

FRANK BOWLING

Matthew Collings, 'Soul of a Nation - Art in the Age of Black Power, exhibition review: Pride and prejudice', The Evening Standard, 11 July 2017

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Frank Bowling, 'Texas Louise', 1971, (detail).

This ambitious and energetic show charts 20 years of the struggles that formed the modern black artistic identity in America

Tate Modern's *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* is a trip through 20 years of black artists in the US experimenting with what black art could possibly be. Some of it is worthy but dull. Some of it is great — and often precisely because it's rather ambiguous about the big issue. And some is absolutely great and focused on the issue but couldn't care less about being art.

It covers a 20-year period from 1963. Terminology was on the minds of the curators. "Negro" gave way to "black" in the period of Civil Rights, and "African American" replaced "black" in the Reagan era. 1963 was the year of the Great March on Washington led by Dr Martin Luther King. It was in that year and responding to that event that the black art group, Spiral, was formed in New York.

The Spiral art featured in the show plunges us into the contrasting moods and sensibilities that characterise the exhibition. It includes the fantastically refined and exquisite collages of Romare Bearden made from cut-up faces and bodies found in photos in popular magazines (*Ebony*, *Life* and so on) but also tasteful (albeit perhaps rather humdrum) abstracts by Norman Lewis, and propagandistic pictures of

demonstrating black crowds in a broad social realist style by Reginald Gammon.

Benny Andrews worked with Bearden in another group, the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. In *Did the Bear Sit Under a Tree?* (1969), a black protester shakes his fist at the American flag, which is meant to protect him, but is seen closed-off in its own cold space.

Very different is the selection of graphic art by Emory Douglas, a Black Panther minister (he joined the party in 1967) and co-founder of the party newspaper, as well as designer of its cover art. In his pictures preaching revolutionaries confront us in thick black outlines with sunrise patterns bursting from their heads. Modern warrior mothers bear babes in arms and machine guns. Reflections in the lenses of a black child's sunglasses show the free breakfasts the Black Panthers provide for poor, working-class families.

Sometimes there's a deliberate adolescent regression, it seems. Paintings within this bracket are often pretty mesmerising. Works by Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Nelson Stevens, Carolyn Lawrence, Gerald Williams and Wadsworth Jarrell — all members of the AfriCOBRA group, founded in 1968, in Chicago — tell us about slogans, staring eyes, beating drums, horned devils and exploding psychedelia.

Jarrell, in particular, puts propagandistic imagery that was corny even at the time through a sort of Op Art crunching machine, with the result that Malcolm X — in *Black Prince* (1971) — and a group of revolutionaries — in *Liberation Soldiers* (1972) — appear as swirling decorated corpuscles of brilliantly vibrating colour. Radiating bands of colour in Williams's *Wake Up*, and *Nation Time* (both 1971), have a similar compelling effect. The AfriCOBRA group said their “new aesthetic,” departing from Pop and Abstract styles, was based on “rhythm” and “shine” — on “the rich lustre of a just-washed ‘fro’”. Their name stood for the “African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.”

There are seductive abstract paintings in the show. A British artist, Frank Bowling, supplies the greatest highlights of painterly sensual refinement. He was in his thirties when he lived for a few years in New York and achieved the distinction of a one-man show at the Whitney Museum.

In a painting from 1971 he shows stencilled letters spelling Guyana's newly independent name (he was born in 1936 when it was British Guiana). What's interesting about Bowling's contribution to *Soul of a Nation* is the subtlety of the racial theme, indeed all themes — visual, autobiographical and literary — in his painterly balancing act. Another work from the early Seventies balances an upper section of juicy orange and shocking pink with a cloud of warm grey-brown below. More than six and half metres wide, it suggests an enormous version of a landscape by Turner but the colouring is tropical-hot not Turner's rainy mists. An image emerges, hardly noticeable at first — a stencilled outline of a map of South America.

A fair bit of the art in the show appears pseudo-African: carved wooden sculptures of simplified forms, part human, part abstract, by Elizabeth Catlett; or assemblages of wood and bone, and other objects imitating tribal fetishes by Betye Saar. The idea of a problematic African essential nature — an inner African state that is always distorted — is powerful, obviously legitimate rhetoric. There's something numbing

about the results, though. As if being right is not necessarily the best thing art can be. The art might be honourable or reasonable but not necessarily penetrating.

A weird counterbalance to correctness is provided by an object from 1975 by David Hammons, now a heavy hitter in the realm of conceptual art. With this early work, encountered in the final room of *Soul of a Nation*, you get a sense of what's special about him.

It is an elegantly designed construction made of overlapping brown paper shopping bags, many with a small repeating triangle of black hair. There appears to be little to it — the bags are greasy, they've obviously been used, perhaps they contained hot food, and the triangles of hair are rather creepy — but it gets into you, amounting to a strongly poetic statement rich in possible interpretations.

We're seeing something like outstretched wings, one up and one down. The black shapes make a beautiful abstract arc across the length of one of them, the opposite in its geometric purity to the deliberate, galumphing obviousness of the outer contours of the object, where you see the shopping bag handles traipsing along. It's funny but the humour is black, a black joke about black ambivalence: beauty but also loss and neglect; elegance but also rejection and ugliness. Both hopeful and sinister at once, the two moods are compressed in Hammons's clever and daft title: *Flying Bag Lady*.

Twelve rooms, each with a distinct mood, altogether raise one big question — if a show's theme is worthy, is everything in it automatically good? The answer will always be no. Nevertheless the curators ensure there's no let-up of energy of one kind or another.

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power is at Tate Modern, SE1 from tomorrow until October 22; tate.org.uk