

Virgil Abloh: “Figures of Speech”

Virgil Abloh (American, b. 1980) has made a career of questioning assumptions and subverting expectations. Raised in the Chicago area, Abloh trained as an architect but found his calling as a fashion designer. Since then he has continued to work across disciplines, collaborating with graphic and furniture designers, musicians, and contemporary artists, as well as other fashion designers. In undertaking projects in new fields, he not only influences the conversations within them but also expands their traditional audiences, reaching millions through social media.

Virgil Abloh: “Figures of Speech” offers an unprecedented survey of Abloh’s creative work over nearly two decades and pulls back the curtain on his process. In the exhibition, prototypes are presented alongside finished artworks, product designs, and fashion to reveal his myriad inspirations—from centuries-old painting to commonplace signage at construction sites. Running throughout the exhibition is an emphasis on dialogue, which Abloh creates through his inventive use of language and quotation marks, turning the objects he designs and the people who wear his clothing into “figures of speech.”

The exhibition is organized by Michael Darling, James W. Alsdorf Chief Curator, with curatorial assistance from Chanon Kenji Praepipatmongkol, Marjorie Susman Curatorial Fellow. The exhibition is designed by Samir Bantal, Director of AMO, the research and design studio of OMA.

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Outside the Gallery

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

“PSA,” 2019
Nylon flag
Private collection

Virgil Abloh takes nothing for granted in his approach to design, an attitude encapsulated in his motto “question everything.” With this flag, he rallies audiences to avoid complacency and think critically about their experience in the MCA. Abloh reiterated this message by placing the term “CITY HALL” on the museum’s facade, broadcasting his vision of the art museums as a civic gathering space.

Culture Wall, 2019
Print on vinyl
Private collection

This mural graphic maps out Virgil Abloh’s influences from adolescence onward. He developed it with Samir Bantal of AMO (the research and design studio of OMA), and it includes references to art, music, pop culture, and architecture that range from the esoteric to the everyday. It also highlights moments of social and political upheaval that bracketed his upbringing, from the Cold War to the 9/11 terror attacks. This breadth of influences reflects the balance Abloh sees in himself—at once a “tourist” and a “purist,” both an enthusiastic novice and an expert insider.

“*BARRIER TO ENTRY*,” 2019
Painted metal and vinyl
Private collection

Abloh finds much of his inspiration in urban environments, drawing from construction sites, directional signage, and advertising. These influences reflect Abloh’s training in architecture as well as the way he explores cities as a curious citizen of the world. This sculpture borrows the convention of

marking the maximum height in a parking garage to set the viewer's expectations for the exhibition.

"Early Work"

Abloh got his start in fashion with a t-shirt. In the early 2000s, his fledgling designs caught the attention of Kanye West's creative team, and West was so impressed that he invited Abloh to join his inner circle. Over the next decade, Abloh witnessed experiments in fashion and concert merchandise design. He also completed an internship at the Italian fashion house Fendi and, in 2012, was ready to go out on his own. He returned to graphic t-shirts, designing clothing with streetwear brand Hood by Air and later his own brand Pyrex Vision. This early work was inspired by sports uniforms and hip-hop and skateboarder fashion, as well as provocative images and graphics found in contemporary art. It shows the first signs of Abloh's subversive interest in taking something basic—boring, even—injecting it with new meaning, and then sending it out into the world to be seen again in a fresh way.

To hear entrepreneur and fashion designer Tremaine Emory talk about Virgil's use of imagery, go to mcachicago.org/ablohaudio.

Juergen Teller
(German, b. 1964)

What is Virgil Abloh? No. 7, 2017
Photograph and light box
Courtesy of Juergen Teller

Taken by famed fashion photographer Juergen Teller for a feature on Abloh in the fashion magazine *System*, this image offers a biography of Abloh: the European Union flag represents his entrance into high fashion with his brand Off-White, while the Louis Vuitton toolbox is an item he designed so buyers could customize their designer handbags. His sweatshirt bears "R. Mutt," the signature that French modern artist Marcel Duchamp used to transform an everyday object into a disruptive readymade artwork, and the jacket on the floor was designed by one of Abloh's role models, Belgian designer Raf Simons, in collaboration with artist Sterling Ruby. The dinosaur and wooden plank, which just happened to be in Teller's studio, reflect Abloh's willingness to improvise.



Marcel Duchamp (French, 1887–1968)
Fountain (detail), 1917/64
Ceramic, glaze, and paint
15 x 19 1/4 x 24 5/8 in.
Photo: Marcin Rogozinski/Alamy Stock Photo

"A TEAM WITH NO SPORT," 2012

Video (color, sound)

5 minutes, 55 seconds

Private collection

Abloh established Pyrex Vision, his first fashion brand, in 2012. He screen-printed "Pyrex," "23," and images of a painting by sixteenth-century Italian Renaissance artist Caravaggio onto store-bought sweatshirts, shorts, socks, and plaid shirts. Pyrex" nods to the glassware used in home drug labs and "23" to the jersey number worn by basketball star Michael Jordan. These references allude to two stereotypical ways disadvantaged youth can overcome their hardships: by selling drugs or becoming a famous athlete. Caravaggio's story, which Abloh learned about in college, convinced him that one artist can alter the course of history, and he included the painter's work in this clothing line to inspire others. This video to promote the launch of Pyrex Vision features members of the then-emerging rap group A\$AP Mob.



Caravaggio (Italian, 1571–1610)
Saint Jerome in his Study, c. 1605–6
Oil on canvas
44 x 62 in.
Galleria Borghese

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Shayne Oliver
(American, b. 1988)

"IN CONVERSATION WITH SHAYNE," 2019
T-shirts in cardboard boxes
Private collection

Before launching his own fashion brands, Abloh had a guest role at the high-fashion streetwear brand Hood by Air (HBA). Started by designer Shayne Oliver, the brand blends influences from club culture, streetwear, and the downtown New York queer scene. While creating work for HBA, Abloh honed his interest in applying bold texts and logos; this book documents the work he and Oliver did from 2012 to 2013.

