8 Valinda Carroll, Kayla Henry-Griffin, Nylah Byrd, and Ariana Makau of Black Art Conservators on Black objects, performance, and the future of conservation

A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin

The group Black Art Conservators was founded in 2020 to address racial injustice in conservation. Here, four members of the group—Valinda Carroll, Kayla Henry-Griffin, Nylah Byrd, and Ariana Makau—discuss the significance of conserving Black art and culture, highlighting the lack of resources in many institutions to properly preserve these artifacts. Their experiences as Black conservators allow them to bridge cultural gaps and better understand the context and value of artworks within their communities. The conservators advocate for people-centered conservation, where objects hold emotional and cultural significance, and they recognize the importance of oral traditions and body language in preserving performance art, which may not be adequately captured in written documentation. Regarding biases in conservation, the conservators argue for the inclusion of specialists from communities associated with the items to ensure a more equitable and contextual preservation process. They envision a future in conservation that embraces diverse cultural practices and perspectives, calling for more research and recognition of the work of Black artists, like Elizabeth Catlett, to better understand their contributions to the field. The conservators also discuss conserving emotionally charged artworks and the challenges of preserving objects that may have been used to oppress marginalized groups. They emphasize the need to approach such objects with sensitivity and to involve the community in decision-making processes.

Valinda Carroll: I'm a paper conservator in private practice right now, but I previously worked in libraries as well as in mostly history museums and regional centers. While Nylah and Kayla are both emerging conservators, I've been in the field for over twenty-five years. So I have a wide range of different experiences with different types

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of collections and haven't really in my professional work encountered performance art, except when I was working at the Hirshhorn Museum as a contractor, because they did have some things that were the documentation or parts of performance-related works. It was interesting, what things were the tangible objects that belonged to the museum, as opposed to the things that had to be recreated each time the work was presented to an audience. What I was dealing with as a paper conservator in some cases was the contract from the artist, and in other cases was maybe a box that has a printed work, and then also a digital file on a disk or on a jump drive. It's really a wide range of things.

Kayla Henry-Griffin: I'm currently Media Collection Specialist for the Audiovisual Media Preservation Initiative (AVMPI) at Smithsonian Libraries and Archive. Formerly, I was a fellow at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I worked closely with the time-based media conservator. And as part of my practice, I'm also looking at performance artworks and how to preserve all or a bit of the performance. What makes the performance? What do we preserve, and what part of it? Is there anything tangible that we keep as part of the performance or is it more a—I don't want to say time-sensitive—very ephemeral piece of work? In time-based media, a lot of things are ephemeral.

Nylah Byrd: I'm specialized in object conservation and library/archives conservation. I graduated from the WUDPAC program in 2022 so I'm an early career professional. I am interested in conserving the ephemeral. There is the physical thing, but there is also what the thing is giving off, that's often ephemeral. Being able to conserve a document in ways that are outside of writing is really interesting to me and something I want to explore.

Jules Pelta Feldman: We would first like to ask you all: What does it mean to be a Black conservator today? And why is it important to you personally to be part of this association of Black Art Conservators?

Byrd: For me it definitely does mean something, but I feel I don't know if it should, in an ideal world. Today, it means having to carry a perspective that's different, to always be aware of that difference, thinking

of it and being ready to voice that because nobody else will. I think it's important because Black art and culture is also an underserved area in terms of preservation. Who's really going to have the cultural ties and understanding to be able to work with Black artifacts in their fullness, besides other Black people?

Carroll: So many collecting institutions in the places where I've worked—in particular on the east coast, in Philadelphia, Virginia, and Washington, DC—that have the wealth to have conservation staff also tend to be those collections that don't emphasize African American culture and African American history. There are a lot of small organizations that do emphasize Black culture, but they lack resources to do conservation. I worked for thirteen years at a historically Black college, and I was the only full-time conservator. There are 107 historically Black colleges and universities in the United States, and most of them have never had a conservator on staff. Some of them are starting to have a preservation officer or conservator because they've been able to get grant money to support that. But for most of their history, they have not had access to those resources. So I think that being someone who bridges those two sides of the cultural heritage sector, being a Black conservator, makes me uniquely qualified to see where some of the gaps are in our practice.

Henry-Griffin: I want to echo what Valinda and Nylah have both said. For me it's about filling in those gaps. We have a lot of artwork—in my case, time-based media artwork—where things get lost in translation due to the fact that someone may not be from our culture, or from that area of expertise or geographical region. It's not as if someone who isn't Black cannot do conservation work on an artwork made by Black artists. But I already have that knowledge and an idea of what that artist is doing with their video work. I don't need to think twice about the elements of the work that I'm identifying as significant.

