

‘Men of Change’ exhibit at Washington State History Museum tells the stories of Black men’s lives

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By [Carla Bell](#)

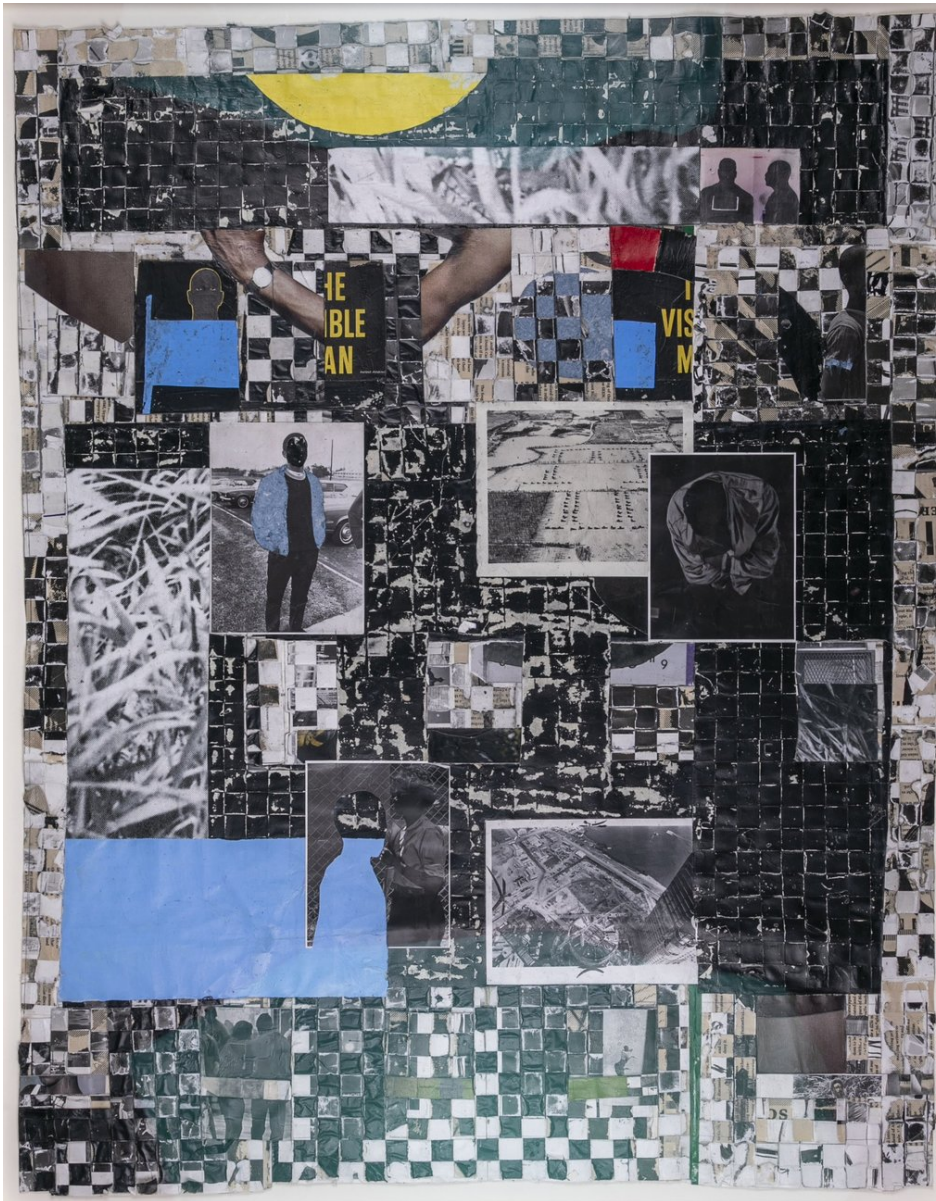
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More than 60 crates arrived at the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, carrying precious cargo — the stories of Black men's lives.

In its beautifully complex arrangement of modular scaffolding, framing, lighting and suspension, the "[Men of Change: Power. Triumph. Truth.](#)" exhibit illuminates the stories behind the stories we've read, about the men behind the men we know.

