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## KONG!

Giant Puppet  
Roars on  
Broadway



# African Americans and African Diaspora:

## Living Puppetry and Objects

*By Jacqueline Wade*

**L**iving Objects: African American Puppetry, which runs October 25 through April 7, 2019 at the Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry, is a groundbreaking, must-see exhibit. Co-curated by Paulette Richards and John Bell, it highlights the work of African Americans and Africans from the diaspora. It can also be viewed online at <https://bimp-exhibitions.org/livingobjects/the-exhibition>, which is how I was able to experience it.

The outstanding puppets, masks, and objects from twenty artists, working in a variety of styles and mediums, are from the early twentieth century to the present. The objects, beyond revealing the artistry of African American puppeteers, showcase the beauty, struggles, complexity, and resilience of African Americans. As the exhibit states, “Living objects (sculptural figures animated in live performance) played an integral role in African communal rituals, but slaveholders prohibited the enslaved from creating figures they viewed as ‘heavenly idols.’” The objects here, although motionless in the exhibit hall, come alive with the spirit of their creators and the polyrhythms, memories, experiences, traditions, and stories of the African American community and Africa.

Sister Edwina, built by Edna M. Bland, is a wonderful foam hand puppet that highlights the traditions of African American church going mothers. The pecan colored puppet wears a bright deep pink satin skirt-suit, white blouse, pearl necklace, earrings, and hat. In her Sunday best, she is the epitome of the African American looking correct, well dressed. This is part of the Black Church tradition. She is going to the house of her God, a place of empowerment, spiritual enrichment and societal refuge for many African Americans in a racist society.

Lulu White Mirrors, built by Pandora Gastelum of Mudlark Puppeteers, is a papier-mâché brown paper bag complexioned bunraku-style puppet dressed in an off-white eggshell colored gown with lace and jewels. She is Lula White, the historical creole darling of the



**Dinner Party Guest from *Food for the Gods* by Nehprii Amenii.** Photos courtesy of Ballard Institute & Museum of Puppetry.

sex trade in New Orleans. This puppet highlights issues of power, wealth, race, identity, and poverty within the very racist rigid color caste society of late 19th and early 20th Century New Orleans.

Other puppets that express the complexities of race and power are Bruce Cannon's two marionettes, Nine-Year-Old Michael Jackson and Adult Michael Jackson. Comparing them reveals the dilemmas of race and identity Jackson represents and makes one wonder how the younger Michael Jackson, cocoa brown with Negro features and an afro and the shorter, frailer looking Adult Michael Jackson, bone white with European features and jet-black wavy hair, will interact and accept each other on stage.

Brad Brewer's purple crow puppets, with caramel colored beaks, are part of The Legendary Crowtations, a musical group. These hand and rod puppets, dressed differently and serving various functions in their band, offer a variety of different black male characters and points of view. Otis, in formal suit and tie, smoking a cigarette, is the leader and philosopher of the group while Johnny

Jay, in sunglasses, hip jacket, wearing a gold ring, is the heartthrob. Fast Eddy is the proletarian, a working-class former truck driver and bass singer, and Junior, the youngest, in red turtleneck and wearing locks, sings tenor. Brewer undoes negative stereotypes of similar characters in Walt Disney's *Dumbo* in which white men pretend to sound black with imitation jive talking crows who did stereotypical dances that had nothing to do with being African American.

This brings us to the issue of race with Ralph Alexander Chessé,

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an African American painter and puppeteer. He was able to pass for white during his life time even though he had creole and African American roots in New Orleans. Highlights of his five works in the exhibit are Brother Buzz, a favorite on the television show “The Wonderful World of Brother Buzz,” a plastic wood marionette with a brown and light tan face. His Grandpappy Woodmouse, who is a dark grey mouse, might be a black character who does not need to wrestle with his mixed heritage. There is intuitive familiarity about Chessé’s characters for me, an African American. He also uses the word Brother, which is slang in the African American Community for another Black male. Chessé’s ebony-colored Emperor Jones, aka Brutus, dressed in a uniform like Marcus Garvey, is the title character from Chessé’s first puppet production, based on Eugene O’Neill’s expressionist play. Chessé brings across the essence of Brutus’s power and his oppressive nature in the puppet’s design, stern facial features, and deep, heavy set eyes. Brutus is a man who was oppressed as a Black man in an American prison system but escaped, only to oppress others on the island..

Another puppet with important social implications is Meta Phorical or Mr. Phorical, a shadow puppet designed by Dirk Joseph. Mr. Phorical is a hip looking shadow puppet with locks in his hair, who is arrested when he confronts a police officer.

Carmen R Henry’s Lovuro wears an afro and a silver over vest on top of his dark grey hoodie, which gives him a superhero quality. Lovuro is part of the show “Planet Peacuro,” in which he is “an alien from the planet Peacuro who hits the streets of Washington, D.C. to gain a better understanding of the community's problems.”

Two puppets built by Schroeder Cherry offer important African American representations: Dallas Dan, is a black cowboy, casually dressed in slacks, who sings the blues and paints everything in primary colors; Jamahl is an urban black afro-centric brother. He is dressed in a Kente Cloth outfit, a cowrie shell necklace, and cornrows in his hair. Kente Cloth is an Akan royal and sacred cloth worn only on special occasions and cowrie shells have been a form of currency in many parts of Africa. These clothes give Jamahl a royal air and connect him to his African roots as he attends a Kwanzaa celebration, which takes it to an even deeper cultural level. Both Dallas Dan and Jamahl are rod puppets with articulate sculpted eyes and mouth.

