

Leslie HEWITT

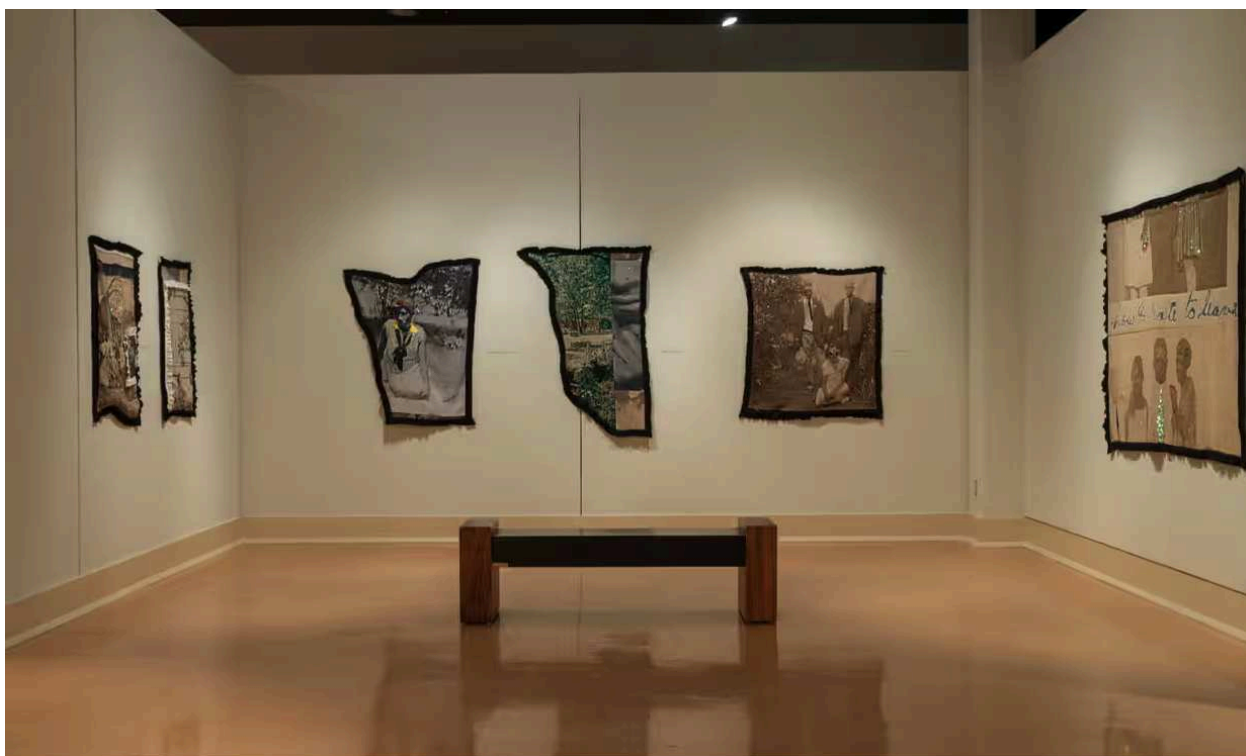
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'A sense of radical possibility': re-examining the great migration through art

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In a new exhibition titled *A Movement in Every Direction*, the migration of Black Americans from the rural south to the urban north has inspired a range of new artwork



Akea Brionne – *An Ode To (You)'all*, 2022. Photograph: Photography BMA/Photograph by Mitro Hood.
Courtesy of the Mississippi Museum of Art and Baltimore Museum of Art.

The way we talk about the great migration is often oversimplified,

limiting it to the movement of Black Americans from the rural south to the urban north through the early and mid 20th century. But there are many more stories of the great migration than just this one. The new joint exhibition between the [Mississippi](#) Museum of Art and the Baltimore Museum of Art, *A Movement in Every Direction* seeks to complicate that tidy narrative through freshly commissioned artwork that adds new stories to the great migration, and explores how it continues to this day.

Ryan Dennis, co-curator of the exhibit and Chief Curator of the Mississippi Museum of [Art](#), told me that, “our vision for the show was to think more expansively about the great migration and to its deep connections to the south”. Revising predominating narratives of this massive exodus, Dennis believed that “it was really important to move away from the deep trauma connected to the great migration and to think more about how self-determined agency and possibility were a part of the story”.

To that end, *A Movement in Every Direction* shows new work in various media by 12 celebrated artists, including Carrie Mae Weems, Mark Bradford and Theaster Gates Jr. The show opened at the Mississippi Museum of Art in April, and in the fall it will travel to the Baltimore Museum of Art, opening there on 30 October 2022.



Mark Bradford - 500, 2022. Photograph: Photography BMA/Photograph by Mitro Hood. Courtesy of the Mississippi Museum of Art and Baltimore Museum of Art.

