ARTS

Before Anything Else, Geoffrey Holder Was a Painter. A New Show Spotlights His Tremendous Body of Work

BY SALOMÉ GÓMEZ-UPEGUI
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Photo: Getty Images

Geoffrey Holder refused to choose a lane. Born in Trinidad and Tobago in 1930, he was a principal dancer with the Metropolitan Opera Ballet, the first Black man to win Tony Awards for both directing and costume design (for the Broadway hit *The Wiz*), and the voice and face of 7Up throughout the 1970s and '80s, all while building a celebrated film career with roles in *Doctor Dolittle, Annie*, and the Bond film *Live and Let Die*.

And yet, before everything else, Holder was a painter. "Painting always came first," says his son, Leo Holder, who oversees the artist's estate. "Practically everything else he did has always been an extension of this. He was always working on something. At any given time, wherever he was living, there were several canvases in progress." Still, across his decades-long career, it was the facet of his work that received the least attention.

ADVERTISING

"Geoffrey Holder: Black Magic," on view at the Museum of Contemporary Art North Miami from November 18, 2026, to April 4, 2027, aims to correct this. Guest curated by Dr. Erica Moiah James, principal investigator and publication editor for the Geoffrey Holder Project, it's the first museum survey to center Holder's work as a visual artist. Bringing together more than 60 works across eight decades, the show offers an unprecedented look at the practice that anchored his entire multidisciplinary career.

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Geoffrey Holder, *Untitled*, n.d. Oil, oil marker, and China marker on wood. 84 x 36 inches. ©2026 Estate of Geoffrey Holder / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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Influenced by his older brother, Boscoe Holder—himself a painter, designer, dancer, and musician—Geoffrey took up painting in childhood and had his first formal exhibition in Trinidad by the age of 14. According to his son, Holder funded his move to the United States in the early 1950s by selling 20 of his paintings, and when he died in 2014, he left behind more than 250 paintings and 300 collages, along with a trove of drawings, sculptures, and photographs.

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The exhibition is the result of more than a decade of work, beginning when James was first invited by Holder's family to see his archive in 2015. "I knew Geoffrey the way most people knew him," James tells *Vogue*. "I had seen his films. I knew he was involved with *The Wiz*, I had seen the 7Up commercials. But I didn't *know him*. What I realized the moment I stepped into his archive is that he knew himself. He understood there would be a moment when people would get it. He might not be there, but he was going to select and preserve the record of his life so that we could really dive into it."

Geoffrey Holder, *Waiting for the Dance*, 2001. Oil, pastel crayon, and China marker on Masonite. 48 x 48 inches unframed. 50 ½ x 50 ½ inches framed. ©2026 Estate of Geoffrey Holder / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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The show takes its title from Holder's deep interest in what he dubbed "magical people," those whose creative spirit and sheer presence carried an unmistakable energy. "There's a negative way of framing Black people as 'magical Negroes,' but he wasn't thinking that way," James explains. "He thought of it in incredibly positive terms, and was referencing a *je ne sais quoi*—something almost beyond language, a sort of confidence and way of being in the world that is truly remarkable. So we took the word 'magic' and racialized it, because most of the subjects in the exhibition are Black people."

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Occupying the full museum, the show is organized into five sections—Portraits, Epistles, The Sacred and the Profane, Genre, and Figure Studies—pairing the artworks with a rich collection of costume sketches, performance footage, correspondence, and memorabilia that provide historical context while illustrating the breadth and depth of Holder's creative life.

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©2026 Estate of Geoffrey Holder / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
Geoffrey Holder, *Portrait of Carmen*, 1980. Oil on canvas. 72 x 36 inches unframed. 74 x 38 inches framed. Private Collection, New York.

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Geoffrey Holder, *Woman in Yellow*, 1985. Oil, pastel crayon, and China marker on canvas. 48 x 36 inches unframed. 50 x 3 inches unframed.

One standout is *Portrait of Carmen* (1980), an oil on canvas depicting a stylized Black woman in a sleek black dress and turquoise earrings against a crimson background. The painting reflects not only Holder's interest in the female figure but also his profound devotion to his wife, the American dancer, choreographer, and actress Carmen de Lavallade, to whom he was married for 59 years, until his death. Also on view is the portrait *Woman in Yellow* (1985), part of a motif that, according to James, traces back to the first time Holder saw de Lavallade, wearing a yellow dress. "He painted women in various stages of a yellow dress forever," she says.

Geoffrey Holder and Carmen de Lavallade in 1955, the year they married. Photo: Getty Images

The couple in 1981. Photo: Getty Images

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Also central to the show is a series of works that reinterpret biblical stories through Holder's distinctive lens. *Adam and Eve* (ca. 1990s), for instance, is a towering diptych in oil, oil marker, and china marker on canvas, in which black tree trunks rise through a dense forest of green leaves; in the lower left corner, two nude figures are nearly swallowed by the foliage. In another large oil painting, *Adam and Eve* (2000–2005), Holder returns to the same subject, this time creating a more intimate image that foregrounds the couple while still enveloping them in greenery. Holder's son explains that the artist's interest in biblical narratives was not, strictly speaking, religious. Instead, "he saw them as a wonderful source of storytelling, theater, and drama."

Geoffrey Holder, *Adam and Eve*, 2000-2005. Oil on board. 71 7/8 x 30 inches unframed. 73 ⅓ x 31 ¼ inches framed. ©2026 Estate of Geoffrey Holder / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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In another biblically inspired work, *John the Baptist and Jesus* (undated), Holder depicts the two figures as Black men standing together in cerulean water, sharing a tender moment as a crowd looks on. "This is one of my favorites, because it shows a level of intimacy between Black men—a level of care, gentleness, and tenderness that you just don't [usually] see out in the world," James says. "Geoffrey is making a point. He's appropriating the religious story, but there's something very contemporary, maybe even a longing for that kind of open expression of care among Black men in the world."

Reflecting on the interest in his father's visual art practice more than a decade after his death, Leo Holder says he's more convinced than ever that, as a multihyphenate, his father was ahead of his time, rarely seen as a serious painter because of his many other creative pursuits. "Nowadays, we have far more of an ecosystem that allows you to be polymathic. And he's gotten the kind of attention for his art that he never got when he was alive," he says. "In part, it's because now everybody's caught up."

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