

Projects 75 : Laylah Ali : the Museum of Modern Art, New York, March 12-May 21, 2002

[Kristin Helmick-Brunet]

Author

Ali, Laylah, 1968-

Date

2002

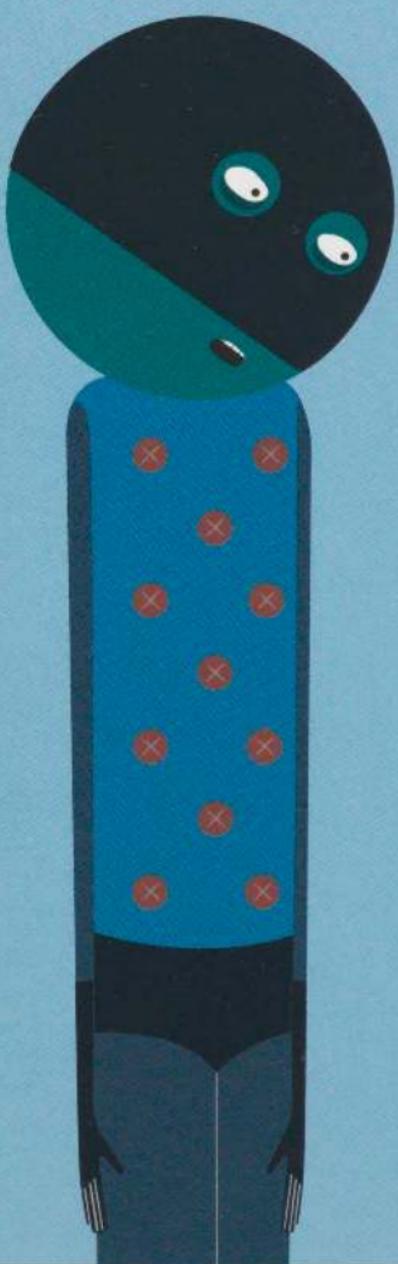
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projects 75 laylah ali

