

CRITIC'S PICK

# JAM, a Gate-Crashing Gallery, Expanded the Idea of Blackness

In the hardscrabble New York of the '70s, Just Above Midtown Gallery created a model for an art world to come. At MoMA, that experiment has plenty of life.



By Holland Cotter

Oct. 6, 2022

When is a time capsule a treasure chest? When does a scrapbook read like a utopian syllabus? When is an art archive its own form of art? Answer: when the exhilarating exhibition “Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces” opens at the Museum of Modern Art this Sunday.

The Manhattan gallery named Just Above Midtown debuted in 1974, an inopportune moment for a start-up. New York’s economy was scraping bottom; infrastructurally, the town was a mess. The gallery itself had scant financial backing, yet was setting up shop on 57th Street, in what was still, at the time, art’s commercial Gold Coast, a few blocks north of MoMA.

There was another, potentially intractable obstacle to success: The new gallery was African American-owned and run. And, as such, it was the first of its kind to plant a flag inside the gated community that was and (despite surface signs otherwise) still is a white New York art world.

jam

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57th Street 1974–1979



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sims bell ehlers eggshells razorblades freasybaps  
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Franklin Street 1980–1984

whatidoforart exhibitions demolition  
performance baretti pigdung dialogue  
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flashfloods blinddates turkeys desire wisdom  
hoyt blackcurrant whitfield  
businessofbeingawriter icaalpuck spaceheads  
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butterpopcorn dukebootie cakewalk jones  
cummings hammons candidawoud crossovers  
soapoperaconstruction ingberman bidwhist  
transafrica videoinstallations jackson sullivan  
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fidourek valerio kracke atkins smith wilson  
domina crew blum o'connor gutierrez-solana  
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503 Broadway 1985  
—The Second Decade

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kelly cummings shepard houston-jones miller richter  
pickett burckhardt recherchez eginton taylor irwin  
heyward laub palevsky talk jamam videogenix  
computerdesignsconsultants nysigraph ragabash  
weiner gordon jones spectarldynamics hayes  
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goode birthofanation: revised...  
Expect the Unexpected!

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jam

the second decade

Just Above Midtown, Inc.  
503 Broadway, 5th floor / New York, NY 10012  
(212) 966-7020

Just Above Midtown's programs are supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, The New York State Council on the Arts, the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of New York, Con Edson, the Edith C. Blum Foundation, and the various artists who rent JAM facilities.

Flier for Just Above Midtown Gallery, circa 1985. via Collection Linda Goode Bryant, New York

The founder of Just Above Midtown (hereafter referred to as JAM) was a 25-year-old Black artist, art historian and activist named Linda Goode Bryant. And she opened the gallery where she did precisely with gate-crashing in mind. If that meant keeping the space afloat by maxing-out credit cards, so be it. Playing the debt game worked. Despite three evictions, JAM survived for 12 years. And its can-do, risk-tolerant example has provided the DNA for many other experimental ventures that have followed.



Linda Goode Bryant, the founder of JAM, with Thomas (T.) Jean Lax, one of the curators of the MoMA exhibition "Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces," on Oct. 3. Austin Donohue

What Bryant and JAM had going for them from the very start was a built-in core community of artists as talented as they were ambitious, who were hungry for exactly the kind of in-but-not-of-the-mainstream-art-world positioning that JAM provided.

In photographs in the MoMA show, we see these artists doing their own work, but also doing JAM work: answering phones, brainstorming finances, and renovating the gallery's three successive locations. Together they published journals and books (including an early study of Black



Conceptualism), collaborated on a proto-podcast video workshop called “The Business of Being an Artist.” They lured audiences in from the street with homemade “JAM brunches,” and at one point ran an artists’ day-care center on the premises. On every level, JAM was a D.I.Y. situation.



Installation from “Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces,” including, at center bottom, Tom Finkelpearl’s “Wood Mantelpiece with NYC MTA Subway Handles,” circa early 1980s; and Maren Hassinger’s “Consolation (after Palmetto [1980]),” from 1996, galvanized steel, 100 objects. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Most of the artists were Black, but not all were. Sociologically speaking, JAM’s goal was not integration, but desegregation. Bryant didn’t want to simply insert an island of Blackness into a sea of whiteness, leaving the island under threat of submersion. She wanted to create a model of desegregation in which artists of various ethnic and cultural identities could coexist, with all parties retaining equal weight and agency.

And, of course, it’s the artists you come to MoMA to see, and for good reason. JAM nurtured (and was nurtured by) some of the best. Some you’ll know, others you likely won’t, and even if you’re familiar with the contemporary New York art world landscape of the 1970s and ’80s, you’ll find surprises.

