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'STARGAZERS': 'Elizabeth Catlett in Conversation With 21 Contemporary Artists'

By **HOLLAND COTTER**

Bronx Museum of the Arts

1040 Grand Concourse, at 165th Street, Morrisania

Through May 29

Friday is Elizabeth Catlett's 96th birthday, and there's a party in progress for her at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, with younger colleagues from two generations in attendance. They're a stellar array, they owe [Ms. Catlett](#) a debt, and in her life and work they have everything to admire.

Her story is often-told. Born in Washington in 1915, a grandchild of slaves, she studied science at Howard University, then plunged into art with sculpture and prints blending Socialist Realism, modernist abstraction and African influences. In 1946 she went to Mexico and immersed herself in the politically charged atmosphere of Taller de Gráfica Popular. After marrying the artist Francisco Mora (1922-2002), she made that country her home, with periodic returns to the United States.

Little, if any, of the work by the 21 artists chosen by the independent curator Isolde Brielmaier was made for the occasion, but all of it indirectly touches on [Ms. Catlett's life and work](#). Roberto Visani's 2009 sculpture of a cast plastic handgun in a smashed glass case and Wardell Milan's 2008 photographic montage of a world in ruins pick up on references to military violence in her prints from the 1960s.

Her repeated images of maternal groupings find counterparts in family portrait photographs by Xaviera Simmons and Renee Cox. And the figure of the solitary woman that dominates the 31 examples of [Ms. Catlett's art](#) placed throughout the show finds echoes in the works by many younger artists, like Lalla Essaydi, Iona Rozeal Brown and Kalup Linzy, with Sam Durant's photograph "Female Indian (Nude)" and Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz's

mural-scale “WEPA Woman: Exile Series/Lamento de la Llorona” standing out.

Ms. Brielmaier has also added some vintage Taller de Gráfica prints to the mix. But the show is Ms. Catlett’s. Maybe it’s the group context, with its voluble personalities, but I’ve never seen her formal assurance and expressive serenity look so commanding. She’s the life of the party just by being the quietest, wisest voice in the room.

(The exhibition “Digame: Elizabeth Catlett’s Forever Love” is on view through May 26 in the Neil L. and Angelica Zander Rudenstine [Gallery](#), W.E.B. DuBois Institute for African and African-American Research at [Harvard University](#).)