



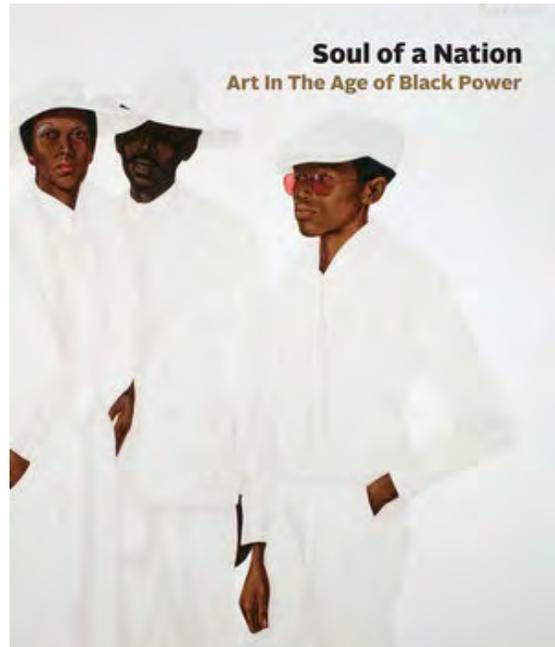
'Soul of a Nation' and 'The Wall of Respect' Prompt New Looks at Cutting-edge Black Art

By Mike Reynolds

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Nothing about the intersection of 43rd and Langley on Chicago's South Side suggests it was once the epicenter of a cultural movement.

On one corner, there's a vacant lot next to a modest building housing the Rain or Shine Baptist Church. On the others are sections of a recently constructed complex of apartments and townhouses. There's not much retail in the immediate vicinity. On the whole, it's not unlike many pockets of black Chicago -- new development attempting to revitalize a once-vibrant neighborhood.



Such wasn't the case in the summer of 1967, when people flocked from across the city and beyond to witness history in the making. That was when a group of artists created a powerful tribute to black achievement and self-determination -- a mural of heroes and sheroes known as the Wall of Respect.

It wasn't evident at the time, but the Wall was just one piece of a larger explosion of black creativity happening throughout the country. This art took its cue, if not its actual content, from the ongoing political climate, and the transformation from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power era. Artists became emboldened to forge new avenues of self-expression, speaking to the moment by celebrating their history and giving voice to their unmediated, unapologetic visions of blackness.

The moniker Black Arts Movement would arise, but was generally applied mostly to just the literary wing of this vanguard, as represented by Amiri Baraka, Sonia Sanchez, Ed Bullins and others. That output has been widely anthologized, and surveyed by James Smethurst in *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005). Similarly, much of the new, fierce music that arose then -- swaggering funk and R&B; the various permutations of post-Coltrane free jazz -- has been reissued in one form or another, and virtually all the pivotal figures have been duly heralded.

But the visual arts output hasn't gotten its complete due until relatively recently. Individual artists like Faith Ringgold and David Hammons have been celebrated and collected, and local movements like that in Los Angeles (including the filmmakers of the L.A. Rebellion) have been chronicled. But not until London's Tate Modern mounted the sprawling exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* in 2017 was there a comprehensive overview of the era's artwork, its genius and its continued impact. And not until the publication of *The Wall of Respect: Public Art and Black Liberation in 1960s Chicago* (Northwestern University Press, 2017) did a signature moment from those days receive the historical treatment it deserves.

It ought to go without saying, no matter where you are on the wokeness spectrum, that taking a fresh look at the era's art in these charged times would reveal a lot about politics then and now. But that wasn't the first time in history a cultural movement had political overtones (or vice versa). In fact, the visual art of the Black Power era set the tone for 21st century blackness in ways broader than politics, and far more profoundly than its more famous musical and literary parallels.



Tate Modern via Amazon

Soul of a Nation (Tate, 2017) (a title with a double-edged meaning, given the omnipresence of "soul" in the 'hood back then) is more than just a Black Power roundup, and not the place to get your red-black-and-green memory lane on. Its 200-plus works span 20 years, from the short-lived Spiral movement, a mid-'60s effort by artists including Romare Bearden to respond to the Civil Rights Movement, to performance art by Lorraine O'Grady at a 1983 Harlem parade. In between are paintings, photographs, sculptures, mixed-media work and various documents expanding the formal boundaries of their respective crafts, as black artists asserted their personal and collective freedom to speak of and for themselves.