I felt that I needed to join Black Art Conservators because I was going through a lot personally, with my professional life, and trying to understand my place within conservation. Recognizing and being aware that there are also other

Black conservators—I was very grateful for that. I'm still very grateful, but now there are other reasons why I'm part of the Black Art Conservators.

Hanna B. Hölling: And Nylah, how can we understand what the Black object is? You also mentioned that there are methods that you would like to employ that are not necessarily connected with writing. Could you elaborate on those two aspects?

Byrd: I was thinking about a colleague of ours, LaStarsha McGarity, who was working on a piece that involved mustard seeds.[1] And she already knew the cultural significance of that being used in an artwork, whereas someone else who wasn't Black might not have understood that, just because they didn't have that cultural background. Little things like that are expressions of Black culture, and a white person just probably wouldn't automatically be able to understand without having to do some research.

I don't necessarily have other established methods outside of writing. I feel like in conservation, the documentation generally involves just taking some pictures and writing a report. Beyond just taking pictures, how do we document something without writing it down? Because one of the symptoms of white supremacy is worship of the written word. Obviously writing is important, but I don't want it to be the only way. So that's where that's coming from. But realistically, I just write a report.

Carroll: I have a history of having done dance as a child and then, later, modern dance as a teenager. While there is dance notation, a lot of the transmission of dance takes place through the oral tradition and through watching and learning from your teacher. I'm a practitioner of Esoteric Buddhism, in which hand gestures are based on physical mimicry and learning through watching and doing—it is another form of transmitting performance information that isn't written.

Henry-Griffin: My best friend's friend had a dance performance last year, and he didn't want it recorded. And of course, as a conservator, I asked, how is it going to be preserved? But then it made me really think about his reasoning behind not having it recorded. And that reason was due to the fact that his dance performance was based on Black memory and having a Black paradise. Sometimes this Black paradise is only within our Black minds rather than through writing or through other forms. The continuity of this performance is basically me repeating what I've seen, whether that be I'm

dancing it myself, or just through word of mouth. I know a lot of people who are interested in performance art are thinking of oral traditions. But, as Nylah said, there's this big emphasis on writing. Why are we so dedicated to writing and less to body language and other forms of communication? It's essential to not only think about writing but also whether there are body movements that someone else can adapt.

Pelta Feldman: I'm wondering if you feel that there is a kind of performance or performative aspect to the work that you do, if performance does come into your work as a conservator, either from the side of the artworks that you're caring for or from your own activities as a conservator?

Henry-Griffin: I'm thinking of an example where I had to get documentation on this software-based artwork and writing a report was not going to work out because I would have missed out on so much information about it. What I ended up doing with my supervisor was to make a video recording that recorded the artwork's behaviors so that another conservator in the future will understand this behavior. In my experience, time-based media works are kind of performances; the artwork behaves in such a way that it stimulates my interaction with it. That is more than just doing a condition check or writing up documentation.

Byrd: As conservators, we sometimes perform cleanliness, especially when taking pictures for websites and social media, or when we host people: "Oh, my God, we got to clean up the lab." You have things out in a kind of stage where it's almost the way you would work on something. But in the picture, you've got a great posture, and you're holding your breath. When we had an open house, we had to clean the lab and organize the cabinets. And obviously it is nice to take time and clean up your space every once in a while. But the place isn't always in order, and that's okay.

Pelta Feldman: That also comes up often in critiques of performance documentation—that you might have a beautiful photograph of a performance that actually doesn't represent most of what that performance was like. In a similar way, if people in the future are wondering what early twenty-first century conservation was like, the photos Nylah is talking about might not actually give them a very accurate sense of things.

Carroll: From my perspective as a paper conservator, a lot of the techniques of how you roll or lift paper when you're handling it and how you apply a lining have been influenced by the Japanese tradition of scroll mounting, or *hyogu*. There's a

certain amount of knowledge that you can transmit in writing or through video, but a lot of it is being there and doing this physical act. You learn through repetition. You learn the texture of paste and how it's supposed to feel when you're making it after you've made multiple batches of paste, in a physical action. There is a physical performance associated with a lot of our conservation techniques.

