

BLANTON MUSEUM OF ART

agbs

Art Galleries at Black Studies

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Carlotta Stankiewicz, 512.475.6784, carlotta.stankiewicz@blantonmuseum.org

Penny Snyder, 512.471.0241, penny.snyder@blantonmuseum.org

Lise Ragbir, 512.471.1784, lise.ragbir@austin.utexas.edu

**The University of Texas at Austin Presents Two Exhibitions on
Acclaimed American Artist Charles White**



Exhibitions at two campus sites celebrate Charles White's practice and legacy

AUSTIN, TX—August 13, 2019—The Blanton Museum of Art and the Art Galleries at Black Studies (AGBS) at The University of Texas at Austin will present two exhibitions featuring works by Charles White. In 2014, Drs. Susan G. and Edmund W. Gordon gifted their collection of White's works to the university; the collection is stewarded by the units of Black Studies and the Blanton. The Gordons' gifts and select acquisitions make UT home to one of the most significant collections of works by Charles White, with 23 drawings and prints, as well as a rare large-scale painting.

The AGBS exhibition *Charles White and the Legacy of the Figure: Celebrating the Gordon Gift* will be on view in the Christian-Green Gallery from August 28 to November 30, 2019. The Blanton's exhibition *Charles White: Celebrating the Gordon Gift* will be on view in the museum's Paper Vault from September 7, 2019 to December 1, 2019. The exhibitions are accompanied by a catalogue published by Tower Books, an imprint of UT Press.

"With these exhibitions, we are honored to celebrate the Gordons' generous gift to the university and Charles White's enduring legacy alongside our collaborators at Black Studies," said Blanton director Simone Wicha. "The University is proud to display works by one of the most accomplished draftsmen and influential arts educators of the 20th century. White's strikingly rendered images of both heroic and everyday Black figures imbued with power and dignity are sure to provide inspiration and resonate with both the audiences we welcome and the students we teach here at the university."

“It is Black Studies’ honor to celebrate Drs. Susan and Edmund Gordon, whose donation made The University of Texas at Austin a crucial destination to research Charles White, African American art, and social realism,” said Dr. Cherise Smith, Chair of the African and African Diaspora Studies (AADS) Department, the founding executive director of the Art Galleries at Black Studies, and curator. “Lifelong friends, the Whites and Gordons were dedicated to advocating for children, education, and equity for Black people. We hope visitors will take home a new-found appreciation of White’s significant contribution to 20th-century art.”



“UT is a fitting home for these works and exhibitions given both White’s and the Gordons’ shared commitment to education,” said Veronica Roberts, Blanton curator of modern & contemporary art and co-curator of the exhibition. “White believed that education is crucial to fostering a more just society and taught at numerous institutions throughout his career. We’re honored to celebrate his legacy through these exhibitions on campus.”

Charles White and the Legacy of the Figure at Christian-Green Gallery considers the long shadow cast by White on the art world, in particular how younger generations of artists have engaged the tradition of portraying the human body that he championed. As seen in his *Homage to Sterling Brown* (1972) and *Harriet* (1972), White committed his prodigious talents mainly to representing African Americans and everyday African American culture in a realistic style.

The exhibition focuses on key visual themes that emerge from White’s art. Deborah Roberts’s *Stinney (Nessum Dorma)* (2019), for instance, contemplates how treacherous childhood can be for African Americans, while Elizabeth Catlett’s “*For the boys and girls who grew up in spite of these things...*” (1992) glories in the innocence of the Black child in the face of challenges. John Biggers’ *Study #2A* (1965), Robert Pruitt’s *Pimp and Circumstance* (2004), and Henry Taylor’s *Take Out* (2006) demonstrate the artists’ commitment to monumental figures, a trait they share with White. In works by Kara Walker, Belkis Ayón, and his former student Kerry James Marshall, viewers will see an exploration of Black identity through the use of black materials. *Charles White and the Legacy of the Figure* examines how representing the human body allows artists to meditate on formal and political concerns.

The Blanton’s exhibition foregrounds White’s connection to his contemporaries and his participation in larger social and political movements in his life-long career as an artist, activist, and educator. In particular, the exhibition places White’s career-long interest in the human figure in dialogue with Mexican modernists, including artists who worked out of the Taller de Gráfica Popular, where White

visited and worked in 1947. Drawn from the Blanton's renowned collection of Latin American art, works by Luis Arenal, Leopoldo Méndez, and David Alfaro Siqueiros illuminate the connections between White's graphic depictions of powerful Black figures and Mexican political printmaking and drawing traditions.