They range from Emory Douglas' graphics and poster art in service to the Black Panthers, to the post-abstract expressionism of the Washington Color School. There are artists working with neon and light bulbs, and artists mounting performance pieces in highway underpasses. Some photographers took straightforward pictures of people on the street, while others bent the medium to their own whims. There really isn't an overarching motif that ties the pieces of the exhibition together, aside from the freedom and glee with which artists explored their own personal, artistic and cultural motivations.

But a couple of themes emerge throughout *Soul of a Nation*. Evident throughout is the self-determination artists exercised to make and present their works. The mainstream gallery world was not always amenable to showing black artists, so they often made their own ways. In addition to the aforementioned Spiral, there was Chicago's AfriCOBRA collective, known for their word-driven outbursts of color and resistance. In the wake of New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 exhibition *Harlem on My Mind*, which excluded interpretive works in favor of more documentary-based artists, a group of artists formed the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition to protest the Met, and ended up consulting the Met and advocating for prison art programs. A similar turn of events happened in California, with the Black Arts Council working in tandem with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art to mount several shows.

The overview section of the hardbound catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition concludes with scenes from the massive Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC), held in Nigeria in 1977. Many artists represented in the preceding pages were there, closing a circle between their work as black Americans and the African rhythms and visions that inspired them. If a subtext of the Black Power movement was to strengthen the connections, spiritual and otherwise, between black America and Africa, FESTAC represented a most tangible realization of that, complete with U.S. Department of State support.

The lengthy essays by exhibition curators Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, however, point towards the longer-lasting impact of the era's art. Godfrey examines abstraction, as manifested by Norman Lewis, Roy DeCarava and others, as a way to get at the heart of blackness in America apart from both extreme propaganda and extreme formalism. Abstraction became a way to incorporate any number of motifs and materials, such as the mixed-media work of Hammonds and Betye Saar, to evoke subtle truths about black life. Godfrey cites a 1975 quote from Saar talking about her own evolution towards abstraction:

"...I think this represents the way black people feel about the movement today. They've gotten over the violent part and have become more introspective and are doing more thinking and plotting. Blacks are dealing with their enemy on a secret level. The political messages are still in my work, but one has to think harder to find them."

Although Whitley's essay focuses on figuration and more literal representations of the black body, it also alludes to the artistic liberties deployed during the era. Thus, Bearden's collages share space with Elizabeth Catlett's two-sided sculpture -- one side two faces, the other side a

clenched fist -- and Jae Jarrell's two-piece suit with an "edge" that could be used to carry lipstick, or bullets. In pieces such as these, the intent to represent a specific attitude about blackness is unmistakable, but never dogmatic or simplistic.

And that, in turn, points to the greater legacy of the art represented here. From this point forward, there would be no one-size-fits-all notion about what art by black people could or couldn't, should or shouldn't be (which, for many throughout time, was their whole truth and nothing but). Granted, the Studio Museum in Harlem's groundbreaking 2001 exhibition *Freestyle*, a coming-out party for a new generation of "post-black" artists unchained to old notions of propriety, would have been a major event no matter what, but its total lack of stylistic hegemony might have been less of a news flash had there been greater awareness of the diversity their forebears exhibited. Similarly, many of the same ideas that *Soul of a Nation*-era artists pursued emerge in the work of present-day superstars like Kara Walker and Kerry James Marshall.

That holds especially true for black women artists, an unspoken current running throughout the exhibition. Although the catalogue has a brief section on the gender bias issues black women artists faced in general, they are featured throughout the text, as artists, thinkers and activists in their own right. Their ranks include Linda Goode Bryant, who founded the Just Above Midtown gallery to showcase cutting-edge black art, and Jamella Lewis, who founded the *International Review of African American Art*, and the Museum of African American Art in Los Angeles. Further, it shouldn't be surprising that many of the artists featured in *Soul of a Nation* also figure prominently in *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85*, an expansive survey of black women artists and activists confronting racism, sexism and contradictions within the feminist movement (the exhibition opened at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in summer 2017, while *Soul of a Nation* was concurrently across the water in London).