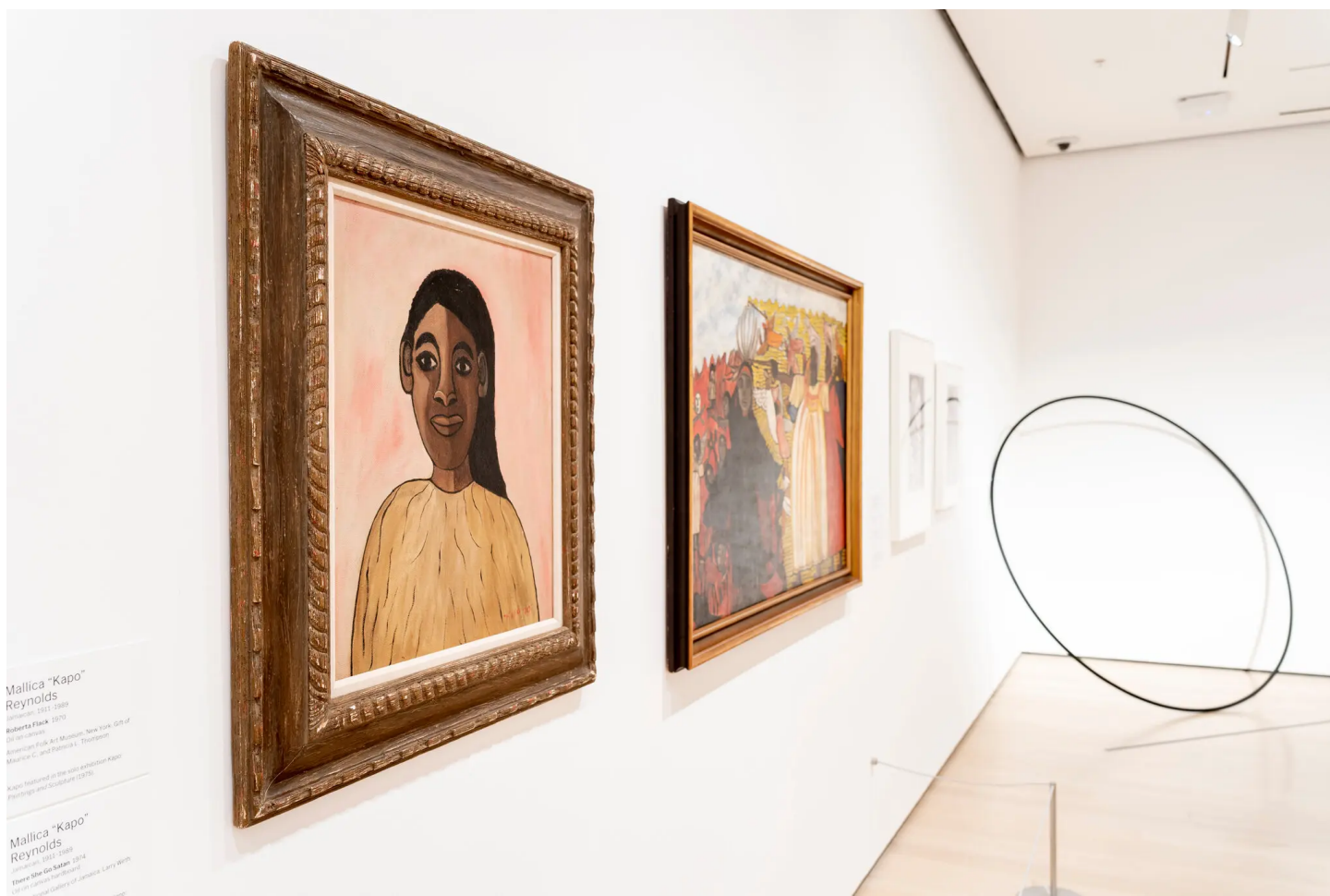


David Hammons (left) and Suzette Wright (center) at the Body Print-In with Hammons's exhibition "Greasy Bags and Barbeque Bones," 1975. via David Hammons and the Collection Linda Goode Bryant, New York; Photo by Jeff Morgan

The show's curators — Thomas (T.) Jean Lax and Lilia Rocio Taboada of MoMA's department of media and performance, collaborating with Bryant and Marielle Ingram, and assisted by Amber Edmond, Brandon Eng and Argyro Nicolau — have laid out the show in three main sections corresponding to the progressively larger spaces JAM occupied before ending its run in 1986.

The 57th Street gallery measured only around 700 feet square and the work representing it here is modest in size and much of it traditional in forms. Small prints by Valerie Maynard and paintings by the Jamaican artist Mallica (Kapo) Reynolds are straightforwardly representational. (One of Reynolds's two pictures is a portrait of the singer Roberta Flack, an early JAM supporter.





Installation view of Mallica (Kapo) Reynolds's portrait of the singer Roberta Flack (1970), an early supporter of JAM. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Bryant's interests were at this point still evolving, and in expansive directions. She was alert to arguments among Black artists over the relative identitarian merits of figurative versus abstract art: the former could be "Black," some said, but the latter, never. So she gave both modes equal presence, and championed artists like Vivian Browne, Suzanne Jackson and Noah Jemison who blended them in their paintings, as Senga Nengudi did in her pendulous nylon mesh sculptures.

The very idea of Black identity, as a locked-in category, itself came with problems for Bryant and she wanted to shake it up. Early on she showed paintings by the African American artist Palmer Hayden (1890-1973), whose use of racial caricature complicated what the image of "Blackness" could (rather than should) be.





