

HYPERALLERGIC

How Hair Weaves Us Together

Styling Identities pushes the boundaries of museum display to incorporate local communities and global art through the theme of hair.

Alexandra M. Thomas | July 30, 2024



Installation view of photographs by J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere in *Styling Identities: Hair's Tangled Histories* at the Wadsworth Atheneum (all photos Alexandra M. Thomas/*Hyperallergic* unless otherwise noted)

HARTFORD, Conn. — *Styling Identities: Hair's Tangled Histories* at the Wadsworth Atheneum combines global contemporary art with a deep commitment to Hartford-based storytelling.

The exhibition surveys local and global hair culture through various cultural and political lenses. Spread across several galleries, it includes a vast range of historic and contemporary art, interactive installations, material culture, and thought-provoking didactics. At the start, Pedro Bermudez's "My Hair Helps Me Remember" (2023/24) presents interviews with a diverse array of people from the Greater Hartford area; the participants reflect on the religious, political, communal, and otherwise culturally significant roles that hair plays in their lives. It's one of two looped films in the exhibition by the artist, who has deep roots in Hartford. Elsewhere, "Elevated Seats" (2023/24) introduces local visitors to what is likely a familiar scene, the interiors of local barber shops and beauty salons.

In fact, one of the Wadsworth's galleries is designed to look like a barbershop, complete with a black and white checkered floor, a sign exclaiming "Walk-Ins Welcome" on one of the bright yellow walls, and a barber chair in which you can sit to snap a selfie in the mirror. An interactive display of hair on the wall invites visitors to touch the differently textured locks, though text on the adjacent wall serves as a reminder that we can feel the hair on display, but it is not okay to touch someone's hair without

permission in real life. We learn from other didactics that the CROWN Act (Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) is a law in Connecticut and 22 other states. The law protects Black people from the race-based hair discrimination that has all too often policed the hairstyles that can be worn at school and in the workplace. Nearby, museum-goers are prompted to “share your hair story” on a wall of notecards displaying stories and self-portrait drawings. Wadsworth staff members and other folks from the community also share their hair stories, reproduced in a zine that was designed in conjunction with the exhibition; the stories take the form of poems, artworks, and personal essays. A notably delightful page reveals a map of 26 barber shops and hair salons in downtown Hartford, some of which collaborated with the curatorial team.



Installation view of *Styling Identities: Hair's Tangled Histories* at the Wadsworth Atheneum

These individual reflections are a prelude for the other local and global hair stories that unfold, ranging from the turbans worn by Sikh men to the societal pressure on Black women to straighten their hair.



Sonya Clark, “Bubble Gum and Double Dutch” (2020)

