

Rosen, Miss and Adam Katzman. "The art world remembers the force of nature who we lost too soon," Dazed, 18 April 2018.

## The art world remembers the force of nature who we lost too soon

Text [Miss Rosen](#)

Text [Adam Katzman](#)

Never let it be said that one person can't change the world. African-American philanthropist, activist, and collector Peggy Cooper Cafritz (1947–2018) did just this, over and over again. As a doyenne of arts and education in the nation's capital, Cooper Cafritz was a force of nature.

Hailing from Mobile, Alabama, Ms Cooper Cafritz moved north in 1964 to attend George Washington University, with a mission to fight against segregation at the tail end of Jim Crow. As a senior in 1968, she had a vision of what would become one of her greatest accomplishments: a public high school that served artistically gifted students of colour from disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

In 1974, Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Ellington officially opened, providing professional training in music, theatre, paintings, and dance, along with an academic curriculum. Notable alumni include comedian Dave Chapelle, singer-songwriter Me'Shell Ndegéocello, and operatic mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves.

Ms Cooper Cafritz did not stop there. Her dedication to cultivating talent extended far beyond the school grounds as she took a hands-on approach in developing one of the largest private collections of African-American and African art that includes work by [Kehinde Wiley](#), David Hammons, Kerry James Marshall, [Mickalene Thomas](#), Carrie Mae Weems, Emory Douglas, [Barkley L. Hendricks](#), and LaToya Ruby Frazier, to name just a few.

Tragically, more than 300 pieces of the collection were destroyed in July 2009 after a fire at her home. It was a loss that would have devastated many, but Ms Cooper Cafritz, in her inimitable grace and determination, soldiered on. Working with co-editor Charmaine Picard, Ms Cooper Cafritz created *Fired Up! Ready to Go!; Finding Beauty, Demanding Equality: An African American Life in Art* (Rizzoli), a stunning volume that showcases 200 of the lost works.

On February 18, just five days before the book's official release, Ms Cooper Cafritz died at the age of 70. Her death came as a shock to the artists whose careers she helped to nurture and cultivate. Two months on, Ms Picard and a host of leading artists remember the life and legacy of Peggy Cooper Cafritz.

WILLIAM VILLALONGO

[William Villalongo](#) navigates the politics of historical erasure directing his work towards a reassessment of western, American and African Art histories. Working out of the notion of blackness as a verb, he explores dualities such as male-female, visibility/invisibility, humanity/nature incorporating appropriations from ancient myth to contemporary politics. The recipient of the prestigious Louis Comfort Tiffany Award and the Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptor's Grant, Villalongo is currently represented by Susan Inglett Gallery, New York, and is an Assistant Professor at The Cooper Union School of Art.

Rosen, Miss and Adam Katzman. "The art world remembers the force of nature who we lost too soon," *Dazed*, 18 April 2018.

William Villalongo: The first time I met Peggy was around 2005. I think she had known I was at the Studio of Museum of Harlem residency and she was actively looking for me even though I didn't know her. She came to visit me at my studio in Tribeca with an entourage of young guys (I later realised it was her sons Zack and Cooper and a couple of high school friends). She was all excited, going through my stuff, and would ask how much something was or tell me I should do more of these. I probably had a look on my face of like, "What in the world?"

She just said, "I know, I know, I know! I'm too much!" But she came there on a mission. She bought a couple of pieces from that visit and had someone helping her with the logistics.

I didn't bump into her again until maybe a year later at an art opening and she looked at me and asked, "When are you coming to visit me in DC?" So I decided to visit and it was amazing. She was a very warm and unbelievably generous person.

I hadn't gone to a lot of collectors' homes at that point in my life, but the ones that I had didn't have collections as in your face as hers. She went for things that were boldly political, tough images to consume, that were right there above the designer sectional sofa. She had art from Ellington students and work that she was collecting all together. She didn't draw a line between them; she thought of them as the future and the present all in the same place. You can just imagine these young kids visiting her and seeing their work next to a Kehinde Wiley.

Peggy was like a mentor. She helped me understand what it means to be doing art, thinking about art, having it as the centre of one's life, as a force that does something good in the world, as a way to be thoughtful, as a way out, particularly in underprivileged communities. It was really inspiring.

She would call me every once in awhile and say, "How are you doing?" I could be very straightforward with her. She was very frank, didn't beat around the bush, and would say, "Do you need some money?" (*Laughs*). At that point in my career, I was trying to make something happen and it was really hard. To have a person who supportively checks in and even buy something at a critical time was very helpful. I could visit her and have really good conversations about what was going on in the world. I remember talking to Peggy as a young professor. I was having a tough time with younger African-American students. I was talking to her about understanding the place of representation and how important it is to understand that framework. I found that younger students really didn't care or were sometimes hostile to the notion that those things would matter and be part of the conversation. She looked at me and said, "*You have to make them understand!*"

It hit me really hard. For her, that type of understanding of self in relation to the world, particularly African Americans to the world, is too important to let go.