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GALLERIES & MUSEUMS

Four Black Artists Reprise Important Show in Sag Harbor

By Oliver Peterson

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Nanette Carter is featured in "Return to a Place by the Sea"

The Church in Sag Harbor is celebrating the village's legacy of Black artists with a new exhibition, *Return to a Place by the Sea* featuring **Frank Wimberley**, Nanette Carter, Gregory Coates and the late Al Loving – four abstract artists with local roots and a shared past.

Co-curated by artist and co-founder of The Church **April Gornik** and Chief Curator Sara Cochran, the selection of paintings, mixed media and sculpture were created between 1982 and 2021, and will remain on view through May 27.

These four talents previously showed together in 1999's *A Place by the Sea*, an exhibition in Albany curated by Jim Richard Wilson, director of the Rathbone Gallery at Russell Sage College, that traveled to Christiane Nienaber Contemporary

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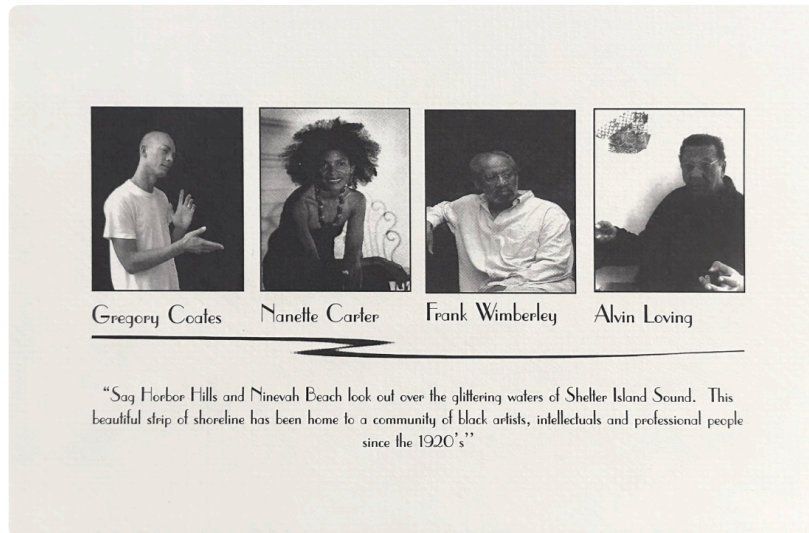
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Art in NYC and then Arlene Bujese Gallery in East Hampton.

The show, which inspired **The Church's** sequel this year, explored the work and relationship between the artists with Sag Harbor connecting them.



Gregory Coates Nanelle Carler Frank Wimberley Alvin Loving

"Sag Harbor Hills and Ninevah Beach look out over the glittering waters of Shelter Island Sound. This beautiful strip of shoreline has been home to a community of black artists, intellectuals and professional people since the 1920's."

Original "A Place by the Sea" exhibition poster from 1999. Courtesy The Church

Aside from the obvious, that all four artists are Black and work in abstraction, The Church explains that they were influenced by the experimental nature of jazz, and "they shared connections to The Studio Museum in Harlem which supported them, the Cinque Gallery in New York where they showed, and Sag Harbor's historic districts of Eastville and Sag Harbor Hills, Azurest and Ninevah Beach (**SANS**) that provided them with a haven to work, socialize and relax."

The Church points out that the original curator, Wilson, said "place" for these artists was not geographical but was instead a network of relationships that nurtured them. "A Place by the Sea displays some of the material results of the nurturing environment that these four, and many other, artists have enjoyed as part of a very special community," Wilson wrote of the first show and SANS back in 1999.

Returning after more than 20 years, the group's connections to Sag Harbor are not as strong, certainly in a physical sense, and the artists' careers and lives are quite different.

Al Loving died at the age of 70 in 2005, and Wimberley, the elder statesman of the group, is 97 years old and spends most of his time in New York City, but both men



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had a profound effect on their counterparts, Carter, who sold her Sag Harbor home, and Coates who now lives in Allentown, Pennsylvania.



Gregory Coates with "Iona Blue" Courtesy The Church

"I feel like in my career now, I am still just beginning. And I say that because time has gone by and I have had some accomplishments and many, many travels and things, but I still feel like I'm at the place where I began in 1999," Coates says, despite the time that's passed since the first *A Place by the Sea* exhibition.

