

Energy and Abstraction at the Studio Museum in Harlem

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HISTORIES get lost. That's how life is. Then, when the time is right, they get found. "Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980" at the Studio Museum in Harlem, is about such a history, which went something like this:



The Studio Museum in Harlem
William T. Williams's "Trane" (1969).
Mr. Williams sought to reconcile color-field painting and Expressionism.

"Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980" remains at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, through July 2.

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The Studio Museum of Harlem
Melvin Edwards's "Cotton Hang-Up" (1966), a work in welded steel.

During one of the most radical periods in 20th-century American politics, the black power era, a group of African-American artists was working with what was, and still is, one of the most radical forms of 20th-century art, abstraction. Radicalism is relative, though, and in this case politics and culture were on different tracks.

At a time of impassioned gestures and hot visions — raised fists, "the fire next time" — abstract art appeared cool and noncommittal. It had been conceived as a revolutionary language of color, line, shape. But the 1960's revolution was about bodies and beliefs. Also, abstraction raised authenticity issues. It was widely seen as white art, academic art. Whites viewed black practitioners as copycats; blacks dismissed them as sellouts.

So, while a few figures like Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam and Al Loving (1935-2005) gained visibility, abstraction by African-Americans as a phenomenon faded from view, and its invisibility has persisted. The Guggenheim Museum's 1996 survey, "Abstraction in the 20th Century: Total Risk, Freedom, Discipline," included no artists of color.

But now the relationship between aesthetics and politics is changing. Many young artists see racially defined art as limiting; a problem, not a solution. A return to the story of earlier artists who struggled with that same view is in order, and that's what the Studio Museum exhibition does.

It is not alone. Two years ago, at Franklin and Marshall College in Pennsylvania, the painter Bill Hutson organized "Something to Look Forward To," a survey of African-American abstract painters whose careers began in the 1960's. He included nearly two dozen artists, but much of the work was recent, so the show was really about a past continuing in the present. A full-scale historical survey was still needed.

"Energy/Experimentation" is not that survey. It has only 15 artists. Much of the art is large, and the Studio Museum galleries are fairly small. A multi-venue show, done in partnership with, say, the Bronx Museum of the Arts, or one of the [City University of New York](#) campus galleries,

might have been a solution. Although it is by no means complete, the present show, organized by Kellie Jones, an art and cultural historian at [Yale University](#), does many things right. All but one piece date from the 1960's and 70's, when a number of black artists — too few to be a movement, too many to be a circle — were turning contemporary styles (Pop, Minimalism, Conceptualism), new materials (acrylic paint, plastics, light) and varying degrees of multicultural content to abstract ends.

The artists spanned generations. When Alma Thomas (1891-1978) first started painting her abstract images of gardens in Washington, D.C., in the 1960's, she was almost 70. When Mr. Gilliam had his first career retrospective in that city in 1967, he was in his 30's.

Cosmopolitanism ruled. Frank Bowling was born in Guyana, trained in London and settled in New York. The Americans Ed Clark and Barbara Chase-Riboud emigrated from New York to Paris. Ms. Chase-Riboud, who has a splendid 1972 aluminum floor piece in the show — it's like a Carl Andre spouting green silk creepers — lives in France still.

The show traces spheres of influence. Haywood Bill Rivers (1922-2002), represented by a florette-pattern picture inspired by quilts and Islamic arabesques, was a mentor to artists like Jack Whitten. In the late 1960's, the superb painter William T. Williams who was instrumental in establishing the artists in residence program at the Studio Museum, which has nurtured major talent.

What's instantly apparent when you enter the galleries is the absence of any binding "look." These artists were a determinedly individualistic bunch. Mr. Loving and Mr. Williams both did high-color, hard-edge painting early on, but the results are unlike: one favored self-contained forms, the other fragmented compositions pitched at a tilt.

Fragmentation, in fact, was a shared interest: Ms. Pindell made ethereal relief paintings from sewn strips of cloth; Tom Lloyd (1921-96) assembled sculptures from colored lights. So was an interplay of weightlessness and gravity. Steel sculptures by Mr. Edwards, like "Lifted X" (1965), were heavy but free-hanging. Joe Overstreet's "Saint Expedité A" (1971) is a shaped painting that seems to levitate in midair.

Daniel LaRue Johnson's smashing, spacey "Homage to René d'Harnoncourt" floats between categories. It is at once a reclining polychrome sculpture and a painting that hovers horizontally over the floor. Metaphors of floating in space are everywhere in the show. Mr. Whitten's paintings look like lunar landscapes. Fred Eversley's plastic-resin sculptures have an otherworldly sheen. A 1972 painting by Ms. Thomas of a cloud of red strokes against deep blue ground is titled "Mars Dust."

Images of suspension made sense in an age obsessed with aeronautics and mobility. They also had pertinence to the lives of forward-looking artists who found themselves on uncertain ground in relation to the mainstream art world and to the intensifying identity politics of the day.

These politics found their way, however obliquely, into abstraction. Mr. Loving, Ms. Pindell and Mr. Williams were all inspired by traditions of African-American quiltmaking and African weaving. Mr. Overstreet's piece refers to Native American shelters but is painted in a Africanesque palette of black, red and green.

Mr. Bowling, who argued adamantly against the association of art with racial politics, made paintings in the colors of the Guyanese flag. Mr. Lloyd's flashing light sculptures have links to the work of Dan Flavin and Bruce Nauman, but also to police cars. The title of Mr. Edwards's sculptural series "Lynch Fragments" speaks for itself.

In short, politics is here if you want it, but it is just one aspect of an art that focuses on extracting something fresh from formal convention and new materials. Only one piece, Ms. Pindell's video "Free, White and 21," is a direct-address indictment of racism. Made in 1980, it points to a type of confrontational, non-abstract, activist art that dominated the following decades.

Actually, that dominance was never as monolithic as it is often made out to be. And Ms. Pindell herself has consistently blended abstraction, figuration and political content into a single expressive language. Younger contemporaries, like Ellen Gallagher, have done the same in nuanced bodies of work, some more abstract than others. So have still younger figures like Louis Cameron, Arnold Kemp and Annette Lawrence, who are in a show at the museum titled "Collection in Context: Gesture" that complements Ms. Jones's exhibition.

If we were seeing their art someplace other than the Studio Museum in Harlem, would we necessarily read it as African-American at all? And because we know it is by African-American artists, must we automatically mine it for racial and political content? The answer to both questions is no.

Art is about possibility. As Ms. Jones's fine show demonstrates, it is capacious; its history is ever-changing; and what is lost is only lost until you see it again.

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