ART REVIEW

Radiant and Radical: 20 Years of Defining the Soul of Black Art

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Elizabeth Catlett's 1985 sculpture sculpture "Black Unity" and Faith Ringgold's 1987 painting "American People Series #19: The Flag Is Bleeding," both from the collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem, are on view in the exhibition "Black Power." Clockwise from top: Installation view of the Studio Museum in Harlem; Elizabeth Catlett, 1985, "Black Unity," Image courtesy of the New York Times; Installation view of the Studio Museum in Harlem; Faith Ringgold, 1987, "American People Series #19: The Flag Is Bleeding," Image courtesy of the New York Times

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power | AT SAN DIEGO MCA

By Roberta Smith

Sept. 12, 2019

It will be a happy day when racial harmony rules in this land. But that day's not coming any time soon. Who could have guessed in the 1980s, when civil rights became law, that a new country would bring white supremacy tiki torching out of the closet and turn the clock back on women, or beyond obvious, into a desperate hands-on?

Installation view of Elizabeth Catlett's "Black Unity" (1985) at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Image courtesy of the New York Times

Actually, African-Americans could have seen such things coming. No citizens know the national narrative, and its implicable racism, better than they do. And no artists have responded to that history-that-won't-go-away more powerfully than black artists. More than 80 of them appear in the passionate show called "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" now at the Brooklyn Museum, in a display filling two floors of special exhibition space with work that combines beauty with an sonic detective, political persuader and defensive weapon.

This exhibition, which originated at the Tate Modern in London, asks basic questions about art. What's its purpose? To deliver a message? Cause a ruckus? Stand there looking pretty? And who is it for? The knowledgeable few? A wide public? These questions were in the air at the time much of this art was being made, beginning in the early 1960s when 15 African-American artists who called themselves the Spiral Group gathered in New York City. Their work opens the show on the museum's 18th floor.

Some of the group's members — Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis — already had substantial careers. Others, like Emma Amos, the sole female member, were just out of art school. Crucially, several had been at the 1963 March on Washington and were fired up with the idea of infusing art with political content, and in making work that would be, in some way, distinctively black.

Romare Bearden, "Prevalence of Ritual: Baptism," collage on board, 1964, © Estate of Romare Bearden. Image courtesy of the New York Times

For artists who worked with figures, this wasn't a stretch. Alston and Bearden were already depicting scenes of black life, and Bearden's collages from the early 1960s, like "Prevalence of Ritual," were tougher. He was committed to Abstract Expressionism, a movement interested in myth and emotion, not matters. Through it he had gained a foothold in a highly segregated mainstream art world. To mix politics with aesthetics was to place himself outside that world. He took the risk.

His 1968 painting "America the Beautiful" appears, at a glance, to be a scatter of flame-like white shapes on a black field, with slow looking the white shapes reveal themselves to be burning crosses. Bearden's work, like that of Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Alston, like an abstract horizontal flow of gestural upright, though it was inspired by photographs of the Selma-to-Montgomery march of that year.

Norman Lewis's "Processional," 1965. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

In short, during the two decades covered by "Soul of a Nation," Bearden's work changed. So did that of his colleagues, whose works are "black" to a lively issue. And the show — organized by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, curators at the Tate, and overseen in New York by Ashley James, an assistant curator at the Brooklyn Museum — is, among many other things, about the varied and inventive solutions artists came up with.

Certain early responses feel almost counterintuitive. In the same years that Lewis was injecting topical stories into abstract painting, Roy DeCarava was experimenting with making photographs without photographs. His 1963 image of a woman in his famous image "Mississippi Freedom Marches, Washington, D.C., 1963" has the weight of a monument. But a shot of John Cathran from the same year has an auto-like feel, and a picture called "Face Out of Frame" is a featureless glow, undefined by race or gender.

The woman in Roy DeCarava's "Mississippi Freedom Marches, Washington, D.C., 1963" (1963) is a symbol, yes, "Into the weight of a monument". (Art © Estate of Roy DeCarava. Image courtesy of the New York Times)

By the late 1980s, the national temperature had dent from civil rights era hot to Black Power torrid, and you see the change in art. After galleries of black and white Spiral paintings and shadowy DeCarava photographs come a punch of color and instantly readable symbols.

> **The Museum's Special Section**
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> - **Rocky, Reconsidered** The sculpture is at the center of a show by the Philadelphia Museum of Art that explores the meaning of monuments.
> - **Rails Of Tears** 100 Exhibitions recall the history of the mass carnival that helped define the American road trip.
> - **A Museum Comes With Life** The Center for Brilliant in Indianapolis, housed in a Frank Lloyd Wright Gallery, aim to extend inspiration of what an art museum can be.
> - **The Fisher Collection in a New Light** A Rita Ziegler Kenly Gallery show with SFMOMA that called for exhibitions of the collection's works every 10 years.
> - **Wars on Monuments** Artists and institutions are adapting to changing times.

