

FRANK BOWLING

Beck Feibelman, 'Black Power Art Raises a Fist at the Brooklyn Museum', The Clyde Fitch Report, 26 October 2018



The Clyde
Fitch Report.
Arts. Politics. Grow.



Frank Bowling, *Texas Louise*, 1971, (detail)

The Brooklyn Museum is taking the current, horrific state of American identity politics very seriously, and I am here for it. Over the last couple of years, the museum has showcased work by “*Black Radical Women*,” Latin American “*Radical Women*” and now the radical, but not gender-specific, “*Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*,” is currently on view through Feb. 3, 2019. This large, eclectic, important exhibition is something of a revelation. The show focuses on the period between 1963 and 1983, when an ever-growing number of Black artists, individually as well as organized into art groups and collectives, looked to the Black Power movement for inspiration, community, political empowerment and greater artistic opportunities. Many of these artists are still alive and working.

Curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley at the Tate Modern, where the show originated, and organized for the Brooklyn Museum by Ashley James, “*Soul of a Nation*” feels like two well-integrated shows in one. The first half of the exhibition looks at the different geographical sub-groups of Black Power artists, with genuine insights about the specificity of artwork coming out of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago (with a brief glance at Emory Douglas, whose iconic images illustrated the Black Panthers’ newspaper, in the Bay Area). The second half focuses on aesthetics and artistic style, investigating the roles of abstraction, figuration,

minimalism, conceptualism, performance and more among many of the same artists from the first half. This curatorial strategy, showing the work of individual artists in multiple contexts rather than keeping each artist’s work grouped together, enriches the exhibition and makes unexpected connections among diverse artists.

Many of the individual artists and collectives talked about developing a “Black aesthetic,” but what the exhibition demonstrates is that no singular such thing can possibly exist: the artists in this exhibition approach work from a broad array of perspectives, with diverse formal, aesthetic and political concerns. I don’t mean to discount the role of Black identity as a vital component of the work; my point is that the artwork in “*Soul of a Nation*” acknowledges the importance of these artists’ identities, but does not essentialize or limit the smoldering power of how each artist is influenced by Blackness and how each chooses to represent or express these parts of their identity in their work. The multiplicity of artistic styles and modes of political expression make for an eye-opening and thrilling exhibition.

Early on, the exhibition’s politics announce themselves very clearly. Elizabeth Catlett’s carved cedar *Black Unity*, 1968, a large Black Power raised fist, sits in front of Faith Ringgold’s *American People Series #18: The Flag is Bleeding*, 1967 (see image

up top). Catlett made her sculpture the year Tommie Smith and John Carlos protested American racism at the Mexico City Olympics with the same closed-fist salute. Ringgold painted a number of unsentimental, and really very jarring, America flag images in the late '60s, and her direct critique of American racism is plainly on display in the blending of racialized violence with the flag, which seems to bleed from its red stripes.

This largely New York-focused section of the exhibition (there are a few works from elsewhere on the east coast) includes a number of intensely pointed artworks that refuse to turn away from white violence. A recreation of a 1965 Spiral Group show of only black-and-white work includes a pair of very different, highly abstracted crowd scenes by Norman Lewis; the ironically titled *America the Beautiful*, 1960, unmistakably shows a KKK rally, while *Processional*, 1965, pays homage to the Selma March. A sculpture by Dana C. Chandler, a bullet-riddled front door called *Fred Hampton's Door 2*, 1975, refers to young Black Panther member Hampton's execution in his own bed by the Chicago police. Very different in tone, the young woman in Roy DeCarava's photograph *Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, D.C.*, 1963, looks serious and focused and maybe a little sad and a little angry and certainly defiant.

The more-or-less narrative and more-or-less figurative artwork from the east coast shifts abruptly to largely informal assemblage and other sculpture made in LA. Betye Saar is the best-known of these west-coast artists — at least by me, in NYC — but other prominent members of this artistic circle include Melvin Edwards, Noah Purifoy and John Outterbridge. These artists built sculptures out of found materials from thrift stores or from the trash, creating new juxtapositions and contexts that evoke elements of life in LA, as well as traditional African sculpture. A wall text in the exhibition explains that some of these materials came from the rubble-littered streets after the Watts Rebellion in 1965, a days-long uprising in response to police brutality.

