

# VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

Press Release

## ROBERT COLESCOTT: WOMEN

November 15, 2022–January 14, 2023

Opening: Tuesday, November 15th, 6:00–8:00 PM

Venus Over Manhattan

55 Great Jones Street

New York, NY 10012



*Colescott is at his most provocative in depicting women.* – Lowery Stokes Sims <sup>1</sup>

*I'm involved with these non-flesh-and-blood women that are made of paint and canvas. While painting these dancers as Matisse, I'm also faced with this flesh-and-blood woman. It's a conflict between art and reality.* – Robert Colescott <sup>2</sup>

(New York, NY) – **Venus Over Manhattan** is pleased to present **Robert Colescott: Women**, an exhibition organized to trace the development of the artist's depictions of female subjects over the course of his sixty-year career. Serving as a coda to the recent, critically-lauded traveling museum retrospective *Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott*, this presentation charts the evolution of Colescott's ambitious practice through some thirty works produced between 1955 and 1996. Organized in close collaboration with **The Robert H. Colescott Separate Property Trust**, Venus Over Manhattan's exhibition is the first to trace the development of Colescott's representations of women through major works from key moments in his career.

**Robert Colescott: Women** will be on view at Venus Over Manhattan's downtown location at 55 Great Jones Street from November 15, 2022 through January 14, 2023.

## VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

Nearly fifteen years after his death, Robert Colescott remains best known for audacious, satirical, and racially charged paintings like *Eat Dem Taters* (1974), *George Washington Carver Crossing the Delaware: Page from an American History Textbook* (1975), and *Natural Rhythm: Thank You Jan Van Eyck* (1976), which recast familiar Euro-centric compositions to interject “[B]lack people into art history.”<sup>3</sup> Populated by a cast of racist and misogynist caricatures, these blunt appropriations enlist the artist’s signature blend of confrontational humor, startling subject matter, and vivid color to undermine widely held cultural assumptions about history, race, and gender. These bawdy, troublesome works date from the middle of Colescott’s career—he turned fifty the year he painted *George Washington Carver*—but their concerns, and the painful stereotypes they employed to address them, were hardly new to his practice. A light-skinned Black man raised to pass for white (and whose brother identified as white), Colescott made work that often exploited racist and sexist imagery to address his “perception of himself as a Black male and an artist in America.”<sup>4</sup> Tying his private concerns to public issues, Colescott deployed this imagery with various intensity throughout his career, but consistent across his work is a frank engagement with the female figure, which he used to explore his complex—and sometimes objectionable—relationship to women. Writing about his career in 1987, curator Lowery Stokes Sims noted that “Colescott’s depictions of women have provided some of his most interesting and relentless imagery,” and until the end of his career Colescott would continue to cast women in difficult roles, considering the layered effects of race, power, and stereotypes on their position in both society and his own life.<sup>5</sup>



Colescott developed a set of consistent visual strategies that he used to explore increasingly complex topics around gender, many of which are evident in his early work. *There Are Two of Us* (1955), the earliest painting in the exhibition, employs a strategic doubling to render a pair of nude figures, and renders his subjects racially ambiguous with expressionist brushwork fashionable of the era. In *Cloud Watch* (1963), a nude man and woman lounge in a sparsely appointed interior, from which the woman observes a bucolic landscape through large windows that bisect the composition. The window allows Colescott to juxtapose interior and exterior space, and he would continue to exploit the visual possibilities of what he called the “magic window” to great effect in his later work. Discussing

## VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

this strategy, Colescott described the window as “a kind of barrier” that allowed for “looking at two planes in existence. The outside was not just looking through a window, but the outside seemed to be a very different kind of place, and maybe a different time.” In his depictions of women, Colescott would frequently juxtapose discontinuous scenes to animate tensions about race and gender and establish visual distinctions between art and reality.



As art historian Michael Lobel notes, a “central factor in the development of Colescott’s work was the time he spent away from the United States” in the fifties and sixties.<sup>6</sup> After he graduated from UC Berkeley, Colescott spent a year studying in the atelier of Fernand Léger, an experience he described as “influential in getting [him] to re-consider the human figure as subject matter.”<sup>7</sup> Paintings like *IMAGINE ACROBATS* and *FENCiNG WOMEN* (1964) register Léger’s influence, blending his flat, monumental women with an early form of Colescott’s irreverent humor. In the mid-sixties, Colescott spent two years living in Cairo, where he was “influenced by the narrative form of Egyptian art, by 3,000 years of a ‘non-white’ art tradition, and by living in a culture that [was] strictly ‘non-white.’”<sup>8</sup> The paintings that followed this experience jettison a palette of greys and greens for skeins of brilliant color, and works like *why did we come here?* (1966–67) and *6 Witnesses* (1968) abandon planar concerns to blend discontinuous space. Feminine figures merge with otherworldly landscapes that stem in part from Colescott’s visit to the Valley of the Queens, where he encountered narrative paintings decorating the tombs, as well as the spirits of “those exceptional women who managed to intrude themselves into the male-dominated royal succession of ancient Egypt.”<sup>9</sup> These experiences—both “the monumentality of Léger” and the idea of “narrative as a basis for a painting”—suggested a new direction for Colescott’s practice that would prominently feature images of women.<sup>10</sup>

