

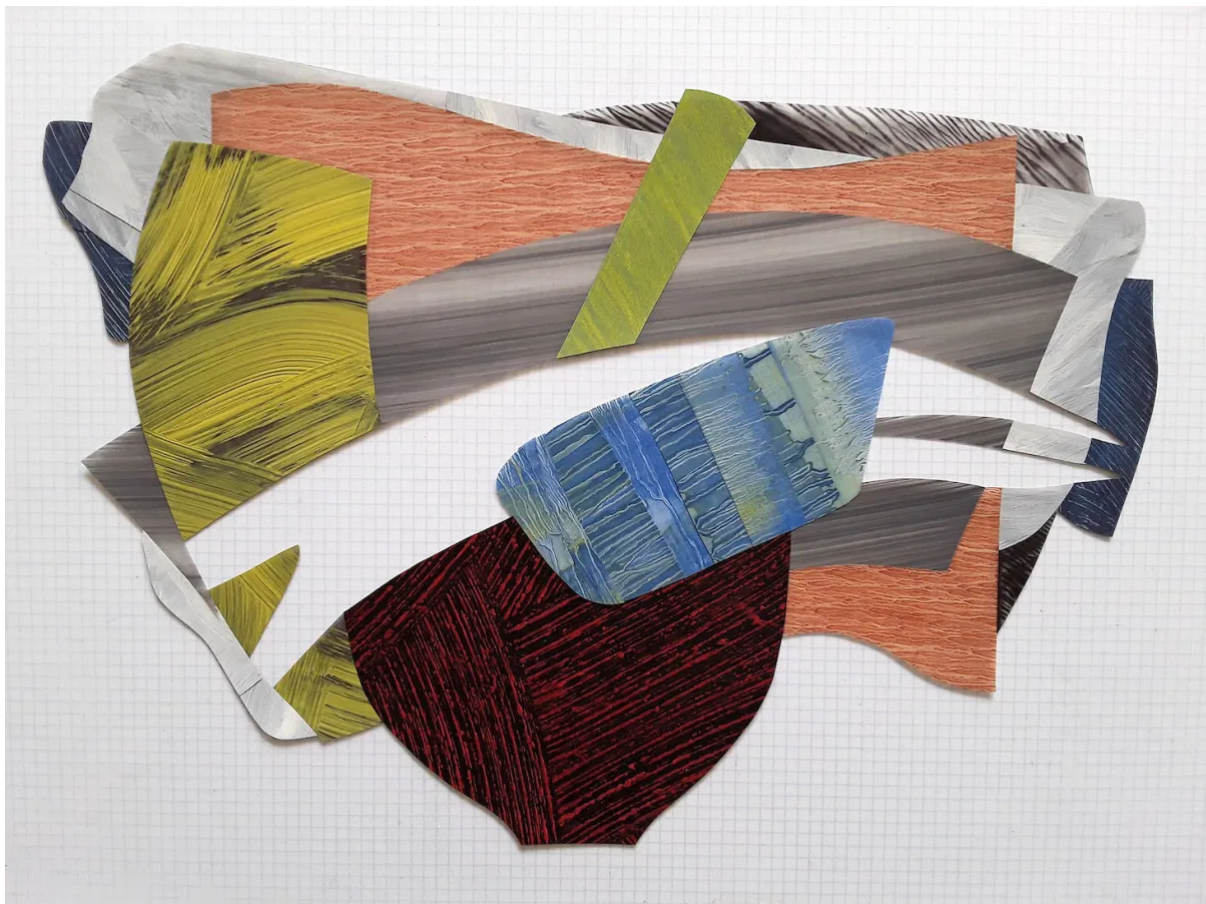
Art **Reviews** Weekend

## Another Chapter of Black Art History

The legacy of Cinque Gallery demonstrates that the work of Black artists between 1969 and 2004 was as diverse as its mainstream counterpart.



