

## “SOUL OF A NATION: ART IN THE AGE OF BLACK POWER” INTERVIEW WITH BROOKLYN MUSEUM CURATOR ASHLEY JAMES

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By Indira Cesarine



### Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power

The Brooklyn Museum

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A resurgence of political awareness has swamped our country and art has come along with it. “Soul of A Nation: Art in the age of Black Power,” brings together more than 60 artists and 150 works made in one of the most crucial times in history. The show begins in 1963, before the emergence of the Black Power Movement, and it goes on to trace how artists across the country continued to work in collectives, communities, and individually during the rise of the Black Power Movement.

“With *Soul of a Nation*, we are honored to highlight the truly exceptional work produced by African American artists during one of the most significant moments in U.S. history and to honor these artists and all those arts professionals, here in Brooklyn and beyond, who have long supported their work,” said Anne Pasternak, Shelby White and Leon Levy Director of the Brooklyn Museum.

The show also addresses formal concerns and aesthetic innovations across abstraction and figuration in painting and sculpture, featuring such works as Sam Gilliam's *April 4* (1969), Barkley Hendricks's *Blood (Donald Formey)* (1975), Frank Bowling's *Texas Louise* (1971), and Martin Puryear's *Self* (1978). With its central triangular form, Jack Whitten's powerful *Homage to Malcolm* (1970) recalls the pyramids that Malcolm X visited on a trip to Africa in 1964, and was painted as a memorial to the late activist. Given the divisive political turmoil our country has endured over the couple of years, the exhibition is not only timely, but also extremely relevant.

In an exclusive interview with Indira Cesarine for *The Untitled Magazine*, curator Ashley James explains the grounds and importance of the political art resurgence.

**Indira Cesarine: This is such a powerful show. Can you elaborate on why the Brooklyn Museum choose to feature this exhibition on "Art in the Age of Black Power," and why is it so crucial now to revisit these works?**

**Ashley James:** This is a traveling show. It started last year at the Tate Modern [in London]. The curators Mark and Zoey have been working on it for a couple of years now. After the Tate, it went to Crystal Bridges in Arkansas. This is the third stop. The presentations have been a bit different as it moves locations.

And to answer your question about "why here now," the academic side of me says the sixties and seventies are really hot right now! I think it has something to do with the passage of time and the ability to look back in time and asses it because you're far enough to do so. But I also think this period really gets at essential questions of art: what is art? who is it for? who owns it? who has access to its histories? All of these are essential questions. What literally is it? What can it be made out of? On a technical and social level, it's an intersection of so many questions that we all ask ourselves about life, politics, and art, and it brings all these together. What people are feeling is a synergy of all these questions that are so relevant to the day. I think that just because these artists were taking seriously the same kinds of questions, people are getting a sense of urgency to respond. So I keep on saying "urgency" but I feel that urgency is really felt on the show: how does one respond to a call for change? Will that be political, social, or aesthetic change? And I think people just want to see answers.





*Artist Gerald Williams*

**This is the third stop of the exhibition. Does each museum tailor it to its own space and also make a selection of works, or is it the same at each institution?**

In my case, I rearranged some rooms to affect the narrative that I was more interested in. That meant making it more regional. Trying to tease out the nation and this idea of a national aesthetic, but breaking that down between how that aesthetic practice played out amongst different regions of the country; which I felt was a nice gesture in bringing a show that originated in London to the U.S. So a little bit more specificity– but also because in terms of the academic scope of this period, which is also interesting because I studied this period and I have been for a long time before I was assigned this exhibition. I know that history from literature in particular. In literature and art history, there's this emphasis on regional art making.

