

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE

ART & EXHIBITS

Houston Museum of African American Culture's 'Souls of Black Folk' shows little has changed

The Houston Museum of African American Culture features contemporary works about Black identity and racism in "Souls of Black Folk."

Molly Glentzer July 1, 2020 | Updated: July 6, 2020, 10:18 am



The figure in Cedric Ingram's sculpture "Dreamer" appears to be peering into one of the galleries of "Souls of Black Folk" at the Houston Museum of African American Culture.

Photo: Molly Glentzer / Houston Chronicle

A few blocks from the MFAH, the modest but resolute Houston Museum of African American Culture has mounted “Souls of Black Folk.”

Curated by CEO emeritus John Guess from local collections, this unofficial companion show and response to “Soul of a Nation” fast-forwards the conversation with more contemporary works. Guess borrowed his title from a collection of essays by W.E.B. Dubois, who articulated a double-consciousness separating Blacks from opportunities that whites take for granted. Although it was published in 1903, Dubois’ book “might as well be about Black life and race relations today,” Guess says.

“Souls of Black Folk” features works by 40 artists — some legendary, some midcareer, some emerging. Houston artists represent strongly.

Cedric Ingram’s “Dreamer,” a wood sculpture of a young girl on her tiptoes, peeking over a fence, leads visitors into the first-floor gallery. This room is a bit of a rambling meditation on images of Black identity. David McGee’s lushly painted “The Homosexual,” which riffs on a famous portrait of the 17th century’s Cardinal de Richelieu, dominates the room. Kaneem Smith’s minimal “Body Bag” sculpture feels most of-the-moment. An untitled portrait by Delita Martin holds strong next to a John Biggers portrait of a woman with a similarly intense expression. Floyd Newsum’s strong black-and-white “The Journey Never Ends” blends pictographic symbols, including a boat, water, fish, hands and ladders.

There’s more anger upstairs, where the focus turns to racism — Ted Ellis’ crowned portrait of George Floyd and tougher “On Our Backs,” featuring a man with a scarred back and references to the industries of the Deep South. In Michael Ray Charles’ “Forever Free,” a white-shirted man putting on a tie sees a Sambo figure staring back at him through a mirror. That piece is nicely juxtaposed with the swaggering figure of Dominic Clay’s “Thugger Life.” Works by Demetrius Oliver, Rick Lowe, Jamal Cyrus, Vicki Meek and others help to make this floor the show’s strong suit.