

PRESS RELEASE

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SEATTLE ART MUSEUM PRESENTS BARBARA EARL THOMAS: THE GEOGRAPHY OF INNOCENCE

Seattle artist's first solo exhibition at SAM features new cut-paper and sandblasted portraits in an immersive, light-filled installation



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SEATTLE, WA - The Seattle Art Museum (SAM) presents *Barbara Earl Thomas: The Geography of Innocence* (November 20, 2020–November 14, 2021), the first solo exhibition at SAM for the celebrated Seattle-based artist. Featuring nearly all new work, the exhibition reflects Thomas's longtime explorations: light and shadow, perception and knowledge, Black lives and experiences, and the limits and possibilities of empathy. In this exhibition, Thomas asks: "How do you read a face, and what are your expectations when you enter its terrain?"

The Geography of Innocence is installed in the museum's Gwendolyn Knight & Jacob Lawrence Gallery and the adjacent hallway gallery. The visitor first enters an immersive, light-filled installation. The gallery's three walls are sheathed in backlit, intricately cut Tyvek panels, creating a lantern-like glow. In the center of each wall is an "altar," with a backlit portrait in sandblasted glass and a corresponding hand-blown glass candelabra. In the center of the gallery is the only previously exhibited work, premiering for the first time in Seattle: *Falling: Bodies in the Matrix* (2017), a 12-foot luminaire formed of hand-cut Tyvek panels with highly detailed imagery.

After the immersive installation, the visitor enters a hallway flanked by a series of 10 cut-paper portraits, rendered in black paper against bright, hand-colored paper backgrounds. Each portrait is someone the artist knows and who is a part of her life, either a family member or a friend's child. These portraits capture the subjects in unguarded moments. In a world where the mainstream adult gaze is often loaded with negative expectations, fear, and apprehension, Thomas invites viewers to pause and reflect on how these preconceived notions get in the way of truly seeing.





“My goal is to disarm,” says Thomas. “The exhibition is a portal, into a place where you are surrounded by beauty and you pause to take in the complexity of the stories being told. It’s a creative endeavor, one where I invite you to hold the pain alongside the beauty. I anticipate that the audience will come with their own experiences, some very different from mine, but my hope is that each person leaves having found some part in this story that belongs to them.”

“It has been a privilege to be in conversation with Barbara Earl Thomas this past year,” says Catharina Manchanda, Jon & Mary Shirley Curator of Modern & Contemporary Art. “This new body of work is not a reaction to recent events but rather the crystallization of thoughts that have propelled her all along. That they resonate now speaks to the timelessness of these experiences and issues.”

ABOUT BARBARA EARL THOMAS

Barbara Earl Thomas was born in Seattle in 1948, among the first generation in her family to be born outside of the American South. She earned a Master of Fine Arts at the University of Washington in 1977, with Jacob Lawrence and Michael Spafford as mentors and friends. Also, a writer and arts administrator, she is a former director of the Northwest African American Museum.

Notable exhibitions include a major career survey at the Bainbridge Island Museum of Art (2016). She is the recipient of a Washington State Governor’s Arts & Heritage Award (2016), the Irving and Yvonne Twining Humber Award (2016), and a Mayor’s Arts Award, Seattle (2013). In May 2020, Thomas was commissioned by Yale University to create a work to replace the controversial stained-glass windows in its newly renamed Grace Hopper College.

TICKETING INFORMATION

Museum Hours

- Closed Monday–Thursday
- Friday–Sunday 10 am–5 pm (beginning March 5)
- Open for First Thursdays 10 am–5 pm (beginning April 1)
 - First Thursdays will be FREE all day, including special exhibitions

Suggested Admission for SAM Collections and Installations

- \$19.99 Adult
- \$17.99 Senior (65+), Military (with ID)
- \$12.99 Student (with ID), Teen (15–18)
- FREE for children (14 and under)
- FREE for SAM Members

The museum is at limited capacity with timed tickets available for purchase online and in advance. Admission prices for SAM Collections and Installations are suggested, meaning visitors may choose to pay what they want by

contacting SAM's Customer Service Center in advance using the [online form](#) or by calling 206.654.3210 from 10 am–5 pm Wednesday–Monday.

EXHIBITION ORGANIZATION AND SUPPORT

The exhibition is organized by the Seattle Art Museum.

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Generous Support

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Image credits: Installation view of *Barbara Earl Thomas: The Geography of Innocence* at Seattle Art Museum, 2020, © Seattle Art Museum, photo: Spike Mafford. *Siblings*, 2020, Barbara Earl Thomas, American, cut paper and hand-printed color backing, 40 x 26 in., Courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery, photo: Spike Mafford. *Color Wheel*, 2020, Barbara Earl Thomas, American, cut paper and hand-printed color backing, 40 x 26 in., Courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery, photo: Spike Mafford. *Grace*, 2019, Barbara Earl Thomas, American, cut paper and hand-printed color, 40 x 26 in., Courtesy of Claire Oliver Gallery, photo: Spike Mafford.

ABOUT SEATTLE ART MUSEUM

As the leading visual art institution in the Pacific Northwest, SAM draws on its global collections, powerful exhibitions, and dynamic programs to provide unique educational resources benefiting the Seattle region, the Pacific Northwest, and beyond. SAM was founded in 1933 with a focus on Asian art. By the late 1980s the museum had outgrown its original home, and in 1991 a new 155,000-square-foot downtown building, designed by Venturi, Scott Brown & Associates, opened to the public. The 1933 building was renovated and rededicated as the Asian Art Museum in 1994, and it reopened on February 8, 2020, following an extensive renovation and expansion. SAM's desire to further serve its community was realized in 2007 with the opening of two stunning new facilities: the nine-acre Olympic Sculpture Park (designed by Weiss/Manfredi Architects)—a “museum without walls,” free and open to all—and the Allied Works Architecture designed 118,000-square-foot expansion of its main, downtown location, including 232,000 square feet of additional space built for future expansion. The Olympic Sculpture Park and SAM's downtown expansion celebrated their tenth anniversary in 2017.

From a strong foundation of Asian art to noteworthy collections of African and Oceanic art, Northwest Coast Native American art, European and American art, and modern and contemporary art, the strength of SAM's collection of approximately 25,000 objects lies in its diversity of media, cultures, and time periods.