

Forbes

Pulitzer-Prize Winning Critic Hilton Als On Curating A Toni Morrison Show For David Zwirner

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Toni Morrison in China, 1984. Courtesy of Princeton University Library (Toni Morrison Papers, Manuscripts Division, Special Collections, Princeton University Library). Photographer unknown. COURTESY OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

“She was just really funny. I hope people remember that about her. She had a great sense of humor and was also sexy. I found her to be very sexy and feminine,” smiles curator, author, and Pulitzer-prize winning critic, Hilton Als, who is speaking about the late literary Nobel laureate, Toni Morrison.

He pauses to answer the next question, which is, “What was sexy about her?” After giving it a moment's thought, he goes on to explain, “It was her physical openness to people and to the world. She was very relaxed in her body, and I think that having been the head of a household, she wasn't struggling with ideas about what a woman could and couldn't do. And it was that kind of self-acceptance that was really beautiful and sexy about her.” He pauses again. “And power. Power is sexy, too,” Als says through another smile.

Als' continuation of his relationship with Morrison and her work is now being brought to life in a show he's curated called *Toni Morrison's Black Book*, which opens today at David Zwirner.



Beverly Buchanan, *For Mallory*, 1995 © The Beverly Buchanan Estate and Andrew Edlin Gallery, New York DAVID ZWIRNER GALLERY

An exhibition in three parts, Als creates a visual narrative of Morrison's work and career by bringing together existing and commissioned works by artists such as Julie Mehretu, Irving Penn, Beverly Buchanan, and Walter Price, through mediums such as painting, sculpture, film, installation, and photography. The majority of the works are positioned next to lines of text selected by Als from Morrison's books.

"The Black Book", Morrison's tome upon which this show is conceptually based, is an anthology of images, texts, and documents edited by her and published in 1974. A collage-like book comprised of elements as varied as faxes, obituaries, and sheet music, it is, as Als described in the show's official press release, "A kind of blueprint to Morrison's grand project as a writer, which is to tell the story of Black men and women in America as they helped invent the country."



This work by Kerry James Marshall was inspired by Morrison's book "Song of Solomon." Credit: Kerry James Marshall, A lithe young man..., 2021 © Kerry James Marshall Courtesy the artist and David Zwirner, London DAVID ZWIRNER GALLERY

The book, despite being lesser-known and lacking institutional support, was nominated for a National Book Award and has become a significant text on black history. In a 2003 profile Als wrote on the author, he credited "The Black Book" as, "A great influence over the way Black anthropology was viewed."

In a piece commemorating the anniversary of Morrison's first novel "The Bluest Eye" for the New Yorker, where Als is a staff writer, he wrote this about "The Black Book":

In “The Black Book,” which she worked on for a feverish eighteen-month period, Morrison wanted to provide visible evidence of where blackness had been and where it was going. She included documents—a patent showing that William B. Purvis had invented the fountain pen, for instance—and photographs, among them one of Lena Horne bathing in her drive and significance, and one of the black cowboy Nat Love. There were descriptions of voodoo charms; a full-color ad showing a black baby in a white cap and gown advertising Sunlight Soap; pictures of clothes made by slaves; and another patent, this one for Norbert Rillieux’s “improvement in sugar-making.”



There were lines of poetry by Langston Hughes and by Henry Dumas, whom she considered one of the most talented of her authors. There were images of Black men being burned or lynched, and a clipping about Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who killed one of her children so that she would not grow up in slavery—a story that haunted Morrison and inspired her 1987 novel, “Beloved.”

Martin Schoeller, Toni Morrison; Grand View-on-Hudson, NY, 2003 ©

Martin Schoeller DAVID ZWIRNER GALLERY

“[The exhibition] begins with her as an editor putting “The Black Book” together. Then, we experience her as a young novelist. The third part is about her history in Modernism.”

This is not the first time Als has curated a show with David Zwirner. Indeed, it is his fourth show at the gallery. It’s his work with Zwirner that has helped mold him into an expert of producing shows similar in nature to *Toni Morrison’s Black Book* where the work of a known artist, sometimes visual and sometimes not, is explored through Als’ specific lens.

He curated *Alice Neel, Uptown* for the gallery in 2017 where he brought together a collection of the artist’s paintings and works on paper of African-Americans, Latinos, Asians, and other people of color for the first time. He also curated an exhibition of another literary artist and activist, James Baldwin, called *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*.

“I felt much more insecure with Baldwin than I did with her,” he says. “First of all, she’d been alive when she [Morrison] approved it. So I felt I had her trust. One of the things that everybody waits for is permission to write or permission to perform. And she had given me permission and that really was such a powerful strong point.”

Nearly every piece—excluding archival work and ephemera—in the Zwirner show is positioned next to a line of text chosen by Als from one of Morrison’s books. At times, he knew exactly what was required to visually narrate the text. “For instance, with “The Bluest Eye,” I knew I had to have Joseph Cornell because of his series of dolls. The Cornells are very hard to get because they’re very fragile, but we did get one and it was a doll and it was actually falling apart, which was perfect.” Other times, there was a more aligned effort between him and a commissioned artist.

“Kerry James Marshall, I have to say, was a standout experience. I asked him if he had read “Song of Solomon.” He hadn’t. I sent it to him and I said, “I wonder what you

would respond to in this work,”” recalls Als. “And his work is beautiful because Milkman is an upper-middle-class Black man, and he shows the props of that in the painting. It was a lovely experience to go to Chicago and see him and also to see his films, which he never shows, which we have now in the show as well.”

It’s clear Als’ relationship with Morrison is one that transcends contemporary and collaborator as this show so evidently flowed from a passionate intimacy he possesses for Morrison and her work.



James Van Der Zee, Untitled, 1939 © The Estate of James Van Der Zee and Howard Greenberg Gallery, New York DAVID ZWIRNER GALLERY

“I felt it in my bones,” he says when asked how he went about choosing the works represented in the exhibition. “I remembered a number of things in my bones about the work because you never forget loving someone in your body, I don't think. I had a powerful reaction to her and a powerful reaction to loving her. I got emotional sometimes because I wanted her to be there, but she was always there.”

He adds, “I think that had she been gone when I proposed this, I would've yearned for her approval. And I think that that yearning can sometimes block you. But I think that because she gave me permission, I was able to be creative right from the beginning.”

Als credits David Zwirner himself for having the vision to embark on this curatorial journey with him. While Als has a strong history of curatorial work—he co-curated a retrospective of Christopher Knowles's with Anthony Elms for the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia in 2015 and organized an exhibition of work by Celia Paul at The Metropolitan Opera's Gallery Met in New York, amongst others—his work at Zwirner has landed him his biggest critical acclaims.

“I started to do the [Alice Neel] show and he [Zwirner] called me aside, it was in one room then, and he said, "Why are you in one room?" And I said, "I have no idea, budget I guess." Then he said, "Take both spaces." So he gave me the two gallery spaces on 19th Street and we've worked together ever since. I don't know if he knew I could do it. I don't know anything about what made him have such faith in me, but it is one of the great experiences of my life.”

Als describes in the show's release that the visual components of the exhibition were chosen “to italicize the beauty and audacity of her work.”

Does he think they succeeded at this?

“I think the whole gestalt, the atmosphere of it, is *her*. And I think that she would've been amazed and delighted to see visual corollaries to her...*being*. The show is an *atmosphere* about her project, which was to do an enormous black book on American life.” He pauses one last time, finishing with a familiar yet wistful smile, “And I think we're as successful as we can be with this.”