ARTnews

Hilton Als on Curating a Show Inspired by Toni Morrison for David Zwirner: 'It's Filled with a Lot of Emotion'

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Toni Morrison in China, 1984.COURTESY PRINCETON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Unlike *Beloved* (1987), which is studied in high schools across the U.S., and *Song of Solomon* (1977), which won a National Book Critics Circle Award upon its release, *The Black Book* (1974) may not rank among Toni Morrison's more well-known tomes in some circles. Assembled with collector Middleton A. Harris and a team of researchers while she was still an editor at Random House, *The Black Book* is an assortment of primary-source documents intended to act as a survey of the Black experience in the U.S. It is every bit as high-impact as Morrison's novels, however, and it seems that Morrison herself knew as much. In a 2009 foreword to a reprint of *The Black Book*, she recalled receiving a letter from a prison inmate requesting two more copies.

“I need one copy to give to a friend, another to throw against the wall over and over,” the inmate wrote. “The one I already own I want to hold in my arms against my heart.”

All are appropriate reactions to *The Black Book*, which, in under 200 pages, traces about 300 years of history and an array of interwoven topics. Using written and visual material culled from newspapers, circulars, advertisements, legal papers, and more, *The Black Book* features texts about the trans-Atlantic slave trade, racism in the U.S. educational system, lynchings, the colonization of parts of West Africa, the stories of Black landowners, Black cowboys, Black soldiers, the rise of minstrelsy, significant strides by Black athletes and musicians, the pain of history lost and erased, and much more. While not explicitly organized in any specific way, it becomes apparent while reading that Harris and Morrison have curated their texts as though they were mini-essays. In one section, Harris and Morrison offer texts about song and dance written and performed by slaves as a form of aesthetic resistance. By that section’s end, those same artistic styles have been appropriated by the white middle-class.

Ever since its original publication, *The Black Book* has held a special place within history. “The book exercised a great influence over the way black anthropology was viewed,” *New Yorker* critic Hilton Als wrote in 2003, when he profiled Morrison. Now, for a show he organized at David Zwirner gallery in New York featuring works by Garrett Bradley, James Van Der Zee, Martin Puryear, Beverly Buchanan, and more, Als has returned to *The Black Book* to muse on its impact on the arts. Julie Mehretu, Kerry James Marshall, and Amy Sillman have been commissioned to make new works specifically for the show, titled “Toni Morrison’s Black Book,” which opens today.

Earlier this month, *ARTnews* spoke with Als by Zoom to hear more about the show. The conversation, which follows below, has been edited and condensed for clarity.

ARTnews: This isn’t the first time you’ve curated a show about someone’s writings. You did a show about James Baldwin at David Zwirner in 2019, and you’re now at work on an exhibition about Joan Didion for the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. Tell me about that process. How do you decide what works go in?

Hilton Als: Well, I think that one of the things that interests me is: How do we find the visual component in 20th-century American writers who have been more often than not as influenced by film as they’ve been by literature? These artists are strongly visual, and they’ve had a very sort of intense relationship to visual culture. I feel that they choose me, in a funny way. It’s in reading and seeing what they visualize and interpreting it that gives me the confidence to go in there and say, “Well, actually, at this point, you know, it would be very interesting to have a Joseph Cornell [in the show] now because of his relationship to birds, or at this another juncture, it might be very interesting to for us to try to use a Beverly Buchanan because of her relationship to home, particularly to areas where Black women lived and prospered or didn’t prosper.” I’m fascinated by what we're able to do with literature, which is to make a kind of three-dimensional cinema based on these artists who give us the gift of their visualization.

Beverly Buchanan, *For Mallory*, 1995.©BEVERLY BUCHANAN ESTATE AND ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY, NEW YORK

So what you're interested in drawing out is that there are visual artists who came into the orbit of these writers that you're interested in. For example, there was a photograph of James Baldwin by Richard Avedon in the Baldwin show. But there were also the thematic resonances that you're interested in visual resonances. It's not always directly about the text.

