

# Aaron Fowler's Tough Love

by Jeff Regensburger



Family (detail) — by Aaron Fowler.

On June 1 it was announced that Michael Goodson would resign his position as Director of Exhibitions at the Beeler Gallery at Columbus College of Art and Design and assume the role of Senior Curator of Exhibitions at the Wexner Center for the Arts. While I expect Mr. Goodson will be greatly missed at CCAD, we can take heart knowing that his considerable talents will remain in Columbus. Similarly, his legacy at CCAD will remain in both the gallery renovations he undertook and the quality of work he selected for those renovated galleries. Under Goodson's direction, the Beeler Gallery has raised the bar; exposing central Ohio audiences to a host of critically acclaimed local, national, and international artists. Further, he has consistently presented work that is visually engaging, timely, and challenging.

Nowhere are these three traits more in evidence than Aaron Fowler's current exhibition *Tough Love*, a show that Goodson worked closely with Assistant Director of Exhibitions Ian Ruffino to assemble. *Tough Love* is timely in that current events have pushed the issue of race in America to the fore in ways we haven't seen in a generation. It's challenging in that it forces viewers past easy and readily accepted narratives. It's visually engaging in that, well, just look at it. The works burst at the seams and pop off the walls. Fowler channels the kind of uninhibited energy that references the best elements of heroic abstraction while still managing to honor the message inherent in his work. There's a lot of art history here, too. Viewers who look hard enough can find Robert Rauschenberg, Noah Purifoy, Kerry James Marshall, Henry Ossawa Tanner, and even Jennie Augusta Brownscombe.

All of which is to say, there's a lot going on in *Tough Love*. At the center of the show, and taking up a room of its own, is the dual portrait *He Was*. Here, Fowler presents Ferguson shooting victim Michael Brown tethered to a monumental depiction of his mother, Lesley McSpadden. Fowler's arrangement is one that highlights both the strength of the mother and child bond and (ultimately) its tragic vulnerability. In the background, McSpadden's eulogy to her son weaves its way across the picture plane. *He Was* is just one of many references to family that appear throughout *Tough Love*. *Family*, a traditional tableau updated with pop culture references and outsider influences, depicts the artist himself leading a procession of figures out of a forest of salvaged wood and toward a towering palm.



Family (detail) — by Aaron Fowler.

Similarly, civic and religious holidays (Thanksgiving in particular), represent a chance for families to gather and celebrate. Fowler seizes on this theme by reworking a number of famous Thanksgiving paintings (Jennie Augusta Brownscombe's *The First Thanksgiving at Plymouth*, Jean Leon Gerome Ferris' *The First Thanksgiving* and George Henry Boughton's *Pilgrims Going to Church*) with a contemporary, race-bending twist. By populating these resolutely benign and Eurocentric images with African Americans, Fowler channels the approach of Kerry James Marshall and his oft-stated desire to see more black people in paintings (a belief Marshall recently articulated in a lecture at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art when he said, "For me, the thing that has the greatest transformative capacity in the art world today, in terms of what people expect to see when they go to the art museum, is a painting that has a black figure in it, because 95 percent of all the other paintings you see are going to have white figures in them. The whole history of representation is built on the representation of white folks. Now, all of that stuff is good, so you have to figure out how to get good like that, and then get in there on the terms that are relevant for now.")

This is appropriation at its best, forcing viewers to reconcile traditional interpretation of celebrations with today's multicultural world. Similarly, I can't help but wonder if Fowler's crowded and materially rich assemblages are meant to provide a counterpoint to Henry Ossawa Tanner's austere and joyless genre painting *The Thankful Poor*. (Tanner was America's most famous 19th Century African American painter. Given Fowler's apparent interest in art history it seems unlikely this particular piece would have escaped his notice).



He Was — by Aaron Fowler.

These kinds of cultural connections are what makes *Tough Love* so compelling. Fowler is very much an artist of our time; peppering his work with Show cigarillos, smiling emojis, Nike swooshes, and Adidas ball caps. He is, if *Untitled (One Hundred)* is to be believed, keeping it 100. But Fowler is also an artist who clearly understands our complex and crowded history. He recognizes through his work that a seat at the American table (see *Black Flag*), no matter how hard won, is for many a wobbly and precarious perch. The fact is no one can make work this rich and this wry without being well-versed in the myriad of cultural and artistic stories that have brought us here. It is these dual perspectives, Fowler's fluency in both then and now, that give *Tough Love* its resonance. They provide viewers a chance to stand together and reflect on a world that is often messy, sometimes heartbreaking, but always shared



Black Flag — by Aaron Fowler.

*Aaron Fowler: Tough Love* is on view at CCAD's Beeler Gallery June 13 — Sept 10, 2016. For more information, visit [www.beelergallery.org](http://www.beelergallery.org).

Aaron Fowler  
*Black Flag*  
Mixed media on card tables, chair  
2015

Aaron Fowler *Family*  
*(detail)* Mixed media on  
doors  
2015

Aaroin Fowler  
*He Was (detail)*  
Mixed media, mirrors, rope  
2015

Aaron Fowler  
*Untitled (One Hundred)*  
Mixed media on acrylic glass, doors, windows, and panels  
2015

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