

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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**VMFA Announces Two Upcoming Exhibitions Highlighting Works by
Abstract Artist Benjamin Wigfall and Contemporary Artist Whitfield Lovell**



Left: *Untitled*, ca. 1957–1963, Benjamin Wigfall (American, 1930–2017), wood, metal, nails and paint. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Endowment. © Benjamin Wigfall. **Right:** *Because I Wanna Fly*, 2021, Whitfield Lovell (American, born Bronx), conté on wood with attached found objects. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund, by exchange.

Richmond, Virginia — The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) is excited to announce that two comprehensive exhibitions of works by two critically acclaimed artists will open this summer at the museum. One ticket will enable visitors to see *Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village* and *Whitfield Lovell: Passages* at VMFA from June 17 through Sept. 10, 2023.

“We are delighted to bring attention to the works of these remarkable artists,” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA’s Director and CEO. “*Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village* celebrates Wigfall, who hailed from Richmond’s Church Hill neighborhood, and his life’s work as a barrier-breaking abstract artist, educator and mentor to future artists. Visitors to *Whitfield Lovell: Passages* will be captivated by the erased histories, including the stories of individuals from the city’s important Jackson Ward neighborhood, intimated by Lovell’s profound works.”

To purchase tickets and to learn more about these two exhibitions and related programs, visit www.VMFA.museum.

Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village

The first retrospective of works by Benjamin Wigfall (American, 1930–2017) will showcase art and related archives spanning from the beginning of the artist’s career in Virginia in the 1950s to his founding of a neighborhood community art center and printmaking studio, Communications Village, in Kingston, New York in the 1970s.

Born and raised in Church Hill, Wigfall began his career as an abstract painter and printmaker in the 1950s. He achieved two VMFA student fellowships to study at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University) in 1949 and 1951, followed by a fellowship from an anonymous donor in 1952 to fund his final year at the university.

In 1951, VMFA acquired one of Wigfall's early abstract works, the painting *Chimneys*, also among the museum's earliest acquisitions of a work by an African American artist. Painted when he was just 20 years old, the accession made Wigfall the youngest artist to have work in the museum's collection. VMFA later acquired his abstract painting *Corrosion and Blue* in 1958.

Following his graduation from Hampton Institute, Wigfall attended graduate school before returning to Hampton to teach from 1955 to 1963, finishing a Master of Fine Arts degree from Yale University's School of Design in 1959.

Wigfall moved to New York state in 1963 to accept a position at the State University of New York at New Paltz, where printmaking became his central medium. To more fully root his artistic practice within the Black community, he sought a space to convert into a printmaking studio in nearby Kingston, locating an old livery stable in the heart of Ponckhockie, an African American neighborhood.

As he renovated the building, he made it accessible to the young people around him and Wigfall's practice as a printmaker quickly merged with his philosophy as an art educator. In 1973, he officially founded Communications Village. In addition to offering multi-generational printmaking and photography workshops, he invited leading African American artists of the era to engage with the local community while experimenting with printmaking as an art form.

[*Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village*](#) is organized by the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in partnership with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibition is co-curated by Dr. Sarah Eckhardt, VMFA's Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Dr. Drew Thompson, Associate Professor of Visual Culture and Black Studies at Bard Graduate Center. A major exhibition catalogue published by VMFA will accompany the exhibition.

Comprising nearly 90 works of art, 12 printing plates and blocks and more than 50 archival objects, *Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village* is a retrospective of Wigfall's work, which also explores Communications Village through works by the impressive community of artists he welcomed as advisors or visiting artists. Included in the exhibition are works by Benny Andrews, Romare Bearden, Robert Blackburn, Betty Blayton, Ernest Crichlow, Jayne Cortez and Melvin Edwards, Ernest Frazier, Charles Gaines, Diane Hunt, Pat Jow Kagemoto, Mary Lou Morgan, Mavis Pusey, Joe Ramos and Rose Tripoli.

More than 50 works in the exhibition were recently added to VMFA's permanent collection as a major acquisition from the Wigfall estate, which enabled the museum to expand its representation of the artist beyond his early works, *Chimneys* and *Corrosion and Blue*. In addition to 36 works by Wigfall, the acquisition included 19 prints by artists who visited Communications Village.

The story of the artist's development and legacy will be enhanced through the inclusion of letters, photographs, sketchbooks, printing plates and ephemera recently donated by the Wigfall family to VMFA's Margaret R. and Robert M. Freeman Library.

"Wigfall's belief that traditional art and daily activities could function together as powerful communicative and aesthetic expressions served as the foundation for Communications Village," said Eckhardt. "We hope that his art and model of mentorship will inspire others in their own communities."

Whitfield Lovell: Passages

The most comprehensive exhibition to date of works by the renowned contemporary artist, *Whitfield Lovell: Passages* contemplates the ordinary lives and extraordinary journeys of the anonymous African American individuals Lovell depicts, while raising universal questions about identity, memory and America's collective heritage.