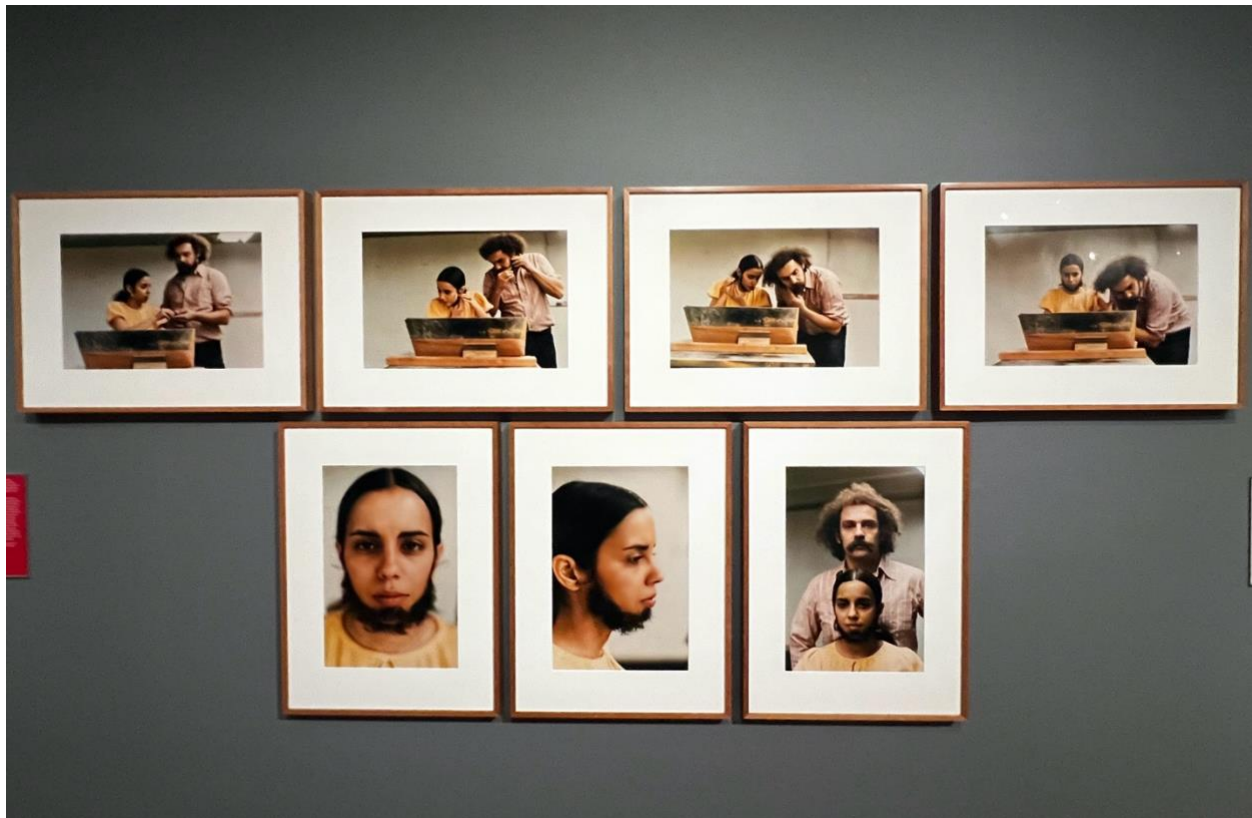
Puerto Rican artist Pepón Osorio’s mixed-media sculptural installation “En la barbería, no se llora” (No crying allowed in the barbershop) (1994) is a powerful meditation on race, masculinity, and belonging in barbershops. Originally shown in a Puerto Rican neighborhood in Hartford, the work comprises a barber chair transformed into an altar decorated with baseballs, chanclas (flip flops), the Puerto Rican flag, and other ornamentation; it becomes a site of reflection on the artist’s first haircut and themes of machismo that emerge with the memory.

Puerto Ricans constitute the largest ethnic group in Hartford, making the inclusion of Puerto Rican art important, as well as the exciting fact that all the wall texts are translated into Spanish. In further mirroring the community, a panel of graffiti with #StylingIdentities by local graffiti artist NISER3A offers another opportunity for visitors to snap a selfie.

A recurring theme is the idea that something as universal yet culturally specific as hair tethers us to one another in unique ways. Sonya Clark’s “Bubble Gum and Double Dutch” (2020) evokes the nostalgia of being a little Black girl wearing braids and hair baubles. Displayed along with a hand-carved wooden afro pick

belonging to Clark's mother, there is a strong sense of Black diasporic kinship, memories, and lineages. A fascinating cross-cultural dialogue occurs between afro picks and the hair combs of Coast Salish communities, represented by Lummi artist Dan Friday's glass "Raven Comb" (2018). The show emphasizes that the traditions that form hair histories are often passed down from elders and ancestors. These stories then influence how we style and take care of our hair today.

While a grid of J.D. 'Okhai Ojeikere's photographs of Nigerian hairstyles from the 1970s channels the utter beauty of African women's hairstyles, Beninese artist Romuald Hazoumè's "Agbota" (2011) is more explicitly political: A plastic jerrican fashioned into an African mask with a twisted hairdo made from steel wire and plastic suggests the treacherous and extractive crude oil market as well as West African masquerade. The exhibition treads further into topical issues and contemporary art with Ana Mendieta's Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant) (1972), in which she wears a beard made from her friend's shaved facial hair — a gender-bending performance that raises questions about the relationship between hair and gender presentation. Likewise, Christopher Makos's photographs of Andy Warhol in a silver wig and glamorous makeup allude to gender nonconformity and the transformation of one's hair as a gendered performance.



