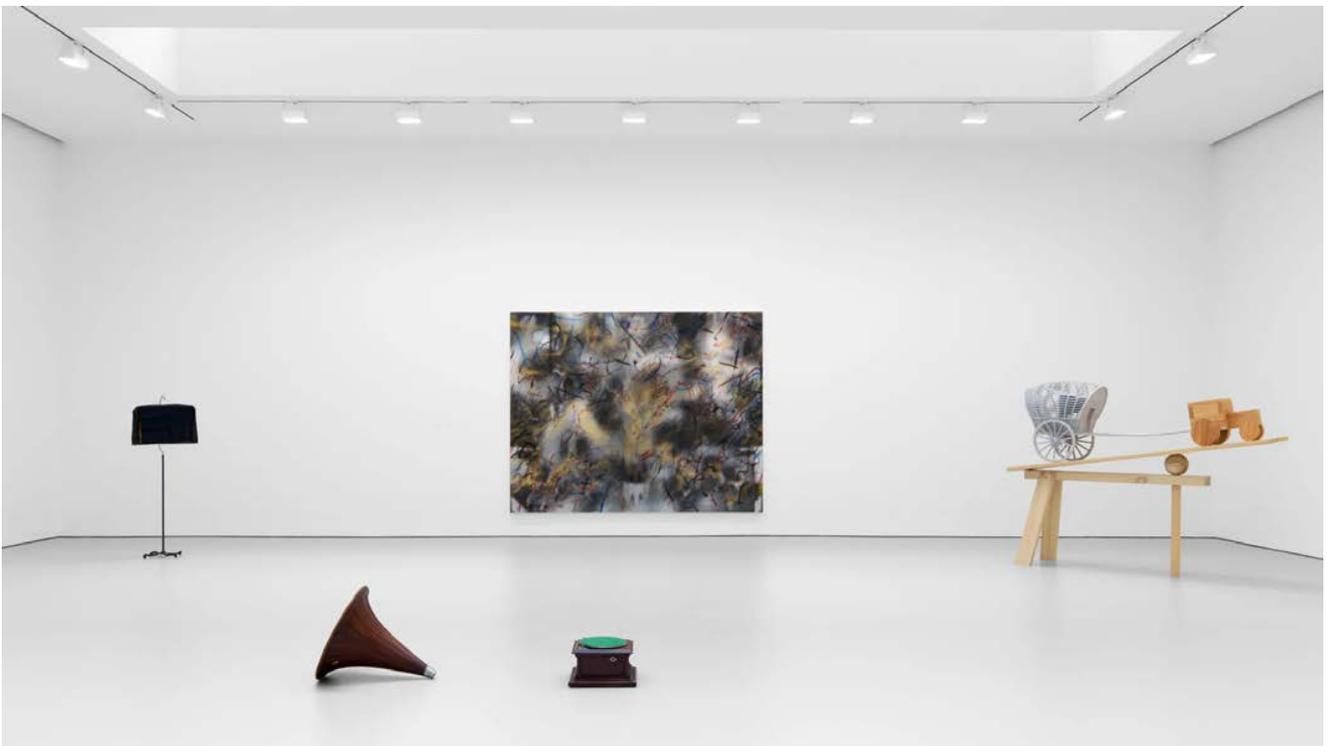


Culture Talk: Hilton Als Sheds Light on His Toni Morrison Exhibition, 'I Wanted to Do This Homage to Her and Talk About Visual Culture Through the Lens of The Black Book'

'TONI MORRISON'S BLACK BOOK,' the latest exhibition curated by **Hilton Als** at David Zwirner Gallery in New York, is a love letter to the renowned author and editor. "I wanted to not only do this homage to her, but I wanted to talk about visual culture through the lens of "The Black Book" and through the lens of her career," Als told Culture Type.

One of America's great storytellers, **Toni Morrison** (1931-2019) wrote about the experiences of Black people and explored African American culture and the hard truths of American history. She invented fascinating narratives and complex characters, and was particularly concerned with the lives of women. Her many books include essay collections and 11 novels. For her extraordinary efforts, Morrison won the Pulitzer Prize for "Beloved" (1988) and was the first African American and first Black woman to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature (1993).



