

Profile

OPENING UP

Valerie Cassel Oliver makes curatorial debut at VMFA

By Amanda Dalla Villa Adams

Valerie Cassel Oliver grew up in a family of 10 children in Houston's Third Ward at the close of the segregation era.

As a child, she saw art museums as places with marble floors that kids were bused to. Not places where she could imagine herself employed.

"You walked through the hallowed halls and saw the amazing artwork, but it was a mystery as to who put it there and why it was there," she says.

Instead, Oliver, experienced art in quilts, family photos and gardening, and in her school's theater. There, she found answers and inspiration.

Richmond audiences will see Oliver's work as a curator this summer for the first time since she joined the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts as curator of modern and contemporary art in July 2017. This month, the museum opened "Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen," the first survey of the New York-based artist's multidisciplinary work that spans five decades. It was co-organized with Naomi Beckwith, the Marilyn and Larry Fields Curator at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.

"Howardena Pindell has proved herself to be ahead of her time and ahead of the curve in conversations around painting, works on paper and even photography and what can be accomplished with the camera," Oliver states in a news release about the exhibition.

The child who couldn't determine how art arrived at museums is now one of the people who chooses the art.

Oliver honed her skills during a career



Curator Valerie Cassel Oliver beside Sanford Biggers' "Overstood" at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

"Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen," opens at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts on Aug. 25 and runs through Nov. 25. 200 N. Boulevard. 804-340-1400 or vmfa.org.

her love for the visual arts emerged, a federal agency, two colleges and art museums. She started as a program coordinator for the Black Arts Alliance in Austin, Texas, and she worked as a program specialist at the National Endowment for the Arts before directing the Visiting Artists Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

that has included stops at a small nonprofit, where

While at the NEA, she worked at Howard University on her master's degree, which explored African-American quilts and combined anthropology, theology and art history.

"My takeaway [from the NEA] is to give artists a platform and to be in institutions that are committed to doing that," Oliver says. "It redoubled my commitment to living artists."

In 1999, she was invited to co-curate the Whitney Museum of American

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Art's Biennial Exhibition, which led to a nearly 17-year tenure at the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston (CAMH), which she left as senior curator. It wasn't the type of job she sought, but it's the kind of work that suits her.

"In my role as a curator, that is my job: to create portals for people to appreciate and understand the work that living artists create and the work that artists have left behind that are no longer with us," says Oliver.

History is one of the things that attracted her to Richmond and Virginia, but it wasn't the only factor. She was also drawn to the quality of life for her and her 7-year-old son.

"You can ride your scooter down the street and there are other kids on the street. I'm really thankful that we can be out in Richmond and know our neighbors," says Oliver, who lives in the West End.

Among Oliver's next acts will be a 2019 exhibition that highlights the VMFA's acquisition of 34 objects primarily by African-American artists from the South, including 13 Gee's Bend quilts and works by Thornton Dial, from the Atlanta-based Souls Grown Deep Foundation. With a working title of "Dirty South," a planned 2020 exhibition will explore hip-hop in the Southeast by looking at its culture, history and identity.

"When you look at [a] Ludacris [video] and it's about the shack and people sitting around the porch — all those tropes that let you know that you are in the South. It's understanding that hip-hop is a genre that is built upon history."

The exhibition affirms her commitment to working with living artists.

"I love the thrill of having [a living] artist and knowing that even though they may say something on this day, their thought might change in five years," explains Oliver. "That notion of writing history as it happens has always been intriguing for me." ■