Elizabeth Catlett's 1985 mahogany sculpture of a giant raised fist, "Black Unity," and Faith Ringgold's 1987 painting "American People Series #19: The Flag Is Bleeding," both from the collection of the Studio Museum in Harlem, are the early 1970s. In the postcard Malcolm X, a "Black Power," Angela Davis is "Revolutionary" and "Liberation Soldier." Image courtesy of the New York Times

Like many black artist activities of the 20s, Mr. Chandler's career developed largely within an urban African-American community, in this case the Los Angeles Watts neighborhood. And most of the work on the museum's 18th floor is arranged by city. In roughly the same time 30s Chandler was working in Roxbury, Emory Douglas, the Black Panther's minister of culture, was designing eye-grabbing polemical posters in the San Francisco Bay Area.

And in the Watts section of Los Angeles, a cluster of extraordinary assemblage sculptors — Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy — were piecing together references to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Aunt Jemima and African mesopotamia.

In the Los Angeles work, hard distinctions between representation and abstraction begin to blur. In the work of the artists in Chicago by members of AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), who specialized in pattern-intensive dazzle. One of the show's inspired sights is a pairing of hand-painted revolution-themed dresses by the AfriCOBRA artist Jae Jarrell with pointillist portraits of Angela Davis and Malcolm X by her husband, Wadsworth A. Jarrell.

Jae Jarrell's ruffled dress, "Brothers Not-Leading Sis," left, and "Revolutionary Soul," right, in a gallery with their painting by husband, Wadsworth A. Jarrell. Above the early 1970s, the portrayal Malcolm X a "Black Power," Angela Davis is "Revolutionary" and "Liberation Soldier." Image courtesy of the New York Times

There's activist work not just because of its political content, or because its flip-energy makes you want to get up and dance, but also because it's so clearly designed, with its polish and flair, to undermine mainstream institutional space. And it sure does look fabulous here.

Down on the fourth floor, regional divisions drop away and the representation vs. abstraction debate plays out. Advocates on one side insisted that art, to be black and powerful, had to declare its politics forthrightly, which abstraction could not do. Those on the other side argued that to confine black artists to a particular formal mode or racialized content was to perpetuate the art world's existing segregationist model. The stakes were high, the debate lively and, for the most part, respectful and civil. What we see in the show itself is not suppression but Bartnoscen.

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Installation view of three works by Joe Bradley (L. Brooklyn, from left, "Wind Cutting Sky," "Brilliantly Endowed (Self-Portrait)," and "Black Unemployed Dancer"), in the museum's fourth floor galleries. Image courtesy of the New York Times

Of many examples of figurative work, three only chill paintings from the 20Ts by Barkley L. Hendricks, who died last year at 72, including a life-size nude self-portrait called "Brilliantly Endowed (Self-Portrait)," are an assertively commanding as particular gaze. The same can be said, on the abstract side, of William T. Williams's 1969 painting "Tirone." With its tilting, crashing compositional lines, it is a kind of abstract portrait of a dancer, the artist's friend Tirone, which is to say harmony relocated — free jazz.

William T. Williams's "Tirone" (1969). The Studio Museum in Harlem © Courtesy of the artist and Alexander Gray, New York

And everywhere, there's politics that doesn't name itself. There's a politics of presence. Ed Clark painted many abstract pictures flat on the floor with a painter's broom. Jack Whitten textured the painted surface of his great dark 1970 pyramidal "Homage to Malcolm" with his Afro comb. (A survey of his sculptures is at the Met Breuer through Dec. 2.)

There's a politics of material. You find it in Melvin Edwards's welded steel sculptures, in Jack Whitten's pieces made from torn barbed wire and chains, and in David Hammons's striking 1970 "Bag Lady in Flight," its wingless form collaged from plain paper bags ornamented with grass stains and patches of hair collected in Harlem barber shops.

And there's a politics of performance. An example comes at the close of the show in photographs of a performance piece organized in 1965 by the artist Lorraine O'Grady for an African-American Day Parade in Harlem. For the occasion, Ms. O'Grady hired 15 dancers to carry formal gold-painted frames along the parade route and photograph bystanders through them.

Politics of performance: Lorraine O'Grady's "Art Is A Girlfriends Times Two," (1965-1966) a photo of a performance piece she organized for African-American Day Parade in Harlem. © Courtesy Lorraine O'Grady and Alexander Gray, New York. Image courtesy of the New York Times

That gesture gave casual snapshots the preciousness of formal portraits. It brought art directly into the community and turned the community into art.

Ms. O'Grady titled her performance "Art Is ..." and, indeed, since the 1980s, the definition of "black" art has continued to expand, and debates about it — what it encompasses, who can use it, whether it matters anymore — have, like the art, become increasingly mind-buckling nation, we've seen in a second sign of Black Power: The political stakes are as high as they ever were. When it comes to "black" art, debate what it means, but go with Ms. O'Grady's ellipsis.

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power
Sept. 13 through Feb. 2 at the Brooklyn Museum, 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

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