"I'd like to make a lot more money on my historical merit, but I haven't reached that

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Frank Wimberley and his wife JuanitaPatrick McMullan/PMC

"With both Frank and Al, I met them out in the Hamptons. Frank lived down the street from me," Carter says, noting that she became friendly with Wimberley's son who was her age, and first visited the house while his parents were hosting a party. "I saw all the art on the wall and I was mesmerized."

That experience with Wimberley's work began her long relationship with the art and artists of the East End. She met Loving at a Guild Hall art opening — he was the only other Black person in the room, so they quickly got to know each other.

"The Black community, we were tight, we knew each other," she said, remembering how the SANS residents would support their artists, buying work and hosting art shows outside traditional venues in the 1970s.

"I can tell you, Sag Harbor, the SANS area, everybody had a Frank Wimberley ... so we were showing, but we weren't being seen in that larger community," Carter says.

Eventually, gallery owner [Elaine Benson](#) attended one of those art shows in Sag Harbor, at the Ninevah Beach home of NYC art world luminary Richard Clark, and she asked Carter, Loving and Rosalind Letcher, a figurative painter from Sag Harbor Hills, to show in East Hampton the following spring.



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yet," he adds, citing generational issues and not receiving attention or importance early in his career.

"The curator picked those earlier works for the sake of the history, which I liked," he says of his pieces from 1998 and 1999, including "Shiroco," a lovely composition with oil and masking tape on wood, and "Iona Deep Blue," a large, cobalt assemblage using a rubber inner tube over a wood shipping palette, colored with acrylic and pigment.

Coates points out that he's the only artist in the show without gallery representation, but he also makes it clear he's not bitter and he's pleased with this exhibition, though not all such shows are created equal.

"When they do the Black art shows, I'm OK with people having the good intentions, but if the Black art show is a color-based issue, we may not have any genuine conversation around art. I tend to have issues with being put into an exhibition that doesn't contend with my aesthetics," he says, which is not the case at The Church.

"This show I like because we are all abstract and non-figurative artists. We all hung out," Coates adds, describing the thread that connects him to Carter, and to Wimberley and Loving, who taught him a great deal.

In many ways, Loving influenced Coates to move toward abstraction and working with found materials, which defines his current body of work. He was painting figurative pieces about social justice, but Coates found no joy in it, and Loving helped him realize that he had to change direction.

"Al and I would have these conversations and he said, 'You know, there's no such thing as political art,' that I owed it to myself to have my own voice," Coates recalls, noting that Wimberley was another important mentor.

"Frank was very supportive of me, introduced me to some other people, Jim Richard Wilson being one. Al and Frank knew each other. There was a lot of simpatico with all of us," Coates continues. "It's easy to talk to each other. We got each other and we enjoyed what each other was doing."

"There were a number of artists in the Eastville community group," Wimberly says, recalling that vibrant time. "One of the things I wanted to do was to be in a gallery that would promote my work, and *they came to me*. That was a blessing from Berry Campbell," he adds, describing how his career really took off with NYC's Berry Campbell Gallery in the 1990s. *A Place by the Sea* highlighted the end of that fruitful decade, before the new millennium began.

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Nanette Carter "Cantilevered #61," 2021
Oil on Mylar, 89 x 62 in. Courtesy Berry Campbell, NY

"We had brilliant, bright, movers and shakers but we just had a hard time getting into the larger arenas, the museums and what have you," Carter continues, but she says things have changed, especially since 2020.

"I think it has a lot to do with [George Floyd](#) — we call it the George Floyd syndrome here, where everybody's eyes are now open," she says, explaining how a lot more doors are opening for Black people, who are finally being seen, in a wide range of industries all around the world. "Now they're coming and approaching and seeing work that should be shown," Carter says.

"Our community was always supportive," she adds, noting that many of her collectors came to The Church opening last weekend, as did Arlene Bujese who hosted the 1999 show. "It was good to pull back together. It was a very important show, it traveled, and now it's back in Sag Harbor."

Coates will present an Insight Sunday talk about his work and process at The

Church on February 26 at 10:30 a.m. He says attendees should expect a conversation where he will interact with the audience and “be as honest and as human as I can.” Carter is presenting her Insight Sunday talk at The Church on March 26 at 10:30 a.m.

Learn more and see images of all the work at thechurchsagharbor.org.

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