

Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition 2020

Each year the Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing Competition invites the creative minds of writers and editors to consider what constitutes a well written exhibition label. Despite the wide-spread use of technology in museums today, labels remain the primary tool for sharing ideas, information, and stories with the public. As such, the goal of this competition is to spark conversations about this integral interpretive tool by highlighting examples of excellent label writing from our community.

This year's panel of jurors included: Dan Spock (Independent Museum Consultant), Rebecca Bednarz (Editor for Exhibition Research and Publishing at the Peabody Essex Museum), Donna Braden (Senior Curator and Curator of Public Life at The Henry Ford), and Swarupa Anila (Senior VP for Exhibition and Gallery Development at the Royal Ontario Museum). Each juror was tasked with carefully reviewing all of the 201 labels submitted to the competition to identify top examples of clear, concise, and captivating label writing. The result of this hard work was 16 excellent labels that we are proud to share with the AAM community. This year's recognized labels will be added to the competition's online archive for use by current and future museum professionals.

We want to thank our jurors for their time and commitment to this process. Without them, this competition would not be possible. Additionally, we extend our thanks to AAM for their continued support, and CurCom for generously sponsoring the competition in cooperation with NAME and EdCom. Lastly, we want to thank you, the reader. We hope that this year's selection of labels inspires you to consider new perspectives and approaches to communicating with your audiences, and we invite you to participate in next year's competition.

Shiro Burnette
Competition Project Manager
Museology Master's Candidate, Class of 2020
University of Washington, Seattle

John Russick
Competition Project Director
Senior Vice President
Chicago History Museum

2020 Juror Biographies & Statements

REBECCA BEDNARZ

*Editor for Exhibition Research and Publishing,
Peabody Essex Museum*

Rebecca Bednarz is editor for exhibition research and publishing at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, MA. At PEM, she manages editorial for the publishing program, which produces catalogues, digital publications, and children's books, and for the museum's changing exhibition program, which involves editing labels and media in creative collaboration with the curatorial and interpretation departments. The PEM team was honored to be recognized with the Annual Excellence in Exhibition Label Writing award in 2019 for a label in the T.C. Cannon: At the Edge of America exhibition. She has more than fifteen years of experience in editorial direction, content strategy and development, and museum learning and marketing. Prior to joining the field, she taught, edited, and published poetry and, for a brief stint, worked in communications with MIT scientists and engineers.

For me, a good label is as much about the craft of the writing as it is about the spirit of learning and connecting that it communicates. I love to read and shape labels that spark wonder, invite close looking, draw out feeling, engage relationship, and get people thinking (and talking) about what they think. Editing at PEM, I'm grateful for how we experiment with the style, form, genre, point of view, and mode of our labels. I remain a student of language and interdisciplinary learning and I hope to bring my humble enthusiasm to the jury.

SWARUPA ANILA

Senior VP for Exhibition and Gallery, Royal Ontario Museum

Swarupa Anila recently joined the Royal Ontario Museum as Senior VP for Exhibition and Gallery. Formerly at the Detroit Institute of Arts as director of interpretive engagement, Swarupa has worked in the field of interpretation for nearly twenty years and has developed award-winning labels, digital interpretation, and exhibitions. Swarupa serves on the editorial advisory board for Exhibition, the journal for the National Association for Museum Exhibition and is a founding board member and current president of the Association for Art Museum Interpretation.

*Most labels inform.
A good label draws you in.
A great label provokes new thinking and wonder.
A brilliant label sweeps you into a bodily experience. Eyes widen. Breath stops. Skin rises to goose bumps.
Heartbeat quickens. You look around and feel you're seeing a world that never existed before that moment.*

DONNA R. BRADEN

Senior Curator and Curator of Public Life, The Henry Ford

Donna R. Braden, Senior Curator and Curator of Public Life at The Henry Ford in Dearborn, Michigan, has spent more than four decades in the museum field. Both at The Henry Ford and as an independent consultant, her career has cut across numerous aspects of museum practice, including material culture expertise, collections development and analysis, historical research, interpretive planning, exhibition development, and visitor studies.

Braden has published widely and presented at numerous conferences on topics ranging from the exhibition process to creating dynamic interpretive manuals to visitor-focused label-writing to what museums can learn from Walt Disney. She is the author of the recent book, *Spaces That Tell Stories: Recreating Historical Environments*, co-published by Rowman & Littlefield and the American Association for State and Local History. She received her bachelor's degree in Anthropology from Ohio State University in 1975, with distinction in American Cultural History, and obtained a master's degree from the Winterthur Program in Early American Culture in 1977, with a certificate in Museum Studies, from the University of Delaware. In 2013, she obtained a second master's degree, in Liberal Studies, from the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

For the last four decades I have been a label-writer and editor, increasingly incorporating visitor studies into the process. Two years ago, in developing a workshop entitled "Exhibit Label Makeovers" for the Association for Midwest Museums, I was able to re-read all the major published works on visitors and label-writing, confirming much of what I've already come to learn about what constitutes a well-written label:

- *Labels should enhance the overall visitor experience at a place where visitors voluntarily devote their own time and effort. They should not be fatiguing or overly didactic. Visitors are not at museums to take a test.*
 - *Visitors expect positive rewards in label-reading, as in other aspects of their museum visit: uplift, enlightenment, inspiration, provocation, and/or personal meaning.*
 - *Reinforcing Judy Rand's insightful writings and presentations about labels, they should be readable (well-organized, well-written, copy-edited, and proofread), relevant (connecting to visitors' own experiences and interests), and understandable (not overly technical or abstract).*
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2020 Juror Biographies & Statements

DAN SPOCK

Independent Museum Consultant

Dan Spock has worked in museums for over 36 years, starting as a planetarium guide. He has worked as an exhibit designer at The Boston Children's Museum and an exhibit developer at the Museum of Creativity project. For 20 years Spock led the museum program at the Minnesota Historical Society (MNHS). While there, Spock's team produced dozens of exhibitions, some of which have received national award recognition. From 2017 to 2019, Spock was the Senior Vice President for Audience Engagement at the Levine Museum of the New South in Charlotte, NC. Today he works as an independent museum consultant.

Spock is an ardent advocate for participatory museum programs suffused with pluralism, and informed by visitor research. His work is rooted in an ethos that values museum-goers as active learners. He has explored the informal means by which the public experiences and values the past as natural pathways for engaging with history in a museum context.

Exhibits produced under Spock's leadership have ranged from multidisciplinary, high immersion, interactive and media rich approaches designed for a general family audience, some of which have traveled nationally, to intensive community-based collaborations, to site-specific interpretive centers and trails, to more traditional art or photography shows. Live public programs have been developed to serve various audience segments ranging from families with children, to school audiences, seniors, young adults, recent immigrant communities, and communities of color.

Spock has consulted and lectured at a variety of museums and learning institutions, has published writings on many museum subjects, and has a BA in Art from Antioch College.

