



Memphis Art Museum Unveils Inaugural Art Program, Major New Commissions Ahead of December 6 Opening



Jordan Ann Craig



Yunhee Min



Carlos Rosales-Silva



Eso Tolson

Press kit available for download [here](#).

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (September 22, 2026) – Memphis Art Museum announced today details about commissioned, site-specific works by artists Jordan Ann Craig, Yunhee Min, Carlos Rosales-Silva, and Eso Tolson, created for the museum’s streetfront facade, mezzanine and theater, and rooftop “art park in the sky” overlooking the Mississippi River. The works will come into dynamic interplay with their architectural and natural surroundings when the museum opens its new Herzog & de Meuron-designed cultural campus on December 6.

The commissioned works are part of an extensive inaugural art program anchored by the major exhibition *Making Beauty: Hooks Brothers Studio, 1907-1984*, the first museum survey of the acclaimed photography studio’s decades-long documentation of Black life in the urban South. The inaugural program also features 15 thematic presentations as short stories drawn from the museum’s collection, unfolding throughout the museum’s 30,000 square feet of gallery space. On the rooftop, two of the commissions will be installed alongside a large-scale abstract sculpture by Sean Scully and a collaborative bronze sculpture by LaKela Brown and Mario Moore in the museum’s 50,000-square-foot art garden.

“These extraordinary commissions have such strong connections to Memphis, either through the artists’ ties to the city or through the ways the works engage with the region’s history, cultural legacy, or distinctive geography,” said Dr. Zoe Kahr, Executive Director, Memphis Art Museum. “Together, they capture what we hoped this new campus could make possible: a museum unmistakably rooted in Memphis and engaged in a global conversation. These works mark the beginning of a new chapter, and they give a glimpse of the kind of museum we will be.”

Among the specially commissioned works is Jordan Ann Craig’s *Sharp Tongue; The Sky and the Heart Aflame* (2026), the artist’s largest public work to date. Installed in the museum’s rooftop art garden, the mural brings contemporary Indigenous abstraction into conversation with the ecology and history of the Mississippi River bluff. Paying homage to historical beadwork by Northern Cheyenne and other Plains Indian artists, Craig (b. 1992, San Jose, California, Northern Cheyenne) translates intricate geometric patterns into a monumental site-specific work that responds to light, movement, and landscape. Its palette evokes the colors of sunset over the river, while changing natural light and viewers’ movement continually alter the pattern’s appearance. Commissioning support for Jordan Ann Craig’s *Sharp Tongue; The Sky and the Heart Aflame* is provided by VIA Art Fund.

Known for her vibrant abstract paintings and architectural interventions, Los Angeles-based artist Yunhee Min (b. 1962, Seoul, South Korea) drew inspiration from Memphis’s riverfront landscape for a custom-woven textile and lenticular installation. *Impressions (bluffs, mounds, landing)* comprises a 92-yard (276-foot) woven retractable curtain that, when fully deployed, encircles the museum’s theater and extends across the building’s mezzanine. It is paired with a 66-foot lenticular installation on the street-facing facade windows. Min developed the installation’s colorful designs from rubbings she made at sites across Memphis, including Cobblestone Landing, the mound at Chickasaw Heritage Park, Big River Crossing, and Chucalissa. The gradual sloped form of the installation alludes to Mississippian mounds, while the curtain’s continuous imagery evokes the rushing waters of the Mississippi River. Support for Yunhee Min’s commissioned work is provided by the E. Rhodes and Leona B. Carpenter Foundation and the Korea Foundation.

Carlos Rosales-Silva (b. 1982, El Paso, Texas) created *Alma del rio* (2026), a dynamic mural painted onto three interior walls of the museum’s parking structure. Through a rich array of iconography, the work evokes Memphis’s past and present, reflecting the city’s layered histories and the dynamic interplay between nature and culture. The title, Spanish for “soul of the river,” refers to the Mississippi River, rendered in a stylized form across the mural’s three sides. Woven throughout are motifs designed by the artist that

speak to Memphis and the broader region, including sassafras leaves, the iconic roofline of Rust Hall in Overton Park, Mississippian ceremonial mounds, and Isaac Hayes's legendary desk at Stax Records. Together, these elements create a visual portrait of a city shaped by the convergence of history, landscape, and cultural memory.