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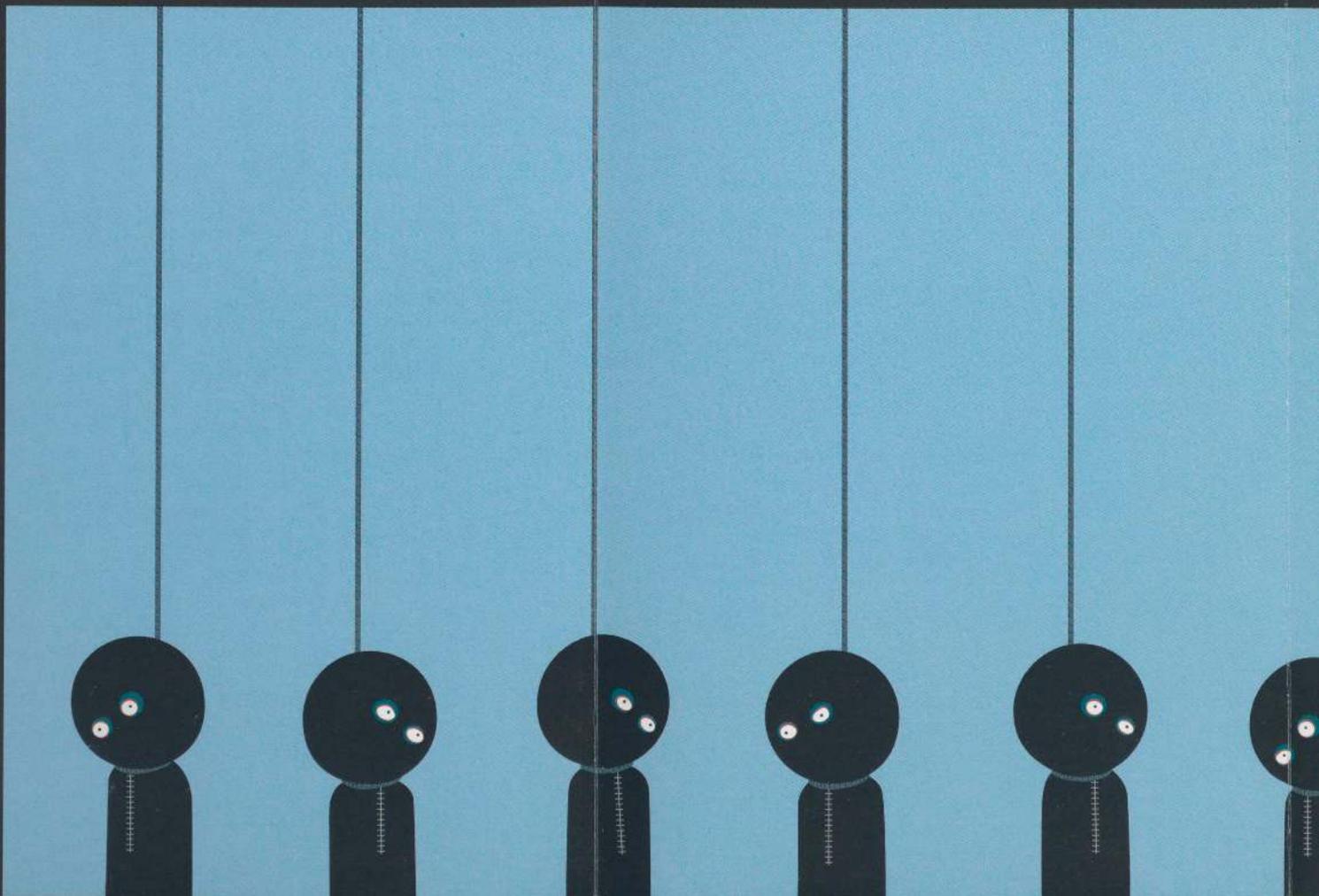
For *Projects 75*, The Museum of Modern Art has published artist Laylah Ali's first book, a work composed entirely of her trademark green-headed, brown-bodied figures engaged in acts of violence. Stock characters such as security officers, sports figures, victims, and oppressors that have been the subjects of Ali's singular gouache pieces in the past, now play out their aggressions in an extended, nonlinear narrative designed by the artist to be a visual novelette. The publication of this hybrid comic/artist's book is also a new endeavor for the Museum, which historically has not given prominence to the comic book as an art form. However, exhibitions at the Museum during the 1990s, such as *High and Low: Modern Art and Popular Culture* and *Projects 32: Art Spiegelman*, have demonstrated the Museum's consideration of the importance of popular culture, including the comic book genre, in relation to modern and contemporary art.

Ali's work may borrow heavily from the traditional comic book in form, but her project departs completely from the genre in content. Like many of the comics with which we are familiar, Ali's images are precisely rendered in highly saturated hues of opaque color, and are organized into the comic strip structure of separated panels that normally permit an orderly progression of story. However, as the viewer moves from frame to frame, it becomes apparent that the narrative has been actively undermined. Throughout the book, Ali periodically inserts a visual leitmotif, a larger figure recounting a tale to a smaller one, the effect of which breaks the action of the story. Consequently, time becomes ambiguous—past, present, and future converge,

and are undefinable. Furthermore, because words and dialogue are nonexistent in Ali's story, each frame is akin to a hieroglyph, requiring that we decipher each scene for ourselves. To put it another way, every detail of every image is a phoneme, which, when added to other details of the scene, form words, which then form language; and in order to glean meaning from the works, Ali demands that we become fluent in that language. The viewer, therefore, plays a central role in bringing life and meaning to these ambiguous images.

Ali's unique realm is peopled by attenuated figures with rounded mouths and eyes, colored in multiple shades of brown, and without gender markings. Age, class, and race are also undefinable characteristics of the inhabitants of this strange universe. Instead, characters are distinguishable by the clothes on their backs—costumes, which by necessity become signifiers of identity. Jogging suits, swimsuits, gym suits, military uniforms, ecclesiastical vestments, running shoes, hats, and masks allow the viewer to "name" Ali's stock characters as soldiers, sports figures, superheroes, prison guards and prisoners, security officers, doctors and patients, and slaves and masters. The uncluttered frames are reminiscent of children's-book illustration, an impression that is heightened by the placement of the figures against a stark blue background—an ambiguous and undefined space that links the work to the high traditions of both mural and fresco painting. The sharp austerity of the drawings and their lack of artifice entice the viewer into drawing easy conclusions about the content and nature of the work.

