ARTS

"The room is on fire as she's fixing her hair"
REPTILIA THE STROKES

Renowned poet honors exhibit celebrating Black artistry at the Beinecke

BY JAMES EWART
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

An assembly of listeners was enthralled at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library on Wednesday, as poet Elizabeth Alexander '84 read aloud a selection of her works to honor the new exhibition "Cave Canem: A Home for Black Poetry."

The poet and the exhibition were introduced by the library's director, Michelle Light, and Kevin Young, a Rosenkranz writer-in-residence in English, both of whom stressed the importance of the nonprofit Cave Canem in building a community for Black voices. The organization has cultivated the literary talent of up-and-coming Black poets since 1996, and is celebrating its 30th anniversary this year in conjunction with the Beinecke's exhibition.

"It needed to be done, and all of us hadn't had the opportunity to work with a community of Black poets," Alexander said in an interview about the significance of Cave Canem's work. "Building community helped me understand who I was as a writer, as a poet, and as an educator as well."

Alexander, an inaugural member of Cave Canem, which was founded by writers Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady, presented the 2026 Mark Strand Memorial Reading to commemorate the nonprofit's milestone and the exhibition's debut. Following the reading, a reception was held with many members of Cave Canem in attendance.

During her reading, Alexander pulled some pieces from her third collection of poetry, "Antebellum Dream Book," and prose from her newest work, "Signals Across Vast Distances." While cracking light-hearted quips about Tuesday's midterm election, Alexander touched on themes of loss, location, history and hope through poems like "When" and "Rally."

Alexander once chaired the Black Studies Department, while it was still known as the African American Studies Department, and taught as a distinguished professor. She now serves as a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and the President of the Mellon Foundation, the largest funder of arts and humanities in the country.

"Dr. Alexander was an early Board Member of Cave Canem and a volunteer faculty member at the very first Cave Canem Summer Retreat in 1996," curator Nancy Kuhl wrote in an email to the News. "It was, in fact, Dr. Alexander who introduced me to Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady, eventually leading to the library's acquisition of the Cave Canem Records."

Kuhl serves as the curator of poetry for the Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke. She helped organize the exhibit by featuring journals, manuscripts, photographs and books that highlight the story of the organization's formation and its contributions to crafting a dynamic community for Black poets.

"It's been an honor to work with the poets of Cave Canem to illustrate the organization's vibrant history and wide influence across poetry and the literary arts," Kuhl said in a press release.

Draft poems by Derricotte, Eady and other members of the nonprofit are on display.

The organization's name, which translates to "Beware of the Dog" in Latin, comes from the famous mosaic of the House of the Tragic Poet in ancient Pompeii — an homage that represents the collective's commitment to protection and fearlessness.

"From my own experience of being the only Black writer in graduate school, I just thought, wouldn't it be nice if I didn't have to be the only one?" Derricotte said regarding the inspiration for the group.

Cave Canem has enjoyed great success, receiving the the Literarian Award for Outstanding Service to the American Literary Community from the National Book Foundation.



JAMES EWART / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
The display celebrates the legacy of the Cave Canem Foundation, a nonprofit that for 30 years has supported Black poets. At the Beinecke on Wednesday, Elizabeth Alexander '84, an inaugural member of the group, read samples of her own poetry to attendees.

Fellowships sponsored by Cave Canem have assisted more than 600 poets, who have achieved distinguished literary careers and won accolades including the Pulitzer Prize. Dericotte said that she used to joke with Eady that their students would go on to be Pulitzer winners and felt delightfully surprised when that came to pass.

"Cave Canem: A Home for Black Poetry" opened at the Beinecke alongside "Beauty Unadorned: Fire!! and the Harlem Renaissance," a showcase dedicated to the legacy of the short-lived yet influential 1926 arts magazine.

"Through these two exhibitions, viewers are invited to engage directly with the visionary work of artists and writers whose experimental, innovative spirit continues to inspire," Light said in a press release.

Young echoed Light's statement, mentioning in his opening remarks that he saw both exhibitions in a new light once they were placed side-by-side.

Alexander also praised the Beinecke's archives. She said she wrote "Amistad," a poetic reimagining of the 1839 Amistad mutiny aboard a Spanish schooner, "downstairs" in the Beinecke's basement while looking at the "extraordinary etchings that were done of Amistad captives at the time."

"This event was really a team effort," Light said during the well-attended reception. "It really shows the stories that archives can tell."

"Cave Canem: A Home for Black Poetry" will be on display until May 30, 2027.

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On wall of YCBA, British artist crafts work with clay, hand and gravity

BY BRETT PENK
STAFF REPORTER

Clay, gravity and a hand are the only tools that artist Richard Long used on Monday to create his newest site-specific piece in the Yale Center for British Art Entrance Court.