Jim Joe
(Canadian)

"THE REALITY," 2016
Woven rug
Private collection

After discovering artist Jim Joe's graffiti work in New York, Abloh brought the artist into his circle of trusted friends. Jim Joe made this rug as a commentary on the simple premise and viral success of Abloh's early Pyrex Vision clothing line, quoting from an article by then deputy style director at Complex Media Jian DeLeon: "It's highly possible Pyrex simply bought a bunch of Rugby flannels, slapped 'PYREX 23' on the back, and re-sold them for an astonishing markup of about 700%." A version of the rug was used in Off-White stores, and Jim Joe cameos as the obscured graffiti writer in the video *"A TEAM WITH NO SPORT,"* also on view in this room.

Homework, 1999
Graffiti sketch book
Courtsey of Virgil Abloh Archive

Abloh's introduction to contemporary art came primarily through graffiti, studying books on the subject and developing his own graphic signature.

Homework demonstrates his early participation in the art form, featuring graffiti aliases such as “Vergone!” and “Ceas.”

“Fashion”

Abloh’s first fashion brand, Pyrex Vision, was based on a limited template of screen-printed store-bought shirts, shorts, and sweatshirts. A year later, in 2013, Abloh signaled the expanded scope of his ambition, launching the clothing brand Off-White, establishing a studio in Milan—the fashion capital of the world—and showing his work at the prestigious design showcase Paris Fashion Week. The brand’s name hints at his critical eye toward social preoccupations with race, pushing for an ambiguous place that is neither black nor white. Nearly every Off-White collection investigates a theme, tackling class, race, history, and the established rules of fashion. His architecture background and interest in the urban fabric also come into play in patterns and graphics derived from roads, signage, buildings, and uniforms. The clothing in this gallery reflects Abloh’s early collaborations and a history of Off-White, bracketed by re-created elements of urban infrastructure that continue to inspire his fashion.

To hear fashion critic Amy Verner explain Abloh’s disruption of the fashion industry, go to mcachicago.org/ablohaudio.

T-shirt for Colette, 2008

Printed cotton

Private collection

Abloh made this shirt, one of his first forays into fashion, for the high-end Parisian retailer Colette. A favorite of the designer, Colette was famous for its early mixing of high fashion and streetwear. Here Abloh borrowed the hip-hop style of wearing multiple, garish necklaces to spell out the name of the store across the front of the shirt.

Pyrex Vision clothing and blanket, 2012–13

Printed cotton, polyester, and cashmere

Private collection

Abloh created first fashion line, Pyrex Vision, by modifying store-bought apparel. He took Champion t-shirts, shorts, and sweatshirts, as well as Ralph Lauren flannel shirts, and printed onto them “Pyrex,” “23,” and an image of

The Entombment of Christ (c. 1602), a painting by sixteenth-century Italian artist Caravaggio. The number “23” refers to Chicago Bulls great Michael Jordan, and “Pyrex” to the glassware used in drug labs. When Abloh was in college he came to admire Caravaggio as a highly influential artist.

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Florencia Galarza
(American)

Heron Preston
(American)

Justin Saunders
(Canadian, b. 1982)

Matthew Williams
(British, b. 1971)

Been Trill T-shirt, 2012
Printed cotton
Private collection

In the early 2000s, Abloh joined a team of creatives working for Kanye West’s DONDA creative agency. In 2012, they formed a “band” of DJs and performed together under the name Been Trill. They also made t-shirts and merchandise to mark the moment, sometimes in collaboration with other brands such as Stussy and Hood by Air (HBA)

Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men’s Collection Spring/Summer 2014, 2013
Flannel shirt
Private collection

Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women’s Collection Spring/Summer 2015
 (“Nebraska”), 2014
T-shirt and anorak
Collection of Ashlee Jacob

“Nebraska” is the first collection that Abloh assigned a theme to, a practice he continues to use to connect various looks into a cohesive creative statement. Here he calls attention to his midwestern roots and also conveys a prairie sensibility in layered and pleated long skirts and subdued colors.

From Look 10, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women’s Collection Fall/Winter 2015 (“Split Ends”), 2015
Turtleneck, pants, and jacket
Private collection

The spirit of late 1960s politics, activism, and slogans inspired the style of this collection. Elements such as shearling jackets, antiwar graphic tees, and flared pants all harken back to the styles of the sixties. The collection also refers to the evocative, even sculptural, image conjured by the hair care term “split ends”: multiple types of fur and split-hem pants echo the phrase and create dynamic clothing collages.

From Look 22, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men’s Collection Spring/Summer 2016 (“Blue Collar”), 2015
T-shirt
Private collection

Abloh used the term “blue collar,” which commonly describes working-class people and professions, as a jumping-off point for this collection. It explores the potential of blue collared shirts and jackets while mixing in signifiers of working-class jobs, such as logos of mail carriers and construction workers.

Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women’s Collection Pre-Fall 2016, 2016
Shirt and belt
Private collection

This look introduced another signature design motif of Off-White: the long nylon belt. Abloh borrowed the object from the shipping industry, where such straps tie down heavy cargo. In place of text that would normally describe the load-bearing properties of the belt, Abloh inserted the Off-White name, claiming the object as a branded product and using its excessive length as a style statement.

From Look 31, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Fall/Winter 2016 ("You're Obviously in the Wrong Place"), 2016

Skirt and shoes

Private collection

Abloh's roften eferences artworks in his fashion. Here he took a reproduction of a surrealist painting by Giorgio Di Chirico and turned it into a dress.

Inspired by surrealism, this collection features unusual mixes of materials and strange tailoring.



Giorgio de Chirico
Piazza D'Italia, 1913
Oil on canvas
63 3/4 x 122 in.
Photo: DIOMEDIA/SuperStock RM

From Look 4, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Fall/Winter 2016 ("You Cut Me Off"), 2016

Coat and shirt

Private collection

Abloh has used the phrase "you cut me off" to not only explain the jarring, collage-like interruptions in the clothes' tailoring in this collection, but also to comment on the intrusion on American streetwear by European high fashion at the time. He felt that European designers were encroaching on his creative territory by focusing on logo t-shirts, sneakers, and other items that were central to Abloh's upbringing in skateboarding and hip-hop culture.

