

# Colby



Colby Magazine

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Volume 107 | Issue 2

Article 9

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December 2021

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Bob Keyes

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### Recommended Citation

Keyes, Bob (2021) "A New Definition of American Art," *Colby Magazine*: Vol. 107 : Iss. 2 , Article 9.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/colbymagazine/vol107/iss2/9>

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## A New Definition of American Art

By Bob Keyes

With great fanfare, Colby announced the creation of the Lunder Institute for American Art in 2017. Established with a gift by Life Trustee Paula Crane Lunder, D.F.A. '98 and Life Visitor Peter Lunder '56, D.F.A. '98, the institute was envisioned as a place for scholarship, creativity, dialogue, and mentorship, operating under the umbrella of the Colby College Museum of Art. Two years later, we have a better idea of what that means and a

clearer understanding of the symbiotic relationship between the museum and the institute.

A designated institute dedicated to creativity and scholarly research is a new endeavor for Colby. These kinds of institutes typically are associated with large museums and universities, said Lee Glazer, the institute's founding director and formerly a curator of

American art at the Smithsonian Institution. "We're still figuring out some of the details, but the vision is evolving," she said.

In the past year, the institute collaborated with high-profile artists, engaged scholars in original research, and invited emerging artists and academics to campus to delve into the Colby museum's collection and focus on issues like climate change and the environment. The Lunder Institute

forged partnerships with Maine’s craft community and reached out in the larger world through its participation in *The River Rail: Occupy Colby*, a special publication by 2019 Lunder Institute Fellow Phong Bui.

As a Lunder Institute Fellow, Bui came to campus several times throughout the year, curating an exhibition about climate change, *Occupy Colby: Artists Need to Create on the Same Scale that Society Has the Capacity to Destroy, Year 2*, on view at the Colby museum until early January.

An exhibition by Theaster Gates, the institute’s inaugural distinguished visiting artist, showed how the museum and institute work in coordination and apart from each other.

Gates and Sharon Corwin, the Carolyn Muzzy Director and chief curator of the Colby College Museum of Art, developed the exhibition *Facsimile Cabinet of Women Origin Stories*, which used nearly 3,000 licensed images from the archive of *Jet* and *Ebony* magazines to amplify a narrative about contemporary black America.

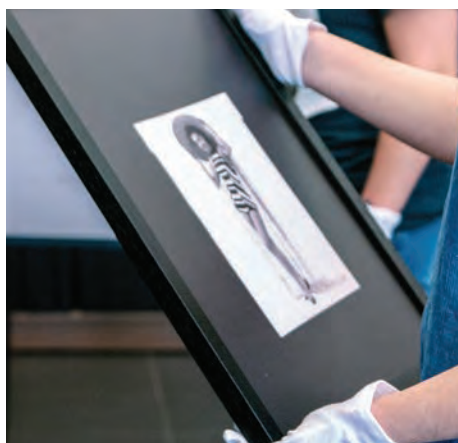
The programs around it, including one-day residencies by scholars and artists invited to campus to engage with the exhibition one-on-one, were led by Daisy Desrosiers, the Lunder Institute’s director of programs. These programs are more robust than those typically associated with museum exhibitions and involve multiple artists and scholars from a range of disciplines who generate new work and research from their time on campus.

There are other examples. The poet Richard Blanco worked with the campus community as an early artist in residence, and New Jersey-based multidisciplinary artist Torkwase Dyson collaborated with dance and theater students.

The institute is equally active in research and scholarship. Tanya Sheehan, the William R. Kenan Jr. Professor of Art, joined the institute as

its director of research in 2018. She has two initiatives planned.

One is a research fellowship program for scholars focusing on art by African American artists. The initiative is motivated by her own scholarship,



Gates’s presence on campus, and works currently on view in the museum. Six research fellows will make s visits to campus in the fall and spring. The fellows have each selected one work from the collection to incorporate in their research, which they will share at a public symposium in March.

Sheehan’s second project is a collaboration with the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art and the

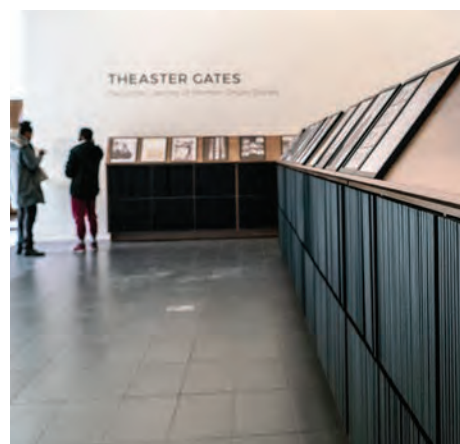


Cleveland Museum of Art to organize a series of workshops for early- to mid-career academics centered on teaching American art through direct

engagement with primary sources. “The opportunity to elevate teaching as a form of research in action is one of the things that sets the Lunder Institute apart from many other research centers,” she said.

By all accounts, Gates’s presence also sets the institute apart. His art—largely rooted in spatial theory, history, and preservation—involves making art and creating platforms that reimagine the artist’s role in redeeming spaces that have been left behind. His attention to site is evident in his work with neighborhoods, significant spaces, and Maine’s Malaga Island, which inspired his acclaimed work *Amalgam*.

Since his appointment, Gates’s work has become widely recognized across the globe, bringing interest and



acclaim to his work, and also to the Lunder Institute.

“But it’s not just about celebrity,” Glazer said. “It’s about working with different kinds of artists than Maine and New England have traditionally been associated with, and aligning that artist appointment with broader trends in the fields of curatorial work and museum work and American art scholarship to think about different ways of defining what American art will be over the next couple of generations.”