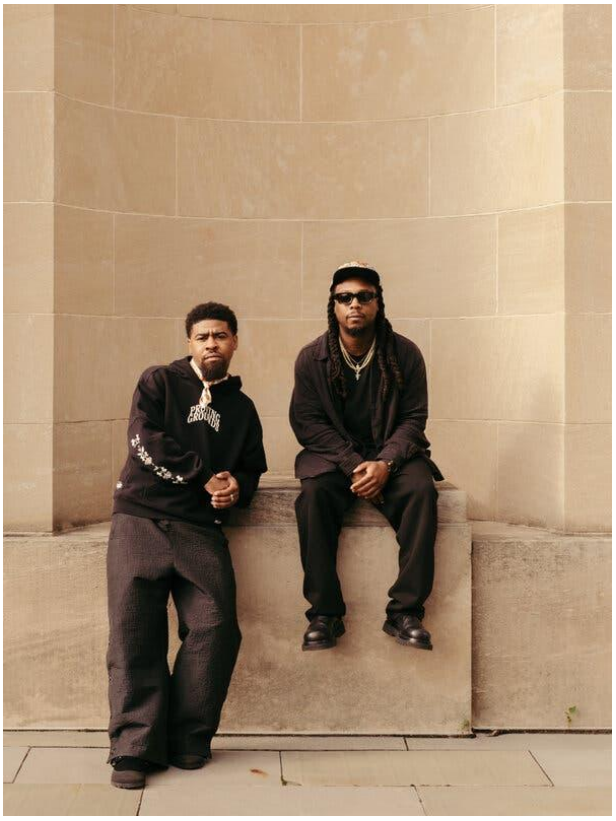
The New York Times

Local Artists Speak to Baltimore's Long and Complex History

Across three fall shows, the Baltimore Museum of Art showcases the multifaceted region through photography, paintings, poetry and weavings.

By Alina Tugend
Reporting from Baltimore
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This article is part of the Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how the world of art and museums is pushing boundaries.



Jerrell Gibbs and Devin Allen are two Baltimore artists who incorporate their beloved city into their work. Credit...Caroline Gutman for The New York Times

The artists Jerrell Gibbs and Devin Allen sat together in the same middle school in Baltimore more than two decades ago, and their lives occasionally overlapped as they remained in their native city.

This fall, works by both of them will appear in exhibitions at the Baltimore Museum of Art, a coincidence that underscores one of the main themes of the museum's fall shows — the breadth and depth of both Baltimore artists and art about the city itself.

Many museums are increasingly looking for ways to display the work of local artists in solo shows and by integrating them within exhibitions of other national and international artists; that's certainly the case with three of the Baltimore museum's fall shows.

"It has been my strategic focus ever since I took the helm to have a drumbeat of the artistic excellence that you find here in Baltimore and the region," said Asma Naeem, who, in 2023, became the museum's first director in its 112-year history to be raised in Baltimore.



"Sprinklers" (2026) by Jerrell Gibbs
Credit...via of the artist and Galerie Myrtis

In the three exhibitions, the museum offers visitors very different ways to think about the city of Baltimore and state of Maryland: "Flashback: Two Centuries of Baltimore Photography" (through Feb. 21, 2027); "Jerrell Gibbs: Come home with me" (through May 2, 2027); and "Diedrick Brackens: lights at the end of the world," which includes the poetry of the Baltimore writer Jöel Díaz (Nov. 8-Feb. 28, 2027).

The vast majority of the 210 works that appear in "Flashback" were shot by Baltimore photographers, including Allen's images of the 2015 protests following the arrest and injury of Freddie Gray. Gray's death from a spinal trauma after being chased and restrained by police was ruled a homicide.

Allen, 38, had just bought a camera two years before — financed with a loan from his grandmother — and ran to both join and cover the protests. He and Gray had mutual friends, having both grown up in West Baltimore.

He posted the photos on his social media accounts where they quickly went viral, reposted by celebrities like Usher and Beyoncé. They also caught the eye of a Time magazine editor, who was surprised to find out that Allen was a self-taught amateur photographer.

On May 11, 2015, Allen's photo of a man racing to join protesters with a phalanx of police behind him ran on the cover of Time with several others inside. The cover and three other images he shot of the protests are displayed in the gallery.

Allen — who arrived for a recent interview with a newly purchased Hasselblad camera around his neck — said he was deeply inspired by the work of the renowned photographer Gordon Parks, who "said he could have chosen a knife or a gun, but he chose a camera as his weapon," Allen said.

"I wasn't trying to get a Time cover. I just wanted to tell the honest truth," he added. "Nobody was going to tell that truth better than someone who is actually from West Baltimore." Like many others who grew up there, Allen and Gibbs have strong ties to the area with its long history of disinvestment and poverty, deep tradition of civil rights activism and generations of celebrated musicians, poets and entertainers.



