

# The Broad's Black Power Art Exhibition Triggers Something Deep

BY LYNELL GEORGE IN ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT ON JULY 12, 2019 11:00 AM



*Barbara Jones-Hogu, Unite (First State), 1969. Screenprint. (Barbara Jones-Hogu, courtesy the Broad)*

There's a question I grew up hearing here on the West Coast. It feels like casual inquiry, but it's code among Black folk — particularly those from or with roots in the American South:

*Who's your people?*

*It's shorthand: a way to quickly acquire context across time and space. The question acknowledges the diaspora: The many lives and souls it took to get here — to get to us.*

That question circled through me as I made my way through the deeply compelling exhibition "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power 1963-1983" at the Broad. As I walked through the galleries, I couldn't separate the art from the music that was made during this era — a soundtrack to the many questions that explore and help define the Black experience.



*David Hammons, Black First, America Second, 1970.  
Body print and screenprint on paper. 104.8 x 79.4  
inches. (David Hammons, courtesy the Broad)*

Who are *our* people? What are we connected by — geography and history? Revolution and resiliency? "*Soul of a Nation*" explores the expansive and complex territory of self-making, and how artists strategize a plan more far-reaching than survival: one that articulates pride and knowledge of self.

The exhibition presents work over two explosive decades, 1963 to 1983, by more than 60 Black artists.

The Broad museum showcases an authoritative L.A. presence, repped by key figures Betye Saar, Charles White, John Outterbridge, and David Hammons among others. Stepping inside the first gallery triggered something deep — that highly-charged sensation you might experience when you recognize something or someone familiar in

an unexpected place — a profile, an intonation, a gesture. The imagery — the raised fists; the halo of afros; the red, black, and green of pride and liberation — yes, that, but also a piece of yourself in the story, where you entered and found your voice, your own footing.

"Soul of a Nation" is not organized chronologically. Rather, it's set up aesthetically, the groupings or chapters dedicated to collaborations, or collectives, or medium or region. This lends an associative feel — ideas sparking another across time.



*Inside the Broad's "Soul of a Nation." (Pablo Enriquez, courtesy the Broad)*

The first pin in the map is 1963. Harlem and the formation of the Spiral Collective, a group of artists based in New York who were grappling with the notion of what it meant to make Black art during the heat of the Civil Rights Movement.

They asked a question that was only by degrees rhetorical: "Is there a Negro image?"

The group, who first met in Romare Bearden's Harlem studio, were named such by the

artist Hale Woodruff because he saw the "spiral" as a metaphor: moving outward, embracing all directions, yet continuing forward.

Norman Lewis's black-and-white expressionist canvases are paired with Bearden's loose and intimate collages that echo busy street scenes or rural homesteads. There is inherent power in the juxtapositions. Side by side, like collage, as Bearden asserted: "Assemblage [itself] forced a variety of contrary images into one unified expression." Activism energized the streets, redrew lines, and urgently threaded through the Black arts community.

The West Coast's expression of upending the status quo found voice in 1965's Watts Rebellion and in the work of Melvin Edwards, Daniel LaRue Johnson, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, John T. Riddle, and Betye Saar. Some of them collected wreckage from the streets and turned broken glass, twisted metal, and other found objects into trenchant works of art. What was deemed as trash or ruin was transformed. The Black artist's gaze determined what was valuable.



Betye Saar, *Rainbow Mojo*, 1972. Acrylic painting on cut leather, 19 3/4 x 49 3/4 in. Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California. (Robert Wedemeyer, courtesy the Broad)

The powerful and varied prism of Black subjectivity — naming and defining oneself — is deeply freeing, and the most compelling gift of this exhibition. Betye Saar observed that artists had begun to look beyond crisis, to find cures through "rituals": totems, altars, observances. As she reflected, "They've got over the violent part and have become more introspective."

That's the gesture, or soul, that forges connection. Beauford Delaney's portrait of James Baldwin offers an alternate view of the writer, depicted not with the worry of the world etched on his face, but rather in a moment you might imagine him seated in the restorative glow of love from friends and found family.



*Roy DeCarava, Mississippi freedom marcher, Washington, D.C., 1963. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper. Courtesy Sherry DeCarava and the DeCarava Archives. (Roy DeCarava, courtesy the Broad)*

It's much in the same way that photographer Roy DeCarava's gradient grays and murky half-light force viewers to adjust themselves to truly see — not just slow down, but stop. Lean in close and examine the image to see humanity.

Lorraine O'Grady's series of images, "Art Is..." in a lighthearted way goes to the very heart of this matter. Do we simply survive or do we thrive? In 1983, under an alter ego, she entered a float in Harlem's African American Day parade —its "feature" was a 9x12-foot gold frame. She hired 15 dancers to carry large gilded frames into the crowds. They'd raise the frame and "make" street portraits. In so doing, the work answers its own open-ended question: "We are."

The "spiral" that Hale Williams settled on as metaphor was a sturdy one. And it was predictive of the fact that the work is ongoing. "Soul of a Nation" is a bold and vibrant exultation of presence and passion, unifying many disparate approaches and perspectives into vivid visual language.



*Inside the Broad's "Soul of a Nation." (Pablo Enriquez, courtesy the Broad)*

There's something striking about this show, given the backdrop of the current looping news cycle — spiking gun violence and hate crimes, retrograde race relations. This doesn't feel like a retrospective, but rather a collection of much-needed tools and templates for how we as a people, collectively, can shape destiny, find community and pride, and, most important, make beauty out of wreckage.

"Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" is at the Broad through Sept. 1. There are related live music events on July 17 and Aug. 14.