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NSU Art Museum's "Lux et Veritas" Brings Plenty of Light & Truth



"I'm trying to keep my faith..." by Wardell Milan

The artists in "Lux et Veritas," an exciting exhibition at the NSU Art Museum in Fort Lauderdale, share two things in common. They all graduated from Yale School of Art for graduate studies from 2000 to 2010, and they are all nonwhite. That these 21 notable artists of color moved through this formerly lily-white institution of the Ivy League is a testament, to some extent, of progress in the admissions departments of higher education, however belated its arrival.

But as a visitor experience for the museum-going public, "Lux et Veritas" (which translates to "Light and Truth," Yale's motto), is a less of a pat on the back to the university and more of a group hug between the Black and brown artists who triumphed under its tutelage and their own singular creativity. This is not a glib comment: There are profound connections between the exhibition's earliest trailblazers and the artists selected near the end of the aughts. They assisted and inspired each other, and that inspiration echoes off the canvases and pedestals and screens.

In many cases, these works are made by artists who have experienced struggle—who have experienced otherness—and have integrated these experiences profoundly in their practice. There are works in "Lux et Veritas" inspired by careful readings of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin, and that comment on the institutional abuse of Black people, from Michael Brown to George Floyd. There are pieces rooted in western European and American art history and others that are wondrously untethered from the white traditions of the classical art canon: Art Year Zero reboots of limitless possibility.

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"The Apostle Peter" by Kehinde Wiley

Because all 21 artists are tops in their fields, the usual variation of quality control across a group exhibition does not apply; "Lux et Veritas" consists of standouts among standouts, with contributions as wide-ranging and eclectic as the African-American and immigrant experience itself. It includes Kehinde Wiley's stirring oil paintings, which exude the realism of classical portraiture, the poetry of the street and the gaucheness of 1970s wallpaper all at once. Mickalene Thomas' "October 1950" deconstructs and reimagines a classic pinup photo of a Black model as an almost Cubist form, complete with glitter and rhinestones and angular geometry. Wardell Milan's "Battle Royale" is a series of Dadaist collages of magazine images spliced into vintage photographs of African-American boxers, the effect of which speaks to the forced labor of the Black man for the entertainment of white audiences.

This show isn't my first encounter with Wangechi Mutu's sculptures, and it's surely not my last; one is hard-pressed to identify a 21st century artist who is more inimitable. "Lux et Veritas" features several pieces, including "Seeing Cowries"—a seated figure with the titular shells embedded into its form, and weeping synthetic hair—and "Sentinel," an earthen, life-size sculpture in red clay, both of which marry imagery that rivets and unsettles in equal measure.



"Sentinel" by Wangechi Mutu

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Another strikingly original voice, Loren Holland paints Edenic scenes invaded by incongruous objects—a Ouija board, a Sprite bottle, a hair dryer—suggesting a paradise defiled by western consumerism.

Delightful coincidences abound in “Lux et Veritas,” in which the artists appear to be conversing, consciously or not. The array of boomboxes that appears in Luis Gispert’s avant-garde live-action/animation film “Stereomongrel” screens just steps from two of william cordova’s works focusing on vintage audio technology. The most striking of which, “machu picchu after dark,” is a collection of no less than 200 found speakers piled to form a monolith. The speaker’s spherical shapes within rectangles resemble eyes eternally watching from every direction.

If cordova reimagines the architecture of musical distribution, Ronny Quevedo creates Frankenstein music from otherwise familiar compositions. In his video “Critical Mass,” feet dance, intentionally offbeat, on a lit-up club floor, to a surrealist mashup of KRS-One’s “Sound of Da Police” and Simon & Garfunkel’s “The Sound of Silence,” fusing two musical “sounds” to create a new one, and throwing the listener/viewer continually off balance.



Installation view

There is no question that contemporary art is still a white-dominated culture, which is why exhibitions such as “Lux et Veritas” are always cause for celebration. As a Caucasian visitor to this community within a community, I appreciated the feeling, rarely experienced at group exhibitions, that I didn’t have a seat at this table—that I was privileged to enter *their* space, and not the other way around. I can’t recommend it highly enough.

“Lux et Veritas” runs through Jan. 8 at NSU Art Museum, 1 E. Las Olas Blvd., Fort Lauderdale. Admission costs \$5-\$12. Call 954/525-5500 or visit nsuartmuseum.org.