Art Reviews

What Just Above Midtown Meant for Black Artists

The long-gone art gallery afforded Black artists a space to create without having to consider the pressures of the commercial art market or the fickle nature of nonprofit art institutions.

Taylor Michael January 18, 2023

Linda Goode Bryant and Janet Olivia Henry (obscured) at Just Above Midtown, Fifty-Seventh Street, December 1974 (photo by Camille Billops, courtesy the Hatch-Billops Collection, New York)

A crucial point in *Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces* comes in a corridor. Between the 50 West 57th Street room and the 178–180 Franklin Street room, the curators wallpaper the area with the groundbreaking art gallery's financial history: past-due bills, eviction notices, and other documents. Through a listening device, founder Linda Goode Bryant can be heard recounting her strategies for sustaining her gallery for more than a decade with minimal fiscal resources. Hosting fundraisers and brunches in collaboration with her artists — for example, a Body Print-In where patrons created their own pigment and graphite prints, like David Hammons's signature x-ray-like works.

Another innovative strategy is presented on the wall of the corridor: the Business of Being an Artist professional development program, a series of courses and interviews geared toward industry hopefuls and intended to increase diversity in the contemporary art market. Perpendicular to the wallpaper of bills is a comparison of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and JAM. JAM's first location was about three and a half blocks east of the first MoMA location (four streets down from MoMA's current building). The exhibition is about JAM but also about what it means to build an institution for and by Black artists.

On view through February 18, MoMA's tribute extends across the Edward Steichen Galleries. Artwork, performance pieces, archival documents, and photographs lay across the entryway, three galleries and a hallway in a loose chronological order. Each room corresponds to one of JAM's three locations, presenting its historical context, solo and group exhibitions, and various projects JAM undertook from 1974 until 1986. The show and publication capture JAM's collaborative, community-oriented, crusading ethos and highlight Bryant's enterprising nature and advocacy for Black artists.

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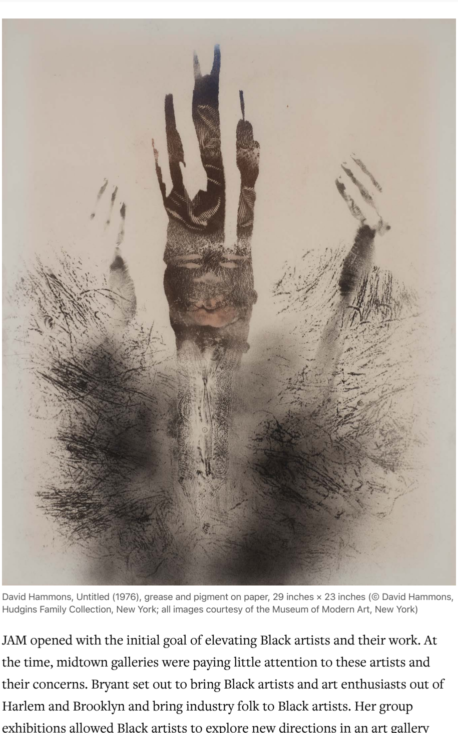

David Hammons, Untitled (1976), grease and pigment on paper, 29 inches × 23 inches (© David Hammons, Hudgins Family Collection, New York; all images courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art, New York)

JAM opened with the initial goal of elevating Black artists and their work. At the time, midtown galleries were paying little attention to these artists and their concerns. Bryant set out to bring Black artists and art enthusiasts out of Harlem and Brooklyn and bring industry folk to Black artists. Her group exhibitions allowed Black artists to explore new directions in an art gallery context and provided a forum for critical discourse.

