

# BILL HODGES GALLERY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## *Figuratively Speaking*

### **Surveying Powerful Works that Trace the Shape and Shadow of Black Life**

529 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, NY 10011  
2 March – 22 April 2023

**NEW YORK, NY**, February 16 – Bill Hodges Gallery is pleased to present *Figuratively Speaking*, a premier selection of vibrant, dynamic works of form and figuration. From tender vignettes of quiet silhouetted repose to scenes of exuberant family life, this exhibition of over thirty paintings, photographs, drawings, and sculptures invites viewers to consider the contours of Black life as depicted by important artists from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to present day. Titans of the canon such as Joshua Johnson, Kara Walker, Romare Bearden, Eldzier Cortor, Carrie Mae Weems, Roy DeCarava, Lorna Simpson, Jacob Lawrence, and others constitute the heart of the exhibition. These rarely seen works reflect on historic milestones in Black history as well as interior moments of quotidian life. With thematic masterworks that bring to life concepts such as lineage, home-going, identity, and more, *Figuratively Speaking* etches a kaleidoscopic portrait of subjects moving through space; rendered in terms unequivocally Black.

An important work from the exhibition that crystallizes this ethos is Romare Bearden's *Sunset*, a collage of verdant greens, delicately accented by the magenta hues of a figure cradled in foliage abound. Bearden, a preeminent American painter of the 20th century and contemporary of Norman Lewis, was born in North Carolina and grew up in New York City and Pittsburgh. While his early paintings were realistic and often religious in nature, his later works (following his military service during World War II) evolved into his signature semiabstract collage style. Though shape and shadow are bisected and sourced from the saturated dyes of cuttings and photographs, the composition of *Sunset* is imbued with a dreamy gentleness that an impressionist scene of idyllic nature might invoke. The feminine figure in the foreground, whose shades of orange share a color palette only with the setting sun, is the portrait of interior serenity. Donning a beaded headband with eyes not quite closed, the corners of her mouth curve into a gentle smile. Bearden, a tour de force of the mixed media and collage genre, beckons viewers to consider how a spirit of tranquility can be inscribed within pressed layers of paper on fiberboard. Created at the height of the artist's collage works, Bearden's *Sunset* is the



**Romare Bearden (1911 – 1988)**  
*Sunset*, 1980  
Collage and Mixed Media on Fiberboard  
14 x 18 in. (35.6 x 45.7 cm)

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pinnacle of craft and detail, illustrative of an artist's keen sensibility of surreal place and personhood that a work can evoke.



**Kara Walker (1969 - )**  
*The Secret Sharer*, 2010  
Etching with Aquatint, Sugar-lift,  
Spit-bite and Dry-point, Printed on  
Hahnemuhle Copperplate Bright  
White 300gm Paper  
From Ed. of 30  
Image: 23 ½ x 23 ½ in.  
Paper: 30 ¼ x 27 ¾ in.

Another uniquely transfixing work featured in *Figuratively Speaking* is Kara Walker's *The Secret Sharer*, from the series *An Unpeopled Land in Uncharted Waters*. This work is a compelling exploration of her signature manipulation of shape, shadow, and silhouette to depict a layered, often historical narrative. Walker, born in California, is an American contemporary painter, print-maker, installation artist, filmmaker, and professor who explores race, gender, sexuality, violence, and identity in her work. She is best known for her room-size tableaux of black cut-paper silhouettes. In *The Secret Sharer*, foreground and background are flattened by an otherworldly sense of perspective and light, as four figures depicted in couplets stand in stunning contrast to each other. The first couplet shows a White man who appears to have washed ashore and is being tended to by a Black woman, whose eyes are wide with interest as she feels his neck for a pulse. Covering most of the man's body is another silhouette, a large side profile of a woman who is posited in the ear of a man, his neck leaned to catch her voice – she is likely the sharer of secrets after which the work is titled. By layering one dramatic scene onto another,

Walker plays with the idea of temporality, aliveness, and death – both psychosocial and corporeal, in this striking and evocative work.

From portrait-style photographs by Lyle Ashton Harris and Chester Higgins to bronze sculptures by Elizabeth Catlett and Richmond Barthé, *Figuratively Speaking* encapsulates the vibrant diversity at the heart of the canon of Black art. Imbued with an ethos of community that transcends genre, medium, and mode, what ties together the important works in this exhibition is each artist's powerful ability to render the form of a body within space – elucidating narratives about the human condition that are sure to remain timeless in the study and collection of art.

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Bill Hodges Gallery is located at 529 W. 20th Street, suite #10E, between 10th Avenue and 11th Avenue. Our closest subway stations are 14th St. & 8th Ave. (A-C-E) and 23rd St. & 8th Ave. (C-E). The gallery is open Tuesday to Friday from 11 AM – 6 PM. Saturday from 12:30 PM – 5:30 PM.. Masks and hand sanitizer provided. For more information or to arrange a private viewing, please contact the gallery at (212) 333-2640 or at [info@billhodgesgallery.com](mailto:info@billhodgesgallery.com).