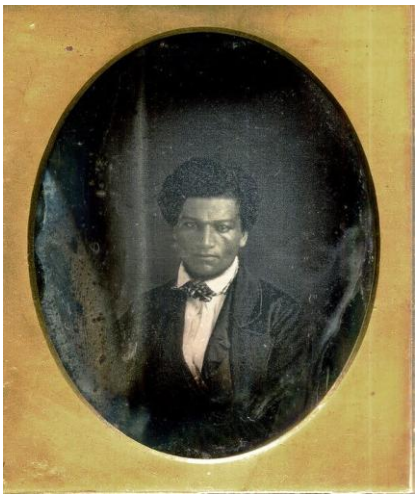
Devin Allen's photo of protests in Baltimore, which was featured as the cover of Time in 2015. Credit...Time Inc./ Devin Allen, Time Vol. 185, No. 17, 2015. Baltimore Museum of Art, E. Kirkbride Miller Research Library.

Allen's career took off after the photos appeared in Time. He was hired by Under Armour, which is based in Maryland, to shoot photos worldwide and has started and supported nonprofits to bring photography to young people all over Baltimore, many, who like him, might be changed by picking up a camera.

His greatest joy is still wandering the streets of his beloved city, shooting anything that grabs his eye; he is well known around town.

"They call me the picture man," he said.

Other highlights of "Flashback" include the first known photo — taken in 1841 — of the famed abolitionist and orator Frederick Douglass several years after he escaped from slavery. He is rarely seen as a young man; he was around 23 in the photo. Although it is one of the few images in the show not taken by a Baltimore artist, Douglass was born in Maryland and spent his formative years in Baltimore.



The first known photo of Frederick Douglass taken in 1841. Credit...Greg French Collection

Douglass would become a strong proponent of photography as a way to foster democracy and counter the buffoonish caricatures of Black people popular in the 19th century, said Leslie Cozzi, co-curator of the exhibition.

"Photography is a way to achieve self representation for people who are otherwise excluded from the democratic process," she added.

The photos have a beauty, not just a history — for example, the delightful symmetry of a 1954 photograph "Druid Hill YMCA Swim Class," of a group of obedient pupils standing in a row in the water and each stretching out one arm, mimicking their swim teacher's motion on the sideline.

It is by Irving Henry Phillips Sr., an acclaimed photographer for the newspaper The Baltimore African-American, known as the Afro, which was founded in 1892 and still publishes today. Ten of Phillips's photos hang in the show.



"Druid Hill YMCA Swim Class" (1954) by Irving Henry Phillips Sr. Credit...The Baltimore Museum of Art

While “Flashback” provides a kaleidoscope of the city, Gibbs, 38, zooms in to give viewers a look at a particular Baltimore way of life and community.

In an interview, he talked about how he was inspired by family photos he found in the basement of his Aunt Ella’s — his grandmother’s sister — whom he lived with growing up, also in West Baltimore. His grandmother resided two doors down. Visitors can see those photos in a small room off the exhibition.

The oil paintings are not replicas of the photos; rather he used them to inspire scenes or portraits that he hopes will resonate with visitors.

“To-go plates,” a painting of a backyard gathering of folks eating and packing up food is a tribute to his grandmother’s generosity. “For as long as I can remember, my grandmother lived in her house by herself, and she would literally cook as if she had 20 people living in her house. Whenever she was cooking on Sundays,” she invited the neighbors over, Gibbs said.

While many of the scenes portray joy and connection, the fear that haunted Gibbs’ family and friends is also present; “The Sounds of the Vic,” shows the back of a woman’s head as she looks over her shoulder outside. She’s hearing the motor of a Crown Victoria, the cars that police officers drove, and which often boded no good in the neighborhood.

The Diedrick Brackens exhibition has a completely different feel. Brackens was born in Texas, but his work includes 14 large-scale weavings loosely incorporating the landscape and history of the Chesapeake Bay region, which includes Baltimore.

The weavings highlight the area’s role as a major hub in the Underground Railroad and the famed wild horses that run on the eastern shore of Maryland.



A large-scale weaving entitled “east of east point seven beaks” (2026) by the artist Diedrick Brackens. Credit...Diedrick Brackens via Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

Both Brackens' work and Díaz’s poems were commissioned by the museum for this exhibition.

Brackens, who lives in San Francisco, combines the ideas of flight, migration and liberation in a number of works. Díaz who lives in Baltimore, is director of programing for The Clifton House, which was the home of former Maryland Poet Laureate Lucille Clifton and is now a nonprofit literary and arts center.

One of his poems was particularly inspired by Brackens’ work “east of east point seven beaks,” which shows a silhouette of a person being carried — or perhaps flying with — trumpeter swans, that were once extinct but have been brought back and now migrate from Canada to the Maryland seashore.

Another weaving, “to be loved more and ridden less (the gate),” portrays a gate again opened by a figure as horses — some lavender and rose colored — run out and seem to fly.

The origin of the wild horses is a mystery. But as Brackens imagines it, “a gate was left open and they walked out, and now they’re free. They negotiate the human and the wild world every day, and there’s something inspiring about that to me,” Brackens said. “Maybe they offer us a way to think about how we could be in the world.”



Brackens combines the ideas of flight, migration and liberation in much of his art. Credit...Ian Byers-Gamber