



Above:
Billy McGuinness, *Interlock*, 2014, Foot traffic on canvas, 108 x 84 inches

Previous Page, clockwise from top left:
Aisha Cousins, *Soulville Census*, 2015, Video (Still), Image courtesy of the artist —

Deb Sokolow, *Joke Research Archive President Barack H. Obama's Prepared Remarks White House Correspondents' Dinners 2009-2016 (Detail)*, 2017, Bankers boxes, labels, and paper, 10 x 15 x 12 inches each (12 boxes) —

Nate Young, *A Container for the Projection of a Political Assertion Posited by a Negro Artist*, 2009, Glass, water, Dimensions variable —

Shonna Pryor (Installation view; left to right): *KALE*, 2017, wooden planter box installation, 119 x 14 x 8 inches, 99 x 13 x 12 inches

Tablecloth Archive I, "Nothing wrong with showing those arms, they're good arms.", 2017, vintage tablecloth, 65 x 52 inches

Tablecloth Archive II, "Fired up and ready to go...that's what I say!", 2017, vintage tablecloth, 48 x 36 inches

Curator's tour of The Presidential Library Project
Sunday, March 26, 3pm

Ross Jordan explains his concept for the exhibition and discusses how the artworks he selected address the Obama legacy.

A Library for a Black and Brown Imagination
Sunday, April 9, 3pm

From the design of negotiating tables to ascending stairs to the entrance of a museum, architecture and design help shape our imaginations and confer power. Think through what a library needs to be in the 21st Century during this round table discussion featuring Jorge Lucero and Obama Foundation design team members Andres Hernandez, Norman Teague, and Amanda Williams. Space is limited. Please reserve your seats through exhibitions@hydeparkart.org.

Exhibition Reception with Musical Performance scored by Aisha Cousins
Sunday, May 21, 3pm

Independent black politics and black presidential candidates 100 years before Barack Obama
Thursday, June 8, 6pm

Join us for a panel of guests to discuss the past political campaigns of potential African American presidential candidates throughout American history, including William Thomas Scott, Jesse Jackson, and others.

Kids' State Dinner (a reprise)

Artist, Shonna Pryor invites Shreya Patel the 2015 Illinois winner of the Kids's State Dinner, to teach youth to make Patel's healthy recipe. The Dinner highlights the legacy of first lady Michelle Obama as a champion of nutritious eating habits among American youth. Woodlawn Charter School partners with Hyde Park Art Center to bring together students and parents to share this special meal.

This exhibition and related events are partially supported by the David C. & Sarajeane Ruttenberg Arts Foundation.

Hyde Park Art Center is a unique resource that advances contemporary visual art in Chicago by connecting artists and communities in unexpected ways. As an open forum for exploring the artistic process, the Art Center fosters creativity through making, learning about, seeing, and discussing art—all under one roof. The Art Center is funded in part by: Allstate Insurance Company; Alphawood Foundation; Andy Warhol Foundation for Visual Arts; Bank of America; Bloomberg Philanthropies; a CityArts grant from the City of Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events; Crown Family Philanthropies; David C. and Sarajeane Ruttenberg Arts Foundation; Field Foundation of Illinois; Harper Court Arts Council; Illinois Arts Council, a state agency; Irving Harris Foundation; John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation; The Joyce Foundation; Lloyd A. Fry Foundation; MacArthur Fund for Arts and Culture at Prince; National Endowment for the Arts; Polk Bros. Foundation; The Reva and David Logan Foundation; Searle Funds at The Chicago Community Trust; and the generosity of its members and people like you.

Photography by Kat Liu unless otherwise noted

THE PRESIDENTIAL LIBRARY PROJECT:
A G I N D E N T I A L
M A R C H - J U L Y

James Britt, Rashayla Brown, Aisha Cousins, Zachary Fabri,
Lamont Hamilton, Billy McGuinness, Shonna Pryor, Deb Sokolow, & Nate Young

MARCH 26 - JULY 2, 2017
KANTER MCCORMICK GALLERY

CURATED BY

Ross Stanton Jordan

Hyde ParkARTCENTER

5020 S. Cornell Ave. Chicago, IL 60615 773.324.5520
www.hydeparkart.org

THE BLACK PRESIDENTIAL IMAGINARY

“The book says anybody born here can be president.”
- Ethel Waters in *Rufus Jones for President*, Warner Brothers Pictures (1933)

The Obama Presidential Center, to open on the Southside of Chicago, will begin to codify the memory and the legacy of the first Black President of the United States of America, Barack Hussein Obama. Unlike previous holders of the office, there exist many images and narratives in popular culture about black presidents that precede the living reality. There is an archive of film, TV, books, music, and visual culture that illustrate an ongoing interest in what it would mean to have a Black President of the United States of America. The “black presidential imaginary” is, in part, the sum total of these images that reveal assumptions about what it means to have a black president, what that means for Black Americans, and how that reflects the meaning of America.

