

16.04.2025  
BEN LUKE

## The Big Review | Paris Noir at the Centre Pompidou ★★★★★

This carefully paced show—one of the last before the Centre Pompidou’s five-year closure—marks a turning point in French exhibitions addressing the country’s colonial past

**Ben Luke**

16 April 2025



The exhibition *Paris Noir* is divided into 15 sections and features 150 artists from Africa, the Americas and the Caribbean who established themselves in Paris

Photo: © Hervé Véronèse

**Total star rating: ★★★★★**

The works: ★★★★★

The show: ★★★★★

“

**[The exhibition tells a notorious story, but somehow it’s a story that has been unpacked and promoted everywhere in the world but in France**

Alicia Knock, curator

The voice of James Baldwin echoes through the galleries of the Centre Pompidou as an excerpt from Terence Dixon’s documentary *Meeting the Man: James Baldwin in Paris* (1970) plays on a repeating loop in the first room of the exhibition *Paris Noir*. But within the labyrinthine arrangement of rooms you hear the great American novelist, activist and thinker almost everywhere. “Sooner or later, all the wretched of the Earth, in one way or another, next Tuesday or next Wednesday, will destroy the cobblestones on which London and Rome and Paris are built,” he says. “The world will change, because it has to change.”

Alicia Knock, the lead curator of the exhibition, told me on *The Week in Art* podcast that the exhibition tells a “notorious story, but somehow it’s a story that has been unpacked and promoted everywhere in the world but in France”. She expands on this in her catalogue introduction, noting that “while Paris has been a unique space of solidarity between Africa and the Americas, France has never highlighted its role in the emergence of Black cultural practices”. She adds that the artists in the exhibition “are embedded in a historical context—that of colonisation and racism, where solidarities were formed—that art history in France has so far failed to take into account”. This despite major shows staged over the past few decades in the US, UK and elsewhere in Europe.

The exhibition’s timing, just months before the Pompidou closes for five years, is not coincidental. Knock says that it is an important show “symbolically” because it can “announce hopefully what this new institution will be”. In the catalogue, she writes of another desired effect for the “panoramic” ambition of the show: to trigger a corrective process that will see French museums and academic institutions “acquire, study, and publish on” these artists.

### Scholarly and exuberant

One feels these aspirations throughout the show, which is both deeply scholarly and visually exuberant. Broadly chronological, its 15 sections fan out from a central, circular hub dedicated to Édouard Glissant, the Martinican poet and philosopher whose “*Tout-Monde*” or “all-world” concept identified a “relational poetics”, where exchange and engagement across geographies and cultures reshape society. Embodying this concept is Glissant’s connection to the Cuban sculptor Agustín Cárdenas, whose wooden sculpture *Couple Antillais* (Antilles couple, 1957) at once reflects the continuation of Surrealist ideas of the fragmented and symbolic body—there are aesthetic rhymes with early Alberto Giacometti—while also exploring a totemic, spiritual form that deepens the cultural contexts into which Surrealism migrated.

Cárdenas’s sculptures echo the forms of his compatriot, the Caribbean Surrealist linchpin Wifredo Lam, for whom the writings of Aimé Césaire were especially important. For Lam, the decolonial project was an explicit subject: in *Umbral* (1950), a painting of three angular beings, comprised of Baule masks from the Ivory Coast fused with African Cuban symbols hovering over a gloomy background, he sought to “disturb the dreams of the exploiters”.

Lam and Cárdenas are among several artists who appear through the show as anchors amid a dazzlingly diverse selection. Among others are Roland Dorcély, the Haitian painter whose *Leda and the Swan* (around 1958)—one of a series he made responding to the Greek myth—brings an unmistakably Black body into sensual engagement with the white waterbird, and Beauford Delaney, the American-born painter who came to Paris at the behest of Baldwin and made striking portraits of him, before building a career that also included depictions of other LGBTQ+ people and abstractions that he called “swirling”. Delaney is the show’s best represented artist.

Many of those in the exhibition were new to me and I imagine few visitors will recognise the majority of artists. Perhaps inevitably, the most familiar are those from the US, who have already been recognised institutionally and academically, unlike many others in the show. Knock and her fellow curators have interspersed these better known figures astutely throughout, illustrating their connections within wider networks. Thus, artists like Romare Bearden, Gordon Parks, Ed Clark and Ming Smith root the viewer within the room’s subject.

## Haunted power

Among the great revelations were Dorcély and another Haitian, Luce Turnier, who was Dorcély's sister-in-law. Characteristically among many artists here, Turnier travelled between locations, including her homeland, Canada and the US. But her 1960s collages, made from cut-up roneographs—a proto-photocopying technology—were made in Paris and respond in part to construction sites in the post-war city. They have a haunted power.

Turnier's work appears in the first of three rooms dedicated to abstraction. And despite such an abundance of artists, the show is carefully paced, with an ebb and flow between themes and artistic languages that creates moments of relative visual rest, to ease a complex journey. For all that this is a polyphonic exhibition, it is not a cacophonous one.

Following that first “Leap into abstraction” are sections on artists taking their Parisian experiences to Senegal and Nigeria, and self-organising artistic hubs and events, then Pan-African solidarities as expressed in trans-continental protest movements, followed by the influence of jazz, that most diasporic of musical and cultural forms. And so it goes on. Four commissions, all from artists who were part of the historic period, add a new layer of reflection tinged with melancholy, given the fraught politics in which the free association and multicultural productivity abundant in the show is rejected by large parts of contemporary French society.

And *Paris Noir* crucially avoids an obvious trap: it does not perpetuate colonial structures, portraying Paris as the gracious hub for grateful visitors. It clearly establishes the city as a mobile site rather than a contained one, a city of mutual exchange—a relational centre, as Glissant would have had it.

Its ambition is indeed abundantly panoramic, to use Knock's term. As a consequence, it is impossible to take in fully in a single visit. Some artists are not best served by their scant presence here, through one or two works. But this is part of that urgent challenge to other institutions. The Pompidou has thrown down the gauntlet in this fascinating show; now, in its five-year absence, it is up to others to pick it up.



**The Pompidou has thrown down the gauntlet in this fascinating show; now, in its five-year absence, it is up to others to pick it up**

## What the other critics said

In *Le Monde*, **Philippe Dagen** states that it is “high time” for such a show. He adds that because it is necessary to “understand the historical, geographical, political and economic contexts” [↗](#), it would be best to visit twice, and regrets that the exhibition makes little room for younger artists. He hopes that the Pompidou will begin again as it has ended: “with Africa in full view”. In *Le Figaro*, meanwhile, **Valerie Duponchelle** describes “a vast constellation of artists and ideas”, adding: “One senses... an urgency to say everything, demonstrate everything, know everything, and save everything, without establishing a hierarchy of values between artists, as the art market does.” [↗](#)

• *Paris Noir: Artistic Circulations and Anti-Colonial Resistance, 1950-2000* [↗](#), Centre Pompidou, Paris, until 30 June