

ARTS, HUMANITIES, & SOCIAL SCIENCES

‘Of the moment’

This year alone four museums and two galleries are featuring work by artist and Professor David Hartt, including currently at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



Artist David Hartt with his installation “The Histories” (Crépuscule) at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the exhibition “New Grit: Art & Philly Now.” (Image: July 2021 when masks were not required.)

The woven tapestry that stretches nearly 21 feet across a Philadelphia Museum of Art (<https://philamuseum.org/>) gallery wall was created from two photographs taken by artist David Hartt (<http://davidhartt.net/>) in the spot in Jamaica where 19th-century landscape artist Frederic Edwin Church drew a series of sketches. The video playing on an adjacent screen was filmed in the location in Canada where Church sketched icebergs crashing into the sea. On the floor is a decades-old radio broadcasting an original music composition created to accompany the works.

Part of the Museum’s “New Grit: Art & Philly Now” (<https://www.philamuseum.org/calendar/exhibition/new-grit-art-philly-now>)” exhibition, the multi-media

artwork is the third in a cycle, titled “The Histories,” that Hartt has created and exhibited in the past three years.

And it is one of four museum exhibitions and two gallery shows featuring Hartt’s work in the United States just this year, including “Reconstructions: Architecture and Blackness in America” (<https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5219>) at the Museum of Modern Art (<https://www.moma.org/>) in New York, and “A Colored Garden (<https://theglasshouse.org/whats-on/david-hartt-a-colored-garden/>)” at The Glass House (<https://theglasshouse.org/>) museum in New Canaan, Connecticut.

His art is based on extensive historical research, connecting the past to the present through themes of race, culture, identity, migration. The works are made from varied materials, including photography, tapestry, video, music, instruments, furniture, plants, and even a currently blooming flower garden.

A dozen museums have acquired Hartt’s work for their collections, from New York to Chicago to Los Angeles to Amsterdam. And he has been noticed by the media, covered by *The New York Times* (<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/21/arts/design/what-to-see-in-new-y>), *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (<https://www.inquirer.com/arts/philadelphia-art-museum-core-reopening-new-gr>), *The Los Angeles Times* (<https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2021-03-19/r>), and art and architecture publications just this year.

In June, Hartt, who started teaching at University of Pennsylvania (upenn.edu) in 2015, was promoted to associate professor of fine arts, with tenure, in the Stuart Weitzman School of Design (<https://www.design.upenn.edu/>).

“A lot of the work is intellectual labor, and it’s about researching and understanding the dimensions of a problem or concept,” Hartt says. “It’s really exciting to be at Penn because I treat the work as scholarship. I’m not interested in a masterpiece or the myth of an artist laboring quietly in isolation. It’s about engaging with the world and trying to understand and put forward the complexities that you encounter.”

An artist ‘at the top of his game’

The “New Grit” exhibition, on view until Aug. 22, features 25 Philadelphia artists, including several from Penn, among them Ken Lum (<https://www.design.upenn.edu/fine-arts/graduate/people/ken-lum>), chair of the Fine Arts Department, and Sharon Hayes (<https://www.design.upenn.edu/fine-arts/graduate/people/sharon-hayes>), professor of fine arts.

“I think it is vital to any fine arts department to have teachers who are producing and relevant and are contributing to the contemporary art dialogue,” Lum says, noting that Hartt’s art projects incorporate several disciplines taught at the School, including architecture, landscape, and historic preservation.



Hartt's multi-media installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, inspired by artworks from the 19th century, focuses on the slave trade route between the British colonies of Jamaica and Canada.

“David is one of those artists. He is of the moment,” Lum says. “David is a player, showing in major exhibitions, and that is important as an example to our MFA students. Someone like David who is at the top of his game right now is invaluable for the department.”

As it turns out, Hartt was in the first college class Lum taught at the University of Ottawa, although Lum says he didn't make the connection until after Hartt had secured the position at Penn. “There were a lot of professors there who could open your eyes to possibilities of art taking different forms, and Ken was one of them,” Hartt says.

Both Hartt and Lum are Canadian. “Trying to explain my own identity, it's always more complicated than I'd like it to be,” Hartt says. Adopted by white, Jewish parents, he grew up in Montreal. His biological father is Black and biological mother is white.

“I have a bit of imposter syndrome,” says Hartt. “To grow up in a Black community and to experience a particular way of life and a particular set of cultural histories, is, for me, the root of Black identity.”

But he did not have those experiences. “The idea of passing for Black, but not having access to those histories or those experiences, always gives me a little bit of apprehension,” he says. “I don't want to claim

something that I don't have any rights to claim.”