Installation view of "Toni Morrison's Black Book," David Zwirner, New York, Jan. 20—Feb. 26, 2022. Shown, Works by Julie Mehretu (center) and Martin Puryear (right). | Courtesy David Zwirner

The trailblazing author began her career as a pioneering figure in book publishing. Morrison was the first Black female editor at Random House, where she worked on books with Black writers, activists, and thinkers, including Muhammad Ali, Toni Cade Bambara, Lucille Clifton, Angela Davis, Henry Dumas, Gayl Jones, Black Panther Party co-founder Huey P. Newton, and Barbara Chase-Riboud, the Paris-based American artist who identified as a poet before she pursued her sculptural practice.

For more than 50 years, Morrison taught writing and literature at several institutions, including Howard University, her alma mater, and Princeton University, where she established Princeton Atelier, an academic program that encourages collaboration among artists across disciplines. The program grew out of her own experience working with musicians, theater directors, and choreographers. Morrison participated in a number of collaborations, most notably, she wrote an opera libretto inspired by “Beloved” and joined forces with jazz drummer Max Roach and choreographer Bill T. Jones on “Degga,” a stage performance that married her words with their sound and movement.

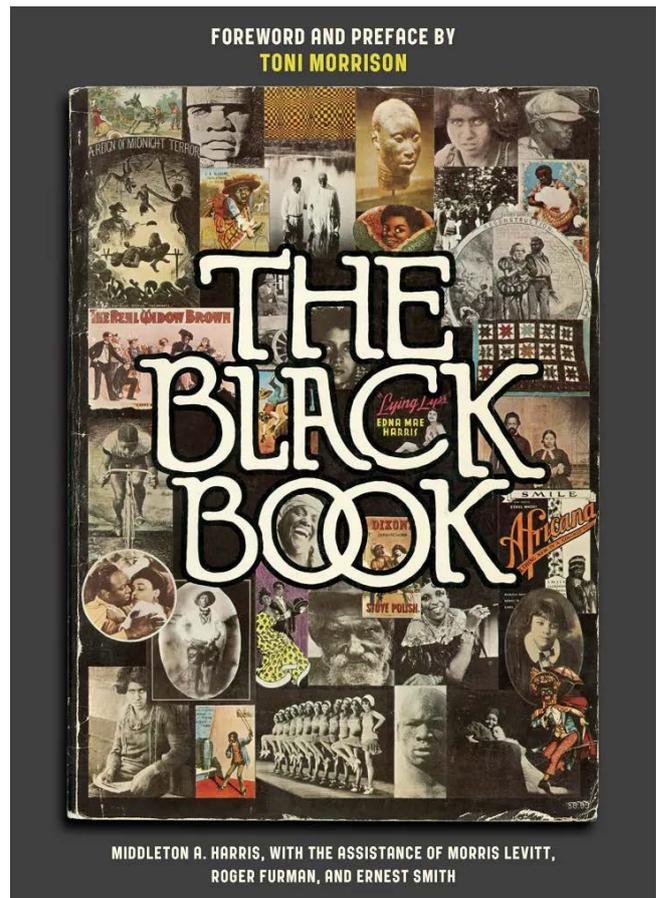
Despite her expansive portfolio, Morrison once told AIs she had a singular focus. “I know it seems like a lot,” she said. “But I really only do one thing. I read books. I teach books. I write books. I think about books. It’s one job.”

After publishing her first two novels, “The Bluest Eye” (1970) and “Sula” (1973), Morrison made a book that visualizes the Black experience with nearly 500 images dating from the 17th to 20th centuries. She called it “The Black Book.”

