

Boston's 10 must-see museum shows for winter

By [Murray Whyte](#) Globe Staff, Updated January 17, 2020, 9:00 a.m.



Peabody Essex Museum organized an exhibition of Jacob Lawrence's "Struggle" series of paintings. THE JACOB AND GWENDOLYN LAWRENCE FOUNDATION, SEATTLE / ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

JACOB LAWRENCE: THE AMERICAN STRUGGLE This monumental display features the most important body of work by arguably the most important black artist in American history. With his “*Struggle: From the History of the American People (1954–56)*” series, Lawrence chronicled a nascent democracy built on equality for some, not all,

to chilling effect. Alongside the 30 paintings, Peabody Essex Museum (which also organized the show) will display works by contemporary artists Derrick Adams, Bethany Collins, and Hank Willis Thomas. Together they help capture a struggle still very much in progress. *Jan. 18-April 26, Peabody Essex Museum, 161 Essex St., Salem. 978-745-9500, www.pem.org*

TSCHABALALA SELF: OUT OF BODY The largest exhibition to date featuring Harlem-based Self, “Out of Body” presents the artist’s richly-imagined figures, gleaned from her observations of day-to-day life in a neighborhood brimming with African-American identity and history. Self’s figures — composites of paint and fabric, drawing and collage — are as compelling materially as they are figuratively. *Jan. 20-July 5, Institute of Contemporary Art, 25 Harbor Shore Drive. 617-478-3100, www.icaboston.org*



Tschabalala Self's "Racer." TSCHABALALA SELF/PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON (CUSTOM CREDIT)/TSCHABALALA SELF/PILAR CORRIAS GALLERY, LONDON

BLACK HISTORIES, BLACK FUTURES Curated by student fellows from three Boston youth empowerment organizations — Becoming a Man (BAM), The BASE, and the Bloomberg Arts Internship Boston program — this exhibition gives agency to its teen curators to present some 50 works by black artists, and provide a model for the future. Jan. 20-June 20, Museum of Fine Arts, 465 Huntington Ave. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org

WALLS TURN SIDEWAYS: ARTISTS CONFRONT THE JUSTICE SYSTEM For decades, social justice has been a pervasive force in art of all kinds, but this show opens a vein of inquiry as ugly as it is particular. Surprising, to me, was the list of names in the show for whom incarceration has been a preoccupation: superstars such as Chris Burden, Andrea Fraser, Kapwani Kiwanga, and Dread Scott, just to name a few. *Jan. 23-April 19, Tufts University Art Galleries, 40 Talbot Ave., Medford. 617-627-3518, artgalleries.tufts.edu*

ELSA DORFMAN: ME AND MY CAMERA The legendary Cambridge-based portrait photographer — her friend and neighbor, filmmaker Errol Morris, made 2017's "The B-Side" about Dorfman and her work — finds her own life in focus with a show of images featuring friends, family, and a large selection of self-portraits. Along for the ride will be selections from her 1974 book, "Elsa's Housebook: A Woman's Photojournal," a catalog of the comings and goings of friends and family to her home and studio. *Feb. 8-June 21, Museum of Fine Arts. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org*



Elsa Dorfman's "My third day with the 20x24" from 1987. MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON (CUSTOM CREDIT)/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

PAINTING EDO With 120 works, “Painting Edo” is Harvard Art Museum’s biggest-ever single exhibition. It illuminates the moment when insular 17th-century Japan, under the warrior government of the shoguns, first opened itself more fully to engagement with the outside world. Spanning more than two centuries, the exhibition charts the famously-reclusive country’s grappling with modernity — and the global exchange it inevitably brought. *Feb. 14-July 26, Harvard Art Museums, 32 Quincy St., Cambridge. 617-495-9400, www.harvardartmuseums.org*

BOSTON’S APOLLO In 1916, John Singer Sargent, Boston’s preeminent portrait painter, met Thomas Eugene McKeller, a black elevator operator at the Hotel Vendome. Sargent asked McKeller to model for a variety of figures in his paintings, but none more prominent than the series of murals Sargent made for the MFA’s grand staircase and rotunda, in which McKeller’s frame became the template for an array of white gods and goddesses, his person subsumed by myth. This show supplants that myth to tell the story of McKeller’s reality as a black man left faceless despite his body being enshrined for the city’s elite. *Feb. 17-May 17, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. 617-566-1401, www.gardnermuseum.org*



