

Toni Morrison's Black Book

Curated by Hilton Als

January 20–February 26, 2022
525 and 533 West 19th Street, New York



Installation view, *Toni Morrison's Black Book*, David Zwirner, New York

David Zwirner is pleased to announce a group exhibition curated by the Pulitzer Prize–winning author, critic, and curator Hilton Als. On view at the gallery's West 19th Street spaces, the exhibition will focus on the enormous output and cultural significance of Toni Morrison (1931–2019), and, as Als notes, "will add visual components that italicize the beauty and audacity of her work." Included will be selected archival materials as well as work by artists Garrett Bradley, Beverly Buchanan, Robert Gober, Gwen Knight, Kerry James Marshall, Julie Mehretu, Irving Penn, Walter Price, Martin Puryear, Amy Sillman, Bob Thompson, and James Van Der Zee, among others, some of which have been commissioned for the exhibition and were made in direct response to Morrison's writings.

Novelist, educator, and editor Toni Morrison's reach across contemporary American letters is profound in its range, concerns, and commitment to bringing non-ideologized Black lives to the forefront of her nation's literature. Born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, the 1993 Nobel Prize laureate, who remains the only Black woman to be accorded that honor, was, from an early age, a reader. By the time she graduated from Howard University with a BA in English, in 1953—she received her MA from Cornell two years later—Morrison was steeped in the modernist tradition; indeed, her graduate thesis at Cornell was a study of alienation and loneliness in the work of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner.

By 1973, when she published her second novel, Sula—her first, The Bluest Eye, had come out three years before—Morrison's life and work included writing, the raising of two boys on her own, and duties as a senior editor at Random House, where she worked with writers, thinkers, and public figures, such as Angela Davis, Gayl Jones, Toni Cade Bambara, Henry Dumas, Quincy Troupe, and Muhammad Ali. (The first book Morrison put out at Random House was the groundbreaking Contemporary African Literature, which helped introduce American audiences to Chinua Achebe and Athol Fugard, among others.) Indeed, Morrison considered her editorial

duties as a kind of activism; she wanted to publish books that expanded on the world's narrow view of women, and of race in general. And it was while at Random House that Morrison conceived of, and published, in 1974, the landmark volume The Black Book. In it, Morrison, whose own Sula came out the previous year, pulled from various collectors of Black ephemera to create a primarily visual volume that charted the lives recorded within, starting with slavery in the South to the Great Migration to post-World War II New York and other American cities. The book was very dear to Morrison, and despite lack of institutional support, it went on to be nominated for a National Book Award.

In a sense, The Black Book can be viewed as a kind of blueprint to Morrison's grand project as a writer, which is to tell the story of Black men and women in America as they helped invent the country. In books ranging from The Bluest Eye to 1987's Pulitzer Prize-winning Beloved, and Jazz (1992) to Home (2012), Morrison set tales in American society as it came to be in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries; in each epoch the writer told stories that relayed history's disfiguring ways, and intimacy's transfiguring ways.

Toni Morrison's Black Book not only takes in The Black Book as a seminal historical document that changed the way Black American history is taught; we look at artists looking at Morrison the writer, who describes the interior lives of men and women of color who made The Black Book with their collective being, and they are looking at Morrison the supreme stylist whose epic body of work stands side by side with their own.

—Hilton Als

On the occasion of the exhibition, David Zwirner Books will publish a fully illustrated catalogue.

The exhibition follows Als's critically acclaimed show *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*, held at David Zwirner, New York, in 2019, and is his fourth curatorial project with the gallery, also having organized *Alice Neel, Uptown*, in 2017, and *More Life: Frank Moore*, in 2021.

Hilton Als became a staff writer at *The New Yorker* in 1994, a theater critic in 2002, and chief theater critic in 2013. He began contributing to the magazine in 1989, writing pieces for *The Talk of the Town*. Als was previously a staff writer for *The Village Voice* and an editor-at-large at *Vibe*. He has also written articles for *The Nation*, *The Believer*, *The New York Review of Books*, and *4Columns*, among other publications. His first book, *The Women*, a meditation on gender, race, and personal identity, was published in 1996 (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). His most recent book, *White Girls* (McSweeney's), discusses various narratives around race and gender and was nominated for a 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award in Criticism.

In 1997, the New York Association of Black Journalists awarded Als first prize in both Magazine Critique/Review and Magazine Arts and Entertainment. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for creative writing in 2000, the George Jean Nathan Award for Dramatic Criticism

for 2002 to 2003, and a Windham-Campbell Prize for Nonfiction in 2016. In 2017, he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism. The same year, he was the recipient of the Langston Hughes Medal. The honor celebrates writers from the African diaspora for their distinguished work. Previous honorees include James Baldwin and Toni Morrison.

In 2010, he published *Justin Bond/Jackie Curtis* (After Dark Publishing), his second book. In 2015, Als cocurated, with Anthony Elms, a retrospective of Christopher Knowles's work at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Philadelphia. He is also the coauthor of *Robert Gober: The Heart Is Not a Metaphor*, the catalogue published on the occasion of Gober's retrospective at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2014. In 2016, he produced a six-month survey of art and text at The Artist's Institute, New York, and organized *Desdemona for Celia by Hilton*, an exhibition of work by Celia Paul, at The Metropolitan Opera's Gallery Met in New York. His work was included in the group exhibition *Looking Back: The Eleventh White Columns Annual* in New York in 2017. The same year, Als curated the critically lauded exhibition *Alice Neel, Uptown*, which traveled from David Zwirner, New York, to Victoria Miro, London and Venice. In 2019, Als presented *God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin* at David Zwirner, New York. Recent exhibitions he has curated include *She Who Is: Adrienne Kennedy and the Drama of Difference*, Artists Space, New York (2020); *Get Lifted!*, Karma, New York (2021); and *Frank Moore*, David Zwirner, New York (2021). He is curating a series of three successive exhibitions for the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, of the work of Celia Paul (2018), Lynette Yiadom-Boakye (2019), and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (2022).

Als is an associate professor at Columbia University School of the Arts and has taught at Princeton University; Smith College; University of California, Berkeley; Wellesley College; Wesleyan University; and the Yale School of Drama. He lives in New York City.

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