Visionaries like the late [Bayard Rustin](#), an adviser to the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., one of his inner circle. It was Rustin who first introduced the program of nonviolent resistance that would later become King's hallmark. But being openly gay in that time, Rustin remained mostly behind the scenes in King's march to freedom.

Myth-breakers like [Shaka Senghor](#), who shot and killed a man at the age of 19, then spent many years in prison. In an interview with NPR, Senghor, now 48, a New York Times bestselling author, and one of [Oprah's SuperSoul 100](#), said "I've had moments where I cried for that young man that I was."



Troy Michie's 2018 depiction of Shaka Senghor, titled "In the Wake." (Courtesy of the artist and Michael R. Barnes / Smithsonian Institution)

These are not men of perfection. These are men who've been through life's trials and shown resilience, intellect and bravery.

“[Men of Change](#),” a project of the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), “invites visitors to weigh what we’re told with what is authentic — in history, politics, art, culture, and activism,” according to its [website](#).

The collection comprises the works of 25 artists — each cognizant of the unique topography traversed by the Black man in America — who [depict the Men of Change](#) through photography, portraiture, sculpture and more.

Among the artists is [Patrick Earl Hammie](#), an associate professor of painting and sculpture at the School of Art + Design at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Though he “grew up in mostly white West Haven,” he says, Hammie’s work explores the Black diasporic experience, and “offers stories that expand how we express notions of gender, race, and representation today.”



Artist Patrick Earl Hammie (Courtesy of Patrick Earl Hammie)

Hammie reflects on “Men of Change” and his contribution to it — a collage portrait of the artist [Romare Bearden](#).

What was your process for the Bearden?

When they asked me for a portrait of Romare Bearden — an advocate and artist I’ve admired since [meeting him in] college — I spent weeks thinking through compositions that could tell his story. I decided to represent Bearden’s likeness through the years and pay homage to the collage works he’s known for. I collected his images, video recordings and personal accounts. I layered my initial references digitally, collaging through transparent photo overlays and projections. After adding volume through several drawn and painted studies, I began the five-month process of completing the large-scale portrait. The journey allowed me to better connect to Bearden’s influence on me and take formal risks that have opened new forms, marks and colors in my practice.

What/who inspires your work?

Years ago, a group of young Black art students attended an opening reception of my work in a city where the Black people have been historically dismissed and ignored and disproportionately persecuted. Watching those students react to seeing themselves reflected in my work and talking with them later about what it meant to them moved me.

As a professor, I work to nurture greater numbers of underrepresented artists and leaders into positions than there were when I started. I want to inspire others to explore similar creative and professional spaces. Those moments give me life and keep me inspired in the studio and classroom, and on the road lecturing.

In your involvement with this project, what has been the most significant experience?

I had the honor of kicking off the tour in Cincinnati with an amazing group of [contributing] artists, designers and organizers. My most memorable experience thus far was hanging with nine out of the 25 artists in the show at the premiere and sharing stories and drinks late into the night. That night was filled with Black joy, creativity and beauty and gave me a sense of community that’s too rare, in my experience. It recalled for me Albert Murray, James Baldwin, Alvin Ailey and Romare Bearden spending days and nights together in France in the ’50s.

What are your expectations for “Men of Change”?

The show itself moves the needle forward. It consults our elders and truth keepers across professions to select and archive the successes of many through these few precious legends. It makes space for a generation of artists inspired

by these changemakers to introduce them in fresh ways.

What is your message to Black boys and men visiting the exhibit?

See yourself, and allow yourself to be seen. It took countless people and efforts to get these featured men, and the artists representing them, into these rooms. You're part of these achievements. We see and appreciate who you are and what you do. Change continues with you, by being the rare and valuable person you are.

“Men of Change” through March 15; Washington State History Museum, 1911 Pacific Ave., Tacoma; admission rates up to \$14; 253-272-3500; washingtonhistory.org

Carla Bell is a Seattle-area freelance writer focusing on human rights, social justice, culture and arts.

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