Colescott returned to the United States in 1969 amid a moment of cultural upheaval, eager to explore “ideas about race and culture” and began making work that boldly addressed his Black identity, constituting a “public announcement” of a previously latent aspect of his life and work.<sup>11</sup> In paintings like *Pancho Villa* (1970), Colescott blends narrative scenes with the visual strategies of his Cairo paintings to stage “conflict[s] between light-skinned [and] dark-skinned individuals,” who often fight over an apparently helpless white woman.<sup>12</sup> As art historian Susan Landauer notes,

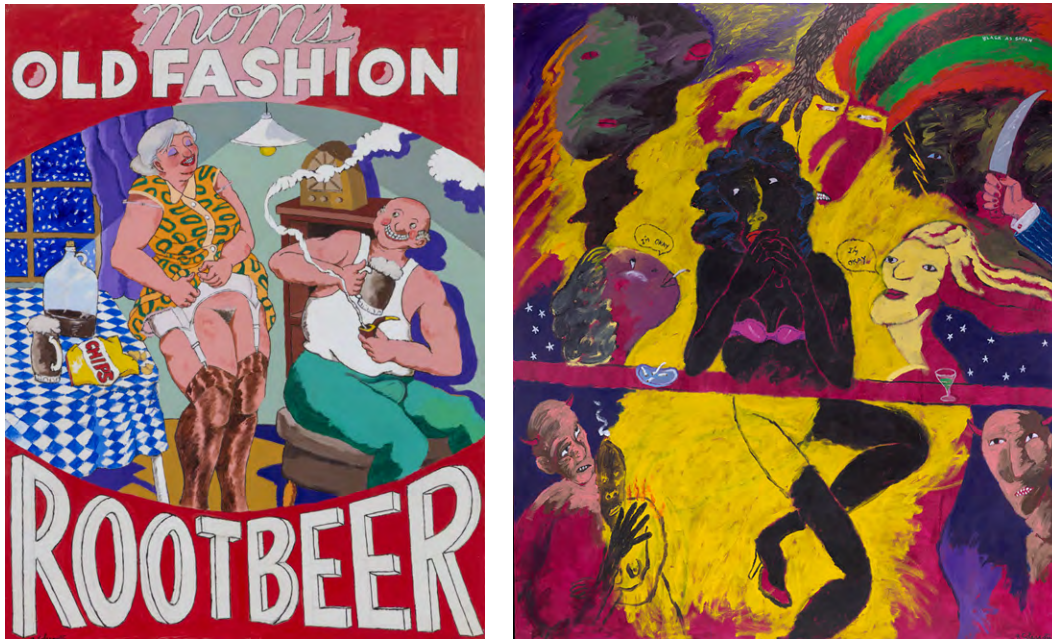
## VENUS OVER MANHATTAN



"[o]ne of Colescott's classic themes is the supposed unattainability of white women and the lust this is thought to provoke in black men," and Colescott's paintings from this period deploy increasingly blunt stereotypes and exaggerated scenarios to confront this dynamic.<sup>13</sup> In the foreground of two related paintings, *Untitled* (c. 1970) and *Olympic Event* (1972), Colescott depicts a busty white woman with blonde hair competing in a race. In one painting, the head of a police officer, a hooded witch, and a series of disembodied limbs float through the sky in a manner that recalls the floating figures of his Cairo paintings. *Olympic Event* recasts the same composition against a series of storyboard cells, in which a sex scene unfolds between the white woman and a black man, but what appears at first to be a rape scene becomes a more ambiguous narrative of possible consensual pleasure. Both compositions juxtapose discontinuous space to suggest a window into the runner's mind, where Colescott exaggerates racialized stereotypes to undermine the supposed sexual purity of white women. Rendering these women as agents of their own sexual exploitation, Colescott imagines what Lowery Stokes Sims describes as the possibility "that rape fantasies can persist in even the most 'liberated' woman," and animates his own anxieties about the ways Black men are sexualized.<sup>14</sup>