- *Concision.* A great label is both brief and smart. They are elegant, cleaving to a point. They are written in clear, direct prose with an absolute minimum of digressions, clauses, qualifications and parentheses. Great labels steer clear of jargon and excessive wordiness.
- *Provocative and evocative.* Labels should be interesting. They should challenge conventional thinking and reach beyond a strictly rational thesis to something that elicits a broad range of emotions including increased curiosity. Great labels may raise more questions than they answer.
- *Fresh.* A really good label represents new scholarship without coming across overly didactic or preachy. Wherever possible, they should present original ideas rather than restating commonly held beliefs, platitudes or common sense. A label should be written with flair and passion for the material which is not the same thing as flaunting curatorial erudition.

- *Diversity.* When there are voices previously underrepresented in a museum, and the subject has special import for a particular group of people, those people should have representation and acknowledgement of authorship.
- *Relevant.* A good label anticipates questions many people are likely to have rather than speaking to an exclusive group of insiders. A good label leads with what matters, like with good journalism, the lede isn't buried to such an extent that interested people never find it or read it. A good label has a reader in mind and speaks to that reader in the present moment when the moment connects directly or indirectly to the thing it describes. A good label treats museum goers with respect without pandering to or patronizing the reader.
- *Work with images and objects.* Good labels communicate with images as well as text. A picture can say many things words cannot say. Images and text are used in a mutually supportive communicative context not merely repeating what can be seen or said. An object label should answer a question a reader is likely to have upon viewing the object, never merely containing the musings of the curator intended for the cognoscenti or describing what can already be clearly seen by a viewer.
- *Factual.* As much as possible, great label should be supported by the facts. Where facts are impossible to ascertain, the ambiguity of definitive knowledge should be acknowledged.
- *Legible.* A good label is designed to be read easily, not decorative or fussy, not tiny or placed too far outside of the context of direct viewing or experiences. A good label is easy to find and read for the curious.
- *Storytelling.* Objects with great stories involving real people and issues should have their stories told whenever possible.

Writers and editor:

B. Erin Cole, Exhibit Developer, label writer

Anjanette Schussler, Government Records

Archivist, label writer

Kate Roberts, Senior Exhibit Developer, label editor

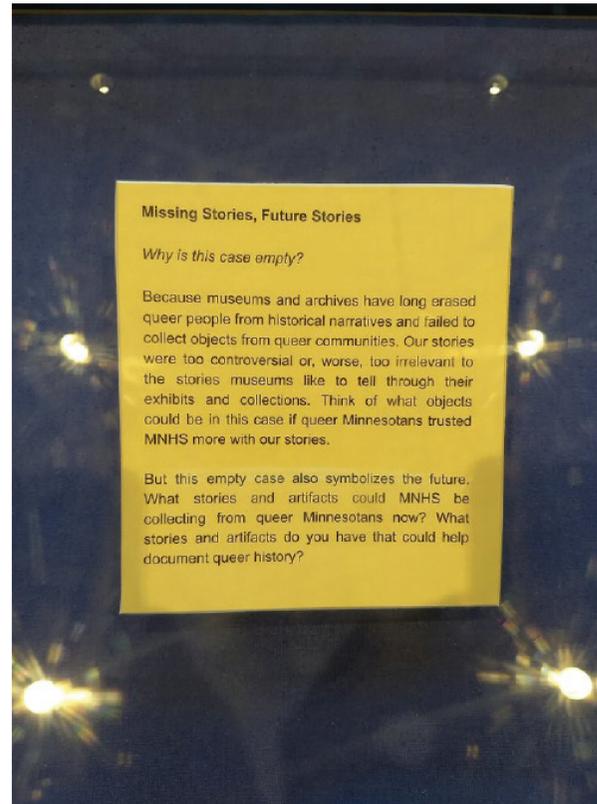
Stonewall's Legacy

Minnesota Historical Society

St Paul, MN

Target audience: Adults and general museum audiences

Label type: Concept



Author Statement

The labels in this exhibit are written with a queer voice, reflecting the points of view of queer staff members at the Minnesota Historical Society as we think about what we've done or failed to do in the past, where we are in the present, and what kind of institution we want to become in the future. Since this exhibit is small and only up for a month, we used it as an experiment in how we talk about our museum's history and the relationships our profession has with historically excluded groups.

Praise from the Jurors

Rebecca: This label has me wishing I could be a witness to this case as historical memorial and metaphor for future community and curatorial/ interpretive action. The acknowledgment of erasure and exclusion in collecting and the hope for new trust from the LGBTQIA+ "we" point of view is an extraordinary statement. It's rare to read a label that communicates such courage and caring.

Missing Stories, Future Stories

Why is this case empty?

Because museums and archives have long erased queer people from historical narratives and failed to collect objects from queer communities. Our stories were too controversial or, worse, too irrelevant to the stories museums like to tell through their exhibits and collections. Think of what objects could be in this case if queer Minnesotans trusted MNHS more with our stories.

But this empty case also symbolizes the future. What stories and artifacts could MNHS be collecting from queer Minnesotans now? What stories and artifacts do you have that could help document queer history?

Writers and editor:

Kevin Boyd, writer (all labels)

Alex Pinigis, writer (wrote some of cell metaphors only)

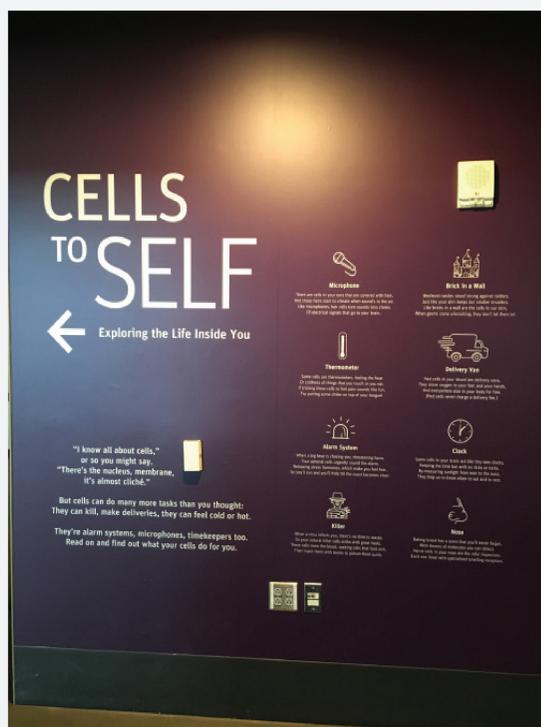
Cells to Self

Exploratorium

San Francisco, CA

Target audience: General audience

Label type: Wall panel



Praise from the Jurors

Swarupa: This was another label that chunked information well. The addition of the use of metaphors could have gone spectacularly wrong. Often, the use of metaphors to get people to connect to a complex or unfamiliar subject ends up only complicating the message further. But this is a skillful use of metaphor because the comparisons allude to concrete and commonplace things. I'll always now think of a skin cell as a protective brick in a wall that keeps germs out. Even though there are a lot of points here and many comparisons, the ideas have stickiness because of the writer's approaches.

Donna: Certainly, every topic does not lend itself to Seussian rhyme. But the label-writer nicely justified both the approach and tone of these labels as being a logical extension of the way scientists explain the intimidating and mysterious topics of cell biology and genetics. The verses are concise, accessible, engaging, and full of fascinating information.

