

NEW CITY ART

Freedom and Inspiration: A Look at “Nordic Utopia? African Americans in the Twentieth Century”

BY RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS | AUGUST 2, 2024

The laws and legacy of Jim Crow were woven deeply into the fabric of post-Civil War America. African Americans remained disenfranchised and threatened in their daily lives throughout the country. The creativity of Black artists and musicians in the early twentieth century was necessarily diminished. How can one maintain a productive creative practice under the burden of codified racial violence and economic disparity?

Josephine Baker, James Baldwin and many other Black artists and intellectuals are remembered as living as expatriates in Paris to escape these burdens. But a less-known milieu of African American creativity flourished in the Nordic countries at this time. “Nordic Utopia? African Americans in the Twentieth Century” is a pioneering exhibition of this singular bohemian history.

Professor Ethelene Whitmire of the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Leslie Ann Anderson, chief curator of the National Nordic Museum in Seattle, have collaborated to bring together a narrative of resilience, freedom and flourishing artistic production. “Copenhagen, Stockholm, Oslo, Helsinki, or Reykjavik,” Whitmire says, “during the twentieth century, many Black American scholars, educators, activists, jazz musicians, singers, artists and writers were drawn to the Nordic capitals. For some figures these locales exerted a greater pull than the City of Light.” For many Black Americans, the Nordic countries of Europe offered inspiration, solace and love.

The exhibition explores the travels and sojourns of African American artists from the 1930s through the 1950s; cross-pollination that occurred as a result of collaborations between African American and Nordic creatives from the 1950s through the 1970s; and the decision made by some



Howard Smith for Valilla, “Blue Irises,” 1978, stretched cotton textile, National Nordic Museum, NNM Purchase, 2023.013.001, Jim Bennett/Photo Bakery for the National Nordic Museum

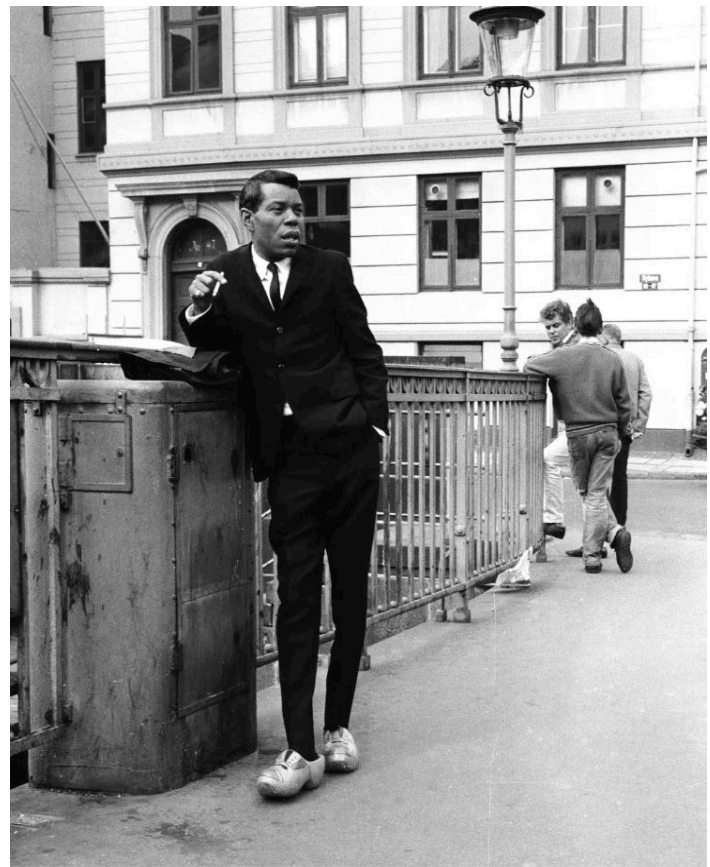
visual artists to build lasting careers and families in the Nordic countries from the 1970s into the early 2000s. Anderson reflects that a sense of “depletion” in the United States was transformed into a comparatively “unencumbered... freedom” in the Nordic countries.