From Look 32, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Fall/Winter 2016 ("You Cut Me Off"), 2016

Coat and bag

Private collection

This collection's name refers to the cuts used in the work of mid-century modern Argentine artist Lucio Fontana. Fontana was known for slashing his canvases with a utility knife in an effort to free himself from the constraints

of the surface. Abloh included homages to Fontana in the roughly cut patches affixed to overcoats and scraps of fabric attached to bags.

From Look 3, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Resort 2017 ("Roses of War"), 2016
Sweatshirt and pleated skirt
Private collection

From Look 10, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Resort 2017 ("Roses of War"), 2016
Shirt, jeans, and sneakers
Private collection

From Look 18, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Resort 2017 ("Roses of War"), 2016
Coat and skirt
Private collection

Multiple references collide in this collection, named for the 1989 movie *The War of the Roses* and Guns N' Roses front man Axl Rose. As a "resort collection," the clothes are meant to be worn on holiday, but Abloh mixed the unexpected pattern of army camouflage with rose motifs to make a rock-and-roll-inflected series of garments. This collection displays Abloh's ability to blend inspirations from many different types of media to create a complex theme.

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Brendan Fowler
(American, b. 1978)

From Look 1, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2017 ("Mirror Mirror"), 2016
Sheer t-shirt and shorts
Private collection

While many of Abloh's collections revolve around a theme, for this men's collection he went further and imagined a fictional rock band named Mirror

Mirror for inspiration. Abloh designed garments that members of the band might wear and concert merchandise that fans might buy.

From Look 12, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2017 ("Mirror Mirror"), 2016
Scarf, knit t-shirt, and pants
Private collection

From Look 22, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2017 ("Mirror Mirror"), 2016
Knit sweater
Private collection

From Look 27, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2017 ("Mirror Mirror"), 2016
Jacket and shorts
Private collection

From Look 12, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Spring/Summer 2017 ("Business Woman"), 2016
Double-breasted suit dress, t-shirt, and shoes
Private collection

In this collection, Abloh returned to the question of what is appropriate to wear in the modern office environment. He creatively mixed t-shirts with structured suits or dresses that may appear better suited to evening wear—but whose asymmetrical cuts and striking silhouettes signal a creative, confident woman who means business.

From Look 36, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Spring/Summer 2017 ("Business Woman"), 2016
Dress and boots
Private collection

From Look 18, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Pre-Fall 2017, 2017

Sweater and belt-bag
Private collection

From Look 9, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Pre-Fall 2017, 2017

Fur coat
Private collection

This collection involved a collaboration with the graffiti-inspired French artist Pablo Tomek. Tomek borrowed the smeared brushwork used to cover up storefront windows in transition, applying the pattern to bags, dresses, and coats. This collection used Tomek's signature pattern as well as Abloh's black-and-white diagonal stripes to connect luxury outerwear to the urban environment.

From Look 2, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Fall/Winter 2017 ("Nothing New"), 2016

Hooded sweatshirt
Private collection

The Belgian fashion designer Raf Simons is a hero and fashion inspiration to Abloh. When commenting on the new generation of designers entering the scene in 2017, Simons decried Off-White as not bringing anything original to fashion. Abloh immediately responded with the collection "Nothing New," which unabashedly reiterated his established design approach. He took established staples of the fashion vocabulary—coats, dresses, sweatshirts, jeans, plaids, tulle, cotton, and denim—and served them up with unexpected twists.

From Look 4, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Fall/Winter 2017 ("Nothing New"), 2016

Jacket
Private collection

From Look 10, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Fall/Winter 2017 ("Nothing New"), 2016

Tulle and denim pants
Private collection

From Look 31, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Fall/Winter 2017 ("Nothing New"), 2016
Metallic cropped jacket and dress
Private collection

From Look 8, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Fall/Winter 2017 ("Seeing Things"), 2016
Mohair sweater
Private collection

Inspired by surrealism and dream-like visions, this collection embraces the textured visual effects of mohair, fur, and corduroy. Distorted checkerboard patterns create visual illusions, while other garments with affixed golden leaves appear to meld with the natural backdrop. Abloh presented the collection in a dimly lit forest setting under a large glowing moon.

From Look 20, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Fall/Winter 2017 ("Seeing Things"), 2016
Work jacket and pants
Private collection

From Look 2, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2018 ("Temperature"), 2017
Knit t-shirt, pants, boots, and bag
Private collection

"Temperature" was presented in 2017 at the height of the refugee crisis in Europe. Abloh enlisted contemporary artist Jenny Holzer to create video projections of poems about the plight of refugees. She selected works by poets Ghayath Almadhoun, Omid Shams, Anna Świrszczyńska, and others that scrolled across a screen as the show's backdrop. The clothes draw upon nautical themes and use materials from emergency and rescue professions. Abloh has explained that he felt a personal responsibility to respond to the crisis, saying, "In this climate, coming off recent elections, I have a voice. In my work, I react."

From Look 10, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2018 ("Temperature"), 2017
Jacket, layered shorts, and boots

Private collection

Virgil Abloh with Jenny Holzer (American, b. 1950)
Shirt for Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2018
("Temperature"), 2017
Cotton, tape, and printed material
Private collection

Abloh was invited to compete in the prestigious Pitti Immagine Uomo event in Florence, a twice yearly exhibition of men's clothing and accessory lines. For the runway show Abloh partnered with artist Jenny Holzer on texts that appeared not only on garments such as these, but also in a giant video projection. Borrowed from a poem written by Iranian poet Omid Shams, the text was chosen to comment on the refugee crisis in Europe at the time.

