

ARTS & BOOKS

SITE HAS
JUST ABOUT
ANY SOUND
SET TO PLAY
POP, E7

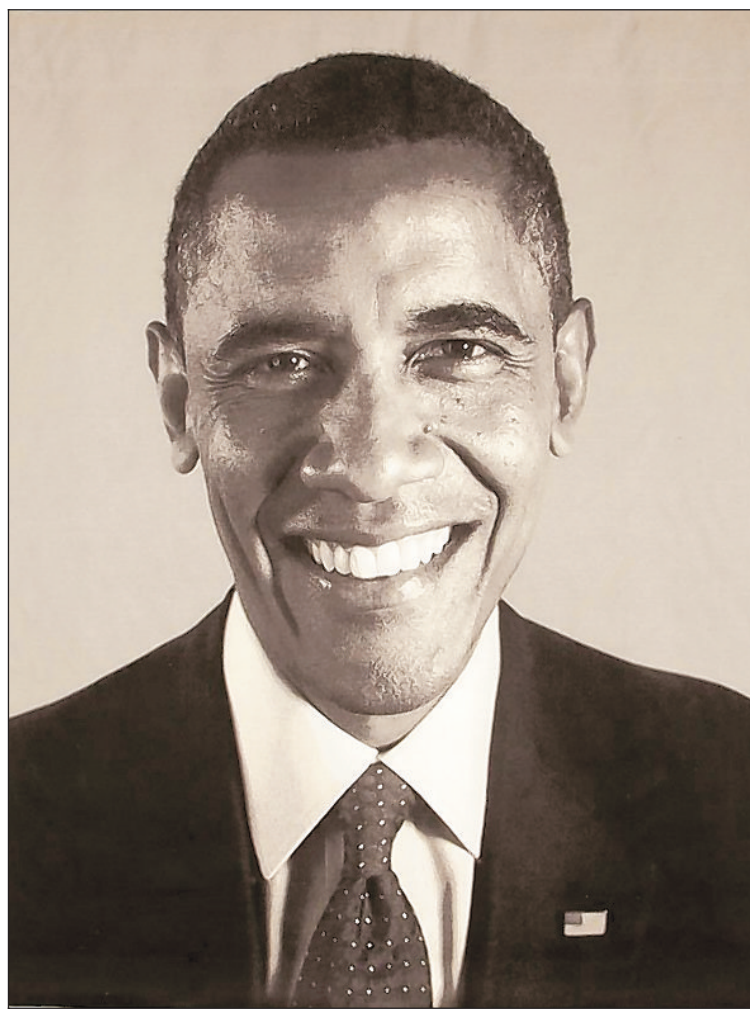
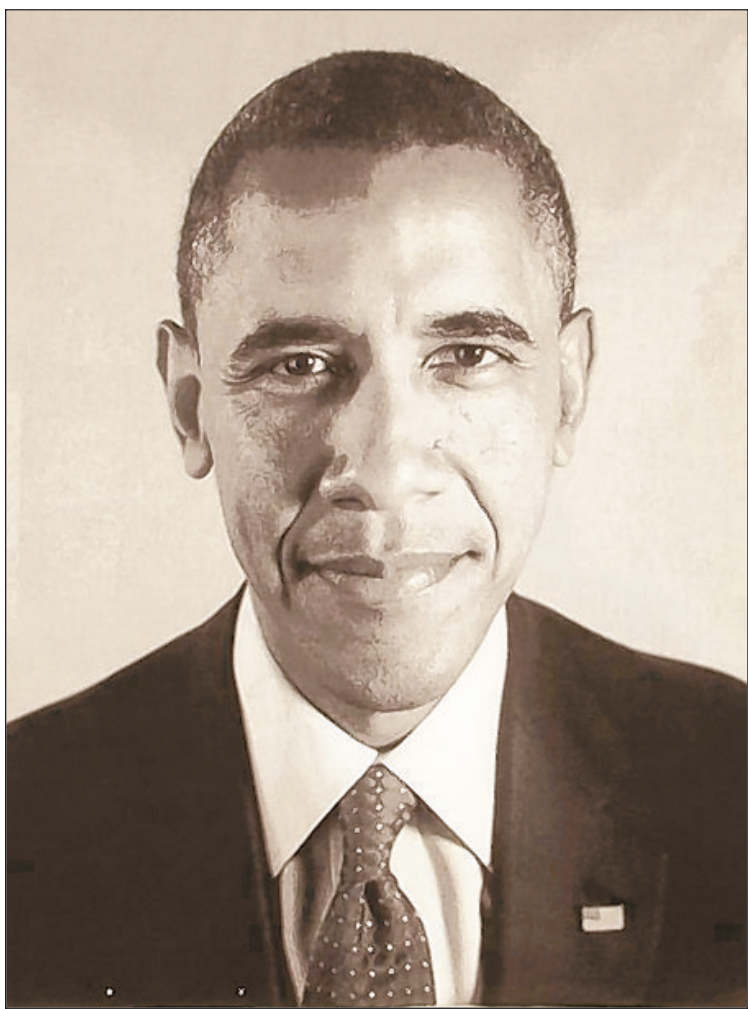
JOIN
THEM,
IT'S OK
DANCE, E6