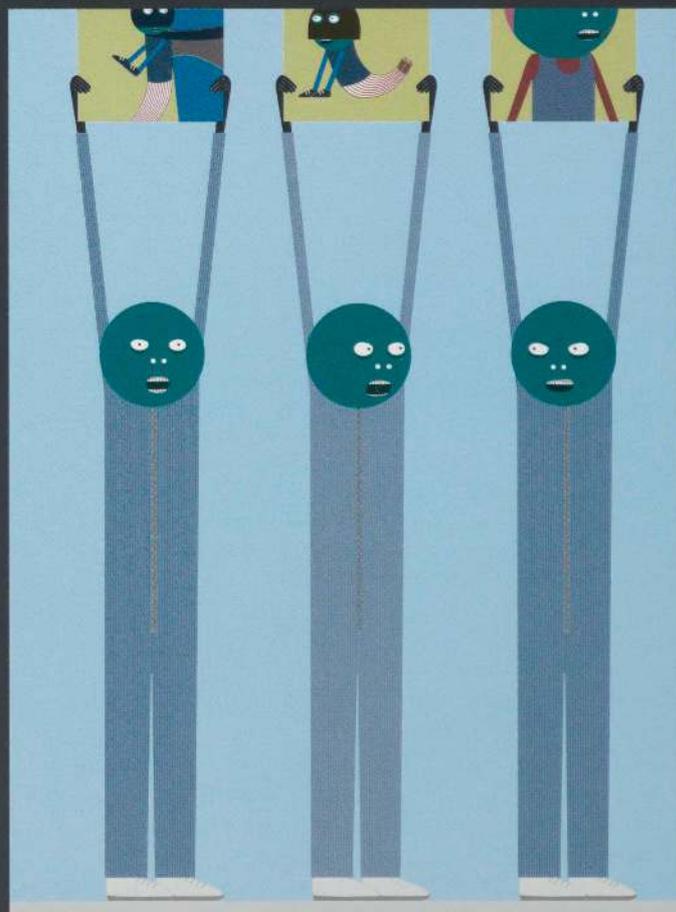
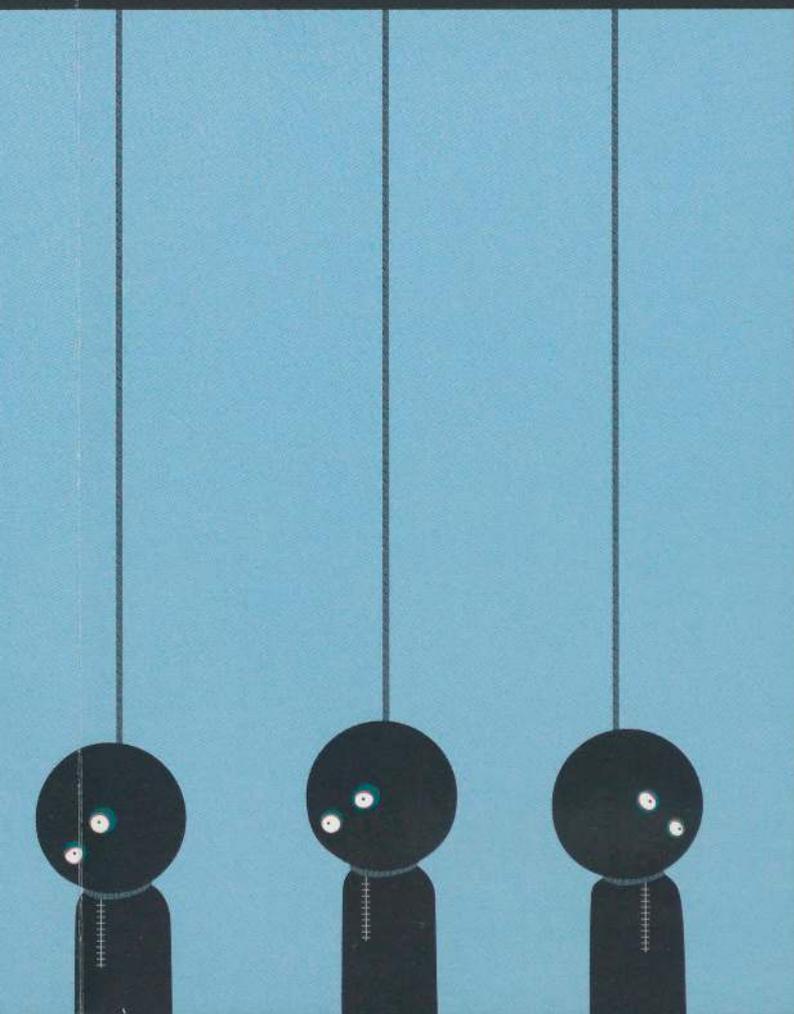
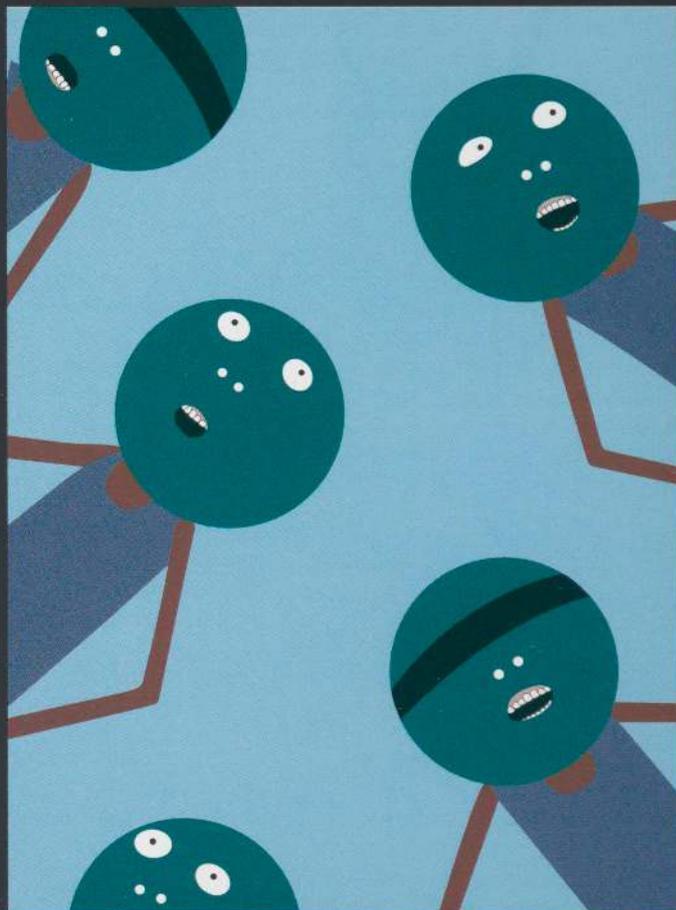
But these images are deceptively simple. As we examine the panels, we begin to catch minute details. We revisit each scene, more closely