Arranged scrapbook-style, the volume is an archive of sketches, photographs, advertising, newspapers, documents and maps. The contents include notices for public slave auctions; specifications for patents obtained by Black inventors; lynching images; sheet music for work songs and freedom chants; images of Sambos, coons and other racist stereotypes; a portrait of Frederick Douglass; maps of “fugitive slave” routes to Canada; images of bleaching creams and skin whiteners; a listing of the 14 Black jockeys who won the Kentucky Derby between 1875 and 1902; the front page of the Jan. 24, 1863, edition of the New-York Weekly Caucasian, “the white man’s paper”; ironwork made by “negro” and “slave” blacksmiths; images of Black entertainers, athletes, cowboys, and soldiers; and much more.

First published in 1974, Morrison penned an updated foreword to “The Black Book” in 2009. She recounted receiving a letter from an incarcerated man who had a copy of the seminal volume and was requesting two more from her—one to give to a friend, the other to throw repeatedly against the wall. The one already in his possession he said he would hold tight to his heart.

Morrison viewed his passionate response to the contents as evidence of the book’s staying power. “Now, thirty-five years later, the material can still enrage, can still excite a reader enough to want to share it with a friend and still break a heart with love and pity,” she wrote.



A Pulitzer Prize-winning theater critic for The New Yorker, Als previously curated “God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin” (2019) and “Alice Neel Uptown” (2017) with David Zwirner Gallery.

Introducing his current exhibition, Als wrote: “From the start of her editorial career, Morrison considered herself something of a publisher-activist, committed to bringing more women writers and authors of color to the fore.... In her ‘scrapbook’ and in her novels, Morrison built a grand and spacious architecture to house the visual, linguistic, and political reality of Blackness, and the sustenance, complications, and joy to be found there, too.”

“Toni Morrison’s Black Book” presents works by 20 artists, including Garrett Bradley, Joseph Cornell, Gwendolyn Knight, Jacob Lawrence, Chris Ofili, Walter Price, Irving Penn, Martin Puryear, Amy Sillman, and Bob Thompson, whose works reflect “The Black Book” and explore Morrison’s characters and fictional narratives. Kerry James Marshall contributed two paintings of young Black men and four single-channel videos shown publicly for the first time. Alongside the art, ephemera related to Morrison’s life and work is on display—documentary photographs, materials and correspondence pertaining to her publishing projects, a couple of childhood books, writing she contributed to her junior high school newsletter, and first editions of her books.

Als and I talked by phone about his concept for the exhibition, the intersection of visual art and literature, and the artists and artworks that speak to Morrison’s storytelling:



Installation view of “Toni Morrison’s Black Book,” David Zwirner, New York, Jan. 20—Feb. 26, 2022. | Courtesy David Zwirner



WALTER PRICE, "Follow the flame," 2021 (acrylic, gesso, Flashe, and collage on wood panel, 10 x 8 3/8 inches / 25.4 x 21.3 cm). I © Walter Price, Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

CULTURE TYPE: I have been looking forward to talking with you about this exhibition and thrilled we are in conversation on Toni Morrison's birthday (Feb. 18). She would have been 91 today.

HILTON ALS: Oh yes. Yes. I'm really, really happy about that. I stopped by the gallery on my way home to give her my continued respect, and love, and a little kiss, you know?

I love that.

I love her. I loved her dearly. She was a great, really a kind of amazing figure in terms of her work ethic. I was talking to someone and I realized that the word that really defines her or the way of being that defines her, was her lack of sentimentality. She knew that art was work. She wasn't a self-indulgent person. A lot of people who do that kind of work, want to be rewarded for it personally. I think that one of reasons that she was such an extraordinary writer was that she understood what language was from an editor's point of view.

A lot of writers become involved in personal narratives because it reflects something about themselves. And I think that she was very interested in writers because she was interested in writing, but she was also interested in

supporting the idea and the reality of the Black village and in the Black village there had to be storytellers. There had to be ways in which narrative became part of the fabric of the village. And it was through storytelling that we of course get to know who we are to each other. And I think that the phenomenal thing that she was able to do was to tell us who she was and tell us who we were simultaneously. That simultaneity is a mark of genius that you can hold more than one thing in your head at a time.



