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# THE CUT A Civil-Rights Visionary's Collection of Artists of Color

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Peggy Cooper Cafritz, the civil-rights activist, and patron of the arts and education, died last week at the age of 70 in her Washington, D.C., condominium. She had moved there after a fire in 2009 consumed more than her eight-bedroom home, destroying not only her mementos and belongings, but claiming one of the most important and lovingly curated collections of work by [artists of color](#) in the country.

Cafritz's home also served as a salon for thinkers, policy-makers, activists, and artists. Decades of painstaking collecting – what Cafritz called her "relentless search for beauty" – were reduced to ashes. Gone were works by Kerry James Marshall and [Carrie Mae Weems](#).

Underinsured pieces by artists like Ghanaian weaver El Anatsui, whose work she acquired before subsequent acclaim, were lost. Instead of wallowing, Cafritz found comfort in the community of artists for whom she acted as a spiritual foster mother to, and began collecting again.

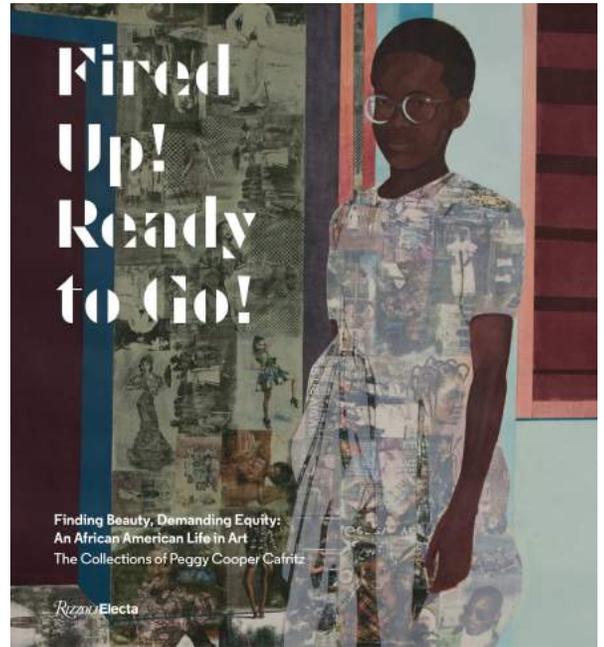
Cafritz's monumental collection, both before and after the fire, and the indomitable spirit that drove her to acquire it, are examined and celebrated in the late collector's new book from Rizzoli, *Fired Up! Ready to Go!: Finding Beauty, Demanding Equity: An African American Life in Art*. Because, as Cafritz writes, "I am me. Key to understanding my collections is understanding me."

Cafritz was born in Mobile, Alabama, in 1947 to the most distinguished and wealthy black family in the community. But their prosperousness did not shield them from the prejudices endemic to the Jim Crow South, so Cafritz and her siblings were sent to boarding school after a backlash following her father's attempts to integrate Mobile's Catholic school. While pursuing a law degree at George Washington University, Cafritz became an influential civil-rights activist, where she helped establish a black student union and tackled racism within the Greek community. Later



she helped establish the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, which counts Dave Chappelle and Samira Wiley as alums.

Fired Up! Ready to Go! is a decadent offering of work spanning various media, formats, continents, and times. Most thrilling in the book is the presence of Cafritz, whose voice carries throughout, from a beautiful introductory essay to captions that share insight into her curatorial process. The question that resonates – asked by Cafritz explicitly and implicitly – is why artists of color are missing from permanent collections, from museum art director positions, from institutional places of prominence. In her collection, Cafritz provided a template, a ground-work, and a vision for an inclusive future: “These dreams of ... this art allow me to breathe, sustain me, keep me filled with the hope that all elements of the art world will fire themselves up and commit to seeing with wide, broadly educated eyes.”



**Images:**

Njideka Akunyili Crosby. “The Beautiful Ones, #1a,” 2012. Photo: © Njideka Akunyili Crosby

William Villalongo. “Father I Cannot Tell a Lie,” 2009. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Susan Inglett Gallery, New York. Photo: Jeremy Lawson

Fired Up! Ready to Go!: Finding Beauty, Demanding Equity: An African American Life in Art. The Collections of Peggy Cooper Cafritz by Peggy Cooper Cafritz. Photo: Courtesy of Rizzoli