Virgil Abloh with Jenny Holzer (American, b. 1950)
Coat for Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2018
collection ("Temperature"), 2017
Cotton, tape, and printed material
Private collection

Virgil Abloh with Jenny Holzer (American, b. 1950)
Coat for Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2018
collection ("Temperature"), 2017
Cotton, tape, and printed material
Private collection

From Look 12, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer
2018 ("Temperature"), 2017
Terry-cloth wrap and belt
Private collection

From Look 14, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection
Spring/Summer 2018 ("Natural Woman"), 2017
Blouse, shorts, and purse
Private collection

From Look 26, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection
Spring/Summer 2018 ("Natural Woman"), 2017
Blouse, pants, and boots
Private collection

From Look 17, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection
Spring/Summer 2018 ("Natural Woman"), 2017
Dress and shoes
Private collection

From Look 37, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection
Spring/Summer 2018 ("Natural Woman"), 2017
Jacket, cycling shorts, and necklace
Private collection

This collection was inspired by the twentieth anniversary of the untimely death of Princess Diana of the British royal family, who was beloved for her charisma, style, and philanthropy and often called "the people's princess." Abloh took cues from her highly examined lifestyle and the looks she popularized in the 1980s and 1990s.

From Look 6, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Pre-Fall 2018 ("Glass House"), 2018
Scarf
Private collection

In 2017, Abloh ramped up his use of quoted words and phrases in his clothes, calling out seemingly obvious facts like "checked shirt" or "scarf" on those articles of clothing. The effect was like a user's manual for contemporary dress with parts pulled from an established catalogue, but whose text doubles as witty decoration. "Glass House" nods to Abloh's modern architecture influences, such as the famous structure by American architect Philip Johnson, as well as the architectural environments in which Abloh staged promotional photography of the collection.

From Look 1, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Fall/Winter 2018 ("Business Casual"), 2018
Double-breasted jacket and pants
Private collection

Continuing his interest in the different types of modern dress, for this collection Abloh took on the ambiguous and increasingly prevalent style of business casual. Taking the loosely defined term to surprising places, Abloh created intentionally ill-fitting polo shirts and suit jackets as exercises in experimental tailoring, turned paint-stained jeans into symbols of an artistic alter-ego, and produced a tasteful sweater with his signature diagonal stripes.

From Look 27, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Fall/Winter 2018 ("Business Casual"), 2018
Sweater and pants
Private collection

From Look 1, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Pre-Fall 2018 ("Mrs. Von Freytag"), 2018
Dress and shoes
Private collection

For this collection, Abloh drew inspiration from the stereotype of a leisured upper-crust European woman. Imagining a life filled with chic lunches and weekends in the country, he created designs that feature floral prints, luxurious pant suits, and patterned silk scarves for those occasions.

From Look 2, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Resort 2019 ("En Plein Air"), 2018
Parka, shirt, and pants
Private collection

Resort wear has an established place in the calendar of European fashion houses as a way to sell clothes between other seasons. Clothes from these smaller collections are geared toward holiday getaways to the country or seaside. Abloh connected these ideas to the "open air" tradition of Impressionist painters at work and made a collection that suggests both modern weekend warriors and the cultured activities of nineteenth-century painters.

From Look 21, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Fall/Winter 2018 ("West Village"), 2018

Culottes and boots
Private collection

Abloh has recently turned his focus to different types of fashion consumers, and with this collection he looked at the stereotypically young, active, and moneyed women of New York's West Village. He imagined their days filled with spin classes, lunches, and afternoon horseback riding—followed by a night out on the town. He designed an improbable, tongue-in-cheek range of clothing that could see them through all these privileged activities.

From Look 37, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Fall/Winter 2018 ("West Village"), 2018
Coat, dress, and sneakers
Private collection

From Look 38, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Fall/Winter 2018 ("West Village"), 2018
Top, skirt, and shoes
Private collection

From Look 2, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2019 ("Jim Stark"), 2018
Leather shirt and pants
Private collection

Abloh often blends references within collections. Here he took inspiration from actor James Dean's character Jim Stark in the film *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), as well as the late New York graffiti artist Donald Joseph "Dondi" White. The collection was centered around basics such as jeans and t-shirts featuring Dondi-inspired graffiti as embellishments, as well as luxurious updates on 1970s urban staples that Dondi might have worn, such as a sequined anorak.

From Look 24, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2019 ("Jim Stark"), 2018
Sequined anorak
Private collection

From Look 10, Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2019 ("Jim Stark"), 2018

Coat and pants

Private collection

T-shirts for Louis Vuitton runway show, Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2019, 2018

Cotton t-shirts

Private collection

These limited edition t-shirts—dyed in every color of the rainbow—were worn by 1,500 students personally invited by Abloh to attend the Louis Vuitton Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2019 runway show in Paris. They sat alongside industry leaders and VIPs, emphasizing Abloh's support of the next generation of creators and makers. The same students later appeared in *School Teens* (2019), an advertising campaign for the season shot by photographer Raimond Wouda.

Virgil Abloh for Nike

Serena Williams "Queen" Dress, 2018

Rayon, nylon, and cotton

Private collection

Abloh collaborated closely with tennis player Serena Williams to create an outfit for her appearance in the 2018 US Open tournament. The result is a skirted bodysuit that expresses her bold playing style and transgressive fashion sensibility. A sporty, asymmetric top flows into an airy tulle tutu, a departure from the game's usual simple, all-white dresses and pleated skirts. In addition to their interest in fashion, Williams and Abloh share the experience of excelling to the highest ranks of predominantly white enterprises.

Virgil Abloh and Arthur Jafa (American, b. 1960)

Wakanda Never, 2018

Windbreaker jacket with quilted lining

Private collection

Abloh's collaboration with Arthur Jafa extends both artists' inquiry into representations of blackness in contemporary media. The text on the jacket's back is a play on the black nationalist rallying cry "Wakanda forever" from

the 2018 film *Black Panther*—with a twist that implies that a black utopia is an impossibility. Inside, the quilted lining in the pattern of the Confederate flag attests to Jafa’s long-term effort to visually represent histories and experiences of black Americans. The artists bonded over their mutual disappointment in the film and created this jacket in playful protest.