WALTER PRICE, "Thinly coded language," 2019 (oil pastel, graphite, and charcoal on Tagboard on wood panel, 12 1/8 x 9 1/8 inches / 30.8 x 23.2 cm). | © Walter Price, Courtesy the artist and Greene Naftali, New York

How were you first introduced to or how did you discover *The Black Book*?

One of the culminations of her work as an editor is a book called "The Black Book." She wanted to create a kind of scrapbook of Black American life. She didn't want it to be skewered by text, which would mean ideology or cant. She wanted to show the ways in which the documentation of the Black American experience was valid in and of itself and told the story. I think I was about 12 or 13 when the book came out and I was given it as a Christmas present by my mother, who was a reader.

How did the exhibition come about? When did you first explore the idea of basing an exhibition on “The Black Book”?

The book really opened my eyes up to the possibility of visual culture as a kind of language. I’d never understood that before. Of course, I loved movies and TV and all that, but when a book wasn’t a catalog and a book that was, as she said, called a scrapbook, it opened up my eyes to the fact that visual culture was a manifestation of history and culture at large. That’s what she did brilliantly in the book. Years passed and I went to Columbia for art history. And I never really saw another object like it.

When I started to do shows through David Zwirner, I went to lunch with him and—I can’t thank him enough—he was just incredibly enthusiastic. He gave me space and time to do it. And it was just a gift. I went to him and I said that I wanted to not only do this homage to her. But I wanted to talk about visual culture through the lens of “The Black Book” and through the lens of her career.

When did you have lunch with David Zwirner?

I believe it was 2019. And so in 2020, because of the pandemic, it gave me, it afforded me the opportunity to reach out to some of the artists and to start the dialogue with them. And it was great that they felt really sort of open and porous to these ideas. I’m the luckiest curator in the world.

“*I think I was about 12 or 13 when the book came out (“The Black Book”) and I was given it as a Christmas present by my mother, who was a reader.*”

I was curious about that, how the artists were included in the show, how they were selected. Was it based on artists who are in your orbit, whose work you respond to, or whose work spoke to Morrison’s writing?

I was doing it based on Toni’s writing and I was doing it in relation to what I visualized when I read Toni. And point of fact, she has said that when she was having trouble with a scene, she often turned to paintings for inspiration. That was one clue that she liked paintings very much. I know her younger son was a wonderful painter. I really went to the books and when I would have a thought about someone, I would drop them a note. And I’d say to Kerry James Marshall—who was extraordinarily generous—I said, have you read “Song of Solomon”? He hadn’t read “Song of Solomon.” And then we would have texting conversations about it.

With Amy Sillman, when I contacted her, I said what have you been thinking about? And she had been studying Hebrew at that point and I said, oh, wonderful. She said she wanted to make an alphabet for Toni and we came up with the word “Paradise” for the novel.

Interestingly, Julie Mehretu had just finished a painting after reading “A Mercy” and named the painting “A Mercy (After T. Morrison).” So we were very fortunate. It was almost sort of a weird synchronicity, you know?

The Julie Mehretu painting was made independent of the Morrison show, before you reached out to her she made that painting?

Yes, because she was doing it for her show. (“[Julie Mehretu: about the space of half an hour](#)” at Marian Goodman Gallery in New York, Nov. 2-Dec. 23, 2020.) But she was reading. The painting was based on her feelings about “A Mercy.” Isn’t that interesting?

It’s amazing.

I feel really lucky.

And so you not knowing about that painting, you thought of her in relation to Morrison and her writing?

I did not know until I called her.

As far as commissioned works in the show, you worked with Kerry James Marshall and Amy Sillman and you also collaborated with a third artist...

Amy Sillman, Kerry James Marshall, and I went to the wonderful Walter Price's studio. I had gone to see him about *The Black Book*. We had a wonderful conversation about it. And then I went back to the studio and he had made a couple of paintings based on the maps in the book. They're wonderful big paintings. But it turns out that he had other work up that I chose from. I wanted to talk about the ways in which innocence appears in the first books ("*The Bluest Eye*," "*Sula*") and Walter's work was perfect for that.