Colescott's paintings often exaggerate stereotypes within scenes from an unspecified past, highlighting the nostalgia that frequently contributes to their staying power. He spells this out in large, block letters in a painting and series of related works on paper titled *MOM'S OLD FASHION ROOT BEER* (1973–74), in which the titular, buxom, and white-haired "mom" serves mugs of foaming root beer while variously exposing herself to a series of Black and white children and white men. Rendered in Colescott's crude, lurid style, the works connect the figure of a sexually benevolent mother with a nostalgia for the "good old days," which Colescott further complicates through a series of permutations that exaggerate the racial dynamics of the period. Colescott cements the colorful,

## VENUS OVER MANHATTAN



graphic style for which he became known in these works, marrying cartoon-like figuration with confrontational subject matter to deliver a “one-two punch.” In the mid-seventies, Colescott begins to figure more prominently as a subject in his own work. In *Old Crow on the Fence* (1978), he renders himself as an “Old Crow,” a multilayered character that simultaneously references the Old Crow brand of Kentucky Bourbon, the racist anthropomorphism of cartoon characters like Heckle and Jeckle, and the legacy of the Jim Crow era in the United States. In a manner that recalls the bifurcated composition of *Cloud Watch* (1963), a blond-haired farm girl whose shirt can hardly contain her breasts stands on one side of a fence, and the caricatured face of a Black minstrel figure peers out from a cornfield on the other. Positioned “on the fence” between women of different races, Colescott highlights his own conflicted feelings about race and desire, which he renders in a composition that literalizes this divide. Humor provides an entry to the “disturbing edge” in these works, which as Sims notes, “always seem to have more to do with male fears than a critique of women, who seem to maintain their stance regardless of the reaction or position of the male.”<sup>15</sup>

In 1985, Colescott moved to Tucson, AZ, where he would spend the rest of his life. The paintings from this later period—which include the works he made to represent the United States at the American Pavilion for the Venice Biennale in 1997—take many of his earlier themes and visual strategies to new extremes. In *Black as Satan* (1992), a nervous Black woman, wearing only a pink bra and red heels, sits alone at a bar that splits the painting in half. Bald except for their red horns, two white devils stare menacingly at the woman from underneath the bar, where flames and smoke establish their position in hell. All other figures in the work stare directly at the Black woman, reinforcing her apparent anxiety about her position, and contributes to a violent undercurrent made real by a white man’s arm wielding a large knife in her direction. In these works, forms converge to sit directly on the picture plane, where Colescott moves “away from single, unified compositions to structures

# VENUS OVER MANHATTAN

broken up into multiple parts.”<sup>16</sup> *Death of a Mulatto Woman* employs a similarly bifurcated composition to deliver a punning and complex scene of racial passing. The titular and nominally deceased figure—whose skin is mottled to complicate her racial identity—lies horizontally across the painting. Colescott stages her purported “passing”—between life and death, black and white—against a patchwork of smaller scenes that flesh out aspects of her life, including maps of Africa and Europe, rainbows, and a series of racially ambiguous figures.<sup>17</sup> Colescott described these kind of vignettes as “zones of activity,” similar to the “magic windows” that “allow [him] to have more than one episode or more than one event on one canvas.”<sup>18</sup> His works on paper from this period, like *To have and have not* (1996) render small, brushy scenes that function like isolated “zones of activity,” in which he explores a single scenario that may later appear in a larger composition. Addressing the complexities of his relationship to women with characteristic bravado through the end of his career, Colescott continued to dismantle widely held cultural myths, exploring the ways that both he and society at large navigate the politics of gender.

## ABOUT ROBERT COLESCOTT

Robert Colescott (b. 1925, Oakland, CA; d. 2009, Tucson, AZ) was honored as the first African American artist to represent the United States with a solo exhibition at the Venice Biennale in 1997. He was the subject of a traveling retrospective curated by Lowery Stokes Sims and Matthew Weeseley which began at the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, OH, in late 2019, accompanied by a comprehensive monograph published by Rizzoli Electa. Colescott’s work is represented internationally in such notable institutions as the Akron Art Museum, Akron, OH; American Research Center in Egypt, Alexandria, VA; Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, MD; Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY; California African American Museum, Los Angeles, CA; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX; Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO; Detroit Institute of Arts, Detroit, MI; de Young Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, CA; Henry Art Gallery, Seattle, WA; High Museum of Art, Atlanta GA; Hirshhorn Museum & Sculpture Garden, Washington, D.C.; Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, CA; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY; Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, CA; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA; Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; New Museum, New York, NY; Oakland Museum of California, Oakland, CA; Pinault Collection, Paris, France; Rubell Family Collection, Miami, FL; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, CA; Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA; Tucson Museum of Art, Tucson, AZ; University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, AZ; Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, CT; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, MN; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; among many more.