Works by Saar include *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, a kind of small-scale diorama ironically reappropriating the racist breakfast mascot, and *Nine Mojo Secrets*, 1971, a more chaotic assemblage incorporating tobacco pipes, found wood and mismatched furniture casters. Edwards' metal wall reliefs and Outterbridge's diverse compositions make use of industrial skills like welding to produce a variety of artistic effects. Purifoy's untitled 1970 wall sculpture takes the form of an oversized Ghanaian fertility doll made of materials like common wooden spoons and metal bullet casings.

The work by Black Power artists from Chicago represents yet another total aesthetic shift from that of their colleagues

on either coast. There is some documentation of the Wall of Respect on the South Side, which functioned like a collaborative community mural. Created by the Organization of Black American Culture, it featured celebratory portraits of African-American heroes from artists to civic leaders to athletes and served as a backdrop for performances; the Wall of Respect inspired similar community murals in Black neighborhoods around the country. The other artistic collective from Chicago was AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), known for their embrace of vibrant colors, textual elements and celebratory portraits of Black leaders and other inspirational figures. Artists like Carolyn Lawrence, Jeff Donaldson and James Phillips painted dense, dynamic, "coolade" colored compositions, but, to me, Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell are the stars of AfriCOBRA. A married couple who met in art school, Jae designed clothing using fabric, paint and other materials and Wadsworth painted "kaleidoscopic" paintings of community leaders in a graphical, borderline pointillist style built up out of letters and other shapes. His 1972 painting *Revolutionary* is an image of radical activist Angela Davis radiating power and determination, mid-speech. In the painting, Wadsworth dressed Davis in Jae's *Revolutionary Suit*, 1969, which is on display in front of the painting in "*Soul of a Nation*." The design of the suit, a fairly simple gray outfit with playful flourishes in some of the details, is dominated by a yellow bandolier across the front. Rather than ammunition, though, it contains brightly painted wooden dowels that look like artist's pastels.

After examining these artists based on geography and community, the second half of "*Soul of a Nation*" looks at the vast array of formal and aesthetic approaches Black Power artists embraced. It feels like an argument — a compelling argument — for reinstalling the post-war galleries at MoMA exclusively with African-American artists. William T. Williams' wall-sized homage to John Coltrane in hard-edge, geometric abstraction is extraordinary, while Frank Bowling's color field paintings punctuated by stenciled contours of the continents — especially the monumental *Texas Louise*, 1971 — are almost dizzyingly beautiful. A brilliant, vibrant abstract composition by Alma Thomas hangs nearby. If some Black Power artists struggled with a sense of responsibility to create literal, positive images of Black people (representations nearly totally missing from art history), that is not a concern for these amazing abstract painters, and their work is no less political or communicative.

A section focused on portraiture and images of the body groups work by Charles White with that of Timothy Washington and David Hammons, who were both White's students; these three artists were also the subject of a 1968 exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, that institution's first ever show of Black art. One of Hammons'

H A L E S

images in this section is *Three Spades*, 1971, a body print that makes a playful pun on a racial slur. The portraits include images by luminaries like Barkley Hendricks, Beauford Delaney, Emma Amos and the only white painter in the show, Alice Neel, whose exquisite portrait of Faith Ringgold fits seamlessly into “*Soul of a Nation*.”

The exhibition finishes on an open and hopeful note with Lorraine O’Grady’s photo series *Art is...*, 1983. She joined the African American Day Parade in Harlem with a group of dancers dressed in white and carrying gilded empty picture frames. Members of O’Grady’s group photographed each other and people from the crowd framing each other, elevating each other out of the mundane, bringing art to the street and the community through the performance. The label quotes one attendee begging to be part of the project, “Frame me, make me art!” The playful engagement, the ecstatic smiles, the transformations from mere people into living artworks make a satisfying coda to this history of Black Power art.