And yet he has found a way to emphasize Black history, artists, and experiences into his research, scholarship, and artworks. “I’m somebody who takes and borrows and blends all of these different kinds of cultural histories,” he says. “A lot of the work is the intersection where it suggests a blurring of lines or crossing, which allows for someone to occupy various positions simultaneously.”

‘The Histories’

Hartt’s installation “The Histories” (Crépuscule) in “New Grit” is based on a series of sketches that Church made of the tropical landscape at Kingston Bay in Jamaica in 1865 during the Civil War, and another series of sketches he made of glaciers in Newfoundland, Canada. The artwork, he says, examines routes and currents of the transatlantic slave trade through the two locations, both colonies of Great Britain.



“The Histories” installations include tapestries woven by a Belgian firm based on Hartt’s photographs.

The photo-like tapestry was woven by a firm in Belgium, one of the few that will make one three meters wide, Hartt says. “It’s a photograph with literally millions of colors interpreted into hundreds of individual fibers,” he says. “They’re chosen based on their color value, their density, for contrast, and for detail, and also their reflectivity.”

Because of the pandemic, Hartt couldn’t travel to Canada to shoot the video of the melting icebergs in June as he had planned, so he hired a local photographer. “I gave him all of the reference images and then I

actually shipped up my camera lenses and everything just so that he could shoot it in a very, very specific way,” he says.

The commissioned music playing on the retro Panasonic radio in the exhibit was created by Berlin-based techno musician Pole (<https://pole-music.com/>) based on a piece written by Jamaican music composer Oswald Russell in 1969 for a Swiss-French film. “It’s his own production techniques but the music is deeply inspired by traditions,” says Hartt. “The scores are always meant to be experienced in conjunction with the work.”

The three installations of “The Histories,” he says, “are all in conversation with each other.” Each includes a tapestry created from Hartt’s photographs, his video, original commissioned music, and additional elements, including tropical plants, hand-made furniture, even a Steinway piano.

The first in the cycle, “Le Mancenillier (<https://www.bethsholompreservation.org/programs/david-hartt-the-histories>)” in 2019, funded by a Pew Arts & Heritage grant (<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/penn-faculty-and-projects-receive-pew-center-arts-heritage-fellowships-and-grants>), was at the Beth Sholom Synagogue (<https://www.bethsholomcongregation.org/>) in the Elkins Park neighborhood of Philadelphia. The second, “Old Black Joe (<https://www.corbettvsdempsey.com/exhibitions/david-hartt-the-histories-old-black-joe/>)” in 2020, was at the Corbett vs Dempsey (<https://www.corbettvsdempsey.com/artists/david-hartt/>) gallery in Chicago, and is opening Aug. 21 (<https://hammer.ucla.edu/exhibitions/2021/hammer-projects-david-hartt>) at the Hammer Museum (<https://hammer.ucla.edu/>) in Los Angeles.

The cycle’s name is from Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian, who detailed the movement of people and alliances in the Mediterranean. Hartt transposes the geography to the Caribbean in relationship to the Americas, and the time period to the 19th century.

“And the reason being is that the psychic and physical infrastructure of today is rooted in that century, the formation of colonial empires, the mass migration, both for economic opportunity, but also as a result of slavery of different peoples,” Hartt says. “And so, the world, as we know it, really began to take shape in terms of the displacement and the occupation of land, by specific peoples that didn’t have any history there.”

In each he chose what he calls a cipher, pioneering artists, many of them Black, who “set the framework for thinking through formal aspects of how this cycle might unfold ... an individual who could help me see in a very personal way and understand through their connections and through their social networks that moment in time.”

Circuitous path

History forms the foundation of Hartt’s artworks, even though he says he nearly flunked out of the University of Ottawa as a history major. While working part-time as a dishwasher, he met a student in the fine arts department who explained that photography is a college major. Hartt’s mother had shared her love of photography with him, turning their downstairs bathroom into a darkroom, but he had thought of it as a hobby.

He saved up some money and took his camera on a tour of Egypt. “From those images I put together a portfolio of work to apply to the bachelor of fine arts program,” he says. “Once I was in, I realized I was home.”



Hartt’s artworks often include video and music. In the “New Grit” exhibition, an original composition is actually broadcast on channel 87.5 in a 200-foot radius, referencing pre-internet global communications.

Hartt chose the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for his master’s degree. During his second year he had a part-time, grant-funded curatorial position at the Institute’s photography department. But after graduating in 1994, full-time curatorial work was hard to find.

Work that was easier to find, and paid well, was coding for the nascent internet. “I was really interested in graphic design and this kind of emerging set of technologies,” he says.

His soon-to-be wife wanted to be a fashion designer, so they moved to New York City and he worked for 17 years in the design and advertising field, as an art director and a creative director, overseeing campaigns for large consumer brands.