Memphis-based graphic designer Eso Tolson (b. 1984, East St. Louis, Illinois) uses typography as a vehicle for social commentary and the preservation of cultural language. In *A Memphis for You* (2026), Tolson employs hand lettering and typography in a site-specific installation on the museum's rooftop. The work features a phrase meant to welcome Memphians and visitors alike, which, when encountered in fragments, invites viewers to experience the installation from multiple perspectives. Celebrating Memphis's distinctive neighborhoods, the work also honors the city's enduring spirit, joy, and pride.

The two rooftop commissions will be presented alongside two large-scale sculptures. Sean Scully RA (b. 1945, Dublin, Ireland) explores landscape in *Stack Blues* (2017), using stacked shades of blue to study the meeting of sky and bodies of water at the horizon line. For Scully, the horizon is a point of endless beginning and ending, where land, water, and sky come together. Previously installed in New York City, the work takes on new meaning in Memphis, the "Home of the Blues," reflecting the artist's deep appreciation for the musical genre and its profound influence on his work. LaKela Brown (b. 1982, Detroit, Michigan) and Mario Moore (b. 1987, Detroit, Michigan) collaborated on *The Smoke Coin* (2025), a monumental two-sided bronze coin. One side features Moore's portrait of Brown, while the other bears a relief of a bouquet of collard greens. The work considers how value is assigned and who is deemed worthy of being memorialized on currency. Situated above the Mississippi River across from Memphis's Cotton Exchange, the sculpture takes on additional resonance in a place shaped by the movement of enslaved people and goods.

PRIMARY EXHIBITION

The museum's primary exhibition in its inaugural art program is *Making Beauty: Hooks Brothers Studio, 1907-1984*, a landmark survey devoted to the legacy of Memphis's renowned Hooks Brothers Photography Studio. This first major presentation, on view from December 6, 2026, to July 5, 2027, draws from the studio's extensive archive of more than 100,000 photographs and focuses on the brothers' philosophy of "making beauty" as an act of dignity, resistance, and self-definition during the Jim Crow era and beyond. Through their lens, the Hooks Brothers transformed photography into a powerful form of cultural advocacy, affirming racial pride and cultural self-expression.

Celebrated for their technical proficiency and artistry, the brothers portrayed their

community with dignity, sophistication, and pride. *Making Beauty* brings together a rich selection of vintage photographic prints, select film negatives, and reprinted photographs to show a range of work, including studio portraiture, documentary, and advertising photography. Together, these works illuminate the studio's vital role in recording and shaping Black life in the American South across much of the 20th century. The exhibition also places the Hooks Brothers in dialogue with other pioneering studio photographers of the African diaspora, including James Van Der Zee, Addison Scurlock, Seydou Keita, and James Barnor. Major support for *Making Beauty: Hooks Brothers Studio, 1907-1984* is provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Endowment for the Arts, with additional support from the Phillip and Edith Leonian Foundation.

Through 163 photographs, the exhibition unfolds across five connected themes: Memphis Renaissance: Beale Street and Hooks Brothers Early Photography; Fashioning Beauty: Where There's Beauty We Take It, Where There's None We Make It; Framing Memphis's Black Sound; Hooks School of Photography; and A Revelatory Movement: On Social and Political Uplift. The exhibition will be accompanied by an illustrated catalogue featuring essays by C. Rose Smith, Assistant Curator of Photography, Memphis Art Museum, and scholars of photography Dr. Rikki Byrd, Dr. Cheryl Finley, Dr. Earnestine Jenkins, and Dr. Mark Sealy. The exhibition is curated by C. Rose Smith and organized by the Memphis Art Museum and the National Civil Rights Museum.

The National Civil Rights Museum will present a related exhibition, on view February 4–July 5, 2027, extending the presentation of the Hooks Brothers archive and connecting the studio's photographic record to the broader history of Black life and civil rights in Memphis. The exhibitions will be accompanied by Black Portraiture[s]: Memphis — Portals and Presence of the Studio, held April 22–24, 2027, a conference presented in collaboration with NYU's Department of Photography & Imaging and Center for Black Visual Culture and Harvard University's Hutchins Center for African & African American Research, marking Black Portraiture[s]' first convening in the Mid-South.

Dr. Patricia Lee Daigle, Chief Curator, Memphis Art Museum, said: "What better way to open our remarkable new home than with an exhibition devoted to Memphis? The Hooks Brothers Studio left us an extraordinary artistic legacy. Their photographs reveal a distinctive visual language defined by technical mastery, careful composition, and a profound sensitivity to the individuals they portrayed. Together, these images constitute a remarkable body of American photography, while also preserving an essential record of Black life in the South. Recognizing the Hooks Brothers not simply as chroniclers of

their community, but as significant artists whose work helped shape the history of photography, is long overdue.”