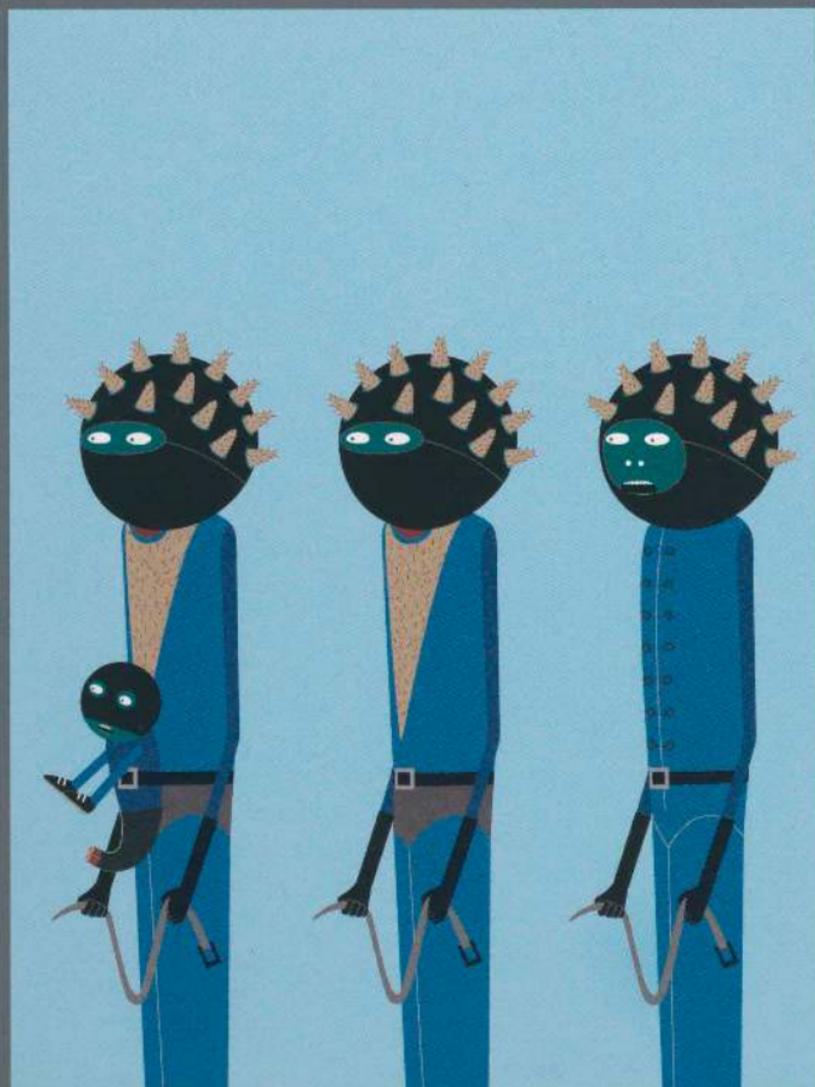


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this time, and discover manacles around necks, wrists, and legs; belts in hands, suggesting weaponry; offerings of dismembered heads and limbs; open wounds; tiny Band-Aids; apparent gunshot wounds, expressed by minuscule red dots; and X's carved into bodies—all evidence of past acts, as well as of future threats, of violence and torture, which Ali mercifully prevents us from witnessing.

As we delve more deeply into each image, these meticulously rendered minutiae lead us to revisit and question our initial impressions and characterizations of the inhabitants of Ali's world. Costumes that previously allowed us to identify the characters of Ali's story now confound us, and the characters' infliction of unspeakable horror upon one another confirms that these figures are not who we thought they were. We realize that it is not even clear who is doing what to whom: Why does the ecumenical figure wear a mask and carry rope? To whom and why are the security officers presenting severed body parts? Are the masked figures superheroes, or bandits? Reflecting the ambiguities of contemporary society, the monikers "good guy" and "bad guy," "victim" and "oppressor" become meaningless in this chaotic narrative of violence and menace. Gestures and facial expressions lead only to further confusion. For instance, similarly costumed figures may convey similar expressions (such as determination, menace, or sadism) in some frames, and then in others a lone figure will have "broken rank," communicating anger, confusion, horror, or shame. This puts into question the dynamics of individual and group identity within our society, and, by extension, leads us to reconsider our own predispositions and biases regarding those outside what we define as "our group."





