

Art in America

Who Gets to Be Abstract? A Legendary Show of Black Artists Gets a Second Look in “Revisiting 5+1”

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By Jasmine Liu



View of "5+1," 1969, at Stony Brook University. PHOTO ADGER COWANS/©ADGER COWANS/COURTESY BRUCE SILVERSTEIN GALLERY, NEW YORK, NY

In 1969 Stony Brook University was in dire straits. Having been rocked by anti-war protests, student demands for a Black studies program, and a drug raid on campus, the institution was under pressure to radically transform just over a decade after its founding. Amid these circumstances, the school invited British Guyanese artist Frank Bowling to curate an exhibition of works by Black artists, sponsored by a new “Afro-American Studies Program.” Bowling seized on the opportunity, later declaring that “young people clamoring for more and better Black studies” were its “natural audience.” Bowling invited five African American artists—Melvin Edwards, Daniel LaRue Johnson, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams—to join him in exhibiting work. The show’s title, “5+1,” gently set him apart as both the curator and the only non-American participant. Despite their disagreements about representational politics and their varying relationships with predominantly white gatekeeping institutions, the artists lamented the reigning expectation that Black artists should produce overtly political, figurative work. At the time, abstraction was often presumed to be the preserve of white artists with silver-spoon upbringings; prominent advocates like Clement Greenberg systematically overlooked Black artists.

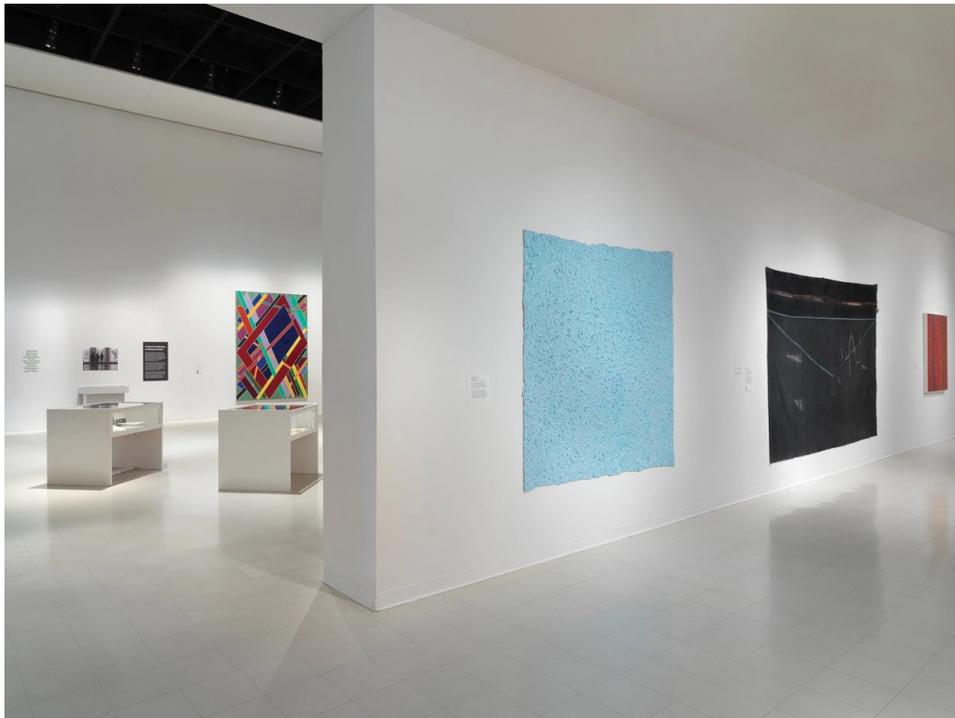


View of "Revisiting 5+1," 2022–23, at the Zuccaire Gallery, Stony Brook University. PHOTO DARIO LASAGNI

Prominently featured in both the 1969 exhibition and "Revisiting 5+1" are similar barbed wire curtains by Edwards, hemmed at the bottom by lengths of rusted metal chain. Although their materials have associations with confinement and oppression, both works transform the severe wire and metal into a gossamer-like and playful architecture. In Cowans's pictures, out-of-focus strands of wire often float harmlessly in the foreground of animated conversations between artists and friends, adding texture and a sense of leisure to the shots. Other standout works include a large 1968 painting by Whitten that commands the exhibition with its infernal blood-orange hue. Layered with indeterminate forms, faint gestures evoking spray paint, and broad strokes and dripping splatters of oil, the canvas is energetic and chaotic, reflecting its turbulent times. Near Whitten's canvas is an untitled Johnson painting (ca. 1969) on a tall wood panel showing an elongated, pyramidal shape composed of candy-colored vertical bands truncated before they reach their pinnacle. The central band is an intense yellow beam. The painting's propulsive directionality, brought to an end ahead of its acme, might evoke thwarted intelligence and purpose. Alternatively, it encourages viewers to complete the mission on their own.

Pindell's section encompasses a range of attitudes, mediums, and artistic concerns. Jabberwocky, a canvas from 1976–77 by activist artist Mary Lovelace O'Neal, is blackened with soot. Though O'Neal faced criticism for a lack of political messaging in her art, her use of color in this work is in fact socially powerful: at the time, soot and the color black were loaded with political and aesthetic meaning, with some artists regarding black as an important signifier of African American identity.

Feeble lines of blue and pink peek through the charcoal, a formal gesture that O'Neal said was inspired by the "shot of light" that would pierce through "black spaces of flatness" in the sky of the Bay Area, where she lived. Elsewhere, a soft, sunny, semi-figural piece by Vivian Browne, painted after a 1971 trip to West Africa, likens the arch of a back to a dangling, especially ripe banana. Browne's trip marked a turning point in her practice: inspired by the region's vivid colors, textiles, and sculptures, she moved toward a more abstract style. Another gem in the show is Betye Saar's *Eyeball*, a 2-minute film (an uncommon medium for Saar) featuring a procession of eyes mischievously close-cropped and edited to produce a haunting, depersonalized, atmosphere.



View of "Revisiting 5+1," 2022–23, at the Zuccaire Gallery, Stony Brook University.
PHOTO DARIO LASAGNI

While "Revisiting 5+1" is exciting for its doubling of Bowling's ambition, it also feels disconnected. Men and women are separated, and there is little discussion of how the original participants and newly included artists influenced and critiqued each other. Discussion of how the work of Black women abstract artists was further excluded and devalued in the late 20th century is limited to a catalogue essay. In his essay for the 1969 exhibition, Bowling wrote, "The structure of Black life has revealed, over centuries, a creative, self-perpetuating process of anarchist, pro-life zeal which a study of the fine arts and history alone, though helpful, can never fully define." Viewers might crave historical or sociopolitical referents for the diverse abstract gestures on display—could the breaks of light in O'Neal's paintings represent the difficulty of individual expression amid prevailing demands on Black artists, or could *Eyeball* read as the repurposing of a surveilling gaze cast on Black women? In the end, these explanations prove to be contortions for justifying work that requires no such justification.