TAKING
ANOTHER
LOOK AT
CHARLES
REIFFEL
ART, E4



POLITICAL ART



SIDE-BY-SIDE tapestries of President Obama by artist Chuck Close are on temporary display at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. The artist recalls that Obama hung around to talk for more than an hour after the sitting was to have ended.

CULTURE
MONSTERPlay to
tap into
Lincoln
mania

By DAVID NG

With everything related to Abraham Lincoln back in vogue thanks to Steven Spielberg's Oscar-nominated movie, a new play about the seamstress who worked for Mary Todd Lincoln is set to open in March in Washington.

"Mary T. & Lizzy K." tells the story of the relationship between the first lady and Elizabeth Keckly, a former slave who became a close friend. The drama, written and directed by Tazewell Thompson, is set to begin performances March 15 at the Arena Stage at Washington's Mead Center for American Theater.

The play is the first commission of Arena Stage's American Presidents Project, an initiative to present one play a year about an American president.

Keckly, also sometimes spelled Keckley, has been an object of historical fascination for decades. She was born a slave in Virginia in 1818 but eventually bought her freedom from her owners in 1855. Keckly, who was of mixed race, worked as a seamstress in Washington and was hired by Mary Todd Lincoln. The two women became personal confidantes.

In 1868, Keckly wrote her memoirs, "Behind the Scenes, Or, Thirty Years a Slave and Four Years in the White House."

In Spielberg's movie "Lincoln," the role of Keckly is played by Gloria Reuben, who is perhaps best known for her role in the NBC series "ER." The first lady is portrayed by Academy Award-winner Sally Field.

"Mary T. & Lizzy K." will have a limited run at the Arena Stage through April 28.

Thompson has written and directed numerous stage productions. His play "Constant Star," about Ida B. Wells, has toured the U.S., including a stop at the Laguna Playhouse in 2004.

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HULTON ARCHIVE Getty Images
"LIZZY K." is ex-slave Elizabeth Keckly, whose friendship with Mary Todd Lincoln is new play's focus.

Face to face with
the 44th president

By LIESL BRADNER

As the nation watches President Obama take the oath of office Monday for his second term, Americans may notice a more mature (and grayer) version of the hopeful candidate depicted in Shepard Fairey's ubiquitous 2008 campaign poster.

Since then, Obama's likeness has been cartooned, lampooned and masterfully crafted by artists of varying inclinations. Although the official presidential portrait will not be revealed until the end of his second term, some interesting interpretations are already on view.

"Visions of Our 44th President," an exhibition at the Charles H. Wright Museum of African American History in Detroit, showcases 44 busts of the president interpreted and designed by 44 contemporary African American artists including Faith Ringgold and Tyree Guyton. Designs are as varied as stained glass, a half-zebra, half-lion mask-like painting and one with his words written around his face.