Dan: The refreshing and playful use of Dr. Seuss-like rhymes and instructive analogies with ordinary things made these labels both memorable, comprehensible and enjoyable to read.

Author Statement

Overall I was aiming to make a potentially intimidating subject—cell biology and genetics—feel friendly and accessible. This meant keeping labels fairly short, keeping language at an easy reading level, but also finding opportunities to inject fun and levity. The Cell Metaphors panel began with a realization that scientists use metaphors all the time in talking about what cells do. We simply extended those metaphors into Seussian rhymes. For Probably Chelsea, I wanted to tell the fascinating story behind these cryptic 3D portraits, while also helping visitors examine their ideas about the role of DNA shaping the human face.

CELLS TO SELF

Exploring the Life Inside You

"I know all about cells,"
or so you might say.
"There's the nucleus, membrane,
it's almost cliché."

But cells can do many more tasks than you thought:
They can kill, make deliveries, they can feel cold or hot.
They're alarm systems, microphones, timekeepers too.
Read on and find out what your cells do for you.

Microphone

There are cells in your ears that are covered with hair,
And those hairs start to vibrate when sound's in the air.
Like microphones, hair cells turn sounds into chains
Of electrical signals that go to your brain.

Brick in a Wall

Medieval castles stood strong against raiders,
Just like your skin keeps out smaller invaders.
Like bricks in a wall are the cells in our skin,
When germs come a-knocking, they don't let them in!

Thermometer

Some cells are thermometers, feeling the heat
Or coldness of things that you touch or you eat.
If tricking these cells to feel pain sounds like fun,
Try putting some chiles on top of your tongue!

Delivery Van

Red cells in your blood are delivery vans;
They move oxygen to your feet and your hands,
And everywhere else in your body for free.
(Red cells never charge a delivery fee.)

Alarm System

When a big bear is chasing you, threatening harm,
Your adrenal cells urgently sound the alarm,
Releasing stress hormones, which make you feel fear,
So you'll run and you'll hide till the coast becomes clear.

Clock

Some cells in your brain act like tiny wee clocks,
Keeping the time but with no ticks or tocks.
By measuring sunlight from east to the west,
They help us to know when to eat and to rest.

Killer

When a virus infects you, there's no time to waste;
So your natural killer cells strike with great haste.
These cells roam the blood, seeking cells that look sick,
Then inject them with toxins to poison them quick.

Nose

Baking bread has a scent that you'll never forget,
With dozens of molecules you can detect.
Nerve cells in your nose are the odor inspectors,
Each one lined with specialized smelling receptors.

Writers and editors:

B. Erin Cole, Exhibit Developer, label writer

Cyn Collins, Exhibit Researcher, label editor

Kate Roberts, Senior Exhibit Developer, label editor

First Avenue: Stories of Minnesota's Mainroom

Minnesota History Center

St Paul, MN

Target audience: Adults aged 20-60 with an existing interest in Minnesota popular music.

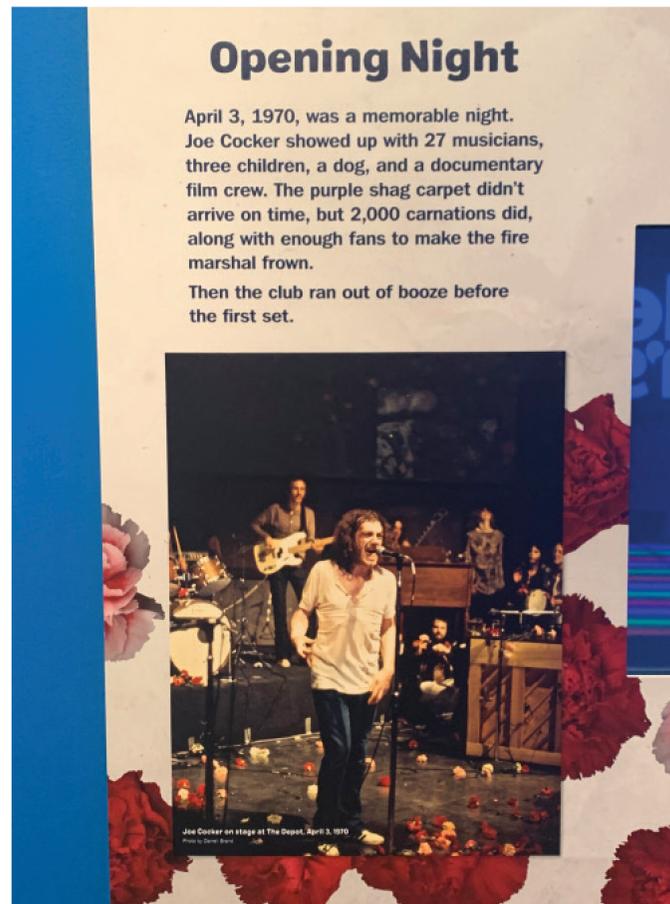
Label type: Object

Praise from the Jurors

Dan: Writing is in pitch perfect 80's-90's 'zine style. Just the right touch of irony, irreverence and enthusiasm to capture the clubgoing, rock scene vibe, as seen through the eyes of a scenester. It's rare that a writing style fits its subject so well in a museum, rarer still when it is authentically funny and evocative of the subculture it describes.

Author Statement

We wanted the labels for this exhibit to be engaging, fun and a little bit cheeky. Visitor testing and formative evaluation told us the main audience for this exhibit would be already familiar with the venue and many of the performers we included in the exhibit. Because of this, we felt free to write labels with a more casual, "insider" voice, like they're written by an older friend who is telling you about something really cool.



Opening Night

April 3, 1970, was a memorable night. Joe Cocker showed up with 27 musicians, three children, a dog and a documentary film crew. The purple shag carpet didn't arrive on time, but 2,000 carnations did, along with enough fans to make the fire marshal frown.

Then the club ran out of booze before the first set.

Writers and editor:

