

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 2, 2017

VMFA appoints new Modern and Contemporary Art Curator

Valerie Cassel Oliver has been named the Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. A curator with a proven eye for emerging artists and the integration of new disciplines with traditional art forms, Cassel Oliver was selected after a comprehensive national search. She will join VMFA on July 7, 2017.



Valerie Cassel Oliver, Sydney and Frances Lewis Family Curator of Modern and Contemporary (Photo: David Stover © VMFA)

Cassel Oliver comes to the museum from the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where she rose to the position of senior curator during her 16-year tenure. Her experience includes co-curating the Whitney Museum of American Art's Biennial Exhibition in 2000; directing the Visiting Artists Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; and administering grants as a program specialist with the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington, D.C.

"Valerie is one of the most dynamic and respected contemporary curators in her field," said Alex Nyerges, VMFA Director. "She brings an impressive network of contacts from across the arts community, and she has an established record of organizing exhibitions that explore topical themes that resonate with viewers. Now, in her new curatorial role at VMFA, she will have the resources to apply her talents in building our museum collections. Based on her previous experience, as well as her curatorial vision, she will undoubtedly push the institution in exciting new directions."

Cassel Oliver's first priority at VMFA will be to review the modern and contemporary art holdings, and develop a collection plan. A primary focus for her acquisition strategy, in line with the museum's strategic plan, will be to add more works by African American and African-diasporic artists. Indeed, VMFA's commitment to diversity, both in its staff and collections, encouraged her to apply for this position.

"I look forward to working in partnership with Alex, Michael, and the entire curatorial team to open up the canon to include not just African American and African-diasporic voices, but many different voices," Cassel Oliver said. "There are artists from myriad social and cultural backgrounds who are not fully represented in today's art world, and we need to ensure their stories are part of the rich narratives we bring to life in our museum. I bring a perspective of inclusivity, and I want to create a context that engages a public that can see itself reflected in the museum. Doing so allows the discussions around art to be broader and only serves to make the entire field stronger."

At CAMH, Cassel Oliver conceived and orchestrated numerous group exhibitions that generated greater audience engagement by extending the artist's reach beyond traditional institutional walls. *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art* (2012) tracked black performance in the visual arts since the 1960s. This groundbreaking exhibition toured nationally until 2015. An earlier exhibition, *Cinema Remixed and Reloaded: Black Women Artists and the Moving Image* (2008), which she co-curated with Andrea Barnwell Brownlee, was nominated for the prestigious AICA (International Association of Art Critics) award in the digital media, video or film category and was later presented at the 11th Havana Biennial in 2012. She also

organized *Hand+Made: The Performative Impulse in Art and Craft* (2010), a CAMH exhibition that featured works by Virginia Commonwealth University alumni and faculty including Sonya Clark.

Other key exhibitions she has curated include *Splat Boom Pow! The Influence of Cartoons in Contemporary Art* (2003); the acclaimed *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970* (2005); and *Black/White Noise: Sound and Light in Contemporary Art* (2007). She also has organized several major retrospectives and single-artist exhibitions: *Born in the State of FLUX/us* (2010), which was devoted to the work of Benjamin Patterson, a contrabass musician, long-time arts administrator and founding member of Fluxus; the survey *Donald Moffett: The Extravagant Vein* (2011); *Trenton Doyle Hancock: Skin and Bones, 20 Years of Drawing* (2014); *Compilation* (2015), a retrospective of work by sonic and visual artist Jennie C. Jones.; and most recently, *Everything and Nothing* (2016), a 10-year survey of work by painter and sculptor Angel Otero.

“Valerie has a reputation for getting to know artists through numerous studio visits and conversations that build trust and respect with them,” said Dr. Michael R. Taylor, Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Art and Education. “Artists such as Trenton Doyle Hancock, Jennie C. Jones, and Benjamin Patterson have opened up to her in a way that they might not with other curators. That’s been a hallmark of her curatorial work. In her exhibitions, the viewpoint of the artist comes first.”

“This VMFA appointment is a wonderful opportunity to begin a new chapter in my curatorial career,” Cassel Oliver said. “Recent, considered acquisitions have positioned VMFA for sustained dialogues in contemporary art. I’m excited to continue that conversation, thinking not only of the current collection and the legacy of these works from a new perspective—a perspective that takes into account my own imprint through new acquisitions and exhibitions.”

At the same time, Cassel Oliver noted that contemporary artists are continually pushing traditional definitions of art, in part with the integration of new media and approaches to art making. “I’m particularly interested in artists who are constantly evolving in the studio and who are employing multiple strategies,” she added. “Artists today move in and out of different mediums, and they never sit in one place. There is a constant need for innovation and experimentation in the studio.”

Sonya Clark, Chair of Craft and Material Studies at VCUarts, praised Cassel Oliver’s appointment. “Richmond’s history is an American story and, in fact, a global story. What we do here in the arts and how we do it is impactful locally, nationally, and globally,” she said. “I’ve known Valerie for almost 20 years, and her approach is a model for the art community. She is artist-centered, committed to inclusion, globally connected, and well-respected. Valerie’s appointment as the Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art at the VMFA comes at a pivotal time in our history. I’m absolutely thrilled she will be joining us in Richmond.”

More about Valerie Cassel Oliver

After earning her undergraduate degree from The University of Texas at Austin in 1987, Cassel Oliver completed her master’s degree in art history at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1992. In 2009, she was a fellow at the Center for Curatorial Leadership in New York through which she received a certificate in executive management from Columbia University.

Cassel Oliver started her career at the National Endowment for the Arts, where she managed a combined \$1.5 million portfolio in the Expansion Arts Program from 1988 to 1995. The next year, she joined the School of the Art Institute in Chicago, where she directed administrative and curatorial functions for the visiting artists program presenting national and international artists. She joined CAMH in 2000 as an associate curator, becoming full curator in 2006, and, in 2010, moved into the senior curator role, where she assisted in shaping and articulating the museum’s curatorial vision.

In 2011, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta presented Cassel Oliver with The David C. Driskell Prize, named for the renowned African American artist and art scholar. This distinguished award recognizes individuals who have made an original and important contribution to the field of African American art or art history.

Among her additional accolades are serving as this year's Senior Fellow for the curatorial studies program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; the Carol and Arthur Goldberg Foundation To-Life Visiting Curator at Hunter College in 2016, and being named to the YBCA 100 by the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco in 2015. In 2007, she also was a non-resident curatorial fellow at the Los Angeles-based Getty Foundation, where she continued her scholarship on Benjamin Patterson. Cassel Oliver has also published widely and lectured extensively throughout her career.

Cassel Oliver's first exhibition project at VMFA will be a retrospective for the acclaimed African American artist Howardena Pindell, which she is co-curating with Naomi Beckwith at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. It will open at VMFA in January 2019. When she asked Michael Taylor for his opinion on future projects at VMFA, he gave her one directive in developing new exhibitions: "Go big."

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences, and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 5,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass more than 35,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is home to important collections of English silver and Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan, and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its 80-year history. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804-340-1400 or visit www.vmfa.museum.

Media contact:

Anthony Backherms | anthony.backherms@vmfa.museum | 804.204.2705
Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 200 N. Boulevard, Richmond VA 23220-4007