Josephine Baker lived, performed and traveled abroad, even becoming a naturalized French citizen. (She refused to perform for segregated audiences in the United States.) Her career in Europe also included performances in Copenhagen. The exhibition displays images of Baker, in regal gowns and furs, as she prepares for and performs at the Tivoli Concert Hall, circa 1935-1940. The photos are candid, journalistic. We see Baker eating apple cake before a performance, and holding a clutch of children's dolls, both Black and white, in her arms, offering a radiant, dimpled smile. Whitmire adds, gratefully, that the photos avoid the artist in her signature but conflicted banana costume.

Additional photos and video of musicians and performances offer a powerful and descriptive narrative. Music plays throughout the galleries of the exhibition. Anne Wiggins Brown starred as the leading role in the original production of "Porgy and Bess" in 1935, and was the first African American vocalist to attend the Julliard School. She later settled in Norway and married.

We also see Babs Gonzales, coolly smoking on a Copenhagen street corner (wearing wooden shoes!), and Dexter Gordon, also with a cigarette, and his saxophone. All of these artists described leaving the United States, at least for a time, to escape racial prejudice.

Several singular works by artist William H. Johnson are also included. Johnson, along with contemporaries such as Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight, rose to become one of the great voices of American art. Born in the South, and emerging artistically in the Harlem Renaissance, Johnson then traveled to Europe where he met and married Holcha Krake, a Danish artist, designer, weaver and ceramist. While Johnson's later work uses techniques echoing folk art and European Modernism, these works are more lyrical and painterly, describing the landscapes and people of Denmark and Norway. These paintings show the artist expressing his freedom to depict and describe subjects that are simply of interest, following his inspiration and creativity to portray what was around him. This seems like a conventional practice, but for minority artists, then and now, this freedom from race and identity in subject matter can be elusive. Johnson ultimately returned to the United States to emerge into artistic maturity and to, in his words, "paint my own people." The Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C. is concurrently hosting an exhibition of Johnson's work, "Fighters for Freedom: William H. Johnson Picturing Justice."



Kirsten Malone (Danish) "Babs Gonzales in Nyhavn in Copenhagen," 1968, gelatin silver print from original/Photo: Courtesy of Kirsten Malone

Though there was relative freedom to create without the burdens of racial inequity in Nordic countries, a question mark remains in the title of this exhibition. Utopias are not an earthly reality, and racialized objects and attitudes toward Black people were still a part of life abroad. The exhibition takes time to examine the imperfect balance that these artists lived with, even within their chosen journeys.

Often, the artists insert these conflicts and comparisons into their creative material, such as in the gauzy landscapes of Walter Williams. The paintings are atmospheric, full of red and orange light, and mix references from the United States and Denmark. Created in the 1970s, the paintings recall some elements of the Black experience in America. We see a shanty and a field of cotton in the distance, but in the foreground, a girl picks a bouquet with sunflowers while butterflies and birds wheel within and about in a glowing sky. The paintings are complex, set within haunting, symbolic spaces. Whitmire and Anderson discuss the significance of Williams' work in encapsulating the exhibition, with Whitmire adding that paintings by Williams are included in major personal collections such as those of Shonda Rhimes and Bill Cosby.



Walter Williams, "Sunflowers," n.d., mixed media, loan courtesy of The Johnson Collection.

The exhibition at the Nordic Museum in Seattle displays gallery walls painted a brilliant, bright red. For its next installment, opening at the Chazen Museum of Art in Madison on August 10, walls will be transformed to a soft, bluish-gray. Anderson adds that while the choice of red was mainly an aesthetic choice, it amplified the exhibition as a whole. While curation has pivoted in recent years from the modernist-mandated white cube, I was interested in the expansive differences in color choice for the two iterations of this exhibition. While the choice of wall color need not inform context in artwork, it can be an opportunity, a tool, to add layers of content, subliminally or in a directly symbolic way.

Anderson says that The National Gallery of Denmark contributed two monumental works on paper by Ronald Burns, which are a culmination.

These ambitious drawings from 2006, entitled "The Sky Is Falling / The Triumph of Nature," show human figures subsumed by detailed descriptions of fish, fauna and abstracted dynamic forms. Together, they create a contemporary coda to the exhibition, revealing a formerly sequestered narrative to the public.

"Nordic Utopia? African Americans in the Twentieth Century," Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 800 University Avenue, Madison, Wisconsin, on view August 10–November 10.

Ronald Burns, "Yes/No," ca. 1980, oil on canvas, private collection/Photo: Christoffer Regild