Adrienne Lalli Hills, writer

Heeseon Choi, editor

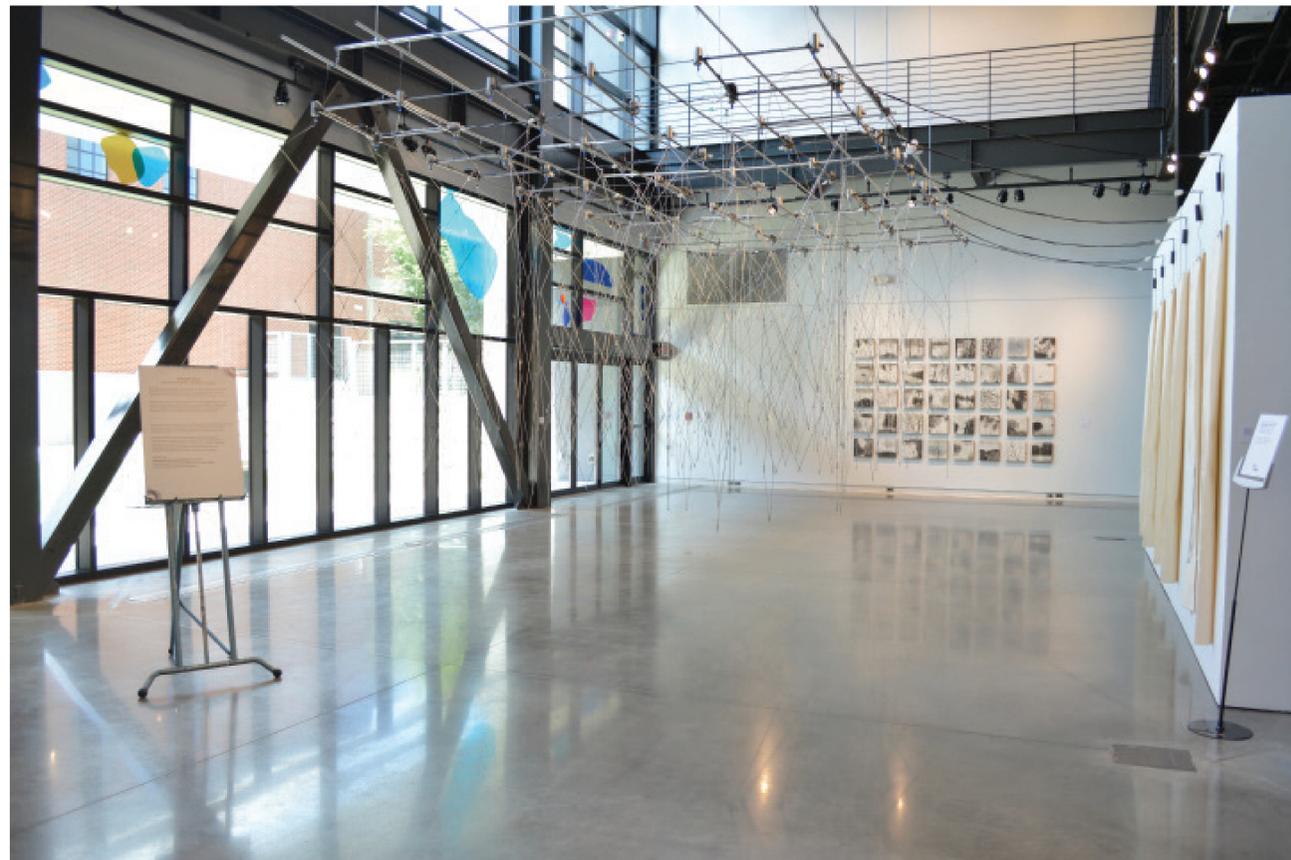
Stillness/Movement: Contemporary Works from the Korean Cultural Center

Ahha Tulsa

Tulsa, OK

Target audience: General audiences, particularly those unfamiliar with non-figurative contemporary art

Label type: Object



Praise from the Jurors

Rebecca: Text that invites you in and shows you how you can move and look and feel and inquire and wonder in the gallery—such a marvelous label! I would like to be transported into this contemporary art gallery to engage in this experience and reflection.

Donna: I've never been a fan of contemporary art. I don't understand it and no one every bothers to explain it. But this label was different. Through clear, concise language that talked directly to me and encouraged active looking, it opened up a world to me that I never thought would happen. The key to achieving this outcome, I believe, is that the label-writers tested them with audiences beforehand, while also ensuring that they were accurate. This, to me, was the perfect blend of staying true to communicating the vision and intent of the artist while also welcoming general audiences (called out as a Target Audience) to access these often unexplained and, therefore off-putting, types of artwork.

Author Statement

Following conversations with curator Heeseon Choi and research of the artists, Adrienne wrote first drafts of copy, which were tested with audiences for ensure that they provided visitors with specific and audience-appropriate strategies for engagement. Final copy was reviewed by Choi for accuracy.

David B. Jang

Deflecting Production (Extended), 2016–2019

Electricity, motors, steel, and custom circuits

Take a slow walk around this massive kinetic sculpture. What sounds do you hear? What shapes and patterns emerge as you look through the field of scissor-like steel arms? Could this pulsing thicket of technology be...alive?

Korean American artist and inventor David B. Jang is fascinated by concepts such as energy, order, motion, and flux. He creates inventive—and at times, comical—sculpture from repurposed materials to question our fraught relationship to commercial products and manmade surroundings.

Writers and editor:

Marla Kinney, Fellow, Department of Prints and Drawings, author
Alex Bortolot, Content Strategist, reviewer
Juline Chevalier, Head of Interpretation and Participatory Spaces, reviewer
Laura Silver, Editor

Color Woodcuts in the Arts and Crafts Era

Minneapolis Institute of Art
Minneapolis, MN

Target audience: General audience and print special interest

Label type: Object

Praise from the Jurors

Rebecca: The sentence transitions in this annotation make for a fine movement of thought. As a reader, I'm carried forward clearly and logically—and with a variety of evocative syntactical choices. Incorporating the artist's voice in the text underlines the main idea about her stylistic choices and enhances my connection to her through story technique.

Donna: The storytelling approach of these labels is a laudable direction for an art museum. Using this approach, the label-writers achieved their purpose of connecting visitors with the artists' lives and their choices in creating these artworks. In each label, the story comes first, setting up an emotionally compelling opportunity for visitors to see the people behind the artwork. The labels also encourage active looking, ultimately increasing both visitors' immediate engagement with the piece and their long-term memory of that encounter.

Elizabeth Colborne

American, 1885–1948

Lumber Mills in Bellingham Bay, c. 1933

Color woodcut

2017.126.1

In 1933, Elizabeth Colborne spent an unusually cold and rainy summer at a cabin in the Pacific Northwest. "I did not come down here to burn up trees but to paint them," she wrote in her journal. Trees were her favorite subject, a fact that makes this scene of logs awaiting the sawmills at Bellingham, Washington, especially pointed.

Colborne had gone to live with relatives in Bellingham after being orphaned at age 12. In 1903 she moved to New York to study with Arthur Wesley Dow, and his advice to simplify is evident in this bird's-eye view. It's here in the flat, flame-colored palette, the abstracted shapes on the dock, and the silhouetted smokestacks, which send their white plumes wafting off the page.

Author Statement

MIA's goal is to draw a sense of emotional connection between the visitor, the artwork, and the artwork's creator. This calls for a focus on storytelling, with an emphasis on the artists and the choices they make or the conditions they faced when making their artworks. In this exhibition, close study of the artworks themselves was rewarded by a better understanding of print techniques and materials; the labels cue close looking, framing what the visitor sees in terms of the artists' creative choices.

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Writers and editor:

Diana Bell-Kite, writer

Doris McLean Bates, editor

QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women's Voices Through Quilts

North Carolina Museum of History

Raleigh, NC

Target audience: Adults

Label type: Introductory

Praise from the Jurors

Swarupa: This is an excellent label with its mix of sentence lengths and content twists.

It sets up a conflict and builds tension. You almost think you know what to expect from the list of social issues in the 3rd sentence, but the last word—"exhaustion"—surprises. The next para sets up a challenge to learn to listen and follows with a list of assertions. The repeating sentence structures are lulling. You think you know where the paragraph is going, even through the question, "What can quilts tell us about their makers?" But another surprise—the last question knocks you out.