Emilie Magnin: Traditional Western conservation is an object-oriented discipline. But objects are also carriers of other values, so that when we conserve an object, we're not only conserving its material aspects. I was wondering if you could think of practices of Black art conservation that could help conserve not just objects as items but also values or cultural relationships that are linked to them.

Byrd: I try to practice people-centered conservation, which means that objects are important because they're important to people. I think about a family heirloom that's been in your family for generations. Maybe it is a really expensive piece of jewelry. But you keep it because your grandma gave it to your mom, and then your mom gave it to you, and you're going to give it to your daughter. That's the practice. While it is still about the object, it's also about its meaning to people and the feelings and memories that it invokes for those who possess or connect to the object.

Henry-Griffin: What Nylah said reminds me of home movies. There are protocols that professional film preservationists follow, but not all are applicable to home movies. In home movies, it's more relevant whether a person can see their dad in the film. It's very interesting that just keeping people in your mind changes your perspective on conserving things.

Carroll: I worked on a project called Save Our African American Treasures (SOAAT), before the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture opened in 2016.[2] I also worked on a community archiving project connected with the National Museum of African American History and Culture. These projects were directly related to people's own photo albums, home collections, scrapbooks, family Bibles, etc. What we can bring to the field is our ability to also look at the existing practices with traditional collections and tease out additional narratives. One example is the well-known sculptor and printmaker Elizabeth Catlett, whose work was oriented around civil rights and who was eventually blacklisted by the US government, acquiring Mexican citizenship. During my work at Hampton University, an archive of her documentation was acquired

from the artist and art historian Samella Lewis; Catlett was actually on the faculty there during the time when Lewis was a student. A letter from the archive describes a print series for which there was a decision to make two different print runs. One run would be printed on Arches paper, which, of course, is standard fine art paper. And then the second print run would be printed on less expensive paper to be sold as a fundraiser for *Freedomways*, which was a civil rights-oriented magazine. The choice of a less expensive paper was made in order for the prints to be accessible to a wider audience. They would make a larger number of prints and they could sell them at a lower price compared to the Arches paper, which is more expensive and was printed in a numbered limited edition. There was a conscious effort on the part of the artist to do this.

I see that the British Library is doing a two-day symposium on Da Vinci's papers, and I have a couple of books that Peter Bauer has written about J. M. W. Turner's watercolor papers. As far as I know, no one in the art conservation establishment has been doing any sort of exhaustive study of the papers of the prolific printmaker Elizabeth Catlett. Why do we not have a two-day symposium and a monograph on the topic of Catlett's choices for her papers?

Pelta Feldman: Conservators very often are not the loudest voice in the room, and sometimes their decisions don't carry the same weight that those of other museum professionals do. Still, do you think there are changes that can be made within conservation to make the symposium on Catlett's paper choices more likely? Or do you think that's something that has to come from the outside because you're already doing that work from the inside?

Carroll: Technical art history tends to privilege painting. There have been a few very notable African American easel painters, and that's where there's tons of research and lots of publications. There's a hierarchy; certain types of art are perceived as more prestigious than others. Breaking down this hierarchy creates space to study other kinds of work.

Hölling: Continuing the discussion of affect, I wonder, can we conserve emotionally charged artworks or artifacts that may not personally resonate with us or that evoke a different response? And, by extension, how do you approach the conservation of artworks that you have adverse feelings towards, perhaps works which you wouldn't treat as Black conservators?

Byrd: I don't need to be involved in preserving anything that was made in order to oppress me. Somebody else can do that.

Carroll: I take the opposite view. In my work, both at Hampton and at the National Museum of African American History and Culture, I have had to treat a lot of things that were pro slavery, pro segregation. Part of the research and understanding of those collections is that there's material of that type. And one case in particular is the racist series of prints, the *Darktown* comics series by Currier and Ives, a very popular, iconic American print company. The *Darktown* series was one of their most popular series, and a lot of people have forgotten that this series existed. I think it's really important to remind people how mainstream that level of racism was in society, because it's very easy to say that it was a long time ago, and it was just a fringe element. No, that wasn't on the fringes! This was very, very, very mainstream. So I did have to treat one of those virulently racist prints when I was at the National Museum of African American History and Culture. And then there were also materials from the KKK, and other similar materials. When people talk about the Holocaust, they say: "Never forget!" In that sense, I think it's important to preserve the memory of racism and make sure that people don't forget how mainstream that type of thought was in society.

