

# The Human Touch at SMOCA

Written by David M. Brown

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Cultural diversity and the complexity of contemporary society are the focus of *The Human Touch: Selections from the RBC Wealth Management Art Collection* through April 28 at the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art (SMoCA). The museum, Second Street and Drinkwater Boulevard, schedules challenging exhibitions and installations throughout the year.



John Baldessari, *Noses & Ears, Etc.: The Gemini Series: One Face (Three Versions) with Nose, Ear, and Glasses*, 2006. Screen print, 34 ¾ x 76 ¾ x 3 inches. Collection of RBC Wealth Management. Image courtesy of the artist © John Baldessari.

From realistic to abstract, serious to whimsical, *The Human Touch* represents selections from the more than 400 artworks in the corporate collection of RBC Wealth Management Art Collection, the Minneapolis-based investment and financial guidance company. Among the topics explored are hybrid racial identities, family dynamics and ethnic heritage and stereotypes.

"Broadly speaking and simply put, the theme of the exhibition is human diversity in terms of both *who* is represented — gender, age, ethnicity, class, for example — and *how* those individuals are depicted: realistically or abstractly; isolated or in the context of a specific setting; alone or with other people; drawn, painted, collaged, photographed or sculpted," says SMOCA's Associate Curator Emily Stamey, the museum's implementing curator for the show, which is curated by RBC's Donald McNeil.

"Within the show, you'll find artists using the human figure to address a wide range of topics: Historic events, personal identities, social relationships and artistic traditions are among the many issues examined," adds Stamey, who began work at SMOCA in September 2012 after serving as curator of modern and contemporary art at Wichita State University's Ulrich Museum in Kansas. As an art historian, her work focuses on pop art and identity politics.

On view at SMOCA are about two dozen artists such as John Sonsini, John Baldessari, Kerry James Marshall, Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Ann Hamilton, Luis Gispert, Chen Qiulin, Hung Liu, Michael Vasquez, Tiranit Barzilay Cohen and Iona Rozeal Brown.

"RBC Wealth Management has a long-term commitment to stewardship, and we constantly strive to strengthen our relationships through our giving programs, volunteerism and charitable sponsorships. By bringing *The Human Touch* to Scottsdale, we have the unique opportunity to share our support of the arts with our clients, friends and community members," says John Taft, CEO of RBC Wealth Management.



Elizabeth Peyton, *"Nick,"* 2004. Seven-color etching with aquatint, 31 ¾ x 24 inches, Edition of 40. Collection of RBC Wealth Management. Image courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise © Elizabeth Peyton.

Quick-to-See Smith, a member of the Flathead Indian Nation in Montana, creates artwork that addresses the myths, values, and experiences of her Native American ancestors in the context of contemporary issues. Influenced by Jackson Pollock and Jasper Johns, she works with appropriated images to confront such subjects as the destruction of the environment and the oppression of native cultures.

Born in China during the Communists' rise to power, Hung Liu received her art training in the realist style promoted by the government. In 1984, she was allowed to leave the country to pursue a degree in California. Although she remained there, she explores Chinese history and culture in her paintings by reworking old Chinese photographs. "The drips of paint that cover her canvases have important symbolic intent," Stamey explains. "They refer art historically to Chinese ink painting and American Abstract Expressionism, and metaphorically to veiled memories and tears."

Michael Vasquez grew up as the only child of a single mother in St. Petersburg, Fla., and found father figures through associations with the Young Bloods street gang. In his portraits of gang members, he acknowledges the potential for gangs to provide friendship, family and a sense of order in a world that often feels dysfunctional and disorienting. "While his subjects are always presented as proud, rather than menacing, Vasquez's aggressive brushwork suggests the intensity of their lives on the street," Stamey says.

And, in her photographs, Israeli artist Tiranit Barzilay Cohen stages people in empty rooms and corridors. Shown in various states of undress, these figures convey feelings of vulnerability, uncertainty, solitude and a loss of identity. Says Stamey: "In many of her images, associations

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with the Holocaust are also brought to mind as her subjects stand in line, appearing to wait anxiously and submissively for an unknown fate.”

Brown is an African-American artist working in Washington, DC. In her paintings and prints, she uses images of geisha and samurai taken from centuries-old Japanese woodblock prints and makes them over in contemporary style.

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*Kehinde Wiley, "Passing/Posing #15," 2002. Oil and enamel on canvas, 56 x 48 inches. Collection of RBC Wealth Management. Image courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago © Kehinde Wiley*

She became fascinated with the Japanese ganguro fashion culture, in which teenagers emulate African-American hip-hop celebrities by darkening their skin and bleaching their hair.

“She’s both flattered and perturbed by the Japanese teenagers’ obsession with African-American culture,” Stamey says, “and uses her artwork to address those conflicting reactions.”

Stamey is uniquely interested in brown’s work as she wrote her doctoral dissertation on the Japanese American artist Roger Shimomura and in Wichita curated a number of African American art exhibitions. “*The Human Touch* exhibition happens to include multiple artists who I have incorporated in past projects, and the opportunity to re-engage with their work through this show is a treat,” she says.

Also based in Los Angeles, artist John Sonsini paints lush large-scale portraits of Latino day laborers whom he hires as models in his studio. “This is a very different kind of labor, one of stillness and patience rather than action and toil,” Stamey explains.

Sonsini will also speak at 7 p.m. to museum patrons Jan. 31 in the SMOCA Lounge, a talk co-sponsored by Bentley Projects, which will exhibit his work Feb. 1–23 at its downtown Phoenix gallery, 215 E. Grant St. The opening reception is Saturday, Feb. 9.

“I think that visitors to the exhibition will find in it a celebration of cultural and artistic diversity,” Stamey says. “More specifically, I think they will find that a number of the artists are challenging us to dismantle racial, ethnic and gender stereotypes and rethink many of the assumptions we hold about one another.”