[*Whitfield Lovell: Passages*](#) is organized by the American Federation of Arts in collaboration with the artist and is curated by Michèle Wije, PhD. This exhibition is presented at VMFA by Alexis Assam, Regenia A. Perry Assistant Curator of Global Contemporary Art.

Whitfield Lovell (American, born Bronx) is an artist who works across a variety of media. His exquisite drawings are inspired by photographs of unidentified African Americans taken between the Emancipation Proclamation and the civil rights movement. These subjects allow the artist to focus on the Black stories that have been lost throughout history.

Lovell creates vivid assemblages imbued with metaphorical associations by pairing his drawings, on paper or on salvaged wood, with found objects. These works are sometimes presented as enigmatic stand-alone tableaux, rich with symbolism and ambiguity. Visitors to the exhibition will be entranced by the assemblages in the artist's acclaimed *Kin* series (2008–2011) and two more recent series, *The Reds* (2021) and *Card Pieces* (2018–2022).

Lovell further pushes the boundaries of the visitor experience when he incorporates his assemblage works into immersive installations. Two such works, *Deep River* (2013) and *Visitation: The Richmond Project* (2001), begin and end the exhibition experience.

The multisensory installation *Deep River* is a monumental work composed of video projections, sound and everyday objects. Documenting the perilous journey freedom seekers took by crossing the Tennessee River during the Civil War, the installation addresses that struggle for freedom and its inherent themes of abandonment, death, life and hope. Through *Deep River*, Lovell further invites viewers to contemplate the larger human quest for equality and the pursuit of a better life — themes that transcend time and geography.

Visitation: The Richmond Project is a profound homage to Richmond's Jackson Ward neighborhood. The installation includes locally sourced objects that the artist collected with the help of Virginia Commonwealth University students. Through this moving installation, Lovell pays tribute to the lives, names and faces that were the people of Jackson Ward, giving the country's first major African American entrepreneurial community its rightful place in the history of this nation.

"Visitors to *Whitfield Lovell: Passages* will find the exhibition powerful and compelling," said Assam. "The exhibition transports visitors through time, moved by the resonant collective memory of the shared African American experience."

Two Artists, Two Exhibitions, One Ticket

One ticket will enable visitors to see the two unique exhibitions of works by two artists, *Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village* and *Whitfield Lovell: Passages*. Combined tickets are now available at www.VMFA.museum: \$12 adults, \$10 for seniors 65+, and \$8 for youth 7–17 and college students with ID. [Museums for All](#) participants can purchase combined tickets to these two special exhibitions at the reduced price of \$2 each with a limit of four tickets per Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) card.

Combined tickets to *Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village* and *Whitfield Lovell: Passages* are free for VMFA members and children ages 6 and under. As a participant of Blue Star Museums, VMFA also provides free tickets for all active duty, National Guard and Reserve military personnel and their immediate families.

Exhibition Sponsors

Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village is organized by the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art in partnership with the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. The exhibition is co-curated by Dr. Sarah Eckhardt, VMFA's Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Dr. Drew Thompson, Associate Professor of Visual Culture and Black Studies at Bard Graduate Center.

Whitfield Lovell: Passages is organized by the American Federation of Arts in collaboration with Whitfield Lovell and curated by Michèle Wije, PhD. Major support for the national tour and exhibition catalogue is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Terra Foundation for American Art. This exhibition is presented at VMFA by Alexis Assam, Regenia A. Perry Assistant Curator of Global Contemporary Art.

In Virginia, *Benjamin Wigfall and Communications Village* and *Whitfield Lovell: Passages* are sponsored by the Community Foundation for a greater Richmond; Lettie Pate Whitehead Evans Exhibition Endowment; Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Garner, Jr.; Dr. and Mrs. William V. Garner; Julia Louise Reynolds Fund; Bank of America; Birch Douglass; Elisabeth Shelton Gottwald Fund; The Francena T. Harrison Foundation; Mr. and Mrs. R. Augustus Edwards III; The Doris Glisson Memorial Fund; Alexandria Rogers McGrath; Richmond (VA) Chapter, The Links, Incorporated; VMFA Council Exhibition Fund; Van Baskins and Marc Purintun; Anne Battle and Leonard Slater; Susan L. Buck in memory of Ed Chappell; Drs. Betty Neal Crutcher and Ronald A. Crutcher; Molly Dodge; Sally and Mike Hunnicutt; Michelle and John Nestler; Paula Saylor-Robinson and Danny Robinson; Paul and Nancy Springman; Stephen L. and Harriet Heldenfels Yake; and Sam and Nikki Young. Marketing support for special exhibitions is provided by the Charles G. Thalheimer Fund.

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 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 50,000 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 also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and French 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 the James W. and Frances G. McGlothlin Wing I after a transformative expansion, the largest in its 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.

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