Henry-Griffin: I haven't been in a situation yet where I feel uncomfortable doing conservation work for personal reasons. I've preserved artworks where I find myself to be not the best fit to preserve those artworks. When I was working at a university library, there were Indigenous works that I preserved to a degree, but I had a lot of questions: Am I the right person to do so? I don't have this knowledge and cultural competency to preserve this the way that it should be preserved. In those cases, I try to talk to someone who is part of that culture.

Byrd: I've had a similar experience and feeling working on African ethnographic works from a specific region. As an African American through and through, with disconnected family history, I don't have that kind of cultural knowledge of any specific place or culture in Africa. This could have been something that was related to me at some point, sometime way back down the line. I don't have the cultural competency to know the best way to conserve it. So I put that in the report: "This is what I did. I made this decision with this knowledge, hoping that it will stabilize the object."

Pelta Feldman: Given the different paradigms of conservation and the different cultural and personal perspectives you've all presented,

do you believe that performance can be conserved? And if so, how, and under what conditions? What constitutes performance conservation for you?

Hölling: And, by extension, is there a concept of Black performance and Black performance conservation?

Byrd: Yes, performance can be conserved, but with the caveat that you have to broaden your definition of conservation beyond doing treatment on a physical object. I feel that memory is conservation, both muscle memory and the things that your brain conjures up when you're recollecting something. If we're intentional about using our memory as conservation, it can be really powerful.

There definitely is such a thing as Black performance, and there are oral and performance traditions that come from Africa. But when I think Black, I have in mind African American. I feel that so much of our African American culture has been created through circumstance. I'm thinking about code switching, how you speak more colloquially with other Black people and how you speak professionally or on the phone so that maybe the customer service agent can't tell that you're Black. That's a performance that we do, but I feel it's only brought out through the necessity to assimilate.

Henry-Griffin: This might be controversial, but we have to realize as conservators that some things may be forgotten. We need to make peace with the fact that we will not be able to preserve everything. It's hard for me to say that, but if you can't preserve everything, preserve the things that are not just valuable for the object but valuable for people to understand its meaning and get it across. Maybe we need to preserve the object's history, but it may not mean that the object will be preserved. This goes back to not relying on just one mode of documentation.

Byrd: What gets conserved now tends to be because the object, or the person associated with the object, is very famous. But there needs to be a push for conserving mediocrity, for lack of a better word. When I first got introduced to textile conservation, I asked myself: The Forever 21 clothes that I have in my closet, are those going to end up in a museum someday? It's a very mainstream, cheap brand of clothing that a lot of people interact with. If we're talking about preserving our culture, that's what it is.

Henry-Griffin: Right! It goes back to the hierarchy that we were talking about earlier with Valinda and Hanna, that with conservation there's a lot more emphasis on paintings than on things that we see in our everyday lives, such as photographs or

paper. I would include time-based media as well because time-based media comes in as a thumb drive, and we see that every time we're in our office or in our homes.

Hölling: I'd like to ask about the future of the Black Art Conservators association. How do you envision it?

Byrd: I have a vision of the future. But I also feel like my vision of the future could be happening right now. We have the resources to do it. So I'm almost deliberately not answering your question, because I want the vision of the future to remain the biggest dream it can be.

Henry-Griffin: I agree with Nylah. How to improve and make conservation more equitable—it's my dream, but we can achieve so much more. But at present, what I would like to see is not necessarily having more Black art conservators, even if that would be wonderful. I would like to see other people, non-Black conservators, starting to take actions in terms of making conservation a more equitable field and conservation practices more open. By 'open' I mean not restrictive to certain protocols or practices but recognizing that different practices exist outside of Western knowledge, or even outside of Indigenous knowledge. I would love to do more research on how we can collectively ensure that whatever we work on, whether that be objects, paintings, paper, textiles, or time-based media, we're treating these works not just with an appreciation for their material but also with an appreciation for the cultures from which they originate.

Ariana Makau in an email conversation with the PCMK project members

PCMK: What does it mean to be a Black conservator in today's world, plagued by inequality and social injustice, and why is it important to you to be a part of the association of Black Art Conservators?

Makau: Unfortunately, it still is quite unique to be a Black conservator in 2023, which is why it's important to be part of an association of other conservators who understand and can commiserate with experiences that are unique to our situation of place, person, and perspective. As one of the people who has close to three decades of professional experience, it is invigorating to see how the newer conservators are entering the workforce. I also feel like I am contributing by sharing how I have navigated through, or parallel to, the system to carve my own path within the preservation field.