For further information about the exhibition and availability, please contact the gallery at [info@venusovermanhattan.com](mailto:info@venusovermanhattan.com)

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55 Great Jones Street  
New York, NY 10012

## GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday – Saturday  
10:00 am – 6:00 pm

## NOTES

1. Sims, Lowery Stokes, "Bob Colescott Ain't Just Misbehavin'," *Artforum*, March 1984, 57.
2. Lewis, Joe, "Those Africans Look Like White Elephants: An Interview with Robert Colescott," *East Village Eye*, October 1983, 18.
3. Sims, Lowery Stokes, "Robert Colescott, 1975–1986," in *Robert Colescott: A Retrospective*, ed. James Liljenwall (California: San Jose Museum of Art, 1987), 2.
4. Sims, *Robert Colescott*, 2.
5. *Ibid*, 5.
6. Lobel, Michael, "Black to Front: Robert Colescott," *Artforum*, October 2004, 267.
7. Weiss, Katherine, "Interview with Robert Colescott," in *Eye of the Beholder: Recent Work by Robert Colescott*, ed. Susanne Arnold (Richmond, VA: University of Richmond Press, 1988) 4.
8. Shengold, Ann, "Conversation with Robert Colescott," in *Robert Colescott: Another Judgment*, eds. Henry Barendse, Bill Dooley, Terry Maxon Miller (North Carolina: Knight Gallery / Spirit Square Arts Center, 1985), 13.
9. Sims, Lowery Stokes, "Robert Colescott, 1975–1986," in *Robert Colescott: A Retrospective*, ed. James Liljenwall (California: San Jose Museum of Art, 1987), 2.
10. Colescott, Robert, "Metaphor, Allegory, Illustration and Narrative" (lecture, *Strength and Diversity: A Celebration of African-American Artists*, The Carpenter Center, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1998).
11. Weseley, Matthew, "Robert Colescott: The Untold Story," in *Art and Race Matters: The Career of Robert Colescott*, eds. Raphaela Platow and Lowery Stokes Sims (New York: Rizzoli Electa; Cincinnati: Contemporary Arts Center, 2019), 13.
12. *Wesley, Art and Race Matters*, 30.
13. Landauer, Susan, "Having Your Cake and Painting It, Too," in *The Lighter Side of Bay Area Figuration* (Kansas City: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2000), 38.
14. Sims, "Bob Colescott Ain't Just Misbehavin'," 57.
15. *Ibid*.
16. Liljenwall, James, ed., *Robert Colescott: Recent Paintings* (Arizona: University of Arizona Museum of Art, 1997), 24.
17. Powell, Richard J., "Robert Colescott: Between the Heroic and the Ironic" in *Going There: Black Visual Satire* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2020), 189.
18. Arnold, Susanne, ed., *The Eye of the Beholder: Recent Work by Robert Colescott* (Richmond: University of Richmond, 1988), 6.

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## IMAGE CREDITS

*Old Crow on the Fence*, 1978. Acrylic on canvas; 48 x 66 in (121.92 x 167.64 cm). Private Collection.

*Untitled*, c. 1970. Acrylic on canvas; 79 x 58 3/4 in (200.7 x 149.2 cm). Photo: Hannah Mjolsnes.

*Cloud Watch*, 1963. Oil on canvas; 59 x 68 in (149.9 x 172.7 cm) Photo: Hannah Mjolsnes.

*There Are Two of Us*, 1955. Oil on canvas; 69 x 57 3/4 in (175.3 x 146.7 cm). Photo: Makenzie Goodman.

*6 Witnesses*, 1968. Acrylic on canvas; 78 3/4 x 59 in (199.7 x 149.9 cm). Photo: Josh Schaedel.

*Mourning After*, 1967. Acrylic on canvas; 78 3/4 x 59 in (199.7 x 149.9 cm). Photo: Josh Schaedel.

*why did we come here?*, 1966-1967. Acrylic on canvas; 78 3/4 x 59 in (200 x 149.5 cm). Photo: Josh Schaedel.

*Olympic Event*, 1972. Acrylic on canvas; 78 1/4 x 58 1/2 in (198.8 x 148.6 cm). Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com.

*Pancho Villa*, 1971. Acrylic on Egyptian linen; 78 3/4 x 58 3/4 in (199.7 x 149.2 cm). Private Collection.

*MOM'S OLD FASHION ROOT BEER*, 1974. Acrylic on canvas; 78 5/8 x 59 3/8 in (199.7 x 150.8 cm). Photo: Joshua White/JWPictures.com.

*Black as Satan*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas; 84 x 72 in (213.4 x 182.9 cm). Private Collection.

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