



Frieze New York: Franklin Sirmans is Channeling Just Above Midtown Gallery and the Pioneering Vision of Linda Goode Bryant

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on May 1, 2019 • 2:58 pm

JUST ABOVE MIDTOWN (JAM) was a solution to a problem. **Linda Goode Bryant** founded the New York City art gallery in 1974. When the city's museums and art galleries were less than welcoming to black artists, Bryant didn't see the point in protesting or advocating for inclusion. Why beg to be recognized, she thought, when they could open their own space?

"So many of the conversations I had with artists were about how 'They won't let us' show in this gallery or this museum, and how 'We can't get our work out there for people to see,'" Bryant said in an [oral history interview](#) recently published by BOMB magazine. "...I had already reached the point of saying, 'Fuck them. Let's just start a gallery ourselves.' I was younger, so I was kind of naïve."

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LORRAINE O'GRADY, *Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire celebrates with her friends)*, 1980-83/2009 (silver gelatin print, 7 x 9.31 inches / 17.78 x 23.65 cm). Shown, Lorraine O'Grady in white dress; David Hammons, far right. ICourtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © Lorraine O'Grady/Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York

Frieze New York is recognizing the legacy of Just Above Midtown this week (May 2-5). Franklin Sirmans is doing the honors. Frieze tapped Sirmans, director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami, to curate a [themed tribute section](#) of the art fair and he decided to focus on JAM. Considered the first space dedicated to showcasing the work of African American artists in a major gallery district, the legendary gallery operated for 12 years.

Sirmans is collaborating with Bryant and invited several art galleries to present solo exhibitions featuring artists who showed at JAM back in the day. Works by seven artists including **Dawoud Bey**, **Lorraine O'Grady**, **Howardena Pindell**, and **Lorna Simpson** will be on display and for sale.

"Linda Goode Bryant's gallery and its experiments with art and artists is the stuff of legend," Sirmans said in a statement. "She gave a home to artists now considered to be part of the canon when they had nowhere else to present their work. If she had only showed David Hammons, Adrian Piper, and Lorraine O'Grady that alone would be enough to celebrate, but when considering JAM's impact in totality, we discover evidence of the great history she created."

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BRYANT’S NAIVETÉ proved to be an asset. When she started JAM, she was 23 and serving as director of education at the Studio Museum in Harlem. She had no money and a modicum of experience, but plenty of vision.

She established JAM in a buttoned-up gallery district where white-owned galleries showed work by white artists. Located at 50 West 57h Street, JAM was black-owned and experimental. JAM presented work by both New York artists (Bey, Simpson, **Adrian Piper, Ming Smith, Fred Wilson**) and Los Angeles-based artists such as Hammons, Senga Nengudi, and Maren Hassinger, who focused on conceptual and performance work.

JAM’s first exhibition was a group show. “Synthesis” featured a dozen artists, including Hammons, **Camille Billops, Vivian Browne, Elizabeth Catlett, Dan Concholar, Suzanne Jackson, and Norman Lewis**. According to the invitation card, the exhibition ran from Nov. 19-Dec. 23, 1974.

In the BOMB interview, Bryant said the turnout was incredible. “The opening was unbelievable. It was a first and everybody came out. The space itself was only 724 square feet so the gallery was packed,” Bryant said. She added:

Not only was the gallery packed, but the hallway and down the stairwell was packed, and it was on the fifth floor. The lobby was packed, and it was packed on the Fifty-Seventh Street sidewalk. It was black folks galore, and it was black folks from all of the arts, so Melvin Van Peebles to Vertamae Grosvenor were there. It was the whole gamut. I mean, the actor Brock Peters was there. If you were in the arts, theater, film, dance, or whatever, you were there for the opening of JAM. The energy of JAM really started that night. There were all kinds of arguments and debates. People were fighting amongst themselves about the work that was on the walls. There was just energy, energy, energy, because we were on Fifty-Seventh Street.

Bryant later said in the BOMB interview: “We were never financially viable from art sales, but we had a huge impact. African American artists showing at JAM were being reviewed in the downtown papers.”

The gallery represented artists, cultivated new collectors, and also made it a priority to educate visitors to the gallery about the artists and their work.