“On selecting the art and artists: “I was doing it based on Toni’s writing and I was doing it in relation to what I visualized when I read Toni. And point of fact, she has said that when she was having trouble with a scene, she often turned to paintings for inspiration.”

What about Beverly Buchanan?

Oh, she's so great. Again, isn't it interesting? I had been talking to Amy Sillman and in an email and she said, do you know Beverly Buchanan's work? And I had forgotten about Beverly Buchanan. It was just extraordinary. I started looking. There's a new little book about her. And then I started hunting around to museums. Beverly's work is so important because a lot of the work about houses is very important in Toni's work, obviously. And in the second section I use some stones that The Met had, that Lowery Sims had bought for The Met, years ago. And in that section, I use a quote from "*Beloved*." The quote was when Sethe says about the ghost, "We could move," she says to Baby Suggs. And Baby Suggs (essentially) says, Why move? There's not a house in this country that is not full of some dead Negro's grief.

Yes. Yes.

And in that section of the exhibition, which joins Toni's early work to her later work—modern, sort of outwardly modernist work—there's a section of the exhibition that's really about death. And that's where that quote is. And there's Beverly, and then there are two pictures from the "*Harlem Book of the Dead*" by James Van Der Zee.

But of course, death always leads to resurgence and new life. And that's the second part of exhibition after you leave that world that Toni describes in "*Beloved*" and Beverly describes in "*Wall Column*" and James Van Der Zee describes in his photographs, we enter a world of modernist life and energy.

What do you have there? What artists are represented there?

Martin Puryear, Julie Mehretu, Amy Sillman, Chris Ofili. Jacob Lawrence and his wife, Gwen Knight.

It's wonderful that you include Gwen Knight. A lot of people don't know about Gwen. What piece of hers do you have in the show? What is it representing?

It's a wonderful piece called "*The Boudoir*." It's from 1941. I have that and the Jacob Lawrence (a painting called "*Pool Players*") next to the famous quote from "*Jazz*" where Toni's character says, "I'm crazy about this city" (Harlem).

“But of course, death always leads to resurgence and new life. And that’s the second part of exhibition after you leave that world that Toni describes in “Beloved” and Beverly describes in “Wall Column” and James Van Der Zee describes in his photographs, we enter a world of modernist life and energy.”

It’s fascinating that the exhibition is inspired by “The Black Book,” but it also very much delves into the characters and the narratives of Morrison’s novels as well.

Exactly. It starts with her work as an editor and then it branches out into her work as an artist.

I’m interested in your connections with Morrison. You talked in the beginning about how much she moved you. I know you’ve spent time in her home interviewing her and writing multiple articles about her and her work. You’ve also interviewed her on public stages. How well did you know her? Can you describe your relationship with Toni Morrison, how she influenced you and also informed your work?

She wasn’t an intimate of mine, but we were friends. To me, an intimate is someone that you can yack on the phone with every day, lying bed, watching TV kind of thing. It wasn’t like that. It was more that if you wrote to her and she considered you a friend, she would write to you and say, come on up. She lived in Nyak (in Rockland County, New York). Or she would try to help you. Or she would read something. The conversations that we had really encompassed a lot of different things and she was a wonderful conversationalist because she was interested in what you had to say, too. Also, a thing that I think is underplayed is how attractive she was as a person. She had a real star quality and she had the kind of beautiful flirtatious of, you know, an attractive woman.

And she was funny, too.

Very. I mean, what’s sexier than humor? The friendship was really about always sort of catching up and reading. You know how when a person is powerful, you have to wait to grow up to them in a way and they’re sort of living their lives and not knowing that you’re sitting there in awe? What I loved about the experience was that she didn’t condescend to people.

You referenced this earlier, but I would like to know more. How would you describe Toni Morrison’s relationship with visual art?

She was very, very interested in painting and she was very interested in visual art as a whole. One of the things that was very important to her, if you think about it, when she started the Atelier program in Princeton, she wanted to start something in which professional artists had a relationship to kids. Again, what a kind of extraordinary gift to give us. She was very interested in mentorship and I think that she learned a lot from painters. I know that she was friends with Frank Bowling and her son Slade (Morrison, 1965-2010) was a wonderful painter. I think that throughout her life, as “The Black Book” shows us, she had a very deep connection to visual culture.