Toni Morrison may have identified the black presidential imaginary¹ as an abstract concept when she sincerely called Bill Clinton the first black president. At least the blackest president to that point on account of his perceived and felt affability with the Black community and the tropes of blackness he displayed.² When Clinton was “metaphorically seized and body-searched” with unprecedented viciousness by his political opponents, a probing prosecution that Morrison thought was usually reserved for black men, she concluded that in fact it was a clear message to the African American community sent via proxy through the prosecution of the first black president. A black president (and by extension African American voting power) is to be dismantled because they threaten a particular status quo. James Baldwin said something similar in 1963, talking to a group of black men in San Francisco, “There will be a Negro president of this country, but it will not be the country we are sitting in now.”³ The black presidential imaginary is our collective waking American Dream about this place Baldwin has identified and that our politics often evoke. Baldwin goes on to coach, “But if you say to yourself there never will be a Negro president then you are agreeing with white people that you are inferior.” The black presidential imaginary, simultaneously antithetical to America and absolutely essential, persist because it is in existential relation to the promise of the American Dream that anyone can be president.

The earliest depiction of a Black president on film, *Rufus Jones for President* (1933) included in the exhibition, attacked the very notion of African American political power. Starring Ethel Waters and seven-year-old Sammy Davis Jr., the film confirmed in popular (white) imagination that black humanity, black voting power, and black presidents are to be mocked for entertainment. In the opening scene Waters reassures Davis that, “the book says anybody born here can be president.” Davis falls asleep and dreams that he gives his inaugural address with a chicken leg in one hand. Rufus Jones’ dream of becoming president is the butt of a joke, which begins with an assurance of equality. The black presidential imaginary reflects the hypocrisy at the center of popular imagination of the American Dream.

After the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act that brought new voting and political power to African Americans the popular imagination reflected a Nation that values the election of a black president as a barometer for tolerance. In 1964 the Catholic American University published a ten volume comic, set twelve years in the future, titled *1976: Pettigrew for President*. Six of the ten volume series have been reprinted and bound for *The Presidential Library Project* exhibition. The story is a kind of tolerance test that follows a “Kennedy-like” figure beyond reproach who is not revealed to the reader as a black man until the final frames of the comic. The comic asks, “would



Rashayla Marie Brown,
She Stands on Her Own, But Never Alone
2017
Canvas, stretcher, frames, glass, photographs, pastel
and pastel and charcoal drawings
Dimensions variable



Zachary Fabri
Aureola (Black Presidents), set of 9,
2012
digital C prints
20 x 30 inches

the young comic book readers of 1964 vote for a Black man if presented in 1976?” The only hint of his being black is the attempt on his life early in the series. Candidate Pettigrew does not run on a platform of racial justice or equity, he is devoid of any relevant political or social issues related to African Americans. If the election of a Black President signals a significant change in the country, as Baldwin points out, this is a place no one would recognize.

Black comedians, directly address race and the presidency with more urgency, often free of moralisms and equivocations. Jordan Peele’s “Obama” and Keegan-Michael Key’s “Anger Translator”, Luther, was cathartic and incisive comedy. Obama was frequently criticized for never appearing outwardly angry in the face staunch political opposition and challenging super power enemies. Luther is meant to translate Obama’s cool attitude into passionate anger in order to improve the President’s communication. The experience of seeing Luther standing behind the actual president at 2015’s White House Correspondents Dinner was surreal. The former President Obama’s sense of humor and self-awareness engaging directly with the black presidential imaginary was an acknowledgement that our political and ideological battles are transformed by our public imagination.

The artists featured in this exhibition cover issues of policy, representation, and identity made more transparent during president Obama’s tenure by using strategies of archive, display, and bureaucracy. Zachary Fabri and Rashayla Marie Brown generate portraits of our popular imagination of black presidents noting that black political figures are always in relationship to constructed images in the public imagination. For example, the “terrorist fist bump” completely consumed the meaning and origins of the dap, which Lamont Hamilton carefully archives in his photographs of African American Vietnam War veterans performing the gesture. Aisha Cousins and Shonna Pryor create participatory and



James Britt
Bad & Bougee (video still)
2017
Video
5:35 minutes



LaMont Hamilton
Excerpt from Five on the Black Hand Side
(1 of 120 handshakes)
2015
Pigment print
26 x 26 inches

archival projects about black communities as self-determined and authoritative. Billy McGuinness projects an image of an archive of art produced by inmates in Cook County Jail at life-size scale and includes large canvas work documenting a trace of the masses of people moving in and out of the prison. Nate Young addresses the empty vessel that politicians construct and occupy to appeal to a larger public in order to remain in power. James Britt blends advertising aesthetics with an inescapably sardonic approach, similar to the tactics of black comedians. Deb Sokolow’s archive room, within this exhibition, speculates the inner-workings of messaging at a political/media/comedy event that was the meeting of the black presidential imaginary and the black presidential reality. In recent months, four southside grassroots organization have formed the Obama Library South Side Community Benefits Agreement Coalition. They present in the exhibition letters from Jackson Park community members that articulate the need for a community benefits agreement to support local residents during historic changes on the Southside in preparation for the actual presidential library to open 2021. Overall, the projects in this exhibition lay a multi-narrative foundation for how the first black presidency is remembered in the public imagination.

Ross Jordan
Curator of *The Presidential Library Project: Black Presidential Imaginary*

¹ Morrison, Toni. “On the First Black President” *The New Yorker*. October 5, 1998. (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1998/10/05/comment-6543>) Accessed March 1. 2017

² Morrison reminds us that Clinton grew up poor in the South, in a single parent household, he played the saxophone, and regularly enjoyed McDonald’s. Being attacked for uncontained sexuality is also on this list.

³ “Take This Hammer” KQED, San Francisco, 1963. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4AFA98fuexA>), This interview is included on a monitor in this exhibition.