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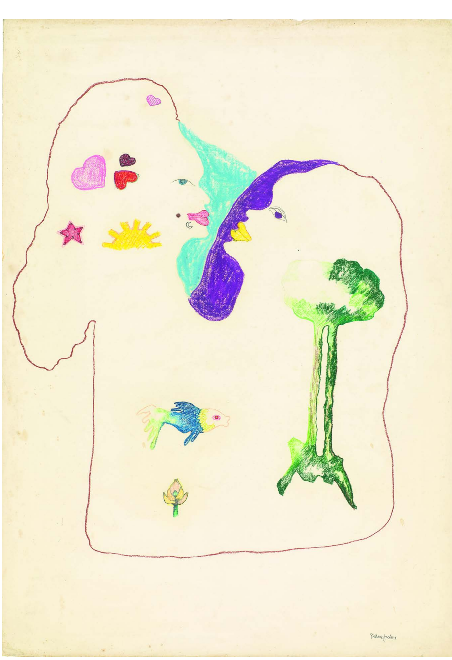
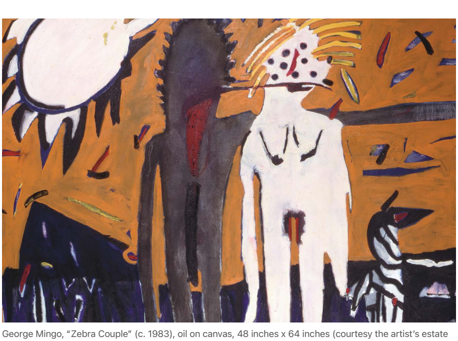
Three of JAM's group exhibitions on view in the first room represent the forum for diverse artists and conversations that Byrant opened up in her first few years. Opening show *Synthesis* presented established artists like Camille Billops and Norman Lewis in dialogue with emerging artists such as Randy Williams and Suzanne Jackson. Their styles ranged from figurative to abstract, and from formal to conceptual, making a powerful statement about the diversity and depth of Black artistic expression, while calling out the US art establishment for its limited views and representations of Black artists. Her artists engaged with politics and explored themes of race and identity but did not practice social realism. In Suzanne Jackson's imaginative painting "MaeGame" (1973), earthy oranges and browns blending into sky blues and dreamy purples cast a contemplative tone over the profiles of the figures in the work. A flower held by one woman, a bird near the other, and the faint outlines of trees emerge from an abundant blank space. Jackson creates a moment to meditate on beauty and its restorative power. JAM had enough breadth to hold this alongside Palmer Hayden, who was known for narrative depictions of Black life.



Suzanne Jackson, "Talk" (1976), colored pencil on paper 41 1/4 inches x 29 1/2 inches (photo by Timothy Doyon, courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York)

Other shows recreated in the exhibition — *Statements Known and Statements New* and *In Recognition*, both in 1976 — further exemplify the nurturing community that JAM created. JAM's bold curatorial vision, exploring experimental and other marginalized aesthetics, elevated Black artists to the same level of acclaim as their white peers. In the former, Bryant hangs a body print from Hammons's "Mop Series 1" (1976) alongside Jasper Johns's similarly asymmetrical print "Hatteras" (1963). MoMA acquired Johns's print in 1963, while Hammons's didn't enter the museum's collection until 2005, years after it was made. *In Recognition* highlighted Black women artists who hadn't received due attention, like Betye Saar, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and Wendy Wilson. These shows, and various solo exhibitions and projects, demonstrate how JAM advocated for Black conceptual art and artists, like Senga Nengudi, through showcasing works on a range of topics and in conventional and unconventional mediums. In her solo show *R.S.V.P*, Nengudi used nylon stockings filled with sand to imitate the shape, form, and tension of sagging breasts in response to both her own childbirth experiences and the larger history of Black wet nurses.

If the theme of the show's 57th Street section is the breadth and depth of African American artists, collaboration and experimentation characterize the Franklin Street section. The works include stills and clips of performances, such as Lorraine O'Grady's "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire" (1980), which she performed at the opening of the Franklin Street location. In Tribeca, JAM adapted to fit the area's alternative art scene in the 1980s. These collaborative and conceptual artists wanted more than wall space in midtown commercial galleries.



George Mingo, "Zebra Couple" (c. 1983), oil on canvas, 48 inches x 64 inches (courtesy the artist's estate and Hudgins Family Collection, New York)

Rather than establishing a specific gallery aesthetic, Bryant focused on supporting the artists in her community as they developed and changed. *Dialogues* presented an opportunity to explore cross-cultural solidarity. JAM was capacious enough to include Indigenous artists, Mexican American artists, and Japanese artists. For this multi-gallery exhibition, Bryant joined with 14 other galleries, including the American Indian Community House Gallery, which showed "Understanding the Uniqueness of an Ethnic Entity" (1980) by Edgar Heap of Birds, a paperboard with die-cut Cheyenne words on the left paired with English mistranslations.