“(Toni Morrison) wasn’t an intimate of mine, but we were friends. To me, an intimate is someone that you can yack on the phone with every day, lying bed, watching TV kind of thing. It wasn’t like that.”



Photographer unknown, Toni Morrison in China, 1984. Courtesy of Princeton University Library (Toni Morrison Papers, Manuscripts Division, Special Collections, Princeton University Library).

Let's talk about your curatorial practice, how it's developed alongside your writing. Can you explain how the platform of an exhibition differs for you from words on the page, in terms of how it serves your expression or the stories you're telling and the ideas that you're considering?

Curatorial work for me is a form of writing. What is different is that there are three-dimensional objects, right? And that also you're responding visually to something that can be read and interpreted in many different ways. When language happens, it fixes things. Paintings, sculptures, photographs are evocative of something. For me, I like the evocation. When I use language, it's just a different intention. But I like the freeing aspect of visual production in life and work. Throughout most of my early career, I supported my habit of writing by working as a picture editor. I was always just super visual and able to very quickly read a story and imagine the photographer and imagine what I would want from the shoot.

Where did you do that?

I was at the Village Voice and at the New York Times magazine and at Vibe. It's funny, it's sort of parallel to Toni, right? I didn't realize that until I spoke to you. Well, you're a very good interviewer. I find it fortifying and I find it satisfying in a different way than writing, but not in a dissimilar way.

Did curating your James Baldwin exhibition inform how you might do something similar with Morrison's work?

I never walk into a situation thinking that I'll do something similar because there is always problem solving. Exhibitions are a lot of work and a lot of fun at the same time, because there's a lot of problem solving that you have to do on your feet. I didn't think of them as being in tandem with one another, but I for sure, when I conceived the exhibition idea, I thought that they would be in conversation with one another. But also, they'd been friends.

How did you envision the presentation of the exhibition, how it unfolds?

It's kind of, it's sort of rather akin to jazz music. You have all the elements and then you're in the space and in the space you have to build a story. Every show is a story. And how you build the story is you look at the pieces to see how they're working in concert with one another, and then you impose the discipline of narrative structure. But first, you absolutely have to begin with, what does it look like? Now that I'm with this Kerry James Marshall or this Walter Price, what do these pieces look like in concert with one another and how do I give them a narrative through line to be in conversation with each other? It's a lot of work, but it's also freeing. You have limitations. You have walls. You have a room. You have this amount space. You have this amount of time. It's really a kind of profound thing have the set limits of architecture.

How involved are you the installation and organization of your exhibitions?

You can imagine. How long have you talked to me? I like every step of it, every inch of it.