Ali's project rhymes nicely with the interest of many of the early modernists in the materials and language of popular culture, which, like Ali, they actively appropriated. Searching for a new artistic voice that would reflect the brave new world emerging around them, these artists, whose works form the foundation of the Museum's collection, created an art that was emphatically of its time. Ali belongs to the tradition of modern and contemporary artists who have been particularly inspired by the comics, and who have capitalized on the tension that is created by juxtaposing its innocent form against serious contemporary issues.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw the explosion of the comic strip, a form that inspired both European and American artists. Pablo Picasso, supplied with American funny papers in France by his friend Gertrude Stein, drew inspiration from them for much of his work, including *The Dream and Lie of Franco* (1937), which satirizes the Spanish fascist dictator. George Grosz and Otto Dix used comic devices to illustrate their own brand of scathing political satire that they wielded against the bourgeois culture of pre-Nazi Germany. When George Herriman's brilliant *Krazy Kat* circulated in France, it was recognized as an early example of Dada art, and a few modern masters produced comic art early on in their careers, among them Lyonel Feininger, who created the popular *Kin-der-Kids* strip. The Pop art movement of the 1960s witnessed the wholesale appropriation of the forms, symbols, and styles of comic book art for the individual aesthetic intentions of a number of contemporary artists, including Roy Lichtenstein, Andy Warhol, and Claes Oldenburg. These artists saw the iconography of comic book art as an appropriate idiom for communicating their contemporary visions, and in the case of Lichtenstein and Warhol, even imported entire frames from the comics into their own works. Pop heirs Öyvind Fahlström's and Philip Guston's iconographies and styles are more directly related to the underground comics or "'zines" of the 1960s, with Guston owing a particular debt to comic illustrator Robert Crumb. The comic strip has continued to inform a younger generation of artists—Jim Nutt, Mike Kelley, and Gary Simmons—while yet another group of artists, including Takashi Murakami and Moriko Mori, has departed from the comic page, introducing instead the "eye candy" of comic animation. Like many other artists, Ali exploits the pictorial language of the comics in order to confront major sociocultural questions. Her substantial themes: individual and group identity, politics and power, race and class, are served up as disarmingly naive fare, the effect of which is to replace the viewer's initial amusement with shock as the scene is slowly digested.

In this regard, Ali's work for *Projects 75* may be most closely linked to the work of comic artist Art Spiegelman, whose Pulitzer Prize-winning tragicomic strip *Maus: A Survivor's Tale* is clearly referenced by Ali. Published in 1986, *Maus* revolves around the story of Vladek Spiegelman, the artist's father, who recounts his experience as a Jew living in Hitler's Europe, his subsequent internment at Auschwitz, and his life as a survivor after the Holocaust. In Spiegelman's vision, the Jews are portrayed as mice and the Nazis as cats, a cartoon format that successfully shocks the audience out of its comforting sense of familiarity with the events described, approaching the unspeakable through the diminutive.

In contrast to Spiegelman, who utilizes the comic framework in order to convey meaning through linear narration, Ali employs the framework so as to disrupt immediate comprehension. Against logic, one panel does not clearly lead to the next; instead, the viewer must rely on his

or her ability to decipher visual details and metaphors in order to gain comprehension. In this way, Ali's work is directly connected to the aesthetics of postmodernism, in which art denies any grand or master narrative. In its place are fragmentation, flux, displacement of fixed certainties and identities, and, ultimately, the disintegration of the notion of a coherent individual subject.



Ali deftly illuminates our desire to categorize and explain the world around us, revealing our ultimate inability to make clear-cut distinctions and assign finite meaning. The myths that we construct in order to make sense of the world around us are proven, through Ali's art, to be themselves hollow and inconclusive, thus rendering our responses to questions of consequence (identity, race, class, gender) as impotent and illusory. It is not the artist's goal, however, to convey the sense that all in Ali's world—and by extension, ours—is meaningless. On the contrary: if one only considers the expressions of expectation on individual faces, or notes the periodic gestures of outstretched, pleading hands, one realizes that stitched throughout Ali's tale, hope is the constant narrative.

Kristin Helmick-Brunet, Assistant Curator, Department of Drawings

Projects 75: Laylah Ali is available for \$2.00 at The MoMA Bookstore, the MoMA Design Store, Soho, and the Museum's exhibition shop.

biography

Born 1968 in Buffalo, New York

Lives and works in Williamstown, Massachusetts

education

M.F.A. Washington University, Saint Louis

selected solo exhibitions

2000 The Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston

1999 *Small Aggressions*, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

selected group exhibitions

2001 *Freestyle*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York

2000 *Try This On*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco

acknowledgments

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