Installation view of Ana Mendieta's photograph series Untitled (Facial Hair Transplant) (1972) in Styling Identities: Hair's Tangled Histories at the Wadsworth Atheneum

It is glorious to be immersed in iconic contemporary art moments, such as Deborah Willis's photograph of Carrie Mae Weems getting her hair done at a salon in Eatonville, Florida (hometown of Zora Neale Hurston), in the same exhibition that takes seriously local Hartford communities and everyday people's perspectives on hair. Such harmonious juxtaposition between Hartford culture and globally recognized contemporary art amplifies local narratives by indicating that the museum values the community as much as it does famous contemporary artists, and by revealing the ways that some of contemporary art's greatest hits still have so much value to everyday people.

From a 19th-century depiction of Medusa on a shield painted by Swiss artist Arnold Böcklin to "Kinks," a 2022 painting celebrating Black women's hair by Ande'Ja Johnson, the show's curatorial range is impressive. The inclusion of a Sikh turban and kanga (small wooden comb), as well as a wig and headscarf worn by Orthodox Jewish women, present further opportunities to grapple with the meaning of

hair across different communal traditions. A massive exhibition with a seemingly infinite web of hair stories and possibilities, *Styling Identities* pushes the boundaries of museum display to incorporate local communities, as well as chances to touch, interact, and learn, and an eclectic range of historic and contemporary artwork, in the format of a sprawling exhibition that maintains a coherent theme: hair.



Ande'Ja Johnson, "Kinks" (2022)



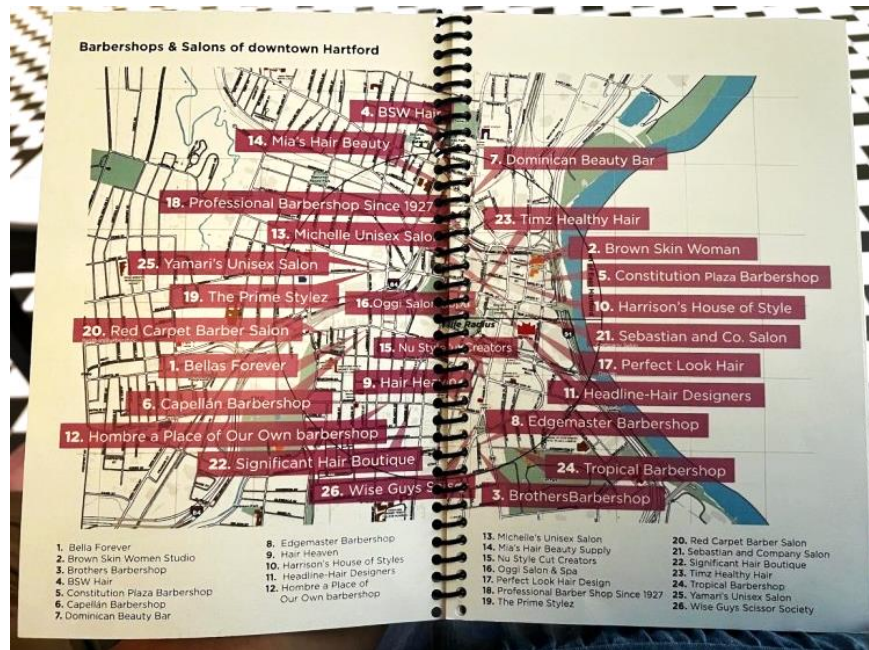
Romuald Hazoumè, "Agbota" (2011)



Dan Friday, "Raven's Comb" (2018)



Installation view of *Styling Identities: Hair's Tangled Histories*



Map of Hartford barber shops and salons published in the zine accompanying exhibition.



Pepón Osorio, "En la barbería no se llora" (No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop) (1994), mixed media. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford, Connecticut (courtesy Wadsworth Atheneum)

Styling Identities: Hair's Tangled Histories continues at the Wadsworth Atheneum (600 Main Street, Hartford, Connecticut) through August 11. The exhibition is co-curated by Bethani Blake, Chloe Collins, Denise Giannino, Matthew Hargraves, Hamid Hemat, Jama Holchin, Alexis Jacqueline Martinez, and Vanessa Sigalas.