The exhibition is divided into three sections. The first section, "Social Realism," includes works by White and other artists that exposed pressing economic and social issues of the 1930s and 1940s. A diverse group of artists including Harry Sternberg, Fletcher Martin, and John Biggers call attention to issues including discrimination, segregation, and struggles of the Black working class, with a special focus on the human form. Included in this section is White's drawing *Can A Negro Study Law in Texas* (1946) that portrays Heman Sweatt, a plaintiff in the Supreme Court case to integrate the law school at The University of Texas at Austin, as a heroic, muscular figure. The drawing was originally commissioned by *New Masses*, a magazine associated with the Communist Party in the US, emphasizing the intertwined nature of White's art and politics, even at an early point in his career.

Highlighting White's extraordinary ability to depict the human body, the second section focuses on "Heroic Figures." White's portraits of activists such as Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman as well as idealized Black women are displayed alongside works on paper by leading Mexican modernists involved in the anti-fascist movement. Also included in this section are several striking color lithographs from White's later experimentations with color, including *Love Letter III* (1977) and *Prophet II* (1975).

The last section titled, "Black Lives Matter," frames White as an "advocate for Black history and social equality" according to exhibition co-curator and Susan G. and Edmund W. Gordon Family Fellow at the Blanton, Phillip A. Townsend. This section includes two large-scale drawings from White's iconic *Wanted Poster Series*, based on runaway slave posters and advertisements for slave auctions. "Functioning as poignant social commentary, these innovative drawings encapsulate the artist's life-long commitment to make visible the systems that fueled slavery and made possible the subsequent subjugation of Black people," elaborated Townsend. This section also includes eight album covers and one journal that were published with illustrations by White from the personal collection of Eddie Chambers, UT Professor of Art History, African Diaspora Art. These items demonstrate White's career-long commitment to accessibility and the widespread reach of his empowering depictions of Black people throughout the 20th century.

The exhibitions will be accompanied by a catalogue, which includes essays on each of UT's 23 works by White; an interview with Dr. Edmund W. Gordon about his and his wife's close friendship with White; and a section of first-person recollections and tributes to White from artists, writers, actors, activists, and students whose lives he touched.

The Blanton's exhibition is curated by Veronica Roberts, Blanton curator of modern & contemporary art, Carter E. Foster, Blanton deputy director for curatorial affairs, Phillip Townsend, Drs. Susan G. and Edmund W. Gordon Fellow in African American art at the Blanton, and Dr. Cherise Smith. The AGBS exhibition is curated by Dr. Cherise Smith, founding executive director of AGBS, Chair of African and African Diaspora Studies, and associate professor of AADS and Art History at UT.

Support for *Charles White: Celebrating the Gordon Gift* at the Blanton is provided in part by Ellen and David Berman.

Programming:

Artist talk: Deborah Roberts and Robert A. Pruitt on Charles White

Moderated by Dr. Cherise Smith

Tuesday, October 8 at 6:30pm

Artists Deborah Roberts and Robert A. Pruitt discuss Charles White's influence and legacy and their own interest in representations of Black bodies in a conversation moderated by Dr. Cherise Smith.

###

About AGBS:

AGBS (The Art Galleries at Black Studies at the University of Texas) is a platform from which to unpack timely social issues, through the arts. From exhibitions celebrating contemporary creative expression, to displays of archives and material culture, AGBS is the sole on-campus entity dedicated to showcasing narratives of Africa and the African Diaspora. Comprised of two galleries—The Christian-Green Gallery and the Idea Lab—AGBS spaces are premiere destinations for anyone who seeks to connect with narratives that affect us all.

About the Blanton:

Founded in 1963, the Blanton Museum of Art holds the largest public collection in Central Texas with around 19,000 objects. Recognized as the home of Ellsworth Kelly's *Austin*, its major collecting areas are modern and contemporary American and Latin American art, Italian Renaissance and Baroque paintings, and prints and drawings. The Blanton offers thought-provoking, visually arresting, and personally moving encounters with art.

Image captions:

Charles White, *Sound of Silence II*, 1978, color lithograph, 25 x 35 1/4 in., Gift of Susan G. and Edmund W. Gordon to the units of Black Studies and the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin, 2014 © The Charles White Archives

Charles White, *Awaken from the Unknowing*, 1961, compressed charcoal and brown and gray vine charcoal with scratching out, blending, and erasing on cold-pressed illustration board, 31 x 56 in., Gift of Susan G. and Edmund W. Gordon to the units of Black Studies and the Blanton Museum of Art at The University of Texas at Austin, 2014 ©The Charles White Archives