

## **Major New Exhibition Exploring Representations of Race in Contemporary Art Will Open at the ICA at VCU in October 2019**

### ***Great Force* will Feature Works by 21 Artists Including New Commissions by Tomashi Jackson, Charlotte Lagarde, and Xaviera Simmons**

**Richmond, VA – January 22, 2019** - In October 2019, the Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) will present *Great Force*, an exhibition that uses painting, sculpture, photography, video, and performance to examine the reality of race in the United States. The exhibition will feature new commissions and recent work by an intergenerational group of 21 established and emerging artists, including Pope.L, Sable Elyse Smith, Charlotte Lagarde, and Tomashi Jackson.

Borrowing its title from a quote by novelist and social critic James Baldwin, "The great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do," *Great Force* explores how contemporary artists contend with persistent black-white racial bias and inequality in the U.S. The exhibition is curated by ICA Assistant Curator Amber Esseiva, an alumna of VCUarts. *Great Force* will be on view at the ICA at VCU from October 2019 through January 2020.

For the duration of *Great Force*, the ICA will convene community discussions about race, representations of the oppressed and the empowered, and how art can become a tool in pursuit of visibility.

"From the long-lingering effects of the U.S. slave trade and the Civil War to the current prison industrial complex, to the rise of movements such as Black Lives Matter, questions of visibility, invisibility, and justice are central issues for artists, curators, and U.S. citizens living and working today," said Esseiva. "*Great Force* grapples with these questions and their consequences, and offers a range of perspectives that challenge narratives of identity and power."

"We hope that *Great Force* can be a powerful contribution to public dialogue about race locally and nationally, and a picture of how perceptions of race function in our everyday lives," said Dominic Willsdon, executive director of the ICA. "The concerns of this show have always been part of the American experience, but are timely in new ways."

*Great Force* will showcase a variety of artistic mediums that ask audiences to consider how artists are choosing to appear in, engage with, and withdraw from racialized representations that dominate discourse in America. Emphasizing the perspectives of artists of color, the exhibition will feature new and recent work from a prolific group of artists that includes Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon, Tony Cokes, and Paul Stephen Benjamin, as well as a group of emerging artists, many of whom will have their museum debut as part of this exhibition.

Seminal works like Pope.L's *The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 5 Years, 1 Street (Segment #1: December 29, 2001)*, 2001-06 which documents the artist's nine year effort to crawl the length of

New York City's Broadway while wearing a capeless Superman costume representing a Black man's struggle to pursue the American dream, will be on view alongside new work commissioned by the ICA. These projects include:

- A site-specific public drawing on the ICA's glass-filled facade by **Tomashi Jackson** (b. 1980) that will displace images of private labor in public spaces through mark-making, figuration, and erasure.
- A multimedia installation by **Xaviera Simmons** (b. 1974) including images, furniture, and sculptural works that present a vision of American policy through the lens of disenfranchisement and oppression.

*Great Force* will present performances and site-responsive commissions that engage Richmond residents and activate urban historical sites, such as **Alexandra Bell's** (b. 1983) *Counternarratives*, a site-specific work that explores how racist narratives are perpetuated through language and news media. *Counternarratives* will be installed on several buildings around Richmond. Additionally, filmmaker and visual artist **Charlotte Lagarde** (b. 1968) will invite the Richmond community to participate in her collaborative city-wide project *Colonial White*, which asks participants to photograph a white paint chip in a place, with an object, or in a situation that embodies whiteness to them.

A robust program of artist performances and public events related to *Great Force* will bring together thought leaders from the Richmond community and beyond. **Claudia Rankine** (b. 1963) will present her *Racial Imaginary Institute*, staged within the ICA's Learning Lab. An interdisciplinary cultural laboratory that addresses race as an invented concept and explores its role in our daily lives, the *Institute* will host free public reading groups and discussions responding to the exhibition's themes. ICA Assistant Curator of Film and founder of the Afrikana Independent Film Festival Enjoli Moon will organize a cinema series to coincide with the exhibition. Additional programs and details will follow.

### **Exhibition Publication**

*Great Force* will be accompanied by a fully illustrated and interactive publication produced by Silas Munro and Brian Johnson, both native Virginians who run the bi-coastal studio Poly-Mode. Taking design and typographic inspiration from W.E.B. Du Bois' migration maps and charts, the publication will include contributions by Nicholas Mirzoeff, Claudia Rankine's *Racial Imaginary Institute*, and Rebecca Walker.

### **About the Institute for Contemporary Art**

*The Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University is a non-collecting institution that showcases a fresh slate of changing exhibitions and programs. The ICA is a place to explore new ideas, providing an open forum for dialogue and collaboration across the region and the world. Mirroring the increasing emphasis on cross-disciplinary studies across VCU, the ICA has created a new environment for artists and scholars from around the world to test ideas. As a university-wide resource, the ICA links campus, community, and contemporary artists by supporting local creative communities, engaging an international network of contemporary artists and organizations, and*

*encouraging collaborations with VCU departments, faculty, students, and the Richmond community. The ICA is a responsive institution that offers a broad range of artistic perspectives from across the world, with the goal of questioning assumptions and encouraging critical discourse. For more information on the ICA, please visit [icavcu.org](http://icavcu.org).*

#### **About VCU and VCU School of the Arts**

*VCU is a major, urban public research university with national and international rankings in sponsored research. Located in downtown Richmond, VCU enrolls more than 31,000 students in 217 degree and certificate programs in the arts, sciences, and humanities. One of the nation's leading schools of arts and design, VCU School of the Arts offers 15 undergraduate and 10 graduate degree programs in fine arts, design, performing arts, historical research, and pedagogical practice. Distinguished faculty members are internationally recognized in their respective fields, contribute significantly to the stature of VCU, and are committed to mentoring the next generation of artists, entrepreneurs, scientists, scholars, and engaged citizens of diverse communities around the world. Its campus in Qatar provides students and faculty with a direct tie to the Middle East and underscores the school and university's commitment to global education and experience.*

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#### **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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