

Carnegie Center's 'Permanent And Natural' Is A Diverse And Spirited Exploration Of Hair

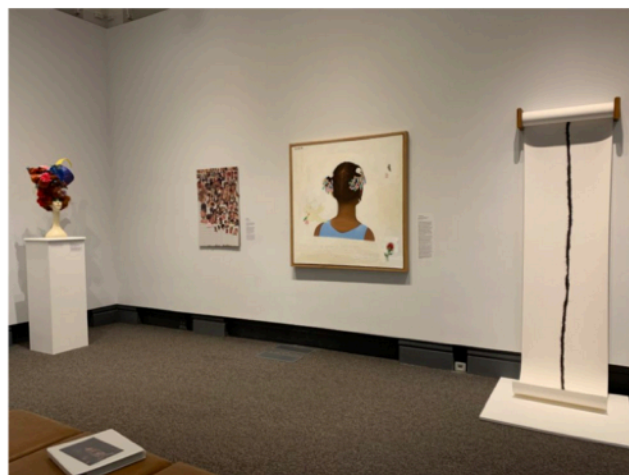
By Natalie Weis



Photo: Courtesy of Kahran and Regis Bethencourt, CreativeSoul Photography.

It can be easy to think of contemporary art as something removed from our everyday, reserved for the hushed and hallowed halls of galleries and museums where it awaits our thoughtful reflection. But one of the gifts of art is its ability to transcend those walls and enter into our daily lives — indeed, into our consciousness — prompting us to consider anew the quotidian objects and rituals we so often overlook.

Case in point: “Permanent and Natural,” the current show at New Albany’s Carnegie Center for Art and History that brings together nearly 30 works by more than a dozen artists from across the U.S. in a diverse and spirited exploration of hair — that crowning human feature that is as permanent as it is infinitely mutable, and as natural as it is subject to outlandish manipulation.



Natalie Weis

Installation view featuring work by Stacey Vest, Y. Malik Jalal and Sonya Clark

For the show's curator, Daniel Pfalzgraf, it was important to approach the subject from a diversity of perspectives and through an array of mediums.

"I really tried to mix up the artists we show in this show, the type of artwork exhibited, the medium, as well as the themes and ideas behind the artwork," he said. "There's a mix of some work that's based on history with, for example, Gabrielle Mayer, who shows Victorian hair wreaths. Then there's cultural references dealing with pop culture such as baseball or punk rock music. And then there's more cultural aspects relating to the politics of hair, dealing with discrimination, dealing with public and private spaces relating to hair, like barbershops and salons."



Natalie Weis

Seventies Baseball Hair Elite, Steve Spencer, 1983, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 in

The result is an incomplete but illuminating and engaging survey of hair throughout history: as personal expression, as cultural signifier and sometimes even as political instigator, as in Steve Spencer's painting "Seventies Baseball Hair Elite," a delightful tribute to four of

the sport's more audacious 'dos. With cartoonish colors and gleeful expressiveness, Spencer portrays four players who, through their proud afros and wild, unruly locks, illustrate the rebellious spirit that had taken hold of the nation's youth and was now infiltrating its most patriotic of pastimes.

By the end of the decade, the pioneers of punk rock were taking what had been a little friendly counter-culture rebellion and pushing it into full-blown anarchy, with the hairstyles to match. Alison Braun's black-and-white photographs of the Los Angeles punk scene captures The Misfits' Glenn Danzig and Jerry Only, as well as other musical mainstays, with all their Mohawks, devilocks, leather, spikes and self-righteous anger. Pfalzgraf's informative wall texts shed light on the cultural misappropriations that led to the Mohawk hairstyle's name.



Natalie Weis

Rapunzel, Gabrielle Mayer, date unknown, human hair, wire, glass vitrine, 118 x 12 in

And the show's contemporary artists don't limit themselves to the recent century. New Albany artist Gabrielle Mayer's hairwork, for instance, revives the Victorian-era practice of creating jewelry and other decorative objects out of human hair in the kind of maudlin gestures that characterized the period. Most compelling of Mayer's delicate works is "Rapunzel," a miniature representation of the fairy-tale maiden's golden mane and attendant braid. Mayer supports the flowing tresses with wire and places the vertical sculpture under a glass vitrine, creating an uncanny resemblance to a brain and spinal cord in an antique specimen jar — one 19th-century curiosity

exchanged for another. Meanwhile, artist Stacey Vest eschews human hair for synthetic; wrapping, twisting, looping and layering the artificial filaments to fashion elaborate headpieces in which hair and hat become one.



Natalie Weis

Watch the Throne, Fahamu Pecou, 2019, altered barber chair and three television monitor installation

One of the show's strengths is its inclusion of multiple works that speak to the African American experience. Its grandest expression is in Fahamu Pecou's "Watch the Throne," an installation that includes three television monitors showing tightly cropped videos of black men getting their hair cut against solid backgrounds in Easter egg hues. In front of the screens is a barber chair, its framework painted gold and its cushions reupholstered in a rich yellow and grey batik fabric with a vaguely African motif. Through these alterations, the artist elevates the utilitarian object to noble adornment, transforming barber chair into royal throne and, it follows, all those who sit in it into kings.



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Long Pan: Red Rice, Y. Malik Jabal, 2018, mixed media on canvas, 48 x 48 in

In his mixed media work “Long Pan; Red Rice,” Y. Malik Jalal tenderly depicts the neatly braided cornrows of a young African American girl. We see only the back of her body from the shoulders up, her brown skin and cerulean top sharply outlined against a background of thick, creamy white brushstrokes. Jalal saves his detailed brushwork for the geometric patterns of her cornrows and the multicolored plastic beads that punctuate their ends, his attention conveying the same care and reverence for this ancient African tradition held by those who carry on this time-consuming practice. The addition of mixed media elements, such as a cartoon sticker and vinyl letters obscured by layers of paint, fix the work in the contemporary moment, adding the girl’s unique, personal experience to the collective narrative of her ancestors.



Courtesy of Kahran and Regis Bethencourt, CreativeSoul Photography.

Sophisticated Soul, Kahran and Regis Bethencourt, 2017, Chrystal archival print, 30 x 20 in

It’s a narrative that expands to include elements of the Victorian, Baroque, steampunk and high fashion in the photography of Kahran and Regis Bethencourt, whose portraits of young African American girls wouldn’t be out of place in the pages of *Vogue* or *Harper’s Bazaar*. Clad in couture-like ensembles, the girls wear extravagantly beautiful hairstyles that command an even greater presence than the

clothes and serve to amplify the distinctive textures, curls and kinks of Black hair. The girls look directly at the camera; their gazes are focused, determined and powerful. They will not be deterred.

Diana Vreeland, the legendary editor of both *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* (and an early champion for women of color in the once lily-white pages of those magazines), once wrote, "Fashion is part of the daily air and it changes all the time, with all the events. You can even see the approaching of a revolution in clothes." Certainly "Permanent and Natural" proves that the same can be said of hair, and if the Bethencourts' photographs are any indication, the empowerment of the Black experience is approaching and a most welcome revolution that will be.

Disclosure: Curator Daniel Pfalzgraf is married to an employee of Louisville Public Media who has no influence over WFPL's news coverage.

"Permanent and Natural" is on view at the Carnegie Center for Art & History until April 18th, 2020. The Carnegie Center is located at 201 E. Spring Street, New Albany, Indiana and is open Monday — Saturday, 10 a.m. — 5 p.m.

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