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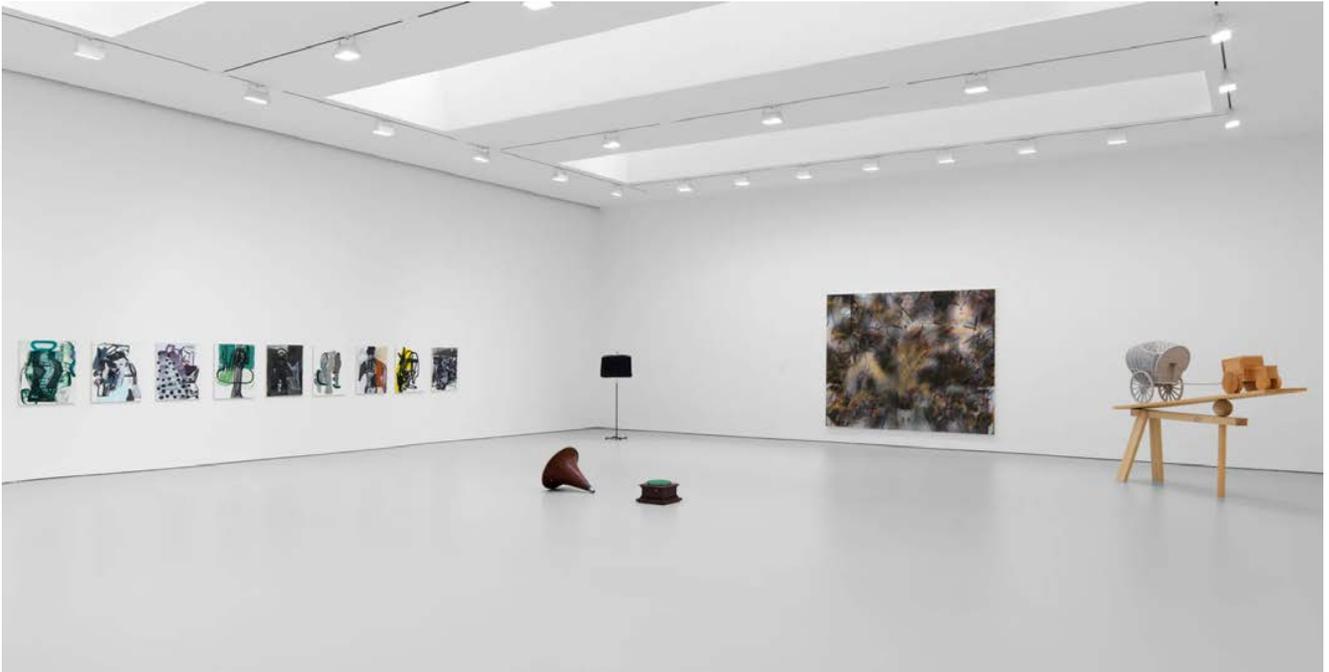
The installation includes a number of randomly placed objects on the floor, a broken victrola and vintage doll. What is their function?

One of the things that is brilliant about “Jazz”—and we have a letter Toni wrote to a friend about it—she didn't want in that book to evoke the Jazz Age as it were. She wanted to write about the spirit of jazz music and, again, that kind of fracturing and cohesion that you hear in jazz music. I didn't want to do a victrola that would be a symbol of it. I wanted to break the victrola apart, the way that she breaks jazz music apart. The victrola is from that era. It's from the 1920s.

The doll is a Shirley Temple souvenir doll from the 1930s. As you know, from “The Bluest Eye,” that's a huge figure in the book. Near the Shirley Temple doll, there's a little red wagon and that wagon is evocative of Eva, Miss Eva Peace who sits in a wagon in “Sula,” her grandmother. It takes some knowledge of Toni's books to see more things in it, but you can also just see the thing for what it is.

Right. And then there's also a row of shoes.

Yes. That's about Sula and Nel, and we have a quote on the wall about Sula returning to the town and being a pariah, sort of, because she's this glamorous figure and Nel is the practical stay-at-home one. So the shoes are kind of like Oxfords for practical people for practical Nel and then gold pumps for Sula. The shoes are used a sculptural elements, but it's also to bring out their differences.



Installation view of “Toni Morrison’s Black Book,” David Zwirner, New York, Jan. 20—Feb. 26, 2022. | Courtesy David Zwirner

What do you hope viewers will take away from the exhibition?

Oh, love. I really just want them to take away the love that she gave us as a kind of village griot and the love that I hopefully have culled in this atmosphere based on her incredible mind. The guiding principle for all of it really is love.

How do you think Morrison would respond to the show if she were able to see it?

I think she would have a ball. Not to pat myself on the head, too much, but I think she would’ve had a blast. She gave me permission. I think that one of the reasons that this show is so strong and freeing really is because of David Zwirner’s support and Toni giving me permission to do it.

What do you mean by she gave you permission?

Well, I wrote to her, this is before she passed.

Really? Please say more.

Oh yeah. I wrote her and asked. I was so frightened to send a letter and she said, yes.

What exactly did you say to her? What did you ask?

Exactly everything that you’ve asked me today. I sent her a list of ideas about it and she said yes. She gave us permission.

Wow. That’s wonderful.

Yeah. It was one of the great moments. I was so frightened. Because I had set my heart on doing it and it just was nicer with her permission. **CT**