Coat Prototype (unreleased), 2016
Found overcoat, ink on paper, metal pins, and tape
Private collection

Shirt Prototype (unreleased), 2016
Found shirt
Private collection

Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ for Beyoncé, 2018
Dress
Private collection

Abloh designed this Off-White dress for Beyoncé’s 2018 *Vogue* cover photo shoot, though it was not published in the magazine. The dress combines a traditional flowing silhouette with Abloh’s signature black-and-white diagonal stripes.

Streetwear

Before designers revolutionized high-end fashion collections with elements such as sneakers, hoodies, and denim, streetwear defined the identity, status, taste, and regionalism of young people. The style developed organically between the worlds of hip-hop and skateboarding, both of which value uniqueness, creativity, and, most of all, the subversion of the mainstream. Since the late 1970s, hip-hop artists honed their image through their clothing choices, often customizing basic components such as sneakers, hats, and jackets to make individualized statements. Skateboarders also gravitated to utilitarian staples such as t-shirts, workwear, and sneakers, highlighting their outsider status by embracing ironically out-of-fashion styles and thrift-store discards, or by altering corporate logos to create subversive messages. Abloh pays homage to streetwear’s contributions to contemporary culture in his fashion, using its techniques of borrowing, remixing, and ironic commentary to guide his work.

"Individual Pyrex Visions," 2013/19

Screen print frames

Private collection

These are remakes of the original screens Abloh used to print reproductions of paintings by the Italian Renaissance artist Caravaggio on t-shirts and hoodies for his first fashion brand, Pyrex Vision. While attending college he learned of the painter and, based on Caravaggio's unique use of contrasting light and shadow, became convinced that a single person can change the course of art through innovation. Abloh has continued to use images of Caravaggio's paintings in his brand Off-White.

"Individual Pyrex Visions," 2018

Screen print frames

Private collection

This collection of images form the conceptual basis of an unreleased clothing line. Designed by Abloh and a creative team in London called Alaska Alaska, the line carries a title that suggests an extension of his original brand Pyrex Vision—but for now remains a speculative project. The clothing reinforces Abloh's love of slogans, logos, and typography as well as his fashion roots in silk screening on t-shirts.

Virgil Abloh

(American, b. 1980)

Fabien Montique

(Barbadian)

False Façade, 2016/19

Printed vinyl on scaffolding

Private collection

Abloh often channels his background in architecture into urban design elements in his fashion work, whether in sites for photo shoots or, as here, in the scenography for a runway show. Made with his frequent collaborator Fabien Montique, this printed image brought an exterior architectural element as well as an incongruous scale to an interior space, making for a surreal backdrop.

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Bella Hadid
(American, b. 1996),

Kendall Jenner
(American, b. 1995)

Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Spring/Summer 2019
("Track and Field"), 2018
Video (color, sound)
1 minute
Private collection

This video shows the opening moments of Abloh's "Track and Field" collection presentation for Off-White, inspired both by female athletes and the fashion phenomenon of "athleisure": a combination of athletic and leisure wear. This clip features supermodels Bella Hadid and Kendall Jenner, two prominent personalities of the "Instagirl era" of modeling, driven by social media.

Virgil Abloh

"NEGATIVE SPACE," 2019
Nylon, wood, and steel
Private collection

Since Abloh's days studying architecture, he has been fascinated by the many objects that make up the urban fabric. Here, an unbranded billboard is deployed as a sculptural object, bringing the scale and grit of the streetscape into the museum and framing the clothing on display in the context of a bustling city.

"Music"

As with his work in fashion, Abloh connects with subcultures and offers alternatives to the status quo in his work with music, performing wide-ranging DJ sets at venues and festivals around the world. Parallel to his work

on Off-White, he has constructed a comprehensive visual approach to branding his work, drawing not only on his skill in graphic design, but also on his experience working for Kanye West's creative company. There, he oversaw the creation of concert merchandise, album packaging, and stage designs for West as well as other musicians in his orbit. This section presents the products of Abloh's collaborations with stars such as West, Jay-Z, and A\$AP Rocky, among others.

To hear entrepreneur and fashion designer Acyde describe Abloh's bridge between fashion and music, go to mcachicago.org/ablohaudio.

Virgil Abloh

"IN HIS IMAGE" A TRIBUTE TO YEEZUS, 2019

Acrylic, tinted film, mirror

Private collection

Abloh designed the album art for Kanye West's sixth album, *Yeezus* (2013), while working for the musician. The packaging reveals Abloh's modernist architectural sensibility: only the necessary elements are retained, reducing the packaging to a single red sticker that keeps the CD's jewel box closed and displays the album's name. Here he has made a new large-scale version to pay homage to the Grammy-nominated album and the graphic clarity of its design.

Kanye West
(American, b. 1977)

Riccardo Tisci
(Italian, b. 1974)

Shawn Carter
(American, b. 1969)

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Watch the Throne album press plate, 2011

Brass plate in acrylic frame

Courtesy of Virgil Abloh Archive

Abloh received a Grammy nomination for his work on the graphic identity of Jay-Z and Kanye West's collaborative album *Watch the Throne* (2011), working with then-Creative Director of Givenchy, Riccardo Tisci. The design is a digital update of a decorative pattern used in Baroque architecture, an opulent and ornate style used in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is the printing plate used to make the original embossed packaging.

Devon Turnbull
(American b. 1979)

"OJAS" speaker cabinet, 2014
Plywood and audio components
Private collection

Abloh sees all of the components of his design projects as opportunities to make a fresh statement. He worked with renowned audio engineer Devon Turnbull to make these speakers for when he deejays, achieving a raw and unembellished architectural look.

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Pioneer DJ
(est. 2014)

Transparent DJM-900NXS2-P1, 2018
Transparent CDJ-2000NXS2-P1, 2018
Sound mixer and digital music player
Private collection

Abloh favors transparency in his designs, a product of his training in modern architecture, which often features glass and open spaces. He worked with the audio company Pioneer DJ to make a clear version of the turntables he favors when deejaying, revealing the internal parts that make up this sophisticated device.