THEMATIC PRESENTATIONS FROM THE MUSEUM’S COLLECTION

To herald the opening, the museum will also feature 15 thematic presentations drawn from the museum’s collection as a series of short stories encouraging visitors to discover unexpected connections among works created in different eras, cultures, and locations. They include:

- ***The River Calling: Storytelling in Memphis and the Mississippi Delta:*** An exploration of the region's unique visual language, this presentation features artists whose work navigates the complexities of Southern folklore, music, and history, considering oral traditions and storytelling. Created from the 1940s to the present, these works were made by artists with deep ties to the Mississippi Delta or by those influenced by their experiences in the region. Notable works include a photograph by William Eggleston, *Memphis Slim* (2003–2004) by Frederick J. Brown, *My Father Was Big as a Tree* (1955) by Carroll Cloar, *The Molasses Man* (2023) by Ahmad George, and *Memphis on the Mississippi* (2022) by Carl E. Moore.
- ***Towards Liberation:*** The centerpiece of this presentation is the *Warren Black Gospel Window* (1877) by Henry Sharp Studio, a nearly 150-year-old stained-glass window that is possibly the first public depiction of a Black Jesus Christ in the United States. At the time of its commissioning, during the end of Reconstruction and the start of the Jim Crow era, the window made a radical statement on racial and gender equality. *Towards Liberation* connects this historically significant work with artworks that grapple with complicated shifts in American history since the nation’s founding in 1776, including *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) by Martha Rosler, *The 1920’s...The Migrants Arrive and Cast Their Ballots* (1973) by Jacob Lawrence, *Martin Luther King – Mountain Top* (1968) by Romare Bearden, and *In Sojourner Truth I fought for the rights of women as well as Blacks* (1947) by Elizabeth Catlett.
- ***An Inner Vision: Selections from the Hyde Collection:*** Highlighting four decades of collecting by Barbara and Pitt Hyde, this presentation traces American abstraction from modernism to the contemporary moment. Key works include *Grey and White Abstract* (1925) by Georgia O’Keeffe, Willem de Kooning’s *Untitled* (1977), and Cecily Brown’s *The Five Senses* (2023). The presentation also includes works by celebrated artists such as Pacita Abad, Stuart Davis, Arthur Dove, Marsden Hartley, Louise Nevelson, and Joan Mitchell.

- ***Speaking in Shapes:*** While geometric abstraction has historically been understood as rooted in European modernism, this presentation examines how artists have experimented with the approach over time and across cultures. The installation highlights women artists and artists of color who were often expected to make identity-driven art, while their contemporaries were celebrated for making art devoid of representative meaning. Defining works include *Passion* (2015) by Samuel Levi-Jones, a large-scale abstract canvas composed of stitched, frayed, and deconstructed encyclopedia covers, *Tempest* (1979) by Elizabeth Murray, a dynamic, shaped-canvas oil painting utilizing bold geometric contours, and *Round Dance* (2023) by Dyani White Hawk, an acrylic, glass bead, and synthetic sinew work bridging Lakota aesthetic traditions with modern abstraction, as well as Memphis native James Little's *Near Miss* (2008), comprising colorful interlocking diagonals.
- ***Medieval Bodies:*** Linked by religious themes, artworks in *Medieval Bodies* were produced between approximately 1000 and 1550 and originated in England, France, Italy, Germany, the Netherlands, and the Iberian Peninsula. The religious art of this period served to educate viewers on their presumed social roles, define national boundaries and racial identities, provide medical care, and ease anxieties about the afterlife. At the same time, these works from the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance used representations of the body to grapple with the human condition. Notable works include Giovanni del Biondo's Florentine altarpiece *Madonna and Child, Saint John the Baptist and Saint Catherine of Alexandria* (ca. 1385), a diptych by Taddeo di Bartolo (ca. 1410), and Adriaen Isenbrandt's *St. John the Baptist and Two Donors*, alongside French stained glass works.
- ***Rhapsodies in Black:*** An immersive presentation set to a curated soundtrack, *Rhapsodies in Black* explores the profound influence of jazz on Black American abstraction from the 1970s to the present. The expansion of jazz in the mid-20th century coincided with an emergence of modern and increasingly abstract approaches to artmaking. Though Black artists at the time were often expected to create representational and political art, many went against the grain, taking up the expressive brushstrokes and rhythmic lines of abstraction, inspired by the era's music. Artists were particularly drawn to free jazz, a looser, improvised subgenre that emerged in the late 1950s in which they found a sense of liberation, spirituality, and transcendence. Highlights include Sam Gilliam's *Azure* (1977), an expansive acrylic and collage canvas embodying rhythmic, jazz-inspired improvisation, Torkwase Dyson's *In the Ways Belonging, I Measure*

Darker (Environmental Liberation) (2018), which grapples with Black compositional thought, and James Little's *Cute Star* (2022).

