

Cartagena, Rosa. "African mythology and folklore collide in William Villalongo's entrancing velvety portraits," *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 15 March 2025.

The Philadelphia Inquirer

African mythology and folklore collide in William Villalongo's entrancing velvety portraits

The Tyler school alum, who will have a career retrospective at PAFA, draws inspiration from the resilience and beauty of Black lives: from Henry Box Brown to his mother's tchotchkes.

by Rosa Cartagena

Published March 15, 2025, 5:00 a.m. ET



Artist William Villalongo in front of his mixed-media paintings "Zero Gravity 1" (top) and "Zero Gravity 2." The exhibit "William Villalongo: Myths and Migrations" runs May 15 through Aug. 31 at ... [Read more](#)
Argenis Apolinario, NYC

Much has been written about [Henry Box Brown's body](#). The 33-year-old enslaved man from Virginia was 5'10" and around 200 pounds in the spring of 1849 when he forced himself into a wooden box not much bigger than an oven. It was addressed to the Pennsylvania Anti-Slavery Society in Philadelphia, where he re-emerged 27 hours later as a free man.

The story of Brown's extraordinary escape to freedom has been retold for generations through books, films, and stage productions (including a play by Tony Kushner). Few works, however, have captured the depth and defiance of Brown's eyes like artist William Villalongo's portrait, *27 Hour Cargo Piece*.

Within the confines of the crate, Brown's body is an abstract amalgamation of cuts. Just his eyes are visible in a swirl of white slices that Villalongo cut out of black velvet, using a method called flocking. The brown concentric circles stare out, arresting and haunting amid the swooshes and hearts that loosely outline Brown's face and knees. His arm and feet are the only parts of his body that Villalongo painted with realistic detail, folded and cramped inside.

"I was thinking a lot about Blackness and movement, and the ways in which Black people, particularly in this country, have to move, change, and shift almost all the time in order to navigate racism and the types of systemic inequalities that are baked into the society we live in," said Villalongo, who was raised in Bridgeton, N.J., and now lives in Brooklyn.

The piece is one of approximately 35 artworks that will go on display at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in May for Villalongo's retrospective, "[Myths and Migrations](#)." The show marks the first touring solo exhibition of his work, spanning his 20-year career, including painting, sculpture, sketches, and a video installation.

An alum of Temple University's Tyler School of Art and Architecture, where he earned his master's in fine art, Villalongo considers the forthcoming show a homecoming. He grew up taking field trips to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Barnes Foundation, eventually participating in an impactful and intensive summer program at the University of the Arts in high school. Today, he's a professor at his alma mater, Cooper Union School of Art in New York.

Villalongo has spent his career making work that criticizes the erasure of Black people throughout art history. Using motifs from African mythology and folklore, he took inspiration from his childhood home in South Jersey, where his mother had a collection of art and tchotchkes — like a velvety painting of a Black woman riding a Pegasus with an afro — that he describes as "Afrocentric '70s kitsch." Bringing that imagery into his practice, he embraced velvet flocking to create textured works focused on the Black body.

"He's giving us much more than meets the eye, an opportunity to iterate on a subject in a few different ways — it's not prescribed," said curator Leah Triplett, PAFA's director of exhibitions and contemporary curatorial initiatives. "The velvet flocking is just such a sumptuous texture. ... It really is work that you need to see in person."

Art lovers will recognize some of Villalongo's references, from Édouard Manet in *Olympia's Window* to Pablo Picasso in the collage *Re: History — Affinities (Picasso, Dan)*. His interpretations are satirical, entrancing, and fascinatingly speculative. *The Thirsty Laborer (If You Build It)*, the sole Villalongo work in PAFA's permanent collection, is an especially intriguing triangular work that invites viewers to linger. In it, in a beautiful grassy landscape, women take apart canvases and easels representing Western artworks and use the material to build a home. Like Villalongo, they create a world for themselves to exist, to be seen, and to thrive in spite of the constraints placed on them.