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Guillaume Berg
(French)

"First Person," 2019
Audio composition
14 minutes, 3 seconds
Private collection

At the beginning of his Off-White fashion shows, Abloh often plays spoken word soundtracks that give clues to the themes of a particular collection. This soundtrack is a compilation of those voice-overs, featuring speakers such as Thurston Moore from the punk band Sonic Youth, artist David Shrigley, and Julia Roberts in the film *Pretty Woman*.

View a transcript at mcachicago.org/fos-transcript.

Flat White DJ Flyers 2015–18, 2019
Print on board
Private collection

Abloh designs templated digital flyers for each of his DJ shows to create a consistent look and allow for endless customization for individual countries, sites, and performer lineups. Posted on his Instagram account, early on including his DJ name "Flat White," they are an instantly recognizable record of his busy schedule of performing concerts around the world.

United Nations cease and desist letter, 2018
Paper letter in display case
Courtesy of Virgil Abloh Archive

In the original design template for Abloh's digitally distributed DJ flyers, he used the United Nations emblem to suggest the international nature of his DJ career and the aspirational democracy he sees in bringing together people through music. The United Nations did not authorize the use of their emblem, however, and wrote this letter asking the designer to immediately stop using the symbol.

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Ben Kelly
(British)

"MANCHESTER, ILLINOIS," 2019

High-gloss paint on metal
Private collection

When studying the history of club culture, Abloh learned of interior designer Ben Kelly, who designed iconic music venues in England such as the Hacienda club in Manchester—the birthplace of acid house and rave music in the 1980s. Kelly uses an industrial-inspired graphic language that includes elements like safety striping, which Abloh has also integrated into his fashion and design work. Abloh collaborated with Kelly to create these sculptural fragments to echo The Hacienda days.

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Sus Boy

"In Other Words," 2017

Video (color, silent)
2 minutes, 5 seconds
Private collection

Never knowing what sort of stage setup he will be offered at the various venues where he deejays, Abloh created a straightforward graphic file to project onto different surfaces. These rotating slogans not only reiterate his fondness for direct texts that spark self-reflection, but also serve the era of smartphones by spawning provocative content for social media.

BLUE, 2019

Plastic curtain
Private collection

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Supreme
(est. 1994)

“Untitled” Supreme c/o Virgil Abloh, 2019
Printed ink on t-shirt
Private collection

Virgil Abloh
(American, b. 1980)

Chief Keef
(American, b. 1995)

Ari Marcopoulos
(American, b. 1957)

Supreme
(est. 1994)

“Untitled” Supreme c/o Virgil Abloh, 2019
Photographic print wheat-pasted on wall
Private collection

Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ “TESTING BELT” for A\$AP Rocky, 2018
Industrial belt with buckle
Private collection

While working for Kanye West’s DONDA creative agency, Abloh designed the graphic identity for rapper A\$AP Rocky’s 2013 debut album, *Long.Live.A\$AP*, and its subsequent tour and merchandise. Abloh made this belt for A\$AP Rocky’s album release *TESTING*, a modification of the long, industrial-looking belts he introduced in his Off-White clothing line.

“TROPHY CASE,” 2019
Wood display case with print
Private collection

Virgil Abloh for Jacob & Co.
“TEXT-BASED OFFICE SUPPLIES,” 2019
Diamonds and gold
Private collection

Office Supplies c/o Jacob & Co, 2017
Diamonds and gold
Private collection

As a kid with little disposable income but aspirations of becoming a rapper, Abloh made necklaces out of paper clips and mimicked his favorite hip-hop personalities—a familiar practice for young people who idolized rap’s icons. Once he reached his own success, Abloh enlisted Jacob the Jeweler, New York-based jewelry designer to the hip-hop elite, to make this set of gold, diamond-encrusted accessories based on that original childhood fantasy.

“Intermezzo”

At this point in the exhibition, you have encountered Abloh’s work in fashion and music, which is guided by an ethos of streetwear. This entails borrowing from the establishment, subverting norms, and making new statements about old ideas. The second half of the exhibition delves deeper into the political messages and social critiques embedded in his work, presents recent collaborations, and explores Abloh’s approach to prototyping. This process of constant making, testing, remaking, and retesting is common in the fashion industry and central to Abloh’s way of working across disciplines. The sculpture in this room is evidence of Abloh’s method—made of impermanent materials, it could easily be imagined as a model in an architecture studio.

“Pink Panther,” 2019
Insulation foam
Private collection

Abloh compares much of his design activity to prototyping, ongoing iterations that may never culminate in a final form but instead lead to other, equally exciting concepts. This sculpture represents one of these ideas, signaling its “test case” nature by using impermanent insulation foam to fashion a modern sculpture reminiscent of those by modern artist Alexander Calder, best known for his innovative mobiles. Foam is regularly used in architecture and design offices when testing new concepts, but for Abloh the material also recalls the practice of salvaging construction materials to make skateboard ramps and other structures.



Alexander Calder (American, 1898–1976)
Flamingo, 1974
Steel
53 x 29 x 60 ft.
Photo: CC Vincent Desjardins

“Black Gaze”

With the 2013 launch of Off-White in Milan, Abloh challenged the elite fashion industry’s long-standing exclusion of black talent. Abloh marketed Off-White prominently on social media, appealing to a younger, more diverse generation of consumers. Off-White campaigns have celebrated black artists, athletes, and musicians, providing a platform and affirming their identity as creators in their own right. In 2018, Abloh assumed the role of Men’s Artistic Director at Louis Vuitton, becoming one of the few black designers to helm a major Parisian fashion house. He now uses his high-profile platform to forge a more inclusive vision for high fashion. This section presents Abloh’s fashion and artworks that reflect on black cultural experiences in the United States.

To hear filmmaker Arthur Jafa frame Abloh’s perspective, go to mcachicago.org/ablohaudio.

