

# The New York Times

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

 [nytimes.com/2018/09/13/arts/design/soul-of-a-nation-review-brooklyn-museum-black-power.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/13/arts/design/soul-of-a-nation-review-brooklyn-museum-black-power.html)

By Holland Cotter

September 13, 2018



Politics of performance: Lorraine O'Grady's "Art Is (Girlfriends Times Two)," 1983/2009. The photograph is from a performance piece organized by the artist for the African-American Day Parade in Harlem. Credit 2017 Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society.

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 1960s, when civil rights became law, that a new century would bring white supremacy tiki torching out of the closet and turn the idea that black lives matter, so beyond obvious, into a desperate battle cry?

Actually, African-Americans could have seen such things coming. No citizens know the national narrative, and its implacable 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 60 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 functioned, in its time, as seismic detector, 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 fifth 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.

For artists who worked with figures, this wasn't a stretch. Alston and Bearden were already depicting scenes of black life, and political protest was part of that life. For Lewis, the choice was tougher. He was committed to Abstract Expressionism, a movement interested in myth and emotion, not marches. 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 1960 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 and Ku Klux Klan hoods. Similarly, "Processional," from 1965, looks like an abstract horizontal flow of gestural uprights, though it was inspired by photographs of the Selma-to-Montgomery march of that year.

In short, during the two decades covered by "Soul of a Nation," ending in the early 1980s, the choice of whether, and how, to make art "black" was 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 photographic portraiture abstract. The face of the young woman in his famous image "Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, D.C., 1963" has the weight of a monument. But a shot of John Coltrane from the same year has an aura-like blur, and a picture called "Face Out of Focus" is a featureless glow, undefined by race or gender.

By the late 1960s, the national temperature had shot 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.

Elizabeth Catlett's 1968 mahogany sculpture of a giant raised fist, "Black Unity," sits in the center of the first Black Power gallery, backed by a 1967 painting by Faith Ringgold of a hemorrhaging American flag, "American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding."

In a corner stands a bullet-riddled wood door, a memorial by the artist Dana C. Chandler Jr. to the Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, killed in 1969 by the Chicago police as he slept in his apartment.

Like many black artist-activists of the day, Mr. Chandler's career developed largely within an urban African-American neighborhood, his being the Roxbury section of Boston. And most of the work on the museum's fifth floor is arranged by city. At roughly the same time Mr. 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 masquerades.

In the Los Angeles work, hard distinctions between representation and abstraction are moot, as they are in a lot of art made 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.

Theirs is activist work not just because of its political content, or because its Pop energy makes you want to get up and dance, but also because it's so clearly designed, with its polish and flair, to infiltrate 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 could be bitter. But the results were win-win. What we see in the show itself is not suppression but florescence.

Of many examples of figurative work, three witty, chill paintings from the 1970s by Barkley L. Hendricks, who died last year at 72, including a life-size nude self-portrait called “Brilliantly Endowed (Self-Portrait),” are as assertively commanding as portraiture gets. The same can be said, on the abstract side, of William T. Williams’s 1969 painting “Trane.” With its tilting, crashing compositional lines, it’s of a visual equivalent to John Coltrane’s harmony-bending — which is to say harmony-releasing — free jazz.

And everywhere, there’s politics that doesn’t name itself. There’s a politics of process: Ed Clark painted many abstract pictures flat on the floor with a janitor’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 delicate-dangerous “Curtain (for William and Peter)” made from barbed wire and chains, and in David Hammons’s unfurling 1975 “Bag Lady in Flight,” its winglike form collaged from plain paper bags ornamented with grease 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 1983 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 empty gold-painted frames along the parade route and photograph bystanders through them.

## Image

Politics of performance: Lorraine O’Grady’s “Art Is (Girlfriends Times Two),” 1983/2009. The photograph is from a performance piece organized by the artist for the African-American Day Parade in Harlem. Credit 2017 Lorraine O’Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

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 should exist as a category at all — continue. In response to a backsliding nation, we’re now in a second Age 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.