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Peggy Cooper Cafritz Leaves Collection to Two Arts Institutions

By Gabe Cohn
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Nina Chanel Abney's "Untitled" (2012), one of the artworks bequeathed to the Studio Museum in Harlem. Credit: Nina Chanel Abney/Jack Shainman Gallery

By the time Peggy Cooper Cafritz died earlier this year, she had worked her way from a childhood in the Jim Crow South to become a Washington-based civil rights activist, educator and esteemed art collector whose private compendium of primarily African-American art was one of the largest in the country. Now, the majority of that collection is being given to a pair of organizations that share some of her passions.

Ms. Cafritz bequeathed over 650 works of art to the Studio Museum in Harlem and the Duke Ellington School of the Arts in Washington, the two institutions announced this week.

The Studio Museum, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, will receive more than 400 works; the Duke Ellington School of the Arts, which Ms. Cafritz was a founder of, will receive over 250.

“We are deeply grateful for this gift — which represents the amazing range of artists that Peggy Cooper Cafritz supported, nurtured and collected — and are incredibly grateful to steward her legacy,” Thelma Golden, the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum, said in an email.

The works given to the Studio Museum include pieces by Kara Walker, Kerry James Marshall, Nina Chanel Abney, Sadie Barnette, Henry Taylor, Sanford Biggers, Theaster Gates and Nick Cave. Ms. Golden pointed out that the gift includes works by many artists who have a history with the Studio Museum, including Mr. Cave, who has exhibited there. “With this gift, we now have the first work by him to enter our collection,” Ms. Golden said.

The Duke Ellington School is being given works by Hank Willis Thomas, BK Adams, Louise Bourgeois and Mark Thomas Gibson.

In a statement, Tia Powell Harris, the chief executive of the school, said, “It’s as if we will now have direct access to Peggy’s amazing vision, seeing the world’s possibilities as she did.”