Author Statement

The curator wrote each object label as a self-contained story, with key details such as date, maker, location, material, and size appearing in a standardized bar along the label's base. The body text engaged with each quiltmaker's story in an inquisitive, non-authoritative tone, often addressing how curators know what they know and asking visitors to ponder the unanswerable questions that many of these bedcovers provoke. Section and subsection labels addressed larger themes about the sorts of messages—both deliberate and unintended—that quilts impart about their makers.

QuiltSpeak **Uncovering Women's Voices Through Quilts**

Quilts speak. They reveal voices from the past—specifically women's voices. Some of these voices have long been silenced by illiteracy, racial oppression, gender inequity, and exhaustion.

But if we know how to listen, we can understand what the quilts are saying. They speak of skill and power. They speak of economy and ingenuity. They speak of memory and forgetting. They reveal the experiences of women whose lives skirted the periphery of written history. What can quilts tell us about their makers? What can they tell us about ourselves?

Writer and editor:

Diana Bell-Kite, writer

Doris McLean Bates, editor

QuiltSpeak: Uncovering Women's Voices Through Quilts

North Carolina Museum of History

Raleigh, NC

Target audience: Adults

Label type: Object



Author Statement

The curator wrote each object label as a self-contained story, with key details such as date, maker, location, material, and size appearing in a standardized bar along the label's base. The body text engaged with each quiltmaker's story in an inquisitive, non-authoritative tone, often addressing how curators know what they know and asking visitors to ponder the unanswerable questions that many of these bedcovers provoke. Section and subsection labels addressed larger themes about the sorts of messages—both deliberate and unintended—that quilts impart about their makers.

PAINSTAKING PERFECTIONISM

Louisa Green Furches was not an easygoing person. In 1852 she began making a quilt for her upcoming wedding, causing several stressful months for her family. Quilting at 11 stitches per inch for hours each day, Furches's fingers began to "fester," her daughter recalled in a 1951 letter. Louisa's mother and sister Sarah pitched in to help. But Louisa, concerned about the quality of her sister's stitches, "took Sarah's out."

Like many elite women, Furches took great pride in her sewing. She won a cash prize for her quilting at the Davie County Fair and gained a reputation in her community as one "who did beautiful needlework," one relative later remembered.

Tennessee Beauty

1852

Louisa Green Furches (Etchison), 1830–1911

Davie County

87 x 87

Given in memory and by the family of Susan Furches

Etchison Eaton

1976.118.1



Writer and editor:

Jacqueline Eyl, writer/editor

Anna Slafer, writer/editor

Alexis Albion, writer/editor

Tony and Jonna Mendez, writer/editor

Exfiltration: The Canadian Caper

International Spy Museum

Washington, DC

Target audience: General audience

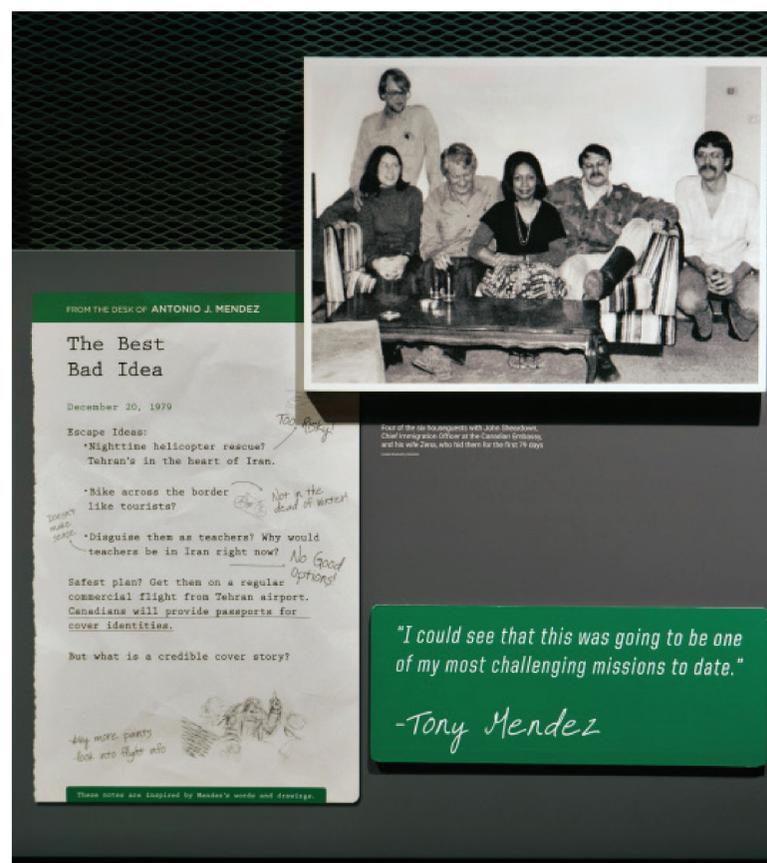
Label type Concept

Praise from the Jurors

Swarupa: A great, fast-paced and personalized use of language. I could do without so many exclamation points but they probably serve to push the sense of urgency along.

Donna: I've seen labels written in the form of personal notes or journal entries, created to be fun, immersive, and readable. But these often tend to be a graphic conceit—they are made up. Rarely does a museum have the extraordinary opportunity to re-create the actual journal entries to become the basis for a group of labels. This approach takes visitors on a step-by-step journey through this story, which is a perfect approach for this topic. The labels are clear, readable, clever, fascinating, and powerful in their sense of authenticity.

Dan: This label does an excellent job of stripping down a real CIA predicament to its essentials and providing how different options are weighed and rejected in a crisis situation. The tone is energetic, irreverent and the sequence of steps are easy to follow. I wanted to find out what happened at the end.



Author Statement

Tony Mendez, the CIA officer responsible for this operation, was a SPY Museum friend and Board Member. We knew we had an extraordinary opportunity to tell this story in his voice – so visitors could hear how a real spy carried out a real spy mission. We worked with Mendez to write these labels as if they were his contemporaneous “notes,” taking the visitor step-by-step through his thought process. Hand-written comments and doodles (some his actual sketches) added drama and authenticity. Tony Mendez died a few months before this exhibition opened. These labels help preserve his know-how, creativity, and humor.

The Best Bad Idea

December 20, 1979

Escape Ideas:

- Nighttime helicopter rescue? Tehran's in the heart of Iran. [handwritten: Too Risky!]
- Bike across the border like tourists? [handwritten: Not in the dead of winter!]
- Disguise them as teachers? Why would teachers be in Iran right now? [handwritten: No Good Options!]

Safest plan? Get them on a regular commercial flight from Tehran airport. Canadians will provide passports for cover identities.

But what is a credible cover story?

