

'Soul of a Nation' at the Broad Gives Black Artists Their Due

Carren Jao

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It almost disappears from view, but in one corner, sitting beside Faith Ringgold's large painting of a bleeding American flag, sits a small photo printed on the wall. It's a reproduction of Phillip Lindsay Mason's "Deathmakers." The painting of two skeletal policemen carrying the body of a slain Malcolm X depicts a dramatic scene that underlies the turbulence of the times. The actual artwork isn't at the Broad. Why? Because, despite the curators' best efforts, it could not be located.

The missing artwork is a telltale sign of how much effort the curators, Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley of Tate Modern, undertook to pick up the tenuous threads that make up the history of African American art. It is only in recent years that [African American artists working in previous decades have seen their works added to the collections of major institutions](#), even then it has only been [a mere trickle](#). Perhaps this latest sweeping exhibition will help hasten the addition of this crucial voice in the American art history canon.

Thankfully, the fate of Mason's work does not hold true for the pieces in "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963-1983," on view at the Broad until September 1. Originated at the Tate Modern in London, the show presents the work of over 60 Black artists working during the height of the civil rights movement in the 60s and two decades hence.

Rather than arrange the show chronologically, "Soul of Nation" instead creates constellations of relationships that pose critical questions, giving viewers a deeper appreciation of the multiple concerns of African American artists then, which still reverberate today. Who creates art? How is it created? What materials could artists use? Who will exhibit this? How can this be seen?



Barbara Jones-Hogu, *Unite (First State)*, 1971. Screenprint. I
Barbara Jones-Hogu

At times, the show groups the art by collectives in key cities. In the first room, New York's Spiral is introduced. This group asked "Is there a Negro image?" and their works give no single answer. Juxtaposing images from magazines, Romare Bearden's collage "Conjur Woman" seems to elevate the ritualistic life of Africans, beyond just the its mainstream media's depictions. Norman Lewis's stark black and white strokes fairly clash in violence in "America the Beautiful," and a longer look reveals that these seemingly haphazard strokes actually form figures during a Ku Klux Klan gathering.

In contrast to the Spiral room's minimal black and white palette, the works of Chicago art collective, AfriCOBRA — the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists — fairly jump out of the walls with its vibrancy and masterful use of color. Silver foil and psychedelic colors make Black Panther members shine in Wadsworth Jarrell's "Liberation Soldiers," while the dancing figures and masked drumming characters of Carolyn Lawrence's "Black Children Keep Your Spirits Free" is a reminder to parents that heritage isn't something to swept under the rug.



At first glace, the images seems to be just powerful strokes of black and white, but a second look reveals them to be the ghostly sight of a Ku Klux Klan gathering. Norman Lewis, America the Beautiful, 1960. Oil on canvas | Pablo Enriquez, Courtesy of the Broad



Using foil and color, Jarrell created an active, eye-catching image depicting members of Black Panther, including Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Wadsworth Jarrell, Liberation Soldiers, 1972
I Carren Jao

“Soul of a Nation” also makes it a point to highlight individuals, as is the case with legendary assemblage artist [Betye Saar](#), who is based in L.A. The show recreates a part of Saar’s first survey show at the Fine Arts Gallery, California State University L.A. The walls of this particular section are painted a cool gray, submerging the viewer in a more mystical atmosphere perfect for Saar’s figures.

In many moments, the show also presents the many ways Black artists have navigated the unfortunate disparities artists of color are subjected to in the art world.

Unable to show in traditional museums? Perhaps the streets can become a place to exhibit, as is the case with Chicago’s Organization of Black American-Culture, who created an outdoor mural in the city’s South Side, the Wall of Respect. In Oakland, the Black Panther Party’s Minister of Culture Emory Douglas instead found his outlet on the pages of the party’s newspaper. Galleries such as [Gallery 32](#) and Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles sprung out of a need for these artists to show their work and to be heard.



