

ARTFORUM

“Revisiting 5+1”

Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery at Stony Brook University

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View of “Revisiting 5+1,” 2022–23. Photo: Dario Lasagni.

In recent years, curatorial efforts to recuperate the stories and careers of Black artists who practiced during the 1960s and '70s have indicated an undeniable expansion of the American art canon—a development that recognizes the as-yet-untapped legacies of Black expression that have, consciously or not, evaded these same historicizing modes. Consider the 2021 restaging of the “Sapphire Show,” among the earliest West Coast exhibitions dedicated to Black American women artists, at New York’s Ortuzar Projects, or the recent “Just Above Midtown” presentation at the Museum of Modern Art, honoring Linda Goode Bryant and the dynamic roster of artists, including David Hammons and Senga Nengudi, who showed at the eponymous gallery. These outings were two newer examples of how throwing institutional muscle behind archival research can yield fantastic results.

“Revisiting 5+1” joined the list of successful retrospective efforts that have substantiated how the knotty debates concerning political representation, activism, and aesthetics among Black artists remain ever complex and salient. The show took as its starting point “5+1,” the 1969 exhibition of Black abstraction at Stony Brook University that featured art by Melvin Edwards,

Daniel LaRue Johnson, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams and was organized by British Guyanese painter Frank Bowling, the “+1” to the quintet. The curators of this iteration—Stony Brook Ph.D. candidates Elise Armani, Amy Kahng, and Gabriella Shypula, with consultation from the university’s distinguished professor of art Howardena Pindell and advisement from Karen Levitov and Katy Siegel—cannily moved beyond a mimetic redux of the first presentation. The decision was partly practical: Many of the original works were lost to history or had been econfigured by the artists themselves.

Vitrines filled with press clippings and documentation of protests by student organizations demanding support and guidance for minorities within the US college system demonstrated how public universities such as Stony Brook did not succeed when they tried implementing more inclusionary policies during the 1960s. A number of these schools were models of progress when they tried bringing in more Black and Latinx students. Yet these populations were failed by the institutional (and racist) impulse to surveil and punish when they became more activist-minded and the “war on drugs” began. Bowling’s exhibition was staged at a time of massive upheaval. His original curatorial conceit was for “5+1” to account for the formal, social, and political tensions between mainstream culture and Black culture by showcasing the range and depth of Black abstraction, suggesting manifold references to historical forms, popular music, and everyday street aesthetics. The elegant stature of Johnson’s work invites comparison to West African sculpture, for instance, and Jack Whitten’s painting from this period bears an energetic gesturalism inspired by jazz, often layered beneath thin, graffiti-like drips of paint.

Recognizing abstraction’s embeddedness within the social and the political highlighted a major gap in Bowling’s thinking about the original presentation—namely, the absence of Black women who worked with abstraction. To rectify this, the curators of “Revisiting” asked Pindell to select a group of six Black women artists to be in the show, while including something from her own oeuvre. Like their male counterparts, these women often took an active part in civil rights demonstrations but chafed at demands that they make their art conform to any overt political ideology. Mary Lovelace O’Neal’s large-scale painting *Jabberwocky*, 1976–77, for instance, mobilizes the poetic gesturalism of *AbEx*. Its faint streaks of neon pink and green against a ground of lampblack, collected from the sooty detritus of oil lamps, produce a haziness that evokes the atmospheric conditions of the Bay Area, where she had moved after leaving New York in the early 1970s. Betye Saar was represented here by one of her idiosyncratic assemblage sculptures as well as by a rare film, *Eyeball*, 1971, a quasi-anthropological montage of eyes culled from pop imagery and spiritual iconography. What emerged across these contributions, and throughout the exhibition as a whole, was a shared sensibility that recognized Black culture as multitudinous and resistant to reduction, embodying, as Bowling described in the 1969 “5+1” exhibition catalogue “a creative, self-perpetuating process of anarchist, pro-life zeal which a study of the fine arts and history alone, though helpful, can never fully define.”