Black Like Who?: Exploring Race and Representation

July 11-November 1, 2015 // Bohorfoush Gallery

Co-curated by Graham C. Boettcher, Ph.D., Chief Curator and The William Cary Hulsey Curator of American Art and Kelli Morgan, BMA Curatorial Fellow and Doctoral Candidate, University of Massachusetts Amherst, with contributions by James Denison, Friends of American Art Curatorial Fellow

‘Race’ is both an empty category and one of the most destructive and powerful forms of social categorization.

-- Michael Rustin, “Psychoanalysis, Racism and Anti-Racism,” 1991

The depiction of blackness in American art has been such a highly scrutinized topic in both artistic production and museum exhibitions that one could ask, ‘what else is there to examine that hasn’t already been sufficiently analyzed?’ Black Like Who? answers that inquiry with a question that considers who renders imagery of blackness and contemplates the various reasons why.

Drawing on the Museum’s collection and select loans from Birmingham private collectors, the exhibition surveys a variety of historical and contemporary works by both white and black artists, and explores how various representations of blacks in American art have been influenced at particular moments by specific political, cultural, and aesthetic interests, as well as the motives and beliefs of the artists. At a time when audiences are openly questioning and challenging mass media outlets regarding biased visual representations of African Americans, Black Like Who? demonstrates that concerns regarding the depiction of African Americans have been debated and highly contemplated subjects for artists and viewers alike for many generations.

The examples discussed in Black Like Who? range from a romanticized Civil War scene completed in 1909 by the painter Gilbert Gaul (1855-1919) that glorifies the deeply rooted myth of the “loyal slave,” to contemporary photographs by Atlanta artist Sheila Pree Bright that blend imagery of Mattel’s Barbie doll with photographs of real black women to visualize how the biases of white beauty standards distort understandings of race and natural beauty.

The exhibition does not seek to provide a comprehensive discussion of blackness in American
art, but instead hopes to provide a platform for meaningful conversations by considering 28 works by 19 artists in five distinct sections: Old Times There Art Not Forgotten: Historical Representations of Race in the South and Beyond; Black Like Me: African American Portraits; Brown Skin Ladies: Picturing the Black Woman; Body and Soul: Rhythmic Representations; and From Mammy and Mose to Madison Avenue: Advertising and the Black Image.

Black Like Who? is made possible by generous loans from Dr. Clark Baker, Paul Barrett, Patrick Cather, Norman and Carnetta Davis, John Mitchell and Joyce Crawford Mitchell, and Jim Sokol and Lydia Cheney.

About the Birmingham Museum of Art: Founded in 1951, the Birmingham Museum of Art has one of the finest collections in the Southeast. More than 27,000 objects displayed and housed within the Museum represent a rich panorama of cultures, including Asian, European, American, African, Pre-Columbian, and Native American. Highlights include the Museum’s collection of Asian art, Vietnamese ceramics, the Kress collection of Renaissance and Baroque paintings, sculpture, and decorative arts from the late 13th century to the 1750s, and the Museum’s world-renowned collection of Wedgwood, the largest outside of England.