[handwritten notes:]

-buy more paints

-look into flight info

Writer and editor:

Jacqueline Eyl, writer/editor

Anna Slafer, writer/editor

Alexis Albion, writer/editor

Tony and Jonna Mendez, writer/editor

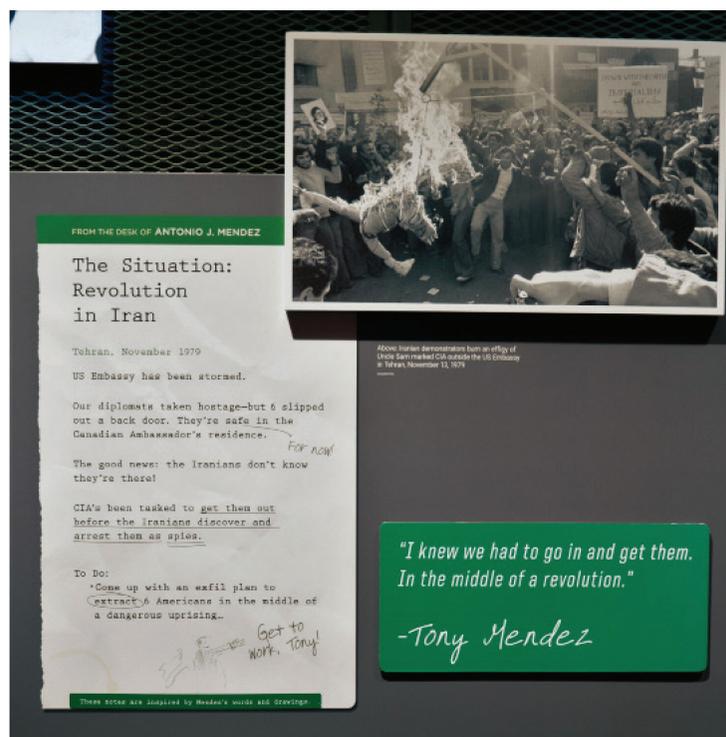
Exfiltration: The Canadian Caper

International Spy Museum

Washington, DC

Target audience: General audience

Label type Concept



Author Statement

Tony Mendez, the CIA officer responsible for this operation, was a SPY Museum friend and Board member. We knew we had an extraordinary opportunity to tell this story in his voice – so visitors could hear how a real spy carried out a real spy mission. We worked with Mendez to write these labels as if they were his contemporaneous “notes,” taking the visitor step-by-step through his thought process. Hand-written comments and doodles (some his actual sketches) added drama and authenticity. Tony Mendez died a few months before this exhibition opened. These labels help preserve his know-how, creativity, and humor.

Praise from the Jurors

Swarupa: What a great—fast-paced, abbreviated use of language that gets across the urgency of the situation.

Donna: I've seen labels written in the form of personal notes or journal entries, created to be fun, immersive, and readable. But these often tend to be a graphic conceit—they are made up. Rarely does a museum have the extraordinary opportunity to re-create the actual journal entries to become the basis for a group of labels. This approach takes visitors on a step-by-step journey through this story, which is a perfect approach for this topic. The labels are clear, readable, clever, fascinating, and powerful in their sense of authenticity. (NOTE: This comment is general feedback on the exhibition)

Dan: This label does an excellent job of stripping down a real CIA predicament to its essentials and providing how different options are weighed and rejected in a crisis situation. The tone is energetic, irreverent and the sequence of steps are easy to follow. I wanted to find out what happened at the end. (NOTE: This comment is general feedback on the exhibition)

The Situation: Revolution in Iran

Tehran, November 1979

US Embassy has been stormed.

Our diplomats taken hostage—but 6 slipped out a back door. They're safe in the Canadian Ambassador's residence

[handwritten: For now!]

The good news: the Iranians don't know they're there!

CIA's been tasked to get them out before the Iranians discover and arrest them as spies.

To Do:

- Come up with an exfil plan to extract [circled] 6 Americans in the middle of a dangerous uprising...

[handwritten] Get to work, Tony!

Writer and editor:

Juline Chevalier, Head of Interpretation, writer, reviewer
Teri Greeves, Kiowa Artist and Co-Curator, writer
Jill Ahlberg Yohe, Curator of Native American Art, writer
Dakota Hoska, Curatorial Assistant, writer
Laura Silver, Editor

Hearts of Our People: Native Women Artists

Minneapolis Institute of Art
Minneapolis, MN

Target audience: General audience and visitors who identify as Native American

Praise from the Jurors

Rebecca: I am grateful for the present tense of this label and its intimate translation so as to clearly communicate about Kiowa cultural context and worldview.

Swarupa: There is a lot to appreciate in this label. The writing is factual and conveys information about cultural practice and beliefs. It encourages looking as the baseline for assigning and discovering meaning. But the writing is also descriptive and somewhat poetic in ways that activate visitors to imagine the cradleboard in use. The translation into a Native American language deserves note. Translations make labels longer and look less approachable. Linguists' diacritical marks can convey even more "foreignness." While translation is often offered to increase accessibility across audiences, presumably the actual number of people who can recognize and read the Kiowa language is incredibly small. All of these standards of label writing are violated here. But here the translation here isn't about access, it's about visibility and viability. In and of itself, the translation adds many more layers of meaning and impact for this label and this exhibition's subject matter.

Donna: These labels provide a rare and unique portal to the world of Native women artists. Some seem to come firsthand from the artists' own voices, others seem to recount the experiences of Native women. Either way, they offer both a powerful glimpse into this world for visitors who are unfamiliar with it and a confirmation of the resilience and achievements of Native women artists for visitors who identify as Native American. According to the label-writers, the museum's visitors responded positively to both the tone of the text and the inclusion of Native languages.

Dan: Instead of describing what these objects are, these labels in beautiful, simple prose, explain what they mean from a Native perspective. Each label provides a window into a certain way of thinking about the world, the things people make, who the makers are, and the values these things represent. Very rare in the representation of indigenous material culture in a museum context.

Author Statement

For this exhibition we worked to center the voice and experience of Native women artists. We were sure not to shy away from difficult histories, but we also focused on the resilience and successes of Native communities. We translated many exhibition labels into the Native languages of their object's maker, and this encouraged us to keep labels to around 100 words each. We got a lot of positive feedback from visitors on the tone of the text and the inclusion of Native languages.



Kiowa artist

Tháp Pán:dòp

Hide, wood, glass beads, cloth, sinew

Gáui pán:dòp àn gyà àu:mè í:p'áugyá tsánhél dé:én. Àn bóngyá gáui máyí gyà àu:mè dè dáu:tsáigyà án dàu:, í: p'áu:gyábèdó. Pánò áidèn:gàu gyà a:sàuihedàu nàu Pán:ò: gyà sàuihé:dàu nàu gyà àuñyàdàu. Gáuimáyí àn gyà bó:gùtdó hàundé sân gyà màuhêmdàu. Pán:dòp gyà aùm:dàu gàu sân màù dé. Sân:dàu ét bón:góm gàu ét t'àu:hát . Tsólhàu àn sân:dàu bét Gáuitón:hái:dèt'àu. Bét kí:á hàidèt'àu:, énhàudèdàum:tai.

Kiowa artist

Hide cradleboard, c. 1890

Hide, wood, glass beads, cloth, sinew

Denver Museum of Nature & Science, AC.3290

This Kiowa cradleboard is a gift created for a new human being. The beadwork is the voice of a Kiowa woman who, through her intentions and prayers, created it to honor new life. While three of the designs on the green background mirror each other, three abstractions on the blue side repeat but are subtly different. In her pattern, this artist incorporated symbols to teach the child about the Kiowa universe. The cradleboard is designed to carry a child upright, so he or she is a participant in the family's daily activities. By watching and listening, the child could absorb Kiowa language and ways of being in the world.