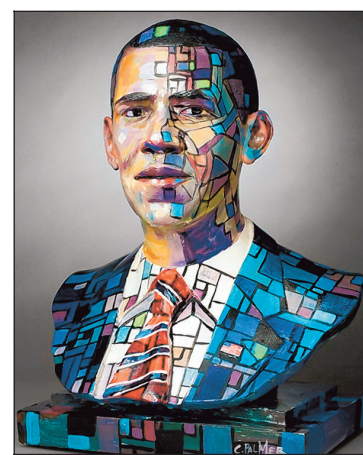
"I wanted to honor, celebrate and expand on the historical importance of Obama's election," said curator Peter Kaplan, founder of Our World LLC, a design and marketing company, who collaborated with the museum on the exhibition. The impetus of the project began in 2008 while Kaplan was working with Santa Barbara scratchboard artist Antar Dayal, who contributed artwork for the 2008 campaign.

"I think the biggest challenge for many of the artists was going from a two-dimensional canvas to a three-dimensional form," said Kaplan. Each artist was presented with a blank white cast resin bust of the president designed by Santa Fe artist Matthew Gonzales.

"I wanted to do something about the progress and events of this country legislatively that made Obama's election possible," said Woodland Hills-based collage artist Phoebe Beasley. Crafted on the bust are newspaper clippings and paintings reflecting Rep. Shirley Chisholm's (D-N.Y.) 1972 run for president and Thurgood Marshall's role in 1954's Brown vs. Board of Education desegregation ruling.



Images from Charles H. Wright Museum



BUSTS for the Detroit exhibition decorated by, clockwise from top, Phoebe Beasley, Charly Palmer and Barkley L. Hendricks.

Los Angeles-based artist and illustrator Kadir Nelson was keen to share the company of fellow artists Barkley L. Hendricks and Charly Palmer. Nelson's piece features a black and blue celestial sky painted across Obama's face and head atop a gold base. "One of the things I enjoyed about

Obama's message was that it was universal and painting the cosmos depicts him in a universal way," said Nelson.

The show runs through Aug. 14. The busts will eventually become part of the museum's permanent collection.

A little closer to the festivities,

the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., is displaying two side-by-side tapestries of the president by leading portrait artist Chuck Close. The 95-inch-by-73-inch woven Jacquard tapestries, on loan from Democratic couple Ian and Annette Cumming of Jackson, Wyo., reveal a serious side and a smiling version.

Close, who has photographed Bill Clinton, Al Gore and Hillary Rodham Clinton for fundraisers, had been offering to paint Obama's portrait since 2008 but to no avail. Finally, he got the call early last summer for that elusive sitting. He was given 10 minutes in a small room at the Jefferson Hotel in D.C.

There was barely enough room for Close (who is confined to a wheelchair after being paralyzed in 1988 from a seizure), his assistants and a massive camera. "It was like pushing a VW [Volkswagen] into a very small space," said the 72-year-old artist, referring to the 235-pound camera that makes instant 20x24-inch photographs on Polacolor film.

The two bonded after Close shared his experience photographing the Dalai Lama and the president ending up staying for an hour and a half. "The president said to me, 'My friends just call me Barack.' I didn't know if I could do that so I just didn't call him anything," said Close.

"These guys kept coming in telling him it was time to go to the White House, and he kept sending them away," recalled Close. "He said there was a picnic for Congress at the White House and he wasn't in any rush to get back and mingle with the people who had tried to destroy him."

From that sitting Close created 10 tapestries and reproduced watercolor portraits in multiple sizes signed by the president and himself. They were unveiled at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, N.C., during the Democratic National Convention. Proceeds from a subsequent auction went to the Obama Victory Fund.

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On the cover

Clockwise from upper left: Works by artists Faith Ringgold, Louise Del-sarte, Tatyana Fazlaizadeh, Shirley Woodson, Felandus Thames and Barbara Jane Bullock.