**How did you define the show for the Brooklyn Museum?**

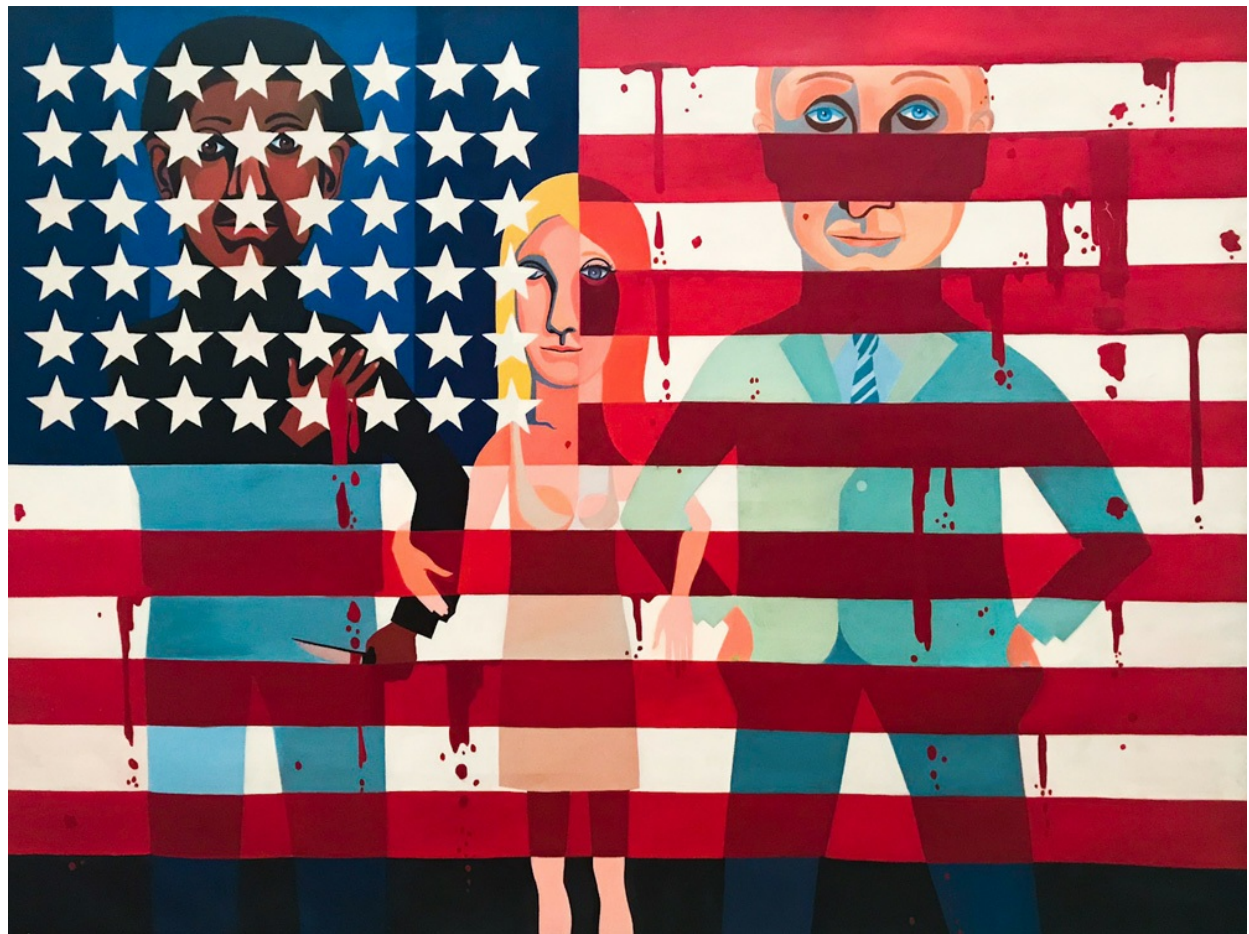
I would say locations and cities was one thread that you can find in the original presentation and I went for it and made it more explicit, especially keeping in mind that its two floors here. It felt like an opportunity to present two different thesis of the time

period. So on the first floor you're thinking about and looking at cities and locales, and on the second you can find artists from different locations, and it's more about abstracted concepts and questions— so a dialogue between the two.

**What do you hope viewers take away from the exhibit?**

Innovation. Learning that black artists were at the forefront of the avant-garde and were experimental and that they were creating with a sense of desire to make things new- and this exuberance, this feeling of urgency. That's what I want the viewers to see. To be inspired by the wide and varied scope of the artistic production.

And the question about political art is always circling this show, and I hope that visitors walk away knowing that even the most politically-assertive and engaged artists also were aesthetically innovative. That's very important to me. Which is another thing with the Brooklyn Museum show. It was important for me to give Emory Douglas his moment as a prime minister of culture for the Black Panther Party. In some ways, he's the most politically instrumental artist in the entire show. You can't get more political than being a prime minister of culture of a political party. Seeing those works together and getting a brass of the language that he created and that is so identifiably his, that came out of his own studies as a graphic designer, and understanding his real intention behind political work. That has aesthetic, innovative, value.



*Artist Faith Ringgold*

**I noticed there are a lot of female artists in this exhibit, although it was such a male-dominated time in history. It is great to see the curators really balanced it out in this exhibit, despite the fact that it may not have been as gender balanced at that time historically.**

There are more male artists in the show, but yes there's also a lot of female artists. I do think from room to room you get a different sense of what gender means in various contexts. In the first two rooms, you can see there are two collectives and in both of those cases there is only one female artist and she was usually on the younger side if not the youngest member. In those cases, in terms of a curatorial focus, there's not really much more one can do besides address that.