by John Yau  
15 hours ago



Nanette Carter, "Cantilevered #39" (2018), oil on mylar, 15 1/2 x 21 3/4 inches (courtesy Nanette Carter and Berry Campbell)

In 1969, during the Civil Rights struggle, three Black artists opened Cinque Gallery, which operated until 2004, to “provide a place where the works of unknown, and neglected artists of talent ...” — primarily Black artists — “would not only be shown but nurtured and developed” (*Excerpts. 1969 Cinque Gallery by-laws*). The gallery was named after Joseph Cinqué, who led a successful revolt on the Spanish slave ship *La*

*Amistad*. Romare Bearden (1911–1988), Ernest Crichlow (1914–2005), and Norman Lewis (1909–1979) were the founders.

During its 35-year existence, Cinque Gallery showed more than 450 artists of color working in a various mediums and styles, from representational to abstract. The list, which includes Wifredo Lam, Elizabeth Catlett-Mora, Richard Hunt, Dawoud Bey, Norma Morgan, Whitfield Lovell, and Camille Billops, is impressive. While the mainstream, or white, art world either ignored or pigeonholed these artists — which raises painful and disturbing questions — the fact that Cinque sustained itself for more than three decades attests to an indisputable fact: the existence of at least two art communities, which were separated along color lines. It is also testimony to the strength and resilience of Black artists more than a century after the end of the Civil War.

The exhibition *Creating Community: Cinque Gallery Artists* at the Art Students League, curated by Susan Stedman (with assistance from Jewel Ham and program curation by Nanette Carter), suggests but does not emphasize the segregation that was largely established and maintained by the commercial art world, with museums and other mainstream institutions often following suit.



Melvin Edwards, "Holder of the Light" (1985), stainless steel, 11 1/2 x 7 x 14 inches (© Melvin Edwards, Courtesy Susan Stedman and Alfred E. Prettyman)

One reason the exhibition is at the Art Students League is because Bearden, Crichtlow, and Lewis taught and/or lectured at the League and were considered important members of that particular community. In the world of art education, they were respected, while in the domain of commercial art galleries they were marginal figures at best.

In one vitrine, I noticed a Cinque Gallery announcement card for an exhibition, *A Selection of African American Sculpture*, which ran from October 31 to November 25, 1978. Twelve artists were listed on the card: Melvin Edwards, Richard Hunt, Daniel Johnson, Robert Kelly, Ed Love, Valerie Maynard, Howard McCalebb, Algernon Miller, Elizabeth Catlett-Mora, Chris Shelton, Jack White, and Jack Whitten.

I was particularly struck by the announcement for this reason: In 1970, Edwards was the first Black sculptor to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Five years earlier, in 1965, he had his first one-person museum exhibition at the Santa Barbara Art Museum. He sold no work from either show and did not receive any offers for gallery representation. Cinque helped keep Edwards's work public.



Installation view, *Creating Community: Cinque Gallery Artists* at the Art Students League of New York (photo by Ed Watkins)

Similarly, in 1971, William S. Lieberman organized the retrospective *The Sculpture of Richard Hunt* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Hunt was the first Black sculptor to be showcased at the museum since a 1937 show featuring self-taught

Black sculptor William Edmondson. In 1957, the legendary curator Dorothy C. Miller — who was the first person to show Ellsworth Kelly, Jay DeFeo, Isamu Noguchi, Lee Bontecou, and Jasper Johns in a museum context — purchased Hunt’s sculpture “Arachne” (1956) for MoMA; it was the first and only sculpture of his to enter the collection. Hunt was 21 at the time. Instead of following this young artist, as MoMA followed young white artists from the same generation, the museum largely forgot about him.

When *Odyssey: Jack Whitten Sculpture, 1963–2017* opened at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, the press release stated:

Although Whitten (1939–2018) has long been celebrated for his work as an innovative abstract painter, this presentation reveals an extensive and entirely unknown body of his work.

