



North Carolina Museum of Art

North Carolina Museum of Art Spring Exhibitions Celebrate Artist Michael Richards and Award-Winning Costume Designer Ruth E. Carter

Exhibitions Highlight Careers of Groundbreaking African American Artists

Raleigh, NC (December 6, 2022)—This spring, the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) will host a pair of exhibitions celebrating the accomplishments of two African American artists, Michael Richards and Ruth E. Carter. Presented March 4 to July 23, 2023, *Michael Richards: Are You Down?* is the largest-ever solo exhibition and first touring museum retrospective of this artist, whose career was tragically cut short when he died in the World Trade Center terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. Richards’s moving tribute to the Tuskegee Airmen, *Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* (1999), is currently on view in the Global Contemporary galleries at the NCMA, and has been a visitor favorite, on continuous display since 2003. This retrospective will feature another version of the sculpture, and will also present several recently conserved artworks, including the exhibition’s namesake *Are You Down?* (2000). *Ruth E. Carter: Afrofuturism in Costume Design*, open from April 1 to August 6, 2023, presents intricately designed costumes from popular movies, including *Amistad*, *Do the Right Thing*, *Malcolm X*, *Selma*, and *Black Panther*. The exhibition dives into the Academy-Award winner’s research, process, and incredible craft.

“We are excited to present these two exhibitions highlighting the work of these trailblazing artists,” said Valerie Hillings, museum director. “*Tar Baby vs. St. Sebastian* (1999) has been an NCMA favorite for years, and we cannot wait to introduce visitors to more of Michael Richards’s powerful and diverse body of work. Ruth E. Carter’s influence cannot be understated, and it is fortuitous that we can share with our visitors her iconic work near the release of her latest project, the costumes for *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*; seeing her artistry go from the big screen to the museum galleries.”

Michael Richards: Are You Down?

Michael Richards: Are You Down? is the first museum retrospective of Michael Richards’s artwork, exhibiting his extensive sculpture and drawing practice. Of Jamaican and Costa Rican lineage, Michael Richards was born in Brooklyn in 1963, raised in Kingston, and came of age between post-independence Jamaica and post-civil rights era America. Richards used the language of metaphor in his art to investigate racial inequity and the tension between assimilation and exclusion. Flight and aviation were central themes for Richards, who explored the concepts of freedom and escape in his work. His artwork gestures toward both repression

and reprieve from social injustices, and the simultaneous possibilities of uplift and downfall, often in the context of the historic and ongoing oppression of Black people.

Significant points of reference for Richards include the Tuskegee Airmen—the first African American pilots in United States military history who served in World War II—and the complexity of their triumphs in the face of segregation. Other important influences include cultural, religious, and ritual stories from African, African American, Jamaican, and Judeo-Christian traditions, as well as Greek mythology. Richards merged worlds in his art, bringing together spiritual and historical references with popular culture. His recurring interest was in both the everyday and the transcendent, and how to bring them into conversation with each other. Centering his own experience, Richards also used his body to cast the figures for his sculptures, which often appear as pilots, saints, or both. Inextricably connected to the moment of its making in the 1990s, Richards’s work—engaging Blackness, flight, diaspora, spirituality, police brutality, and monuments—remains timely and resonant decades after its creation.

Ruth E. Carter: Afrofuturism in Costume Design

An Academy Award–winning costume designer, Ruth E. Carter has dressed film and TV actors in ways that have defined generations. Her art adds dimensionality, flair, and culture to the characters she helps envision. Her vibrancy and attention to detail in costuming is integral to translating stories of race, politics, and culture to the big screen. From humble roots in Massachusetts, Ruth E. Carter has been helping style the Afrofuturism movement, an aesthetic movement connecting African diaspora culture with science and technology, for almost 40 years.

Designing pieces for films such as *Black Panther*, *Malcom X*, *Selma*, and *Do the Right Thing*, Carter has created costumes for legends Oprah Winfrey, Denzel Washington, Chadwick Boseman, Eddie Murphy, Angela Bassett, Forest Whitaker, and more. The exhibition features more than 60 of Carter’s original garments while also showcasing her immersive process and extensive historical research that imbue every project she brings to life.

Organizational Credits:

Ruth E. Carter: Afrofuturism in Costume Design is organized by Julia Long. Support for this exhibition is made possible, in part, by the North Carolina Department of Natural and Cultural Resources; the North Carolina Museum of Art Foundation, Inc.; and the William R. Kenan Jr. Endowment for Educational Exhibitions. Research for this exhibition was made possible by Ann and Jim Goodnight, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fund for Curatorial and Conservation Research and Travel.

Michael Richards: Are You Down? is organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art, North Miami, and co-curated by Alex Fialho and Melissa Levin.

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About the North Carolina Museum of Art

The North Carolina Museum of Art's collection spans more than 5,000 years, from antiquity to the present, making the institution one of the premier art museums in the South. The Museum's collection provides educational, aesthetic, intellectual, and cultural experiences for the citizens of North Carolina and beyond. The 164-acre Museum Park showcases the connection between art and nature through site-specific works of environmental art. The Museum offers changing special exhibitions, classes, lectures, family activities, films, and concerts.

The Museum is located at 2110 Blue Ridge Road in Raleigh and is home to the People's Collection. It is the art museum of the State of North Carolina, under the auspices of Governor Roy Cooper; an agency of the Department of Natural and Cultural Resources, guided by the direction of Secretary D. Reid Wilson; and led by Director Valerie Hillings.

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