Needless to say, if you have an opportunity to take in *Soul of a Nation* when it comes to America (Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Arkansas in February-April 2018, and the Brooklyn Museum beginning in Fall 2018), don't miss it. It ought to go without saying, no matter where you are on the wokeness spectrum, the Black Power era has yet to stop informing contemporary black life (a fact we'll be ceaselessly reminded of throughout this year of seminal 50th anniversaries). *Soul of a Nation* shows how much of that influence retains its power to move people anew in the present day.



Jeff Donaldson Victory in the Valley of Echo 1971
Screenprint on paper 127.8 x 76.2

90



Barbara Jones-Magee Unity 1971
Screenprint on paper 57.2 x 76.2

91

Tate Modern via Amazon

The Wall of Respect is included in *Soul of a Nation*, as the progenitor of the modern urban mural movement. It's also a representation of an early black artists collective, and of the radical creative energy that lives throughout black Chicago to this day.

In 1966, Hoyt Fuller, Conrad Kent Rivers and Abdul Alkalimat (nee Gerald McWorter) founded the Organization of Black American Culture (OBAC, pronounced obah-see) in Chicago, with the intent to use the arts to integrate the arts into an overall strengthening of black Chicago. "Because the Black Artist and the creative portrayal of the Black Experience have been consciously excluded from the total spectrum of American Arts," they wrote in the initial statement of purpose, "we want to provide a new context for the Black Artist in which he can work out his problems and pursue his aims unhampered and uninhibited by the prejudices and dictates of the 'mainstream.'"

OBAC's initial activities covered dance, literature and photography, but the group generally served as a nexus for the black radical output popping up across the city (there was an allyship with the Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians, which had formed the previous year). In June 1967, William Walker told OBAC's visual artists about a side of a building at 43rd and Langley that he'd arranged to paint. The idea clicked, as the artists were more interested in public art than the gallery scene. With Aretha Franklin's recent hit "Respect" already part of black America's DNA, the project would be titled the Wall of Respect.

The artists created a list of people to portray on the Wall -- musicians, athletes, theater activists, writers, statesmen, and faith leaders. The criteria for inclusion was three-fold: living out "the beauty of Black life and genius"; remembering the less fortunate; and being outstanding and irreplaceable at what they do. The honor roll is very much a who's-who time

capsule of circa-1967 black pop and radical culture: Motown was well-represented by Smokey Robinson, the Marvelettes and Stevie Wonder ("such a sweet young prince", according to the original notes); the statesmen included H. Rap Brown and Marcus Garvey; LeRoi Jones (Amiri Baraka) was favored over Ralph Ellison among the writers. Absent from the final cut was Martin Luther King, Jr., who was, remarkably, not considered "bold enough" for inclusion.

The Wall was painted quickly, that August. OBAC member Sylvia Abernathy devised the sectioning of the space for each of the categories, with artists taking a section and working from their own conceptions. As a result, there was no unifying artistic motif to the Wall; the literature section notably featured words, several sections incorporated photography. Neighborhood youths safeguarded the painting and materials, and some became virtual tour guides explaining the visages represented. The creation of the Wall became an event itself, with spectators (and maybe some curious undercover police officers) hanging out and AACM musicians giving impromptu performances.

Gwendolyn Brooks and Hadi Madhubuti read poetry upon the occasion of the Wall's dedication, at the end of that August. It immediately became a must-see destination for both black Chicagoans and black visitors. Its fame spread when *Ebony* featured the Wall in its December 1967 issue, inspiring artists in other 'hoods to create their own murals of respect (examples are referenced in *Soul of a Nation*). But this was not a happy ending, nor would there be one, at least for a while.

First, Walker oversaw the repainting of one of the sections in 1968, without consulting the other artists. He claimed that the original work was not all that compelling, and further that he envisioned the Wall as a living and breathing entity, amenable to being changed to reflect new ideas and events. While some artists were outraged by the unilateral move, they were already beginning to move into other ventures. Some went to Europe, some entered academia, and some founded the aforementioned AfriCOBRA. There would be additional changes to the original work, as well as extensions added nearby.

But even Walker moved on to other projects, and the Wall remained static from approximately 1969 until 1971, when the building that it adorned perished due to arson. Was the fire a politically motivated statement against the Wall, a random event in a troubled part of town, and/or something else entirely? We may never know. All that remained of the Wall was in people's memories, and generations of Chicago folklore.