“I actually abandoned my art practice,” Hartt says.

The couple bought and renovated a brownstone in Brooklyn. “We both had these great jobs where we were earning lots of money,” he says. “We were living the dream.”

But when the first of their two sons was born, their priorities changed. “It’s like we’d lost track,” he says. “So, over the next year we sold the house, quit our jobs, and left New York.”

First to his wife’s hometown of Detroit, and then to Chicago. That’s when Hartt decided to focus on making art, and where he found his first artistic successes. His first museum show was at the Museum of Contemporary Art, and then came the first acquisition, the first gallery association, and a string of awards and grants and fellowships.

“I realized how much I enjoyed it,” Hartt says. “I realized that financially I had a choice. I could leave the safety of my career in design and tech. So I did. I left that behind me and worked full time as an artist.”

Finding Penn

His father was a philosophy professor, and so it was natural for Hartt to explore teaching, first a studio class at the Art Institute and at the Ox-Bow School of Art, and then a summer photography class at Bard College. But lack of conventional teaching experience thwarted his traditional job search. Until he found a match at Penn’s School of Design, recruited by Anita Allen (<https://provost.upenn.edu/person/anita-allen>), now vice provost for faculty, and then-dean Marilyn Jordan Taylor (<https://www.design.upenn.edu/city-regional-planning/graduate/people/marilyn-jordan-taylor>).

“I think Penn is a really wonderful home for me because my practice is situated in a place that values research and scholarship. And so it’s more than just teaching, it’s about being part of an intellectual community,” Hartt says. “I think what’s unique about Penn is that each of us are so distinctly different in our practices that the graduate students can see all of these possibilities of what it means to be an artist.”

Hartt teaches a variety of courses, some available to both graduate and undergraduate students. One of those he named Defense Against the Dark Arts: “What does it mean to think and be, and make, in response to contemporary conditions as an artist? It deals with how contemporary artists respond to moments of crisis,” he says.

Starting in 1968, the course hits different geographical locations and historical moments through readings and screenings and music, students each choose a period to focus on to create a project. “It’s a really beautiful lens through which to understand a specific cultural history,” Hartt says. “They might pick a place in a time that you don’t know but that resonates with them.”

Now an artist and teacher based in Brooklyn, Fields Harrington (<https://fieldsharrington.net/>) took that class when he was an MFA student at Penn. “One thing I noticed with David is a closeness of reading the work or text, the attention to the details,” he says.

Harrington, who graduated in 2019, also worked as an intern with Hartt, and one day listened to “Black Secret Technology,” an album that had an immediate impact on his artistic vision, inspiring him to incorporate patents by African American inventors in his drawings and videos.

“We listened to that start to finish, just the two of us in the studio, and that was a huge influence on the work I began to make,” Harrington says. “David was very supportive and thoughtful in how he engaged with students' work.”

‘The possibility of art’

Hartt says he has been creating artworks constantly for more than 10 years, working two to three years ahead, so the attention on current exhibitions is not his focus. “I just feel incredibly grateful that I can keep working and that those opportunities are there,” he says.



Hartt's installation “A Colored Garden” at The Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut, is created with everblooming flowers, based on a 19th-century painting. (Image: David Heald)

But there has been quite a buzz about the current exhibition, “A Colored Garden (<https://theglasshouse.org/whats-on/david-hartt-a-colored-garden/>)” at The Glass House (<https://theglasshouse.org/>) museum, that opened in April and runs through Nov. 15.

He researched the property's topographical surveys and site maps and learned there once were extensive gardens. So, he created a new garden, a 40-foot circle of flowers, inspired by the still life paintings of Connecticut native Charles Ethan Porter.

“It was a response to what I saw as dormant histories within landscape,” Hartt says. “I created a matrix with all the different flowers so there would be an overlap, moving from spring to fall with the garden constantly

in bloom.”

Architect Philip Johnson designed and built the modernist house and donated it to the National Trust for Historic Preservation upon his death in 2005. “Johnson was famous during his life for having these fabulous salons, inviting some of the best practitioners in the fields of dance, architecture, and art, who would come and discuss and theorize at these garden parties,” Hartt says. “It was overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly male. And I thought, well, what happens if this house is occupied by a different kind of person?”

Hartt plans to shoot a film in the garden in September featuring Tomika Reid (<https://www.tomekareid.net/>), a cellist who is African American, as a character who wanders the gardens while composing and playing a piece of music.

“This is the possibility of art. Art isn’t governed by the same orthodoxies that can limit thinking and possibilities within other fields,” he says. “Nobody’s setting rules within art. So, it’s wherever your curiosity takes you. I think for me, the satisfaction is making connections, making it matter, making it mean something.”

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