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ARTBOUND

The Underground Museum: Noah Davis' Work of Art

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Artbound episode "[MOCA: Beyond The Museum Walls](#)" explores the programming of the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, investigating new programming and curatorial methods that are redefining what it means to be a 21st century museum. This documentary features the The Underground Museum, Wolvesmouth, and Public Fiction. The episode debuted Tuesday, May 31. Check for rebroadcasts [here](#).

When late artist Noah Davis opened the doors to the Underground Museum in 2012, he set out to offer an alternative art space that could showcase "museum-quality art to diverse communities for free." And in 2015, the Arlington Heights creative space entered a long-term partnership with the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles, to [display MOCA's dormant permanent collections](#) and bring them back to life in a multi-exhibition series.

Today, with a bookstore, garden, workshops, and exhibition galleries, the Underground Museum continues to push the boundaries of a traditional museum. In a recent interview for our upcoming episode, Karon Davis, co-founder of the Underground Museum/wife of Noah Davis discussed his vision of providing low-income neighboring communities access to art, and how the space is defining itself as the 21st century museum.

What were the early beginnings of the Underground Museum?

When we started the museum, people thought we were crazy. They're like, "You want to borrow our works, what?" We asked collectors. We asked museums. We asked galleries. Everyone said no. Noah was like, "Okay, this is what we're going to do. We're going to make it ourselves." Our first show was "Imitation of Wealth," where he took these ugly fluorescent lights and he ripped them down -- we made Dan Flavins. We found an old vacuum and we made a Jeff Koons' vacuum cleaner. He wanted to show that you could just take anything mundane and make it beautiful or create your own work of art. People thought they were real. They would come in the space. They were like, "How did you get this in the hood?"



Karon Davis and Kahlil Joseph. | Image: Still from Artbound episode "MOCA: Beyond The Museum Walls."

Everything's come full circle once MOCA came into the picture. It really is a testimony of dreams come true. I know that sounds cliché but we had this dream. We thought we would never be able to have museum quality art in this space, in this location, and now we do.

Why did you choose a storefront as your location?

I think the nature of a storefront is to lure people in and be inviting and I think we've accomplished that. So 2012 is when we moved into this space, it was soon after Kevin Davis, Noah and Kahlil's father, passed away. And Noah had the vision to take four

storefronts, gut them out, and create the Underground Museum. We lived here for about a year I would say, with a three-year-old, Moses, and [Noah] painted in this room that we're shooting in right now. We slowly knocked down each wall and eventually it became this beautiful work of art.

When people step into the bookstore library, they're curious and they want to go all the way to the garden, and people stay for a long time. They want to be in here, they want to meet other people, they want to engage in conversation and exchange ideas. I think that we've done a good job in laying the foundation for that and creating a space of freedom and refuge.



Installation view of "storefront: Noah Davis: Imitation of Wealth," August 29, 2015 – February 29, 2016 at MOCA Grand Avenue. | Photo: Fredrik Nilsen, courtesy of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles.

What was Noah Davis' mission for the Underground Museum?

When we first started nobody would lend us work. His mission was to bring museum quality [work] to this neighborhood that was basically an art desert, and also to [give] people from the neighborhood access to this work that they wouldn't go see. They

wouldn't go to MOCA or a lot of people who came into the space had never been to those spaces. Noah always talked about how the museum could be very intimidating and it's true -- the language used, the buildings itself. Here people are free to explore the spaces and the garden.

How do you see the Underground Museum as a 21st century museum?

I will say that what's mercurial about the Underground Museum is although it's called a museum technically it actually functions as more of a work of art in that it's a Noah creation, as opposed to a group of wealthy people coming together who aren't artists. It also defies a traditional museum on a lot of levels. It's not just a museum, it is not really a museum, and it's not really a gallery, and it's really a studio, and it's not really a garden, and it's not really a bookstore. That's what's so great to me about the Underground Museum is it defies -- it's slippery.



Polaroid of Noah Davis by Quam Odunsi. | Image: Still from Artbound episode "MOCA: Beyond The Museum Walls."

How is the Underground Museum an artist's project, and not just an exhibition space?

There's definitely a lot of artists that... anytime artists move into a neighborhood, scenes change and shift, and there are a lot of artists like Theaster Gates and Rick Lowe that have gone into communities and sculpted them and created this environment that attracts people and lifts up the neighborhood. It's exciting to be a part of that, and that's a work of art: taking something that's so mundane or concrete and making a beautiful building, making a purple garden in the back that the community can enjoy.

Can you discuss the exhibition "Non-Fiction" and what it meant to Noah Davis?

"Non-Fiction" is the second of the series of shows Noah put together with MOCA. He left about 18 shows for us to complete for him. "Non-Fiction," to me, is definitely Noah's love letter to the community. I think it is definitely about the history of the treatment of Black people in this country, and I think he wanted to speak to that. A lot of things were happening last year/in the last few years, with Trayvon Martin and all the deaths. I think that Noah really appreciated the viewer coming to their own conclusions about what the art meant to them, so I'm not going to say too much about what the show is about, but I do think it definitely is a tribute to those who've lost their lives, in the past and in the present, and it's beautiful.



David Hammons, "In the Hood," 1993. | Image: Still from Artbound episode "MOCA: Beyond The Museum Walls."



Lianne Barnes "Sanctum" in the Purple Garden at the Underground Museum. | Image: Still from Artbound episode "MOCA: Beyond The Museum Walls."

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