In time, some of those memories led to the creation of *The Wall of Respect*. In 2015, Alkalimat gave a presentation on the Wall at Northwestern University (in Evanston, on Chicago's northern border), and was surprised to discover the university publisher's interest in a book on it. He eventually joined forces with Romi Crawford, a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and Rebecca Zorach, a professor at Northwestern. Crawford and Zorach had worked together on a 2015 symposium meant to lead up to a 50th anniversary celebration of the Wall in 2017.

As a result, this book is more valuable and lasting than a public event. Indeed, one hopes it will be around a lot longer than the Wall itself. *The Wall of Respect* comes from three perspectives: Alkalimat's as a participant, Crawford's longstanding study of photography, and Zorach's background as an art historian. Archival interviews, documents and photographs detail the creation of first OBAC and then the Wall, revealing both the audaciousness of the undertaking and the contention after its dedication, all with the tumult of the Black Power era as the backdrop.

For all its collected information, *The Wall of Respect* is largely silent on events after the Wall's final revision in 1969. There's no indication of whether people stopped making pilgrimages, or people in its immediate vicinity stopped caring about it. Crawford recently told me that was partly by design, as the focus was on how the Wall happened. As to the years just before the Wall burned, she suggested that the energy that manifested in 1967 soon dissipated, the optimism of a coming black liberation being overtaken by a sense of dread and despair. The neighborhood around the Wall was beginning to register economic decline. With all of its principals on to other things, it appears the Wall was left to its own devices. If anyone in 1970-71 was functioning as a de facto Wall caretaker, they didn't stop it from burning.

None of that detracts from the Wall's revolutionary impact -- which was not as a statement about the path towards black liberation, in the long run, but about the potential of public art to raise up its environs and neighbors. The Wall was virtually unprecedented in its level of cooperation between artists and a community, and in the sense of pride the neighborhood took in its first years. That would be the blueprint for much of the mural movement in black and brown neighborhoods, which the Wall sparked pretty much all by itself. While by its nature the Wall inherently represents the representational end of the spectrum explored in *Soul of a Nation*, its separate segments through the years show clearly that artists were given free rein to create those representations as they saw fit, emphasizing the pride of place given to individual approaches (as well as an evolution even then towards more abstraction in its renderings).

Walker's notion of the Wall as a statement evolving with the times was controversial then, but intriguing now. What if the Wall had survived and, some time later, there was a push to add King to it? Or Toni Morrison, or Harold Washington (Chicago's first black mayor), or hip-hop? What section would have been painted over (the space was used pretty much to capacity, so there was no room to add new sections)? Who would have made that call? In retrospect, perhaps the best decision would have been to let a thousand murals bloom, each representing their own moment in time, the community and the artist's imagination, with the Wall representing its own moment, and standing as inspiration and example for all the others.

In a way, that's exactly what happened. Walls of respect for latter-day heroes and sheroes have been painted all over Chicago. For every massive Kerry James Marshall creation at the Chicago Cultural Center saluting influential Chicago women in arts and culture, there's dozens of murals all over the South and West Sides of town recognizing local legends and current values and concerns (and yes, Dr. King makes more than one appearance). Others simply add a touch of vibrancy to otherwise nondescript surroundings. In the largely Mexican

neighborhood of Pilsen, many murals are even more elaborate, evoking centuries-old religious and cultural traditions. Too bad the Wall itself didn't last long enough to see all that happen.

It ought to go without saying, no matter where you are on the wokeness spectrum, it is a good thing indeed to have *The Wall of Respect*, since the lack of any other formal remembrance is, alas, no uncommon occurrence in Chicago (although, Crawford told me, conversations are underway for a possible artistic commemoration at the site in the future). But its direct legacy lives on, all over America's 'hoods and barrios; one could see urban graffiti writers as descendants of the public mural movement. It's more than safe to say none of the Wall's creators, who funded the work from their own pockets, foresaw public funding or private entrepreneurship ever entering the picture: the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program is so entrenched, it's released three coffee-table books about its work.

And there's also this: In 1985, another section of 43rd Street just west of Langley was named in honor of Muddy Waters, the legendary musician who helped put electric blues into the world from the South Side in the late '40s (and who was featured on the Wall). In 2017, the city kicked off its annual blues festival by officially dedicating a ten-story mural of Waters -- in the heart of the downtown business district, a long way from 43rd and Langley in more ways than one.

Publication link: <https://popmatters.com/soul-of-a-nation-wall-of-respect-cutting-edge-black-art-2525997706.html>