Writers and editor:

Seba Ahmad Azzahir, Community Curator, writer
Elder Atum Azzahit, Community Curator, writer
Sister Sandjock Likine, Community Curator, writer
Elder Semerit Seankh-Ka, Community Curator, writer
Brother Kemii Aptezi, Community Curator, writer
Brother Minkara Tezet, Community Curator, writer
Juline Chevalier, Head of Interpretation, reviewer
Seba Ahmad Azzahir, Community Curator, writer
Elder Atum Azzahit, Community Curator, writer
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Elder Semerit Seankh-Ka, Community Curator, writer
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Brother Minkara Tezet, Community Curator, writer
Juline Chevalier, Head of Interpretation, reviewer
Diane Richard, Editor
Alex Bortolot, Content Strategist, reviewer

The Enduring Soul

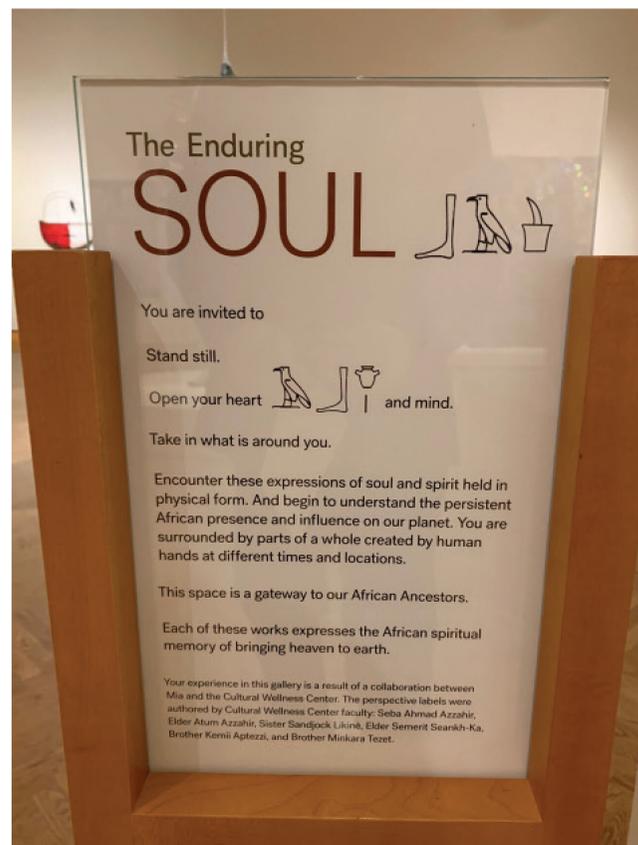
Minneapolis Institute of Art
Minneapolis, MN

Target audience: General audience and visitors of African heritage

Label type: Explains the unique nature of this gallery and prepares visitors for a different experience

Praise from the Jurors

Dan: The mixture of clear and economical descriptions of the artists' processes and intentions, but also the inclusion of short, pithy quotes set these labels apart. through the label in a way that does not make assumptions about who visitors are. Visitors have just enough historical and political context to carry along with a question that puts them at the center of work to confront shared and contested histories of this country.



Author Statement

For this exhibition, Mia collaborated with a local organization called the Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) that centers African knowledge systems as tools of education and healing. CWC staff helped select and place artworks in the gallery, and they authored the labels. CWC staff and Mia's head of interpretation met in depth to discuss the artworks and their significance and meaning. The head of interpretation drafted text based on these conversations, and the CWC staff used that as points of departure for their own labels which then went through some light editing before becoming the final label text.

The Enduring Soul

The Enduring Soul

You are invited to

Stand still.

Open your heart and mind.

Take in what is around you.

Encounter these expressions of soul and spirit held in physical form. And begin to understand the persistent African presence and influence on our planet. You are surrounded by parts of a whole created by human hands at different times and locations.

This space is a gateway to our African Ancestors.

Each of these works expresses the African spiritual memory of bringing heaven to earth.

Your experience in this gallery is a result of a collaboration between Mia and the Cultural Wellness Center. The perspective labels were authored by the Cultural Wellness Center Faculty: Seba Ahmad Azzahir, Elder Atum Azzahit, Sister Sandjock Likine, Elder Semerit Seankh-Ka, Brother Kemii Aptezi, and Brother Minkara Tezet.

Writers and editor:

Seba Ahmad Azzahir, Community Curator, writer
Elder Atum Azzahit, Community Curator, writer
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Alex Bortolot, Content Strategist, reviewer

The Enduring Soul

Minneapolis Institute of Art
Minneapolis, MN

Target audience: General audience and visitors of African heritage

Label type: Object

Praise from the Jurors

Dan: The mixture of clear and economical descriptions of the artists' processes and intentions, but also the inclusion of short, pithy quotes set these labels apart.



Author Statement

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Lonnie Holley

American, born 1950

Pressure from the Burn, 1995

Found wood, fire hose, nails

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Fund and gift of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation from the William S. Arnett Collection 2019.16.11

Lonnie Holley takes discarded and wasted materials from our modern human experiences and transforms them into something enlivened with our present lived experience.

Holley's work transforms what would be trash into enduring expressions of the soul. He converts human debris into lessons of purpose and value. "Having to put out a fire inside yourself, no matter how bad the blaze you been in, you got to go on carrying your burden," Holley states.

His work forces the question: What is in your true nature that endures in spite of brutality and horror in this modern life, where everything will eventually become trash, garbage, or debris? The pressure from the internal burn can be unbearable. Yet it is this very pressure that creates the elemental that produces the catalyst for personal and social transformation.

Writers and editor:

Seba Ahmad Azzahir, Community Curator, writer
Elder Atum Azzahit, Community Curator, writer
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The Enduring Soul

Minneapolis Institute of Art
Minneapolis, MN

Target audience: General audience and visitors of African heritage

Label type: Object

Praise from the Jurors

Rebecca: The language of this label as storytelling and testimony offers good interpretation practice while engaging the kinds of syntax, rhythms, and compelling meaning we find in expressive literary texts. The speaker's reflexivity is powerful. The text reminds me that labels can serve to preserve histories as well as communicate them.

Dan: The mixture of clear and economical descriptions of the artists' processes and intentions, but also the inclusion of short, pithy quotes set these labels apart.



Author Statement

For this exhibition, Mia collaborated with a local organization called the Cultural Wellness Center (CWC) that centers African knowledge systems as tools of education and healing. CWC staff helped select and place artworks in the gallery, and they authored the labels. CWC staff and Mia's head of interpretation met in depth to discuss the artworks and their significance and meaning. The head of interpretation drafted text based on these conversations, and the CWC staff used that as points of departure for their own labels which then went through some light editing before becoming the final label text.

Joe Minter

American, born 1943

Voyage in Chains, 2000

Mixed media

Private collection; promised gift on long-term loan to Mia L2019.154.2

The secret force of a powerful primeval energy within the soul. Voyage in Chains connects me to my birth in the Mississippi Delta in 1943: beautiful circular motion of objects used by sharecropping farmers to cultivate the hard rock dry lands in rural Mississippi.