Carolyn Lawrence, *Black Children Keep Your Spirits Free*, 1972.
Acrylic on canvas. 49 x 51 x 2 in.
Image courtesy of the artist. | Carolyn Mims Lawrence

The show also makes a point of accentuating the different strategies employed by the participating artists. Instead of brush, David Hammons coats himself in grease and prints his body image onto a number of works, the most powerful on view is “Injustice Case,” which depicts this inked image bound and gagged on a chair, referencing a courtroom sketch of Black Panther co-founder Bobby Seale. Rather than pursuing a clean canvas, abstract expressionist Ed Clark used a broom to sweep paint across his workspace, adding bits of dirt, hair and studio debris onto his works. Instead of a flat surface, Howardena Pindell created intriguing texture by cutting up a canvas, sewing it back together and adding hole-punched dots and sequences to the surface.

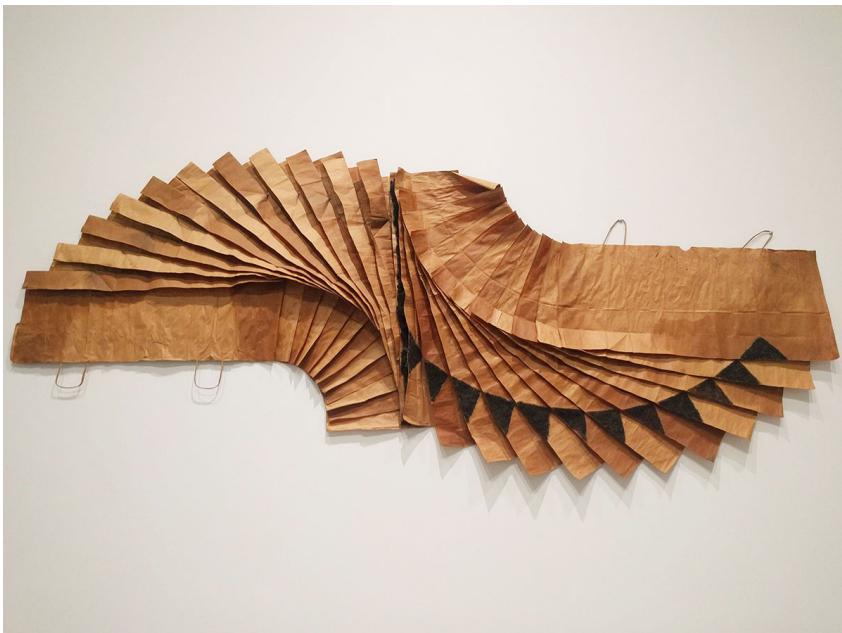


Ed Clark. *Yenom (#9)*, Acrylic paint on canvas |
Pablo Enriquez, Courtesy of the Broad