Bradford's attention-grabbing piece 500 consists of 60 individually painted and oxidized paper-on-wood panels. From afar, 500 looks to be an abstract mass of blacks and ochers, but closer examination reveals that each of its 60 panels is in fact a reproduction of a 1913 advertisement reading "WANTED" across the top, recruiting settlers to the Black-established farming town of Blackdom, New Mexico. Incorporated in 1903 by 13 African Americans, the town briefly flourished during the 1910s, before eventually declining and emptying out amid the Great Depression.

Bradford's 500 has a rustic, time-ravaged feel, the process of oxidation rendering each individual panel only partially legible. It conjures curiosity about the individuals who may have seen this advertisement, the mixture of emotions they felt as they contemplated transforming their lives entirely through the arduous work of traveling out west and building a new settlement. A sense of time and

history also sits layered on to this work, the panels connoting the gulf of a century that separates us from those migrants, even as it raises contemporary questions about who the descendants of these individuals are and where they are living their lives, probably in drastically different circumstances than their ancestors.

Contrasting with the deeply rooted historicism of 500 is artist Leslie Hewitt's triptych of abstract low-rise sculptures, *Untitled (Slow Drag, Barely Moving, Imperceptible)*, placed throughout the exhibit. The title of these pieces brings to mind the very slow, lengthy rhythms associated with long-term migrations, particularly in the era before modern means of transportation. Their strangeness can evoke displacement among museum-goers, yet they also offer viewers a moment of familiarity – as the exhibition co-curator and curator at the Baltimore Museum of Art, Jessica Bell Brown, told me, “Leslie uses materials that connect her to her family’s ancestral origin in Macon, Georgia. So the materials create this sort of abstraction for visitors, but when you look at the work it immediately reminds you of this domestic space, a deep sense of connection to space.”



Foreground: Leslie Hewitt, *Untitled (Imperceptible, Slow Drag, Barely Moving)*, 2022. Background: Robert Pruitt, *A Song for Travelers*, 2022. Photograph: Photography BMA/Photograph by Mitro Hood. Courtesy of the Mississippi Museum of Art and Baltimore Museum of Art.

Brown saw Hewitt's sculptures as connecting with Zoë Charlton's large-scale pop-up collage, *Permanent Change of Station*, which features an enormous wall drawing of a lush landscape behind multiple pop-up-book-like plants collaged together in the foreground. Although the work leans heavily into the natural splendor that is so essential in defining places, its title calls back to the influence of the military in her family's life, which caused Charlton's family to migrate throughout the globe. Brown told me that, "in this piece, Zoë is thinking about her family's origins in the Florida panhandle, as well as so-called foreign landscapes where her family spent so much time in military service. Looking at Zoë's incredible installation, it's phenomenal to me that artists like her and Leslie are speaking to each other through their family stories."

With the breadth of work on offer in *A Movement in Every Direction*, it is clear that Dennis and Brown are trying to position the great migration in a very broad sense, as a complicated phenomenon that can hold many meanings at once. This show is important in that it aspires to put agency back into the story of the great migration, as well as engage with the larger story of how Black individuals have found their homes in the US. Dennis sees migration as "movement and possibility, something that has a really deep impact on Black folks, both in this country and globally. It looks into how people need to move about to protect themselves and allow for a deeper rootedness in the world, and to think about how they need to move for their families." Brown added that, "when I think about all the artists in the show, I think about migration as a sense of radical possibility".



Zoë Charlton, *Permanent Change of Station*, 2022. Photograph: Photography BMA/Photograph by Mitro Hood. Courtesy of the Mississippi Museum of Art and Baltimore Museum of Art.

Curating *A Movement in Every Direction* has also been a very personally rewarding experience for Dennis and Brown. Dennis shared that by collaborating on the show they have “created a friendship that will last a lifetime”. In addition, as Black women with their own connections to the Black community, they found that working on the show gave them space to open up questions of their own personal and family histories. Dennis told me that curating the show, “allowed me to ask more questions of my family and to understand their origin story and movement in a way that I just hadn’t before. It’s been inspiring to really just share this exhibition with my nieces and nephews, who have been encouraged to talk to their great-aunts about just their lives.” Adding to that, Brown said, “there’s a deep deep relevance in this exhibition in that it opens up the opportunity for so many folks to open up their family legacies and to open up how they tell stories”.

Indeed, so far *A Movement in Every Direction* has been doing just that. According to Dennis, in the two years that she's worked with the Mississippi Museum of Art, she's never seen so many people of color come in to see an exhibit. That's particularly important since Jackson, where the museum is located, is 85% Black. For Dennis, seeing the public's response to the show has "been really phenomenal. People in Jackson can see themselves reflected in the work and the narrative of the show, and so they have really showed up."

A Movement in Every Direction is now on at the Mississippi Museum of Art before moving to the Baltimore Museum of Art on 30 October.