



07 SEP 2017

Souls Grown Deep

A revelatory exhibition cements a rising appreciation of African American art

BY PERNILLA HOLMES

The year 1963 was an epochal one in American history. Peaceful grassroots protests for racial equality were met with police violence, as when, in April, high pressure hoses and dogs were turned on students in Birmingham, Alabama. Riots broke out in response to violence and oppression both recent and historic. In August, the protests became a mass movement as more than 200,000 people gathered for the March on Washington, where Martin Luther King Jr delivered his 'I have a dream' speech. In September, Ku Klux Klan violence escalated to church bombing. By November, John F Kennedy, who had condemned segregation and announced a coming Civil Rights bill, was assassinated.

It's in this same year that Tate Modern's exhibition 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power (1963–1983)' begins its story of the radical, brilliant and hugely varied art made by African American artists in the political and

cultural landscape of Civil Rights, Black Panthers, Blaxploitation, and other manifestations of the fight for equality in education, jobs and representation. From overtly political works by artists such as Emory Douglas and Benny Andrews to the highly experimental abstractions of Frank Bowling, Sam Gilliam and Alma Thomas, the show is filled with imperative, but until recently overlooked, artists. A seminal moment comes in the form of Betye Saar's *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972). In this work, the artist appropriates cliché images black women – from the 'mammy' holding a white baby to the maid with a broom, and Aunt Jemima from the eponymous syrup – freeing them from endemic racial and gender stereotypes through the addition of the raised, clenched fist symbolic of Black Power.



Alma Thomas, *Snoopy Sees a Day Break on Earth*, 1970. Courtesy: Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York

'It's not the art history I studied', says the Tate's Mark Godfrey, who co-curated the exhibition with his colleague Zoe Whitley. 'Hardly any of these artists are in, for example, the major *Art Since 1900* textbook by Rosalind Krauss, Benjamin Buchloh et al that came out in 2004,' he explains. 'But the canon of art history is changing all the time. If that book came out today, it would be changed.'

Much changed. 'Soul of a Nation', which after Tate will tour to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the Brooklyn Museum in the US, takes place against a background of the increasing prominence of African American artists of the 1960s and '70s, as well as the art world's more gradual attempt to debunk the history of modernism as a white western male phenomenon. The last five years have seen shows such as 'Now Dig This!: Art and Black

Los Angeles 1960–80' at the Hammer Museum (2011–12); the two-part 'Black in The Abstract' at the Contemporary Art Museum, Houston (2013–14); 'The Freedom Principle' at MCA Chicago (2015); and 'We Wanted a Revolution' at the Brooklyn Museum, which opened earlier this year. Major solo exhibitions of African American artists from this period are also taking place, with five decades of Frank Bowling's work on view at the Haus der Kunst, Munich until January 2018, and retrospectives of Sam Gilliam at the Kunstmuseum Basel and Howardena Pindell at the MCA Chicago due in 2018, among many others.

'The canon of art history is changing all the time.' - Mark Godfrey

On the commercial side, David Kordansky signed Gilliam in 2013, Stephen Friedman signed Melvin Edwards in 2014 and in January 2017, Hauser & Wirth presented its first show of Jack Whitten, joining galleries such as Michael Rosenfeld, Hales, Garth Greenan and Alexander Gray, who have been stalwart advocates of African American artists from this period. Artists such as Bowling, Gilliam, Pindell and Whitten as well as Barbara Chase-Riboud, Al Loving and Virginia Jaramillo, have all had significant solo presentations across the Frieze and other fairs in the last three years. Jaramillo's *Untitled* (1971), which appears in 'Soul of a Nation', was acquired at Frieze New York earlier this year.

This momentum continues at the Frieze fairs in October, where Michael Rosenfeld Gallery will present previously unseen works by nine African-American artists included in the Tate show, including Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Betye Saar and William T. Williams at Frieze Masters. At Frieze London, Stephen Friedman will have a solo presentation of Melvin Edwards, and works by Bowling and Jaramillo will be on show at Hales Gallery.



Emma Amos, *Eva the Babysitter*, 1993. Courtesy: the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York Licensed by VAGA, New York © Emma Amos

For collectors like Pamela Joyner, an infectiously enthusiastic philanthropist and catalyst in the reassessment of many of these artists, it all began with the Spiral Movement. A collective of African American artists including Charles Alston, Richard Mayhew and Hale Woodruff as well as Bearden and Lewis founded in 1963, Spiral artists dug deep into and argued over philosophical questions about how artists should engage with pressing Civil Rights concerns in their work. 'It's a bit like Norman Lewis is the Adam and Alma Thomas [from the Washington School] is the Eve,' says Joyner, 'these artists mentored so many of the artists we work with.'

