseph's University; Community Folk Art Center at Syracuse University; and many others.



**Brittany Webb** is the Evelyn and Will Kaplan Curator of 20th Century Art and the John Rhoden Collection at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts (PAFA). Her most recent exhibition, *Determined to Be: The Sculpture of John Rhoden*, debuted at PAFA in October 2023 and is currently on view at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center (Pittsburgh, PA). Webb's curatorial work at PAFA has been supported by grants from the Henry Luce Foundation, National Endowment for the Arts, the Terra Foundation for American Art, the William Penn Foundation, and the Wyeth Foundation for American Art. She earned a PhD from Temple University and a BA from the University of Southern California.

**Acknowledgements**

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Additional thanks go to our Gallery Coordinator Kristin Qualls; our Art Installers Anthony L. Ballard Sr., Keenan Ore, CJ Stahl and Nathan Dixon; Dr. Andrew D. Hottle; and our Student Assistants Rachel Hanan, Leila Hewitt, Fran Lombardo, Jaylah Ross, and Taha Shanbaz for their support.

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*Photography courtesy of:*  
Constance Mensh | [www.constancemensh.com](http://www.constancemensh.com) (pages 3-4, 5, 7, 12, 17, 20, 23-24, 25-26)  
Brittany Webb (page 27)  
Lavett Ballard (cover, pages 9-10, 11, 13-16, 18-19, 21-22, 27)

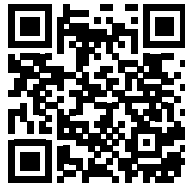
*Catalog Design:*  
Kristin Qualls

*Essay Sources:*  
Hamilton, Virginia. *The People Could Fly: American Black Folktales*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985.  
Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1938; reprinted, New York: HarperPerennial, 1990  
Morrison, Toni. *Song of Solomon*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977.

## **ROWAN UNIVERSITY ART GALLERY & MUSEUM**

A Museum Destination for Contemporary Art

Rowan University Art Gallery & Museum serves as a vibrant cultural destination for South Jersey, the Rowan community, and surrounding region. We are committed to cultivating an accessible and just environment that encourages dialogue and collaboration between exhibiting artists, students, faculty, and the general public through the presentation of interdisciplinary art exhibitions, artist talks and other public programming. Our mission is to present diverse forms of contemporary art by professional artists with content that is thought provoking, relevant, and timely. With our exhibitions and programming, we seek to engender curiosity and a passion for contemporary art, enrich the quality of life for area residents, and create a welcoming and inclusive cultural destination at Rowan University.



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