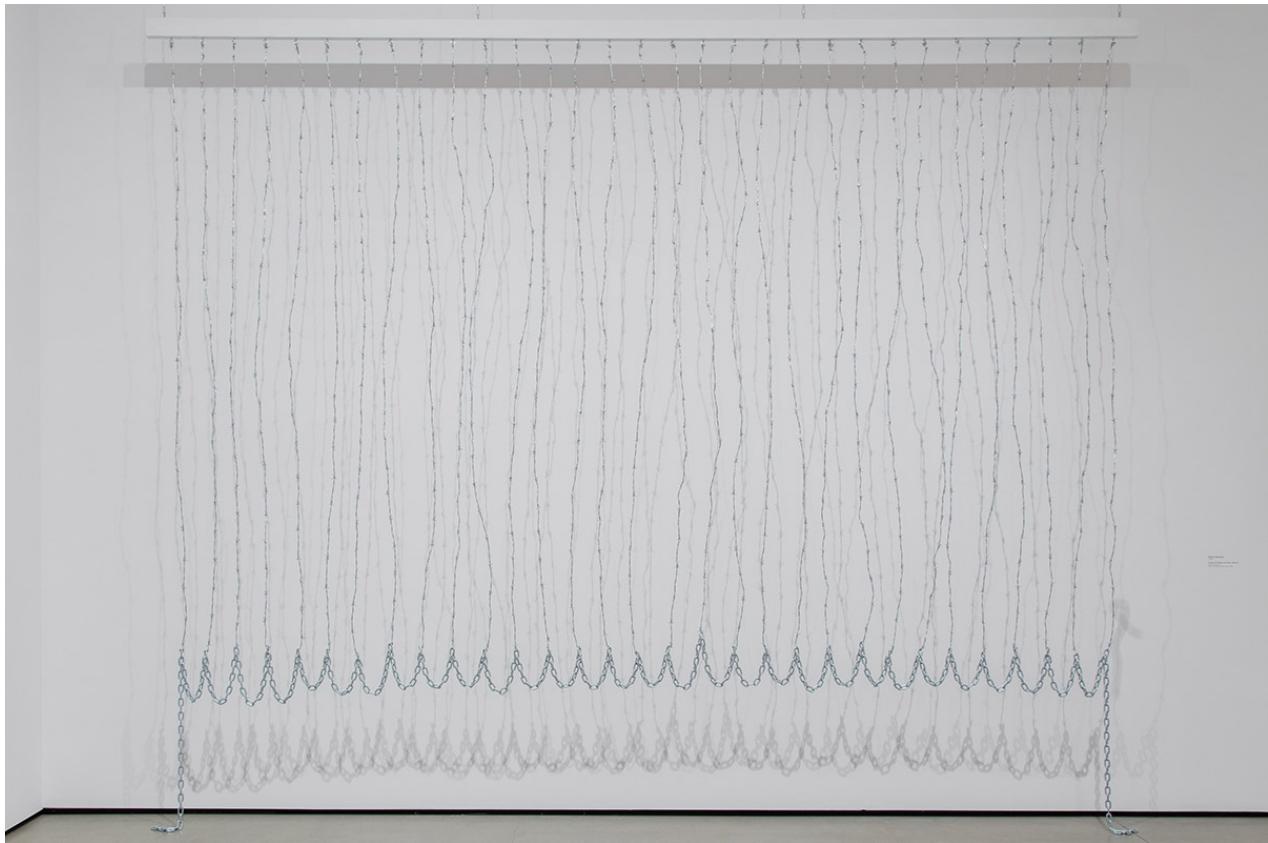


Bobby Seale, co-founder of the Black Panthers, was bound and gagged in the courtroom, after being denied the right to counsel of his choosing and the right to defend himself in court. This is the artist's rendering, inspired by the incident. David Hammons, Injustice Case, 1970, print, body print (margarine and powdered pigments), and American flag | Pablo Enriquez, Courtesy of the Broad

"Soul of Nation" also shows how artists were able to politicize everyday materials, interrogating the status quo in the process. Barbed wire and chain were repurposed as makeshift curtains in Melvin Edwards' "Curtain (for William and Peter)," replacing a domestic, nurturing symbol with one of slavery and incarceration. Nylon tights became Selma Nengudi's material of choice, stretching this symbol of femininity across walls and floors to represent the malleability of the female experience and to question the implications of skin color to the public.



Artist David Hammons used unconventional materials such as paper bags, grease and hair to create a piece that talks about African American stereotypes. David Hammons, Bag Lady in Flight, 1970s. Shopping bags, grease and hair. | Carren Jao



Mel Edwards, Curtain (for William and Peter), 1969 | Pablo Enriquez, Courtesy of the Broad

Taken together, the show successfully raises consciousness on the issues that surround what it means to be an artist of color in an era where equal rights were far from being a given. Unfortunately, even today, their questions continue to linger. Shows like these are a reminder that progress has been made, but there is yet more ground to cover.

Advanced tickets to “Soul of a Nation” can be reserved [here](#). In the interest of broadening access, the museum is also offering free admission every Thursday from 5 to 8 p.m. during the exhibition’s run.