Janet Olivia Henry's diorama "The Studio Visit" (1983) provides a key to what JAM means for nonwhite artists. A White curator visits a Black woman's studio. Their clothes rumple as they sit in conversation. Paintings, food, clothes, newspapers, and other household and artistic items are strewn about. The pair could be discussing the artwork in front of them; they could be friends in the industry; they could be planning an upcoming MoMA show. It's a Black artist's Barbie Dream House. Henry's miniature evokes the possibilities that JAM afforded its artists, to be regarded as artists first with a range of preoccupations, including their racialized identities.

JAM closed after only two years at 503 Broadway. The final move to SoHo signaled another artistic shift, toward video, audio, computer animation, and photography. Bryant created The Corporation for Art and Television (CAT), a subsidiary of JAM, both to protect artists' freedom to create and to generate income. The for-profit production facility would have funded programming and projects for JAM's noncommercial artists. Due to lack of funding and resources, CAT was never fully realized.

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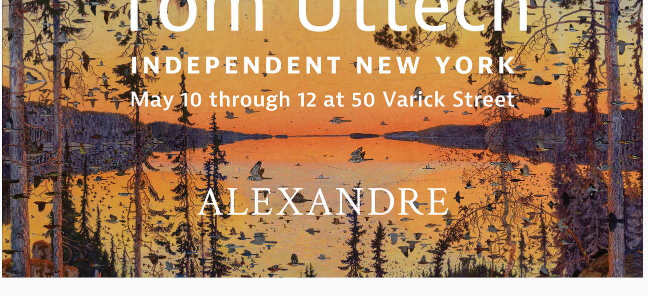
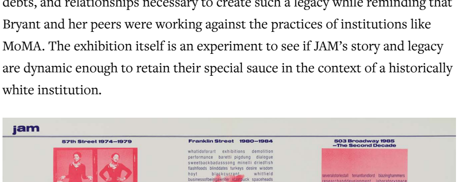


The final part of *Just Above Midtown* reflects this shift with projections of performance pieces, as well as performance stills, flyers for screenings and performances, and issues from JAM's publication *B Culture*. "Screen 4" (1986) from a then-emerging Lorna Simpson conveys JAM's continuing relevance as an incubator for Black talent.

Curators also include work created after JAM's closure in 1986 but still in spirit with the galleries ethos, like Lorraine O'Grady's new knight persona in "Announcement Card 1" and "Announcement Card 2" (2020). JAM in this location becomes more than a gallery. Black artists have a dedicated space to create without having to consider the pressures of the commercial art market or the fickle nature of nonprofit art institutions. Because this model for organizing relies less on physical resources — art, money, space — and more on relationships and networks of care, JAM metamorphoses in as many ways as necessary to support artists. Bryant's latest project, the living installation Project EATS, presents programming with Hammons, Arthur Jafa, Garrett Bradley, and Maren Hassinger across New York City, in vacant lots, rooftops, and neighborhood farms.

JAM established an art institution that is "For Us By Us" before the term was popularized. *Just Above Midtown* takes viewers through all the innovations, debts, and relationships necessary to create such a legacy while reminding that Bryant and her peers were working against the practices of institutions like MoMA. The exhibition itself is an experiment to see if JAM's story and legacy are dynamic enough to retain their special sauce in the context of a historically white institution.



Flyer for Just Above Midtown Gallery (c. 1985) (collection of Linda Goode Bryant, New York)

Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces continues at the Museum of Modern Art (11 West 53rd Street, Midtown, Manhattan) through February 18. The exhibition was organized by Thomas (T.) Jean Lax, Curator, with Lilia Rocio Taboada, curatorial assistant in the Department of Media and Performance, in collaboration with Linda Goode Bryant and Marielle Ingram.

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