The Cinque announcement suggests that this statement is wrong. It also — more importantly — underscores the complete division between the mainstream white art world and all the other, largely non-commercial art communities.

Charles Alston, “Red, White and Black” (ca. 1960), oil on canvas, 50 x 40 inches, Permanent Collection of The Art Students League

While none of what I have written is cited in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, I think the catalogue’s publication is an important event for many

reasons, including its reproductions of ephemera and mission statements, such as the gallery's 1977 report:

The Directors knew that many dealers and museum curators were unwilling to “gamble” on the artistic maturation of young unknown artists. This was especially true for minority painters and sculptors ... who could not be expected to fulfill their potential unless they were encouraged in a positive way.

It seems to me that this historical gathering should provoke further research as well as exhibitions. Although almost every artist is represented by a single work (which is also reproduced in the catalogue) we are invited to both look and dig deeper — and it is incumbent upon us to do so.

It is important to point out that the cross section of artists who showed at Cinque Gallery worked in different mediums and pursued different themes and subjects, that the work made by Black artists between 1969 and 2004 was as diverse as its mainstream counterpart.

Installation view, *Creating Community: Cinque Gallery Artists* at the Art Students League of New York (photo by Ed Watkins)

Some artists in this exhibition were also associated with Kenkeleba House, which was opened in 1974 by Joe Overstreet, Corrine Jennings, and Samuel C. Floyd to support African American culture. I mention this because there were a number of

important venues that arose in the 1960s and '70s that both overlapped with and supported each other, as well as artists of color working in New York.

This occurred to me while looking at Mildred Thompson's abstract pastel on paper, "Atmospherics #2" (2003), which was credited "courtesy Kenkeleba House."

Another important aspect of Cinque Gallery is that it was open to Black abstract artists. Thompson (1936–2003) was a metaphysical abstract artist preoccupied with the cosmological during the rise of the Black Arts Movement. She moved to Germany, where she lived throughout the 1960s and '70s. In 2019, she had an eye-opening show at Galerie Lelong & Co in New York.

Norma Morgan, "Elk Lake Adirondack Mountains, NY" (1993), engraving 6/10, 24 1/2 x 50 3/4 inches (courtesy Petrucci Family Foundation Collection of African American Art) (If you want to contact them: [pffcollection@gmail.com](mailto:pffcollection@gmail.com))

The proximity of an early moody landscape, "Untitled" (1967) by Richard Mayhew, to a haunting oil painting of a deserted mining site, "Abandoned" (1986) by Hughie Lee-Smith, and a large atmospheric engraving, "Elk Lake Adirondack Mountains, NY" (1993) by Norma Morgan, reminded me that I have never seen a show of Black artists who engage with the landscape.

Morgan's landscape is one of the exhibition's highlights. If this work is at all representative of what she achieved in the realm of printmaking, she deserves to be

far better known. Shouldn't someone be giving Morgan a museum exhibition?

Morgan's print also reminded me of the importance of the Black artist and master printmaker Robert Blackburn to the community of Black artists, and beyond. It was in his Printmaking Workshop, which he started in 1947, that a number of the artists in this exhibition made their prints.

Robert Blackburn, "Youth" (1944), lithograph, 10 3/8 x 12 1/2 inches, Permanent Collection of The Art Students League

Another artist whose work I did not know before this exhibition was Ademola Olugebefola; his mixed-media painting "Sun Ra" (1970) contain a reflective moiré pattern that kept changing. Nearby was an emotionally charged abstraction, "Red, White and Black" (ca. 1960) by Charles Alston.

Everywhere I looked, there was something to see and consider, including a slide show of works by Black artists that were commissioned by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. Seen by many who ride New York's subways, these public works by Romare Bearden, Robert Blackburn, Jacob Lawrence, Al Loving, and Faith Ringgold are part of the fabric of many lives, something the mainstream art world is still waking up to.

**Creating Community: Cinque Gallery Artists** *continues at the Art Students League of New York (215 West 57th Street, Manhattan) through July 3.*

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