Two years after JAM opened, it evolved from a commercial gallery to a nonprofit. In 1978, after four years in Midtown, Bryant moved the gallery downtown, first to Tribeca, then Soho. In the later years, JAM began showing a racial diverse slate of artists across a range of artistic disciplines. Choreographer Bill T. Jones participated in programming. JAM showed video art and launched a film screening series. The gallery operated until 1986. OVER THE PAST couple of years, the legacy of JAM has been acknowledged and celebrated in a variety of venues. The gallery and some associated artists were featured in landmark group exhibitions—“We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85” and “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power.” A collage image of Bryant made by Simpson graces the cover of the inaugural issue of Ursula (Winter 2018), Hauser & Wirth’s new magazine. Inside the issue, a conversation with Bryant and Nengudi is featured.

Earlier this month, the BOMB magazine oral history was published. The interview was conducted by Rujeko Hockley, an assistant curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art, who is co-curating the 2019 Whitney Biennial.



Franklin Sirmans (left) is organizing a special section at Frieze New York in honor of the legacy of Just Above Midtown Gallery, which was founded 45 years ago by Linda Goode Bryant (right). | Photos by Angel Valentin, Courtesy PAMM; and David Shankbone

At Frieze, Alexander Gray Associates, Michael Rosenfeld, Hauser & Wirth, and Jenkins Johnson, which is owned by a black woman, are among the galleries paying tribute to JAM. The galleries are exhibiting work by the following artists:

Dawoud Bey | Rena Bransten Gallery, Stephen Daiter Gallery **Norman Lewis** | Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

Senga Nengudi | Thomas Erben Gallery, Lévy Gorvy, Sprüth Magers **Lorraine O'Grady** | Alexander Gray Associates

Howardena Pindell | Garth Greenan

Lorna Simpson | Hauser & Wirth

Ming Smith | Jenkins Johnson Gallery

Frieze asked artists and curators, including Bey, **Tom Finkelppearl**, and **Lowery Stokes Sims**, to [share insights](#) about Bryant's influence and the legacy of JAM.

Bey, the Queens-born, Chicago-based photographer, lived and worked in New York during JAM's tenure. He showed work at gallery then and has photographs in the current Frieze presentation, images from 1983 and 1984 that offer rare documentation of the work and impromptu street actions and performances of artist David Hammons.

The photographer said the opening of the gallery "signaled a bodacious level of ambition not previously witnessed" and the art presented at JAM "caused a seismic shift in the conversation around the kinds of work being made and exhibited by Black artists."

Also in his comments to Frieze, Bey said, The "work bypassed the conventions of modernism and any rhetorical or didactic expectations around black art production, favoring an idiosyncratic approach to art making that was nothing if not unconventional and materially ambitious. The work was not without precedent, but without JAM, would just not have been a part of the prevailing conversation among black East Coast artists at that time. As such, Linda's program was a dynamic and powerful blast of fresh air that forever changed the conversation in New York."

He added: "It was a seriously liberating impulse. Everyone was put on notice that the choices that one could make as an artist who was black could indeed fall outside of any prevailing orthodoxy. Happening when it did, it was a timely influence: an influence that is still being profoundly felt some 45 years later. Being the vision ary that she is, Linda has reshaped African American art history—and by extension American art history..."

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After JAM, Bryant focused on documentary filmmaking, among other pursuits. Her latest creation is [Project Eats](#), a neighborhood-based urban agricultural partnership. The organization has developed a series of urban farms providing sustainable food production in economically challenged New York City neighborhoods. A portion of the fees from gallery sales in the special Frieze section dedicated to JAM will benefit the nonprofit.

FIND MORE about the early years in a [1975 audio interview](#) with Linda Goode Bryant and David Hammons conducted by Mimi Poser, who headed development at the Guggenheim Museum

FIND MORE [about Linda Goode Bryant](#) in an oral history interview conducted by curator Rujeko Hockley for BOMB magazine

FIND MORE [about Linda Goode Bryant](#) in a conversation with artist Senga Nengudi published in Ursula magazine

BOOKSHELF

Linda Goode Bryant wrote about Just Above Midtown gallery in the "[Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power](#)" catalog. Two volumes were published to accompany the exhibition "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85": "[New Perspectives](#)" and "[A Sourcebook](#)."

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