I remember my father's daily motions, rhythms, and expressions of joy at sunrise. I remember my father's cosmic spirituality and laborious meditation, a sacred tradition of hard work and unceasing effort. My father and ancestors of his generation came to a place of the sounds and rhythms of the souls' wisdom.

The pitchfork, the hoe, the shovel, the irons: a quadruple expression of symbols evoking the core consciousness of man's soul. A visible manifestation of the hand of man. The will of man connected to the forces in creation. The serpent's tongue probing the heavens in alignment with the soul of creator in creation.

Writers and editor:

Omar Sharif, Poet and Writer, writer
Roderick L. Carey, PhD, Assistant Professors, University of Delaware Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, writer
Amelia Wiggins, Assistant Director of Learning & Engagement, editor
Heather Campbell Coyle, Chief Curator and Curator of American Art, editor

Posing Beauty in African American Culture

Delaware Art Museum
Wilmington, DE

Target audience: General audience and visitors of African heritage

Label type: Object



Author Statement

For these labels, we invited twelve African American community members to write personal responses to the exhibition's photographs. Exhibition goals were to encourage visitors to consider ideals of beauty: how those ideals have changed over time; how they intersect with race, gender, and class; how artists shape them; and visitors' personal reflections on beauty. The Museum regularly integrates community-created content into exhibitions to integrate multiple perspectives and sources of expertise, and to build connections with local audiences. Exit surveys taken over 14 months show the majority of visitors are interested in reading community members' responses to works of art.

Rude Boy from Back in the Days, 1980

Jamel Shabazz (born 1960)

Digital color-coupler print
Courtesy of the artist

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION

Rude boy, A New York City b-boy with a West Indian "accent." More than likely by way of London. His swag not too much different than mine. Me being a native New Yorker more inclined to rock my Adidas rather than a pair British Knights or Clarks from England. Though I have wore my share of this iconic footwear. Both of us symbols of Street Side Royalty. Debonair, donned in Jewels and Jems fit for a King. Pioneers of a sub culture that would become a major part of American Pop Culture and have influence on the world over.

There are three major pillars of hip hop. Fashion, Dance and music. And there is a little piece of the rude boy in every one.

The rapper Slick Rick the Ruler (Richard Waters) is one of the music genre's most iconic figures and most certainly a Rude Boy.

—Omar Sharif, Poet and Writer

Praise from the Jurors

Rebecca: I am moved by the spirit of "own voices" authorship behind this label. The exhibition copy producer made the clear, poignant decision to step beyond an institutional point of view to solicit, center, and amplify multiple voices from the museum's greater community in response to the photographs on display. This subsequent powerful, knowing, and expressive first-person text by a local poet invites me to read as an engaged listener. The effect is immediate.

Dan: Exceptionally compelling prose drawn from the primary community represented. These labels have a flair and power rare in museum labels elsewhere. They convey a firsthand experience with the subjects portrayed and this invests the descriptions with an emotional immediacy and authenticity that is often lacking in more dispassionate labels.

Writers and editor:

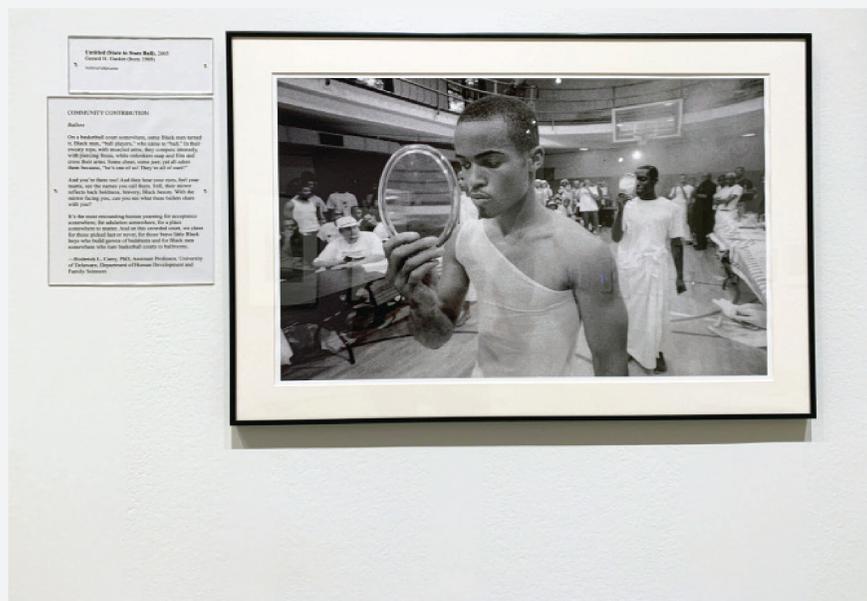
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Untitled (State to State Ball), 2005

Gerard H. Gaskin (born 1969)

Archival inkjet print

COMMUNITY CONTRIBUTION

Ballers

On a basketball court somewhere, some Black men turned it. Black men, "ball players," who came to "ball." In their sweaty tops, with muscled arms, they compete intensely, with piercing focus, while onlookers snap and film and cross their arms. Some cheer, some jeer; yet all adore them because, "he's one of us! They're all of ours!"

And you're there too! And they hear your eyes, feel your taunts, see the names you call them. Still, their mirror reflects back boldness, bravery, Black beauty. With the mirror facing you, can you see what these ballers share with you?

It's the most resounding human yearning for acceptance somewhere, for adulation somewhere, for a place somewhere to matter. And on this crowded court, we cheer for those picked last or never, for those brave little Black boys who build gowns of bedsheets and for Black men somewhere who turn basketball courts to ballrooms.

—Roderick L. Carey, PhD, Assistant Professor, University of Delaware, Department of Human Development and Family Sciences

Writers and editor:

John Gordon, writer

KC Miller, editor

The Public Landing

The Cincinnati Museum Center

Cincinnati, OH

Target audience: General audience and visitors of African heritage

Label type: Concept

Praise from the Jurors

Swarupa: Great beginning and endings. By repeating the phrase take a letter, the writing mimics the repetitive and tedious process of typesetting. The final sentence does the same but without repeating the wording in the beginning.

Author Statement

Despite being the writer for this exhibit, I've never actually been to Cincinnati. But with the help of CMC partners, content experts, and SMM's exhibit developers, we crafted a lot of great stories to tell about the history of Cincinnati and its Public Landing. CMC's exciting exhibit space and depth of knowledge, along with accessible, whimsical, and elegant graphic design from SMM's Sarah Zwier, made these labels a lot of fun to work on, and I'm very proud of how they turned out (these labels and the rest of the exhibit—it was really hard to pick any favorites).



Public Landing

Section: Print Shop

Component: 0707_Typesetting Room Environment

Typesetter Focus Label

(Word count: 7-10 word headline, 50 word copy)

0707-GR01

Take a letter, please. And another. And another. And . . .

Typesetting was tedious work. Typesetters had to lay out each page one metal letter at a time. Everything needed to be backward, too, to produce a readable mirror image when pressed to paper. After printing, an apprentice typesetter removed, cleaned, and returned the letters to their proper drawers. One by one.