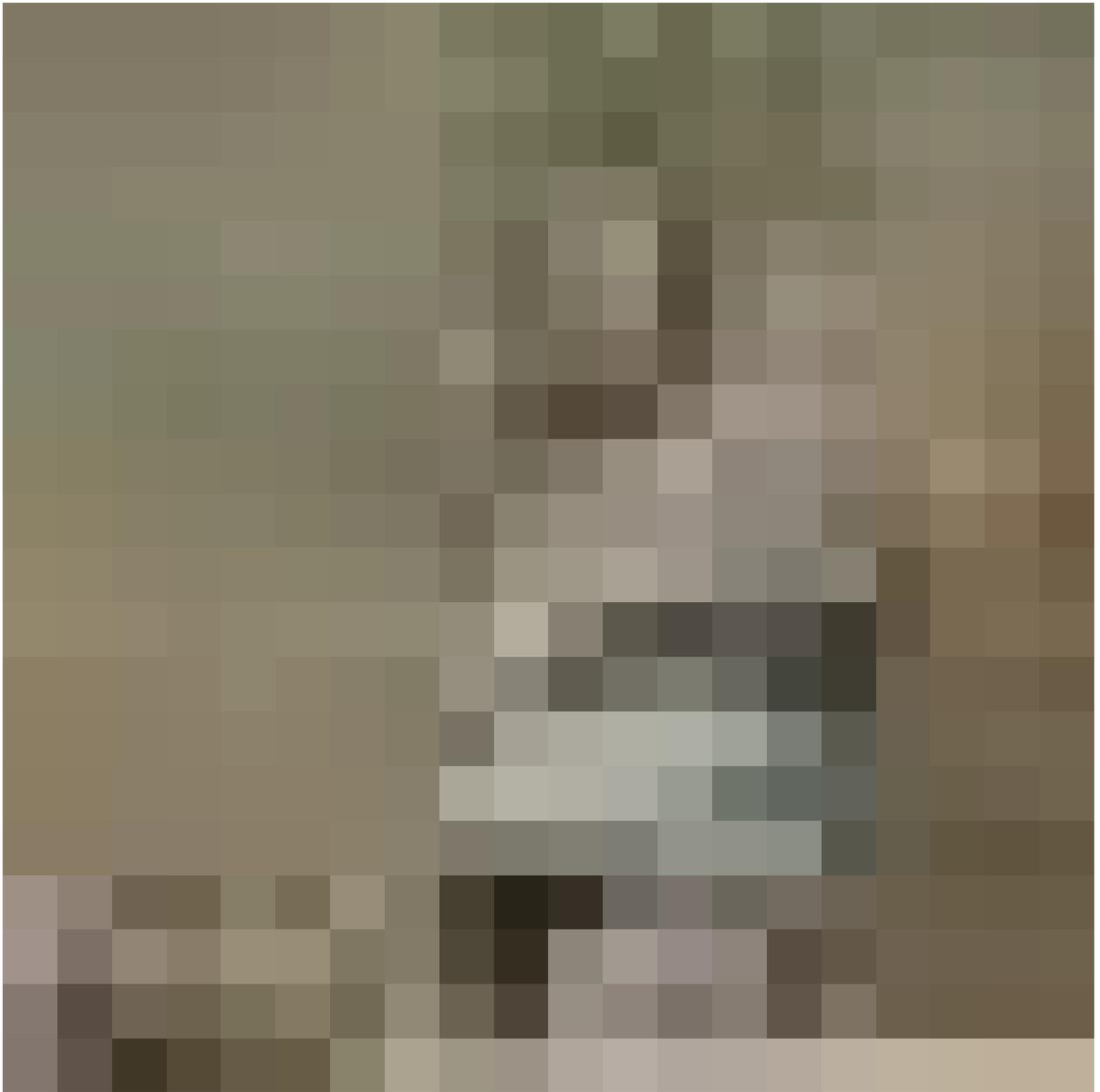
John Singer Sargent's "Chiron and Achilles." MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON (CUSTOM CREDIT)/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

ADAM PENDLETON: ELEMENTS OF ME New York-based Pendleton authored a notion he calls “Black Dada,” a clear, chiding critique of the aesthetic revolution that supposedly liberated a gang of privileged white artists from tradition. While Dadaists were gleefully declaring freedom, displaying urinals and cobbling together nonsense

sound poetry, black artists were struggling for freedom of a very different sort. With his abstract works, Pendleton injects a “revolutionary” movement with an often-excluded perspective and asks where the real struggle lay. *Feb. 13-Sept. 27, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum. 617-566-1401, www.gardnermuseum.org*

STERLING RUBY The first-ever full survey of the revolution-minded Los Angeles-based artist, this eponymous exhibition comprises some 70 works along a loose timeline and tracks the artist’s fascination with (and unpacking of) dark elements of American culture, from prison architecture to graffiti. Ruby is nothing if not abject, wearing the badge of outsider with no small amount of pride. His works represent a sharp undercurrent beneath the country’s all-is-well surface. *Feb. 26-May 26, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston. 617-478-3100, www.icaboston.org*

LUCIAN FREUD: THE SELF PORTRAITS Love him or hate him, it’s impossible to deny the impact of Freud’s leering, often ghastly portrayals of human flesh on a couple of generations of the art world. For this show, the renowned, late British painter turns his unforgiving gaze on himself, with no quarter given. *March 1-May 25, Museum of Fine Arts. 617-267-9300, www.mfa.org*



Lucian Freud's "Reflection With Two Children (Self-portrait)" from 1965. MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON (CUSTOM CREDIT)/MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

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