You’re Obviously in the Wrong Place, 2015/19

Neon sign

Private collection

This neon sign welcomed attendees to the Off-White Women’s Collection Fall/Winter 2016 runway show. It takes a line from the film *Pretty Woman* (1990), when a snobbish saleswoman at a high-end clothing store dismisses the story’s protagonist. According to Abloh, the statement serves as a “manifesto on how the modern girl doesn’t really work on convention.” The phrase also comments on Abloh’s journey into the predominantly white world of high fashion.

"OPTIONS," 2019

Flocked mild steel markers

Private collection

Abloh regularly borrows objects, signs, and symbols from his surroundings for his work. Here, in a darker turn, he calls attention to a grim part of urban landscapes: crime scene signage. In a city familiar with gun violence, Abloh asks viewers to choose the path of creativity that he has chosen, rather than self-destructiveness.

Cotton, 2019

Acrylic on canvas

Private collection

This painting re-creates the logo of Cotton Incorporated, an American lobbying group established in 1970 to promote cotton as the fabric of choice for manufacturers and consumers around the globe. Abloh enlarged the logo to the scale of a billboard advertisement, highlighting the organization's role in telling and selling a positive story of cotton, which hides the crop's historical connection to slavery in the United States.

Untitled (Mirror), 2019

Edition Galerie kreoo

Stainless steel

Private collection

Louis Vuitton Ideation Studio

Mannequins for Louis Vuitton Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2019 ("Dark Side of the Rainbow"), 2018

Creative direction by Virgil Abloh

Green foam

Private collection

For his first season debut at Louis Vuitton, Abloh presented a boldly colorful collection on a rainbow-hued runway at the Tuileries Garden in Paris. The show featured an unprecedented number of models of color. These monochromatic mannequins are based on actual models from the show and have since appeared in Louis Vuitton stores around the world. They attest to Abloh's commitment to representing diversity in all shades.



A spectrum of color ignites the gardens of Palais Royal in Paris for the Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2019 fashion show by Virgil Abloh, the new Men's Artistic Director of Louis Vuitton
Photo: Défilé Collection Homme Printemps-Eté 2019 dans les jardins du Palais-Royal, le 21 juin 2018,
© Louis Vuitton Malletier / Alessandro Garofalo.

Vinoodh Matadin
(Dutch, b. 1961)

Inez van Lamsweerde
(Dutch, b. 1963)

Campaign images for Louis Vuitton Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2019
("Dark Side of the Rainbow"), 2019
Creative direction by Virgil Abloh
Ink-jet prints
Private collection

For his first Louis Vuitton advertising campaign, Abloh decided to focus on the theme of boyhood—not fashion or menswear. The opening chapter of the campaign, shot by the Dutch photography duo Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin, debuted on Martin Luther King Jr. Day, 2019, and features a three-year-old model posing as the Statue of Liberty. The campaign asserts Abloh's belief that children of color will take center stage in the future of luxury fashion.

Fedor Bitkov
(Russian, b. 1992)

Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ "SCULPTURE" Cotton Bag, 2018
Creative direction by Virgil Abloh
Ink-jet print
Private collection

Fabien Montique

(Barbadian)

“*BORDER CONTROL*,” 2018

Creative direction by Virgil Abloh

Ink-jet print

Private collection

Fabien Montique

(Barbadian)

“*AFFIRMATIVE ACTION*,” 2015

Creative direction by Virgil Abloh

Ink-jet print

Private collection

“Design”

For Abloh, design is as much about the process as it is about the final product, which he achieves by asking questions and prototyping. Picking apart established norms in art and design including materials and imagery, he upends expectations to call critical attention to our surroundings. The transparency inherent to his method nods to his training in architecture and his admiration for modernist German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, whose buildings make their structures and functions readily apparent. This section surveys Abloh’s expansive design practice, including forays into architecture, furniture, painting, sculpture, and shoes.

To hear about Abloh’s versatility from art curator and historian Hans Ulrich Obrist, go to mcachicago.org/ablohaudio.

Dorm Room, 2019

Furniture and rugs

Private collection

Dorm Room combines prototype furniture with rugs Abloh created in a 2018 collaboration with global housewares retailer IKEA. Abloh’s modifications to existing designs reveal a question that is fundamental to his practice: Does an object need to be entirely new in order to be “original”? The rugs also demonstrate Abloh’s interest in wordplay. In this case, the disjunction

between the texts and the rugs' appearance provokes viewers to question what they are seeing—and what it communicates.

Virgil Abloh for Nike
"AN ARRAY OF AIR," 2019
Nike shoes on tarp
Private collection

In 2017, Nike enlisted Abloh to redesign ten of the company's most famous shoe styles. Abloh used collaged elements, transparent materials, self-referential labels, tabs, and zip ties to emphasize the shoes' construction, inviting people to take a second look at these iconic sneakers. This display features unreleased shoes from subsequent collaborations between Off-White and Nike in various stages of prototyping. These objects under construction offer a behind-the-scenes view of Abloh's design process, which involves working through many concepts and iterations of a project before reaching the final result.

View an illustrated guide of these shoe styles at mcachicago.org/ablohshoes.

Untitled (Short Bench), 2019
Untitled (Long Bench), 2019
Untitled Chair (High Chair Round), 2019

All works edition Galerie kreo
Graffiti on concrete
Private collection, courtesy of Galerie kreo

Abloh's design studio Alaska Alaska recently created this project, personalizing the outdoor skate park by altering and combining its forms into domestic furniture. The series not only builds on Abloh's interest in graffiti culture as a means of transforming urban design through new textures but also his ethos of taking over established infrastructure and leaving one's mark.

"advertise here" II, 2019
Acrylic on canvas
Private collection

This work plays on the familiar sight of available billboards encouraging interested parties to call and inquire about leasing the sign. By reimagining the billboard for an art gallery setting, Abloh created an object that prompts curiosity. Call the number and you will hear a voicemail explaining the Off-White Men's Collection Spring/Summer 2016 collection "Blue Collar."

"Harpo Studios" II, 2019

Acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Abloh connects two types of media in this work: television and painting. The title, *"Harpo Studios,"* refers to the media production company Oprah Winfrey founded in Chicago—"Harpo" is "Oprah" spelled backward. The shape of the painting echoes the dimensions of wide-screen televisions as well as advertising billboards, suggesting the intertwined nature of media and marketing.

