

**ICA at VCU Presents Major New Exhibition Exploring Representations of Race  
in Contemporary Art**

***Great Force* Features Works and Performances by 24 Artists  
Including New Commissions by Tomashi Jackson, Charlotte Lagarde, and Xaviera Simmons**

**Richmond, VA – October 5, 2019** - The Institute for Contemporary Art (ICA) at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) presents *Great Force*, an exhibition that uses painting, sculpture, photography, video, and performance to explore how art can be used to envision new forms of race and representation freed from the bounds of historic racial constructs. The exhibition features new commissions and recent work by an intergenerational group of 24 established and emerging artists, including Pope.L, Sable Elyse Smith, Xaviera Simmons, 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 Associate Curator Amber Esseiva, an alumna of VCUarts. *Great Force* is on view at the ICA at VCU from October 5, 2019, through January 5, 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.

The exhibition will extend out of the ICA’s galleries to include films, performances, and public discussions which will all serve as catalysts for discussions about race and culture today. The ICA will co-host the inaugural “unConference” for VCU’s Race, Space, Place Initiative (RSPI) with VCU academic partners Tressie McMillan Cottom (Department of Sociology), Chioke l’Anson (African American Studies), and Travis Williams (Sociology). The unConference and other *Great Force*-related public programs will highlight the research at VCU and within the arts nationally dedicated to issues of pressing social importance. VCU faculty, ICA staff, and *Great Force* artists will host talks, workshops, and events to support experiential learning opportunities for graduate and undergraduate students, faculty, and the wider community.

“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 Willson, 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* showcases 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 features new and recent work from a prolific group of artists that includes Carrie Mae Weems, Tony Cokes, Paul Stephen Benjamin, Sable Elyse Smith, Kevin Beasley, and Paul Mpagi Sepuya, among others.

Seminal works like Pope.L's *The Great White Way, 22 Miles, 9 Years, 1 Street (Whitney Version #2)*, 1990 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, are 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 addresses the oversaturation of Confederate monuments in Virginia and the legacies of the myriad black human rights advocates that remain largely uncelebrated in the state's built environment. Through mark-making, figuration, and erasure, Jackson brings into question what it means to memorialize and commemorate and who has the power to do so.
- A multimedia installation by **Xaviera Simmons** (b. 1974) featuring 60 1-minute videos produced by Simmons while she traveled throughout the United States. Layering appropriated texts, constructed monologues, dialogues, and landscapes, the work connects historic and contemporary African American realities.
- A part of his *Door of No Return* series, **Radcliffe Bailey's** (b. 1968) new commission, *Untitled*, finds the sea, framed in isolation, as a lasting symbol of the trans-atlantic slave trade. Sourced from images of seascapes taken by Bailey from all over the world, the ocean becomes a collaborator in the slave trade as individuals face the unknown. By redacting elements of the picture with black glitter, Bailey transforms craft material into a metaphor for captivity.
- **Shani Peters'** (b.1981) *17,195 Sunrises* refers to the number of days the sun has risen between Civil Rights activist Stokely Carmichael's first public utterance of "Black Power" and Alicia Garza's first public use of the phrase "Black Lives Matter." Created in response to the themes of *Great Force*, Peters fuses historic instances of Black political might with metaphors of sunsets and sunrises. Layered throughout Peters' vibrantly colored wallpaper are images from Detroit and Newark during the 'long hot summer' of 1967, during which 159 race riots erupted across the United States.

*Great Force* also presents performances and site-responsive commissions that engage Richmond residents and activate urban historical sites, such as filmmaker and visual artist **Charlotte Lagarde's** (b. 1968) collaborative state-wide project *Colonial White*, which invited Virginia residents 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) is presenting an iteration of her collaborative project, the 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 is hosting free public reading groups and discussions responding to the exhibition's themes.

The ICA has also commissioned artist, experiential composer, and librettist **Richard Kennedy** (b. 1985) to create a new, 50-minute experimental operetta to be performed on November 16, 2019. Drawn in part from Kennedy's own upbringing in suburban Ohio, *A Touch of Elegance* explores the experience of navigating heteronormative spaces as a black queer person through the story of two neighboring, small-town storefronts. Additional events include public talks by Tomashi Jackson, Claudia Rankine, Rebecca Walker, and Poly-Mode design studios. ICA Assistant Curator of Film and founder of the Afrikana Independent Film Festival Enjoli Moon has organized a cinema series to coincide with the exhibition.

*Great Force* is supported in part by a major grant from the National Endowment of the Arts.

### **Exhibition Publication**

*Great Force* will be accompanied by a fully illustrated 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 be set in *William*, a newly developed Du Boisian inspired typeface created by Tré Seals of Vocal Type. The publication will include contributions by Nicholas Mirzoeff, The 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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