

## **Dallas' Site 131 gallery showcases an array of styles from Black artists**

Works from the Curtis E. Ransom Collection are on view through March 25.



"Little Kickapoo," a 1974 abstract painting by Sam Gilliam, is one of more than 40 artworks on display as part of "Texas Collects: Curtis E. Ransom Collection," which is on view at Site 131 in Dallas. (Stephanie DeLay)

"Texas Collects: Curtis E. Ransom Collection" at Site 131 is a group exhibition of over 40 works by Black artists assembled from the collection of a Dallas entrepreneur who has spent more than three decades adhering to a simple philosophy: "Buy what you like and can afford." The exhibition, which includes works by Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Elizabeth Catlett, Sam Gilliam, Johnice Parker, Frank Frazier, and Sam Middleton, is particularly strong from the 1950s to the 1980s and includes works through the 2020s.

This is the third installment of Site 131's Texas Collects series, which features group shows pulled from rarely-seen Texas art collections.

"Texas collectors are private," says Site 131 director Joan Davidow. "It's really been all about timing."

It has been an interesting exercise to see how everyday people go about building great art collections, and in that regard this show is particularly instructive.

As you walk through the exhibition, you can feel the collection being built slowly and passionately over time. There are stunning originals but also many high-quality prints in a dizzying array of styles, including still life, figurative and abstract.

If I were able to take home one piece from this show, it would be the 1974 painting *Little Kickapoo* by Sam Gilliam. The abstract diagonal composition sizzles with bright reds and oranges that are scraped to reveal pale blues and oranges in a piece that feels as vibrant and alive as anything I've seen recently. Compare it with the soft pinks and greens of Evangeline Montgomery's 1998 *Sea Grass* and the purples and yellows of Norman Wilfred Lewis' 1958 *Untitled*. Suddenly, you have a history lesson in Black abstraction.

Other standouts include Rose Theodosia Piper's 1982 drawing *Mostly Dark Things*, a still life of a tea kettle, tea cups, a spoon, and a saucer on a tablecloth rendered in detailed graphite. Upon closer inspection, visitors will note a dragon as a topper, an elaborate spoon handle that feels



Rose Theodosia Piper's 1982 drawing "Mostly Dark Things" pictured on display at Site 131 gallery in Dallas, Thursday, Feb. 23, 2023.(Elías Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

like it could be a key to a secret dimension, and subtle, luxurious shadow work on the tea kettle. Similar attention to detail can be found in Hughie Lee-Smith's 1978 oil painting *Bananas*. The bananas feel so realistic, particularly the bits that are turning an overripe black, that they practically beg you to eat them before it is too late. Dean Mitchell's 2006 watercolor *Antiques* features a tea kettle and skillet in a small work on paper that crams in such detail as decorative bumps on the kettle, a white price tag held by a bit of string to the cast-iron skillet's brown handle, and an ingenious dab of blue on the kettle top.

Both Irene Clark's pieces, the 1950 work *Daisies at Dusk* and 1955's *Flute Player*, are outstanding. All three lithographs by Elizabeth Catlett are wonderful, particularly the highly detailed 1958 work *Shoeshine Boy*. Finally, Johnice Parker's large-scale 2007 work *Cowboy*,



Hughie Lee-Smith's 1978 oil painting "Bananas" pictured on display at Site 131 gallery in Dallas, Thursday, Feb. 23, 2023.(Elías Valverde II / Staff Photographer)

which features a Black cowboy riding a horse, is utterly enchanting. I passed by it three times before realizing it wasn't a painting but was instead made with pastels; such was the painterly effect and movement captured by Parker. The red rein and the cowboy's expression make for a magical moment in time.

There is something very revealing about an exhibition like this. Not only can you see and appreciate the individual artworks, but you also start to feel yourself inside the mind of the collector. What is it that draws a person to collect both still life and landscapes, as well as colorful abstraction? Why the preference for realism in objects but abstract representation in portraits? To me, it reveals a mind at work, one dedicated to the preserving and uplifting of Black culture but also open to myriad ways that Black artists share our culture in a variety of visual mediums.

### **Details**

"Texas Collects: Curtis E. Ransom Collection" is on view through March 25 at Site 131, 131 Payne St., Dallas. Open Fridays from noon to 5 p.m. and by appointment. For more information, call 214-871-2971 or visit [site131.com](http://site131.com).