Exactly. It so happens that we have a Julie Mehretu painting that Julie made coincidentally when she was reading *A Mercy* [2008], which is about the discovery of country and race and so on. Sometimes there's lucky things like that that happen. But on the other hand, all the artists you've mentioned are interpretive artists, so these shows are really a kind of conversation simultaneously with artists, who give us so much in terms not only of storytelling, but in particular of American storytelling.

James Van Der Zee, *Untitled*, 1939©ESTATE OF JAMES VAN DER ZEE AND HOWARD GREENBERG GALLERY, NEW YORK

Toni Morrison is a writer whose work you personally had been in conversation with for a long time. In your 2003 profile of her, you mentioned having come into contact with *The Black Book* very early on and how deeply it had impacted you. What was the experience of first reading this book like, and what did you gain from it?

I was just completely blown away by the fact that it wasn't a text-heavy historical take, but that it was instead a visual understanding of Black American culture. And I think that she was brilliant to free the text of inherent ideology that happens with language. If you were making it a visual project, you were forcing people to look at the information for themselves, as opposed to being directed, as one would for a text. I had read probably a fair amount of Black American history at that point, so it was a relief not to be involved in a scholar or an ideologue's language. It was completely freeing. And it also let me see that one of the things that we can do always—that she had done—is to see history as a real and living thing through documents. It really supported my love of the visual and my understanding that the visual was another language, and that it was a valid language on its own. And she freed me to understand that it was just as powerful and as resonant.

That’s a good point about the aesthetics of the book. She’s expanding what we now refer to as the archive, and doing so in a way that points up, I think, how important visual culture is. It’ll be interesting to see that play out in the show. But I’m curious, too, about why this book in particular, as opposed to, say, another text by her. It’s maybe not her most famous book.

I think that in a way, I was drawn to this book in particular, not only because of the visual, but because it was her work as an editor, which is to say a curator. In the show, I touch on other other books of hers. But I wanted to expand on an idea that she put forth in the book, which is this kind of panoramic view. I wanted to do something similar in terms of her work, not only as a writer, but as an editor and as a curator. And so it felt like this book is where she was present very strongly and not at the same time, in the way curators often are. At the same time, this book was the of beginning of her building of a universe of Blackness through literature. I think that the book in some subconscious way was an expression of what she was going to do as a writer, which is to take this complete history of Black America and make literature out of that. I like that it was kind of unknown to her, you know?

How do you mean unknown?

She didn’t start off as a writer with the grand project of writing about Blackness as historical fact. She started off telling a story. As she developed as a writer, the ambition and the greatness of her project started to grow in her mind, and I think in a funny way, *The Black Book* is kind of a blueprint for what she did as a writer.