To answer the question about historically looking back vs. what was happening at the time, for me that means being honest about what was a gender imbalance that is reflective of a patriarchal society that is still present, even within black spaces. But then there are examples that look a bit different than that. I think in AfriCOBRA, which is a group of artists from Chicago who's manifesto aimed to empower black communities, women artists worked alongside their husbands or other artists. It was a more of a familial collective that was focused on family. They had a collaborative practice that is a

bit different than a question of: was this female artist showing with the male artist at such and such galleries? It was really rooted in a context where women were important anyway, so they also made work together. But there are these examples of Faith Ringgold, she too famously was not allowed into the Spiral Group, and there was a sense of a gender barrier there. Emma Amos was one of the first African-American artists with a solo show at the Whitney [Museum]. Virginia Jaramillo also showed next her male counterparts.

**When you enter the show, it says that there's no specific artwork that represents the exhibit, but at the end of the day, most visitors walk away feeling impacted by some pieces more so than others. Are there any works that resonate with you as key to the narrative of the exhibit?**

Faith Ringgold's "The Flag is Bleeding" is a key piece. It is the key piece once you turn that corner into black power. It really combines lots of the themes of the show and artists who are interested in this kind of explicit imagery take, using the flag as a metaphor for the country. It's super graphic, which is something you see amongst other artists. That piece is perhaps not the best example of this, but she's also in this question of figuration and abstraction, which is key to the exhibition.

I would say William T. Williams's "Train" is another. I think it's a great example of an abstract artist making work after the performative term, and is quintessential to what painting is looking like in the late 1960s and early 1970s; so moving towards perception and thinking about how to offer up a dynamism of the picture playing within four corners. Obviously Sam Gilliam, Carousel Change— it's huge, and that is one of the major innovations of the period: rethinking the canvas and thinking between the lines between mediums such as "what's the line between painting and sculpture?" And all of these avant-garde questions that were circulating at the time. Lorraine O'Grady, which is in the last gallery. It's important. It brings the show full circle because it starts in black and white in the spiral group, then it moves into the photography room, and by the end, you move into performance and conceptual photography. So these questions of "what's the difference in the documentation and the fine art photograph? What happens to the performance after the performance is over? Does the performance live forever in the photograph?" etc. She's also asserting this idea of art not being open to all people, and available for all people to make but that black people are art, and that anyone is art. She leaves it in an ellipsis and that kind of captures the ethos of the show.

**This exhibit touches on issues that urgently resonate right now in our society, with regards to the divisive political climate we are facing. In many respects, history is darkly repeating itself. How do you feel about this show in relation to contemporary art activism?**



I think this emphasis on critique of the nation really resonates in particular which was key to the black power movement because especially with the closed borders and resurgence of nationalism and xenophobia, and these questions about who belongs or not, I think that in particular is so synergistic. And again, when you see the flag is bleeding, it becomes so immediately powerful and ascertainable. It's nowness. It feels like it would've been made today. It's this freshness that is particular to the period but it can have such a long life because it feels it was made now.



*Artist Barkley Hendricks*

**Were there any obstacles that you had to address bringing the exhibit to the Brooklyn Museum?**

In going full force with the regional aspect, that meant that the South was something that I knew had to be addressed. Which kind of already has been addressed by way of this idea of Great Migration or the fact that a number of these artists either came from the South or their parents did. For me, it was important to make a case for the South. I was able to do that with the addition of works by David Driskell, who is an artist and professor who worked at a number of historically black institutions and the University of Maryland, along with some of our own works in the collection. In so doing I essentially

made a case for the South as an institutional incubator for both artists and professors who could literally only find work by going and teaching at specific institutions because they couldn't in Chicago or New York because of segregation and discrimination.

**Was the Tate exhibition also two floors?**

It was a single gallery space. Our floor plans are so different which also helped me with these two different narratives. But also it meant there were distinct rooms, you move from room to room. As you can see, in the Brooklyn Museum we don't have rooms; we have halls, and that lead me to think about intersections, and having some bleed over, and being able to make a case that could draw a line toward a number of galleries.

**Are there works that are unique to the Brooklyn Museum presentation?**

Yes. There were a number of replacements. Traveling shows often have works that can no longer travel because the lender doesn't want them to, and some are conservation pieces. I added works from our collection. We bought a number of black arts movement works in 2012 and incorporating those was important to me. There were a few works that came out of that acquisition. We recently also bought an Ed Clark that we immediately put into the show. I added a couple of artists, David Driskell, John T. Riddle, Fred Eversley, and Suzanne Jackson. There are some artists from the Spiral Group whose work wasn't in the original presentation but we own them, so I obviously added them.

**This is a very important exhibit to have in America right now. It's very interesting that it was initially staged in London...**

It does make sense though. I say that because a lot of the groundwork scholarship for this period came out of smaller shows that happened in the last decade here, and books, and all of these things, so it's not surprising to me – it's almost like a snowball effect. All of this was accumulating largely out of an American context, so I understand why the Tate curators wanted to bring this together– because it's kind of happening.

**Perhaps they could see it more objectively...**

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*Photo gallery by The Untitled Magazine*