It was Joyner, a founding trustee of the Tate Acquisitions Committee for North America, that Nicholas Serota approached to help Tate fill the gaps in its collection of works by African-American artists, and her collection that loaned Gilliam's colossal, un-stretched, draped and sculptural canvas *Carousel Change* (1970) to 'Soul of a Nation', a major highlight of the exhibition. 'I started collecting the 1990s' Joyner explains. 'Early on, I met Richard Mayhew who had been a member of Spiral and who told me the story of these artists and their orbit. I became fascinated by how difficult it was for an African American artist to leave an art historical footprint.' The Joyner-Giuffrida collection (named for Joyner and her husband) recently gifted a number of works by Mayhew to SFMOMA, and selections from the collection will form an exhibition that will tour five US museums over the coming months.

'I was fascinated by how difficult it was for an African American artist to leave a footprint.' - Pamela Joyner

An artist well represented in said collection is Bowling, whose painting *Middle Passage* (1970) is another highlight of the Tate exhibition. One in a series of 'map paintings' that attempt to redraw the world – evoking the history of slavery, family memories and the colors of Bowling's native Guyana – the work also shows Bowling moving strongly towards the work of the Color Field school. For Bowling, ethnicity was beside the point when it came to his practice. In 1971 he wrote 'It's not enough to say that black is beautiful', an essential text from this period. Published in *Art International*, the essay debunked any straightforward definition of 'black art'. In that same year he participated in the landmark 'Deluxe Show' in Houston: supported by the de Menils, its 'de-segregated' hang put Bowling, Clark, Gilliam, Jaramillo, Loving and others alongside the likes of Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland.

Grouping artists together solely on the basis of their ethnicities and the socio-political framework of their time inevitably raises issues about their individual intentions. Artists of the era were heavily engaged in crucial questions about who and what to make art for. 'Some of them would have said "fuck the canon,"' says Godfrey, "'we're not interested in white museums who have neglected black art. We're making black art for black people.'" On the flipside, he explains, 'many would have the opposite position, and wanted to be seen in MoMA alongside Robert Morris.' In this way, 'Soul of a Nation' presents not a monoculture but a diversity of aesthetics, ideas and ambition. Figurative works like the Day-Glo paintings featuring black heroes by Chicago's AfriCOBRA collective, or the large format portraits by Emma Amos and Barkley Hendricks are revelatory. At the same time, knowing that African American artists had for years been largely expected to make works of social realism, and the ambition to make abstract works every bit as important as Helen Frankenthaler or Morris marked a equally revolutionary statement of artistic freedom, the abstractions of Bowling, Gilliam, Thomas and Ed Clark – who created shaped canvases, sweeping paint across them with push-brooms – are no less arresting.



Sam Gilliam, *Carousel Change*, 1970. Courtesy: Tate. Promised gift of Pamela J. Joyner & Alfred L. Giuffrida (Tate Americas Foundation).
Image: David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

A different but related sensibility found in 'Soul of a Nation' is that of David Hammons, who cites such conceptual artists as Bruce Nauman and John Baldessari as influences, but whose works are firmly rooted in Black Power. Demonstrating his use of what the artist calls 'dirty objects' Hammons's *Bag Lady in Flight* (1975/90) is made of greasy brown paper bags delicately folded into wing-like formations and embroidered with African American hair, evoking the feeling of a phoenix rising from discarded objects. This work was first shown at the Just Above Midtown gallery that was dedicated to black art – a crucial champion of artists like Hammons, Lorraine O'Grady and Fred Wilson.

It's a long way from Just Above Midtown to the Tate, but institutions still have an essential role to play today. Asked what she'd like to see happen next for the artists in 'Soul of a Nation', Joyner is clear. 'I'd like to see more museums acquiring their works – which is what will matter after we are all gone – and in the meantime see more solo shows of these artists, and to see them shown together with their artist peers of all ethnicities, as the important artists they are.' The Tate exhibition clearly demonstrates that many of these artists are key figures deserving of a place in the canon of art history and a great deal more attention and study. Asked why he chose to mount 'Soul of a Nation' now, Godfrey is mildly exasperated. 'Since Tate opened we've had countless shows about

American art in the '60s, from Barnett Newman to Cy Twombly, Eva Hesse and more. To me the only question is not why now, but why we haven't done this *before*.'

'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power (1963–1983)' is on view at Tate Modern, London until 22 October. Melvin Edwards's solo presentation is with Stephen Friedman Gallery at Frieze London, Stand C5, and works by Frank Bowling and Virginia Jaramillo are presented by Hales Gallery at Frieze London, Stand D1. Michael Rosenfeld Gallery's presentation of works by nine African-American artists is at Frieze Masters, Stand F15

Main image: Frank Bowling, Texas Louise, 1971. Courtesy: the Rennie Collection, Vancouver © Frank Bowling