The exhibit also shows puppets in more abstract artistic styles that draw on African culture and art. The awesome metal wood doll Swivel Man, built by Garland Farwell, is stacked like traditional African sculpture. The stool the man sits on is on top of another structure, and the lower portion contains a series of nails. This construction is reminis-

cent of Kongolese Nkisi Nkondi, figures that embody defensive powers to protect a community. There is a caged bird that sits on top of the man’s head. Perhaps he is a parrot, which is considered sacred to the Yoruba culture of West Africa. The fish sits on top of the caged bird, stacked. The man’s feet are made of wheels. The doll has keys on his chest, another of many thought-provoking symbols. The man also pivots between opposite sides, showing a character torn between conflict and dialogue.

Nigerian Face Mask #1 is a breathtaking mixed media mask designed by Faith Ringgold.

‘Ayodele’ means ‘joy comes home’ in the language of the Yoruba people of Nigeria. Ayodele, built and performed by Ashley Bryan, is a unique hand puppet whose arms are made from animal ribs and head from skull, all things that were living from nature, reflecting an African aesthetic. His puppets are made from found objects. There is open netting that covers the brown earth colored robe that feels freeing against the Christian cross around her neck. Bryan’s Lubangi, born in the water, is paper-mâché and dressed in all kinds of materials. There are starfish, and the fish within the net she is wearing on her long skirts makes one wonder if she is a child of the West African Yoruba Goddess Yemaya. Her crown has stained-glass with colors of some of the Yoruba Orishas, intermediaries between God and humans. Her arms are extended in a welcoming manner.

Some of the puppets capitalize on dance and movement and express the connections made within African American communities through the arts. Jazz Dancers, created by Pandora Gastelum of Mudlark Puppeteers, are two marionettes joined at the hands. They look like they are dancing in non-stop motion.

Giant Princess is an adorable parading puppet built by Susan Fulcher, Deanna Rallins, and students at the Fiber Arts Program at Illinois Elementary School. The students created the beautiful head, crown, hands and body for the princess. I can imagine the excitement the students had when they completed Giant Princess and paraded her in her beautiful long purple gown and crown.

Judith, built and performed by Nehp-rii Amenii, was created with children of the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater’s Ailey Camp. The puppet represents the dancer choreographer Judith Jamison doing her dance “Cry.” The puppet is a tall, beautiful, ebony-brown papier-mâché, bunraku-style puppet in a short afro. Judith wears a sleeveless, white, long gown that transforms into a screen for shadow puppets, on which the children perform.



**Grandpappy Woodmouse from *The Wonderful World of Brother Buzz* by Ralph Chesse.**



**Schroeder Cherry performing with Curtis at Wits End Puppet Slam.**  
Photo: David Moss



**Sister Edwina by Edna M. Bland.**



**Otis, from *The Legendary Crowtations* by Brad Brewer.**



**Ayodele by Ashley Bryan.**

Amenii’s other puppet, Dinner Party Guest, is a moving bunraku-style hand and mask made out of papier-mâché, paper and wire. This African-American male character, with closed eyes, has been invited to a dinner party with others who have been murdered by police brutality. The closed eyes give the mask a nineteenth-century death mask quality.

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puppetry show. I really love this piece because the historical characters mix in each other’s worlds. The 19th Century Frederick Douglass is joined by 80s political prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal, in prison orange, in protesting Michael Brown’s killing, which leads them to being arrested and put in Guantánamo Bay detention camp. A flat cut-out puppet of Assata Shakur, former Black Panther member, and prison escapee, parachutes in to save the day. This fantastical coming together of historical figures, united in a struggle for black freedom and power, offers a wonderfully magical, black futuristic, and empowering way of thinking.

Paulette Richards’ Hobby Horse Karakuri is a mechanical figure with a Black girl riding a cardboard roll that represents a horse. Richards (co-curator of the exhibit) draws on the karakuri mechanical

Some of the puppets reference specific historical characters that reflect struggles for African-American freedom. Reverend William Mack Lee Ghost Puppet, General Robert E. Lee’s Favorite Slave, from the Pope L’ film “Reenactor,” questions the issue of the black slave’s loyalty to the white master.

Puppet Frederick Douglass, built by Papel Machete, is part of a fascinating table top

models introduced to Japan from China. Round gears on the puppet demonstrate the wheel and axle. The entire device is made of plastic Solo cups, plastic straws, cardboard, pipe cleaner, Styrofoam, googly eyes, yarn, craft foam, velcro, and embroidery floss. In spite of these simple materials, the mechanical device works when it is connected to an electrical circuit.

The exhibit also has exciting work by Tarish “Jaghetto” Pipkins, Akbar Imhotep, Nate Brown, Cedwan Hooks, John McDonough, and Tau Bennett. I wish in the future Kevin Clash’s work can be part of exhibits like this.

The exhibition has successfully accomplished linking African Americans and African diaspora culture through puppetry and objects as it investigates what it means to be an African American and puppeteer. The artists themselves offer different perspectives on the issue through statements included in the exhibit. While Garland Farwell sees himself working in a general American lineage, leaving it to scholars to categorize it further, Schroeder Cherry believes the puppet’s designation is defined by the maker: An African American puppet is made by an African American. Nehp-rii Amenii sees herself as part of the continuum of that very important legacy of black people making powerful objects as she draws on inspiration from the spirits and her ancestors to guide her art. John McDonough believes it is important for him to be visible to his audience so children of color know it is possible for them to be puppeteers. Paulette Richards sees her puppetry as expressing African American culture through its stories, traditions, colors, and cultural heritage. Edna M. Bland wants to introduce children to puppetry so a spark will become a fire. The artistry and diversity in this exhibit are sure to spark many future creative fires and hopefully create more mentorships, scholarships and work opportunities for future African American puppeteers.

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