Palmer Hayden's painting "The Subway," from around 1941. via The Governor Nelson A. Rockefeller Empire State Plaza Art Collection

And in 1975, Bryant gave the Conceptualist David Hammons, like Nengudi a Los Angeles transplant, a first New York solo. His use of street-level, racially-charged materials — fried chicken parts, hair from barbershop floors — caused an uproar among JAM artists and decisively established JAM as an uptown version of that downtown phenomenon, the alternative space.

At the same time Bryant was careful to symbolically anchor the gallery where it was, on establishment turf, with a 1976 group show that paired emerging Black artists with established white stars. At MoMA we see examples of such matchups, including a freshly made Hammons print hung next to a 1963 Jasper Johns, with both looking totally and equally great.

Hammons and Nengudi, along with their gallery-mate Houston Conwill (1947-2016), were also involved in performance work, which became increasingly part of the JAM program as it moved,



following eviction, to larger quarters, the first a storefront on Franklin Street in TriBeCa (1980-1984), the next an industrial loft on Broadway in SoHo (1984-1986).



Cover of the publication B Culture 1, No. 1 (1985), edited by Greg Tate and Craig Dennis Street, with a photograph by Jeffrey Henson Scales of a gang member in Compton, Calif. via Collection Linda Goode Bryant, New York

The title of the inaugural TriBeCa show, “Outlaw Aesthetics,” advertised “downtown” loud and clear, as did the interruptive arrival on opening night of the artist Lorraine O’Grady in her debut turn as



Mlle Bourgeoise Noire. Tiara-crowned, dressed in a gown made of white dinner gloves, and wielding a whip, she castigated the gathered company: “That’s enough! No more bootlicking. Black art must take more risks.”

And JAM, advocate for an expansive Blackness, did. (“There’s a notion that Black exists in the absence of white,” Bryant says in a catalog interview. “Black exists in the presence of Blackness.”) In the 1980s, the space became an incubator for experimental performance, dance and video, forms that, by the middle of the decade, were beginning to lose the attention of an art world in thrall to a reinvigorated market for collectible objects.

The gallery was also helping to keep the flame of multiculturalism alive by exhibiting artists from other ethnically defined downtown institutions. Work by G. Peter Jemison and Hock E Aye Vi Edgar Heap of Birds, both then associated with the American Indian Community House in SoHo, are highlights of the MoMA exhibition.

Again, individual artists, seen through their art, are what you come to any show to see and MoMA has wonderful ones: Randy Williams with a furious 1982 assemblage titled “AIDS Not So Holy”; Willie Birch with an exquisite prayer-card of a painting of Gandhi; Howardena Pindell with jewel-like punched paper collages; and Janet Olivia Henry with a 1983 tabletop tableau called “The Studio Visit,” in which the artist (in the person of a Lieutenant Uhura doll) stares down a Barbie-wigged curator.



A view of Randy Williams's "AIDS Not So Holy" (1982); Ronald Reagan postcard, wood, metal, acrylic paint, plexiglass,



paper, condom and books. Karsten Moran for The New York Times



Janet Olivia Henry's 1983 mixed-media installation, "The Studio Visit," in which the artist (represented by a Lieutenant Uhura doll) stares down a Barbie-wigged curator. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

Like several other artists who exhibited at JAM, Henry was also involved in running the space, which lost its TriBeCa home in 1984 and, despite a record of near-insolvency, found another, in SoHo. (A gallery wall at MoMA is plastered with hundreds of dunning letters and eviction threats that JAM received over the years and that Bryant preserved, like trophies.)

The new space was huge, 25,000 square feet. JAM tried turning its size to financial advantage by renting room to film studios, but got caught up in legal tangles, and in 1986 moved out. It continued briefly to exist as an itinerant performance series. And its hardscrabble spirit is still alive in Bryant's current nonprofit enterprise, Project EATS, an urban farming initiative which, since 2008, has been planting communal vegetable gardens in underserved neighborhoods in New York City.

"Still alive," as a power of example, is what makes JAM and MoMA's homage feel treasurable and utopian. Bryant came to the task of founding the space with some useful wisdom. She understood the breadth and depth of racism in American culture. She understood that the white art world, even in reformist mode, has a calculator for a heart. She understood that market value assigned to art is the equivalent of funny money. (Maybe that understanding is what gave her the confidence to carry JAM on a tightrope of debt.)



Installation view, with artists you want to see, side by side. JAM, which debuted in 1974, survived for 12 years, and in the 1980s, it became an incubator for experimental performance, dance and video. Karsten Moran for The New York Times

She also understood that the urge to creativity was real; that an indispensable condition for nurture is generosity; and that generosity is a practice of interdependence — an energy exchange from which all parties profit. MoMA's scrappy, artful document of a show is a salute to that idea, one that honors a past and encourages a when-in-doubt-do-it future.

### **Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces**

Oct. 9 through Feb. 18, 2023, Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, Manhattan, 212- 708-9400; [moma.org](http://moma.org).

Holland Cotter is the co-chief art critic of The Times. He writes on a wide range of art, old and new, and he has made extended trips to Africa and China. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for criticism in 2009.

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