- ***Head to the Sky***: Traversing major political moments and interpersonal relationships, *Head to the Sky* brings together more than 100 works, many acquired through the museum's Blackmon Perry Endowment to expand representations of Black art, that illustrate the fullness and complexity of Black American life: joy and struggle, leisure and labor, and everything in between. The presentation includes Titus Kaphar's *Ascension VI* (2024), exploring cultural idolization and sports, Jordan Casteel's portrait *Jahi* (2019), which captures contemporary Black identity and everyday life, and Ernest C. Withers's careful documentation of the Civil Rights Movement, alongside works such as *Hoop Hop* (2024) by Derek Fordjour, *I Will Not Suffer For You* (2017) by Vanessa German, and *Spirit Sister* (2013) by Nelson Stevens.
- ***Power and Absence: Women in Europe, 1500–1680***: This presentation considers representations of women in European art in the Renaissance and Early Baroque periods as untouchable ideals, threatening monsters, enterprising community leaders, ornamental accessories to power, and models of faith, nearly all of which were painted by men. *Power and Absence* examines the systems that have stifled the talent of women artists throughout time and considers which artists are written into history and collected by museums. Highlights include rare works by Sofonisba Anguissola, one of the few female masters recognized in early European art history, such as *Portrait of One of the Artist's Sisters* (1560) and *Self-Portrait* (1560), as well as works by Rembrandt, Peter Paul Rubens, and other Old Masters.
- ***Things to Come: Time, Technology, and the Future***: Though concerns about the unintended consequences of technology stretch back to antiquity, humankind continues to look further ahead. Each technological revolution, first met with optimism, gives way to apprehension, and then the cycle renews. This presentation explores the ways American artists have envisioned the future, from idealized utopias to post-apocalyptic dystopias, featuring artwork produced during the Information Age, a period of unprecedented technological growth that began in the mid-twentieth century. Artworks here exemplify the roles television, scientific technology, the internet, digital imaging, and artificial intelligence have had in shaping the way artists view the present and what lies ahead. Highlighted works include *Cell 001* (2023) by Reginald Sylvester II, *Technologies of the Self* (1993) by Nancy Graves, *Molecule Man with Briefcase* (1983) by Jonathan

Borofsky, and *You Found Me, You Should Never Have Lost Me* (2022) by George Alexander.

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ABOUT MEMPHIS ART MUSEUM

Opening on December 6, 2026, Memphis Art Museum ushers in a new era for art, culture and civic life in Memphis. Designed by Herzog & de Meuron with archimania as architect of record, the new Memphis Art Museum expands the institution's current gallery space by 50 percent and significantly increases public access, offering six times more art-filled free public space than its current location. The new 2-acre urban campus, situated on a reconstructed bluff along the Mississippi River, will feature a 10,000-square-foot community courtyard, a 50,000-square-foot rooftop art garden, expanded galleries, new light-filled education spaces, an outdoor amphitheater with stunning river views and an expansive pedestrian plaza. Nearly all of the museum's public-facing amenities, including the store, café, lobby and galleries, are on one level to bring more accessible arts experiences to Memphis. More than a museum, it is a place where creativity and shared experiences bring people together, inviting Memphians and visitors alike to engage with the transformative power of art.

Memphis Art Museum is one of the leading art museums in the American South. Its collection of more than 10,000 works spans five millennia and six continents, including ancient works from Greece, Rome and the Ancient Americas; Renaissance masterpieces from Italy; English portraiture; American painting and decorative arts; contemporary art and African Diasporic art. For more information visit memphisartmuseum.org.

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IMAGE CREDITS

Left to right.

Jordan Ann Craig Portrait, image courtesy the artist. © Jordan Ann Craig. Photo by Derrell Lopez.

Yunhee Min Portrait, 2023. Photo by Christopher Burke.

Carlos Rosales-Silva Portrait, image courtesy of the artist.

Self-portrait by Eso Tolson.

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