PCMK: Conservation—despite its claims of 'scientific objectivity'—is not neutral, and conservators come with their biases that will influence how 'conservation objects' are handled and treated. How, in your

perspective, can we overcome, or at least acknowledge, these biases in conservation practice?

Makau: First and foremost, by acknowledging what you just stated, that conservation is *not* neutral. Second, by seeking out specialists in the object that you are conserving . . . not necessarily in its preservation, but in its place in which, or for which, it was originally made. If you can't find a primary source, go to the community. There needs to be more inclusion—of all cultures. Think of it like a stool. Even a simple stool needs three legs to be stable. You can have experts who are conservators and curators, but if the context of community is missing, the stool is unstable and won't 'hold up' over time.

PCMK: What does Black conservation mean to you in the present moment? How do you envision this meaning unfolding in the future?

Makau: I was recently appointed the Interim Collections Care Director for the public art of Destination Crenshaw (an historic Black area in Southern California). One of the descriptors of 'D. C.' is that it is unapologetically Black; they are very intentional about who is preserving their work. By breaking down the perception that the only way to maintain the art is to cast far afield to find people skilled enough to do this work, they are exemplifying to the art world (and more importantly) to the Crenshaw community that folks right there are extremely competent to do it themselves.

PCMK: Are there works and objects and practices that lend themselves particularly well to Black conservation? Are there Black 'objects of conservation'?

Makau: As mentioned in the previous statement, there are works made by Black artists which would receive an additional type of care from a Black conservator. It might be intangible, but the thought process or contextualization might be inherent because of similar life experiences. That isn't to say that art care needs to be color-coded via skin color; that's an extremely dangerous path to take. But an understanding of place certainly plays a part.

PCMK: Traditional Western conservation has always been a very object-oriented discipline. Are there practices from 'Black conservation' that could help to conserve not just items, but also values, cultures, and relationships?

Makau: Yes! I recently stated that Black culture has been preserving work for generations; it just hasn't been acknowledged as official 'conservation.' When an elder tells a story of an area's history, it becomes a past and current historical event.

For example, I have been working with the Mount Zion Baptist Church Preservation Society, which is working to preserve and repurpose a church into a Black Culture Center for their community in Athens, Ohio. One of the board members, President Ada-Woodson Adams, who attended the church

as a child, is Baptist and was married in the church. Adams is a genealogist, local historian, community organizer, and civil rights activist. She advocates for historical preservation by recounting oral histories of underrepresented people and places. Ada-Woodson's involvement has been included in a video documentation series spearheaded by Trevellya 'Tee' Ford-Ahmed, PhD, Director of Communications and Media of MZBCPS. Tee has actively woven Mount Zion's significance into current events, such as integrating the series into school curricula. Highlighting the building preservation as a conduit for discourse about community inequities has drawn the attention of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, from which the MZBCPS has received a grant through the African American Cultural Heritage Action Fund.

PCMK: Are there works and objects and practices that you would rather not treat, and why?

Makau: That's a hard question. Working on something that oppressed people, depicted them in a demeaning way, or worse, would be difficult. But it could also be an empowering experience that the only way it could be preserved is by the expertise of a Black conservator. I think, in the latter case, I would have to insist upon the acknowledgement of a power shift (to the conservator) and also the understanding and support of colleagues and an institution, if that is where the work is happening.

PCMK: On the similar topic of feelings and emotions: How to conserve works which are emotionally charged but which aren't necessarily resonating with us, or which resonate on a different level?

Makau: To continue the earlier example, it's extremely important for those working around Black conservators to consider the emotional toll of working on specific objects.

PCMK: How can performance be conserved, from your particular perspective? What is specific about Black performance in the context of conservation?

Makau: Black performance can be conserved in multiple ways and mediums. Of course, digital and audio are currently what people think of in preserving a performance. But one can also think more about community involvement as a part of conservation. Consider line dancing. It has a few steps that are repeated, then one turns a quarter turn and the steps are repeated again. People of all ages can join in—the nuance and interpretation are what highlight the more accomplished from those who are just learning. It's by watching while engaging that the dance becomes ingrained in a new group of folks who then can disseminate it in new spaces and venues. It's by this action that the core dance is preserved.

Notes

1 In the Christian Bible, Jesus makes reference to mustard seeds in describing faith's power to overcome adversity: "For truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Matthew 17:20).
2 National Museum of African American History and Culture, "African American Treasures," accessed July 31, 2023, https://nmaahc.si.edu/explore/initiatives/african-american-treasures.

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