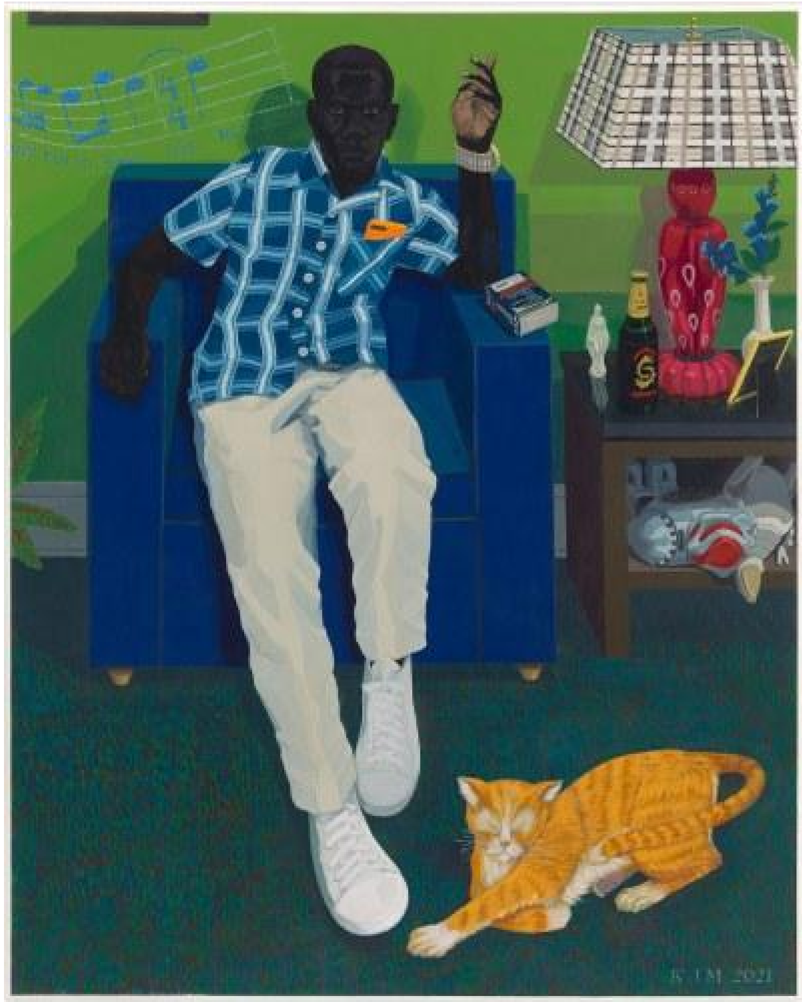
It’s interesting, too, how so many different modes are at play in her book. Is that something you want to mirror with your show?

I’m hoping that I can do something that is half as good as the book. My interpretation of it is obviously my interpretation, but for sure, the collage and sweeping effect of it is something that I hope to be in conversation with.

Robert Gober, *Untitled*, 1993.©ROBERT GOBER/COLLECTION OF PAMELA AND ARTHUR SANDERS

In a 2015 profile of Morrison that ran in the *New York Times Magazine*, a publisher at Random House said that *The Black Book* was Black history from within the Black community. Although not all of the artists in your show are Black, is this something you're also hoping to do?

The dominant cultural force in her book is Black people, but there are for sure many different kinds of people in her books. It was very important to me that it be an exhibition that supported what she had tried to do as an editor, which is to bring more women to the fore as well as people of color.



Kerry James Marshall, *A lithe young man…*, 2021.©KERRY JAMES MARSHALL/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND DAVID ZWIRNER, LONDON

There are newly commissioned works related to Morrison's novels. What do they entail?

Julie's painting is *A Mercy*. Amy Sillman has done what she calls *Paradise (An Alphabet for Miss Morrison)*. Amy was studying Hebrew a lot. The letters are inspired by the Hebraic alphabet and they spell "Paradise," which is Toni's novel. The wonderful Kerry James Marshall responded to *Song of Solomon*, particularly the Black male characters in the book. That was the first time that Toni really wrote about maleness, and Kerry has responded to that very beautifully. One big new development is that we're showing some films that Kerry has made as well. It's not a known part of his practice. A friend of mine in Chicago, Solveig Nelson, asked me if I'd ever seen his film. I had never seen them. When I went to his studio, I was just blown away when he showed me. You know, he's very interested in all aspects of visual culture. And there were these amazing documents that he had made over the years. We also get to show Garrett Bradley's film [*AKA*, from 2019], which is indirectly inspired by *Paradise*. It's a wonderful, mysterious short. There are also some found objects.

What kinds of conversations have you been having with these artists?

It’s been very moving because lots of folks have different reactions to the work. And some of the folks that we’ve invited into this sphere had not read certain texts. So it was really quite beautiful to see how they were relating to this material, and I was just amazed by their willingness to participate. Kerry had a lot of very interesting thoughts that he’d like to talk to me about in terms of her character development. It’s just really been such an incredibly expansive project.

And what about the viewers? What do you hope they walk away with?

I hope they enjoy the project. It’s filled with a lot of emotion and love for this really extraordinary person.