JCDecaux II, 2019

Acrylic on canvas

Private collection

Art history and contemporary advertising collide in this work. In painting the surface entirely black, Abloh referred to Russian artist Kazimir Malevich's groundbreaking monochromes from the early 1900s—some of the earliest examples of abstract art. At the same time, Abloh added a modern reference with the logo of JCDecaux, one of the largest companies in outdoor advertising. Painting—as a surface that commands the viewer's attention—becomes prime real estate for advertising.

A Series of Events, 2019

Ceramics

Private collection

Abloh explored multiple techniques in this series of ceramic works. The vessels are heavily textured, revealing a delicate handmade quality, while the ceramic chains appear to be clean, industrial, and strong. This eclectic combination of styles can be seen across Abloh's recent designs for Off-White and bags for Louis Vuitton.

"LITERAL THREAT," 2018

Polycarbonate, metal, and plastic toys

Private collection

Abloh reinterpreted the idea of luggage personalization in this collaboration with the high-end luggage brand Rimowa. Conceptualizing an alternative to tags, stickers, or monogrammed initials on luggage, he created a transparent suitcase to put the owner's personal belongings on display as a statement of identity. Here, he placed plastic toy guns in a suitcase to playfully flaunt one of the biggest taboos in travel: concealing weapons.

Trivision Sign, 2016

Split-flap display sign

Private collection

"dollar a gallon" II, 2019

Mixed media

Private collection

"a mere image" II, 2019

Print on chrome panels

Private collection

"AS IMPOSSIBLE," 2019

Blue foam

Private collection

"AS IMPOSSIBLE" is one of Abloh's latest forays into sculpture. The fragile work cannot be climbed physically, a reference to his improbable rise in the fashion design industry.

Illinois Institute of Technology, 2003/19

Architectural model

Private collection

Abloh graduated with a master's degree in architecture from the Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, in 2003. This newly fabricated model, based on his thesis project, shows a proposed skyscraper on a plot of land

next to the Chicago River. Like a tree bending toward sunlight, Abloh's building leans over the river and away from other high-rises to allow its occupants an unobstructed view of Lake Michigan.

Gradient chairs, 2019
Painted metal and chrome
Private collection

Abloh's studio Alaska Alaska created these chairs as part of a series of experiments in designing furniture for the home. They embody a key principle in Abloh's design philosophy: transparency. The open frame, inspired by the aesthetics of German modern architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, exposes the rational distribution of weight and leaves the gridded structure in plain sight.

Off-White c/o Virgil Abloh™ Women's Collection Spring/Summer 2015
("Nebraska"), 2014
Video (color, sound)
8 minutes, 55 seconds
Private collection

While this promotional video relates closely to Abloh's work in fashion, the setting reveals his passion for architectural history. He often sets his fashion photo shoots in iconic modernist buildings, whether Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion, Philip Johnson's Glass House, or as here, Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye.

"The End"

Abloh's expansive and democratic views on art and design command attention in retail stores, concert halls, social media feeds, and, now, museums. This section presents three recent works that are emblematic of Abloh's practice of critiquing the influence of advertising, finding kinship among leading contemporary black cultural producers, and subverting expectations. These themes emerged in his earliest work and established a basis for the projects he continues to create. For Abloh, "the end" can only be a figure of speech.

To hear about the future of Virgil Abloh, go to mcachicago.org/ablohaudio.

Arthur Jafa
(American, b. 1960)

Screen Shot, 2017, printed 2019

Epson fine art print face-mounted to Diasec acrylic on aluminum panel
Courtesy of the artist and Gavin Brown's enterprise, New York/Rome

Throughout his career, Abloh has cultivated close relationships with black cultural producers who at turns act as his mentors and collaborators. For this work, artist Arthur Jafa acquired a screen grab of Abloh FaceTiming his friend the rapper Theophilus London, presenting an expanding network of peers and collaborators.

"FOR THE LOVE OF MONEY," 2018

Coated canvas, natural cowhide, leather trimmings, cotton textile lining, and ceramic chain
Private collection

Since assuming the role of Men's Artistic Director of Louis Vuitton, Abloh has reimagined several of the brand's signature products, including the classic Keepall bag that was originally released in 1930. His new version adds heavy ceramic chain links, which have appeared across Abloh's clothing and accessory designs. The chain refers back to Abloh's origins in streetwear while offering a sly commentary on the wearer's enslavement to branded luxury and—in overtly preventing theft—on the desireability of luxury goods.



Keepall bag in cotton canvas

Once belonging to Gaston-Louis Vuitton, c. 1930

Cotton canvas, leather, brass, and paint

Louis Vuitton Collection

Photo: Keepall en toile de coton ayant appartenu à Gaston-Louis Vuitton, vers 1930,

© Louis Vuitton Malletier/Laurent Bremaud



Keepall 45 bag in Monogram canvas, 2005

Coated canvas, leather, and brass

Louis Vuitton

Photo: Keepall 45 en toile Monogram avec porte-adresse, cadenas et attache-poignées apparents, 2005,

© Louis Vuitton/LB Production

“MIRROR IMAGE,” 2019

Print on chrome panels

Private collection

This reproduction of a Newport cigarette billboard addresses the insidious power of advertising, which offers unrealistic fantasies of the good life. “Newport ads are a Chicago thing I grew up with—black people looking happy and joyful, but they’re living in circumstances that don’t look like the adverts,” explains Abloh.

For me, “*Figures of Speech*” is an art exhibition rooted in advertising and “the projected image.”

Any time an idea takes shape on a particular surface—a photo print, a screen, a billboard, or canvas—it becomes real. This exhibition demonstrates how I wrestle with this concept freed from any one medium, looking for personal and specific solutions.

This twenty-year survey shows how I am constantly looking for a way to transform myself from consumer to producer, navigating a path between “Tourist” and “Purist,” between the literal and the figurative.

—Virgil Abloh