Long, who said he uses nature as inspiration in his pieces, created "Gravity" on the wall of the YCBA entrance. The eye-catching piece greets visitors as they enter the center and is visible to those walking along Chapel Street, where the gallery is located. The entire work was created spontaneously, allowing gravity to help design the piece.

"Created at the very threshold of the museum, Richard Long's poetic installation literally brings the earth into our Entrance Court," Martina Droth, the director of the YCBA, said in a press release.

Long said he is responsible for the top part of the piece and allows gravity to create the bottom.

"I feel that it humanizes the space," Droth said. "And it gets us to think about the Earth and the land, and the environment, and our relationship to it, in a really distinctive way."

The piece is the first in a new series of installations supported by the Bukhman Foundation, a United Kingdom-based charity that supports Type 1 diabetes research, in addition to artistic and cultural efforts. The new initiative will bring two pieces to the Entrance Court every year.

"This commission reflects our commitment to bringing artists into meaningful dialogue with our architecture, collections, and communities," Droth said, adding that the grant will allow the court and the museum to "more broadly exist as a dynamic site for contemporary artistic expression."

According to Lucinda Lax, the curator of paintings and sculpture at the YCBA who curated the installation, the museum makes an effort to ensure the Entrance Court is inviting and connects to the history of British art in the collection. One way the museum does this is through working with groundbreaking British artists like Long.

"We want them to create innovative, dynamic works that stand on their own merits but which also engage in a dialogue with our landmark Louis Kahn building and our current exhibitions, to open up new conversations between the past and the present," Lax said.

Long's innovation is the product of his surroundings. His works are often in nature and created while he explores the outdoors. He uses whatever is around him to create art and enjoys the flexibility he finds in his art.

Long said that creating his own work is "his pleasure" and that he uses whatever opportunities present themselves while constructing his work. Every place he goes to is different, and he uses whatever elements nature provides, he said.

According to Droth, the piece helps contextualize the gallery's current exhibits and generates conversation around the present, past and tradition.

"It offers a way for us to also place our historical collections in dialogue with the present because British art, or like any art anywhere, is never a finished story," Droth said. "It's an ongoing conversation."

The piece will be on display in the courtyard through July 11, 2027.

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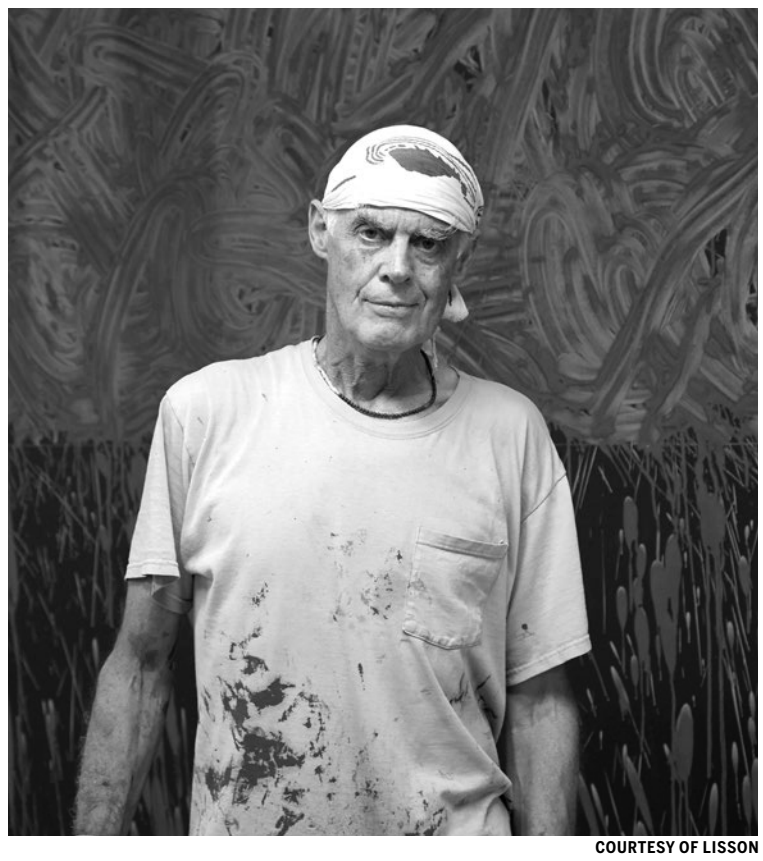

COURTESY OF LISSON
Richard Long, an English artist, created the site-specific piece at the entrance of the Yale Center for British Art on Monday. The work, titled "Gravity," is supported by a new grant that is set to bring two pieces to the site every year.