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Barry Schwabsky, 'The Struggle to Resolve', The Nation, 14 December 2018



Brooklyn Museum, Installation view, *Soul of a Nation, Art in the Age of Black Power*, September 14, 2018 through February 3, 2019
Photo by Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum

In a famous essay published in the January 1971 issue of ARTnews, Linda Nochlin reiterated the question that was constantly thrown in the faces of women who dared to paint or sculpt: “Why have there been no great women artists?” For Nochlin, it seemed obvious that no effort to respond with a historical counterexample would serve. Not that Artemisia Gentileschi or Berthe Morisot shouldn’t be taken more seriously than male art historians had done thus far. But still: “The fact, dear sisters, is that there are no women equivalents for Michelangelo or Rembrandt, Delacroix or Cézanne, Picasso or Matisse, or even, in very recent times, for de Kooning or Warhol,” she wrote, adding for good measure, “any more than there are Black American equivalents for the same.” The art historian’s problem in her view was to show why.

The assumption that there were no great black American artists at the time was not Nochlin’s alone, nor one that existed only among whites. A couple of months after her essay was published, one of the best-known and most successful African-American artists of the day, Benny Andrews, wrote a long, troubled letter to a fellow painter, Reginald Gammon, reporting on an opening party at New York’s Museum of Modern Art for two exhibitions by black artists, the painter and collagist Romare Bearden and the sculptor Richard Hunt. It should have been “the kind of night that all of us had fought for individually and as groups,” Andrews acknowledged, but he was in no mood to celebrate. “The shows were good,

no more no less, not spectacular or even moving, just good and everyday art work by two people that except for being Black probably won’t leave any imprint on the art world.” One might easily ascribe Andrews’s letdown to sour grapes, but in articulating the source of his anguish, he hardly let himself off the hook: “What I think most of us know and are hesitant to admit is the fact that in the graphic arts, painting and sculpture, the discrimination against Black people has proven to have pretty much guaranteed that we have not really created anything in a way that makes any of us truly creative. I do not know of anyone Black that as a painter or sculptor is truly creative like say Andy Warhol, Stella, Eakins, [de] Kooning or anyone that we can identify.”

More than four decades later, one might demur when it comes to Bearden, at least: The resonance of his work keeps growing with time. If accounts could ever be well and truly settled, I’m not sure that he would rank lower than de Kooning and Warhol, the two contemporaries that Nochlin and Andrews seemed to agree were incontrovertibly among the “truly creative.” In art, consensus on what counts as “creativity” or “greatness” is always in flux. Two hundred years ago, Raphael was a god and Caravaggio a nobody; today, Raphael mostly earns a cold respect, while Caravaggio wins our devotion. A strict conceptualist might have wanted to tell Nochlin that Picasso and Matisse were sideshows, that the truly great artist of their time was Duchamp. The arguments continue.

Andrews was painfully aware that there were structural impediments not only to the proper recognition of his achievement but to that achievement as such. Like any serious modern artist, he was fiercely ambitious, and his ambition was of the broadest scope: to be one of the “truly creative” who leave an imprint on their time and on the art of the future—an almost unattainable hope. But he also understood that such creativity has never simply been the product of what Nochlin mocked as “an atemporal and mysterious power somehow embedded in the person of the Great Artist.” It is sometimes nurtured, sometimes stymied, always channeled by history and social conditions. And it cannot exist without the unrelenting efforts of a multitude of practitioners producing what Andrews calls “just good and everyday art work.” Artists are made by other artists—by the effects they have on each other, whether through emulation, rivalry, or antagonism—so that the collective mass of respectable efforts enables a few to reach the stars.

Andrews was an honored figure by the time he died in 2006, with MoMA among the many museums that had collected his work. His paintings, prints, and collages have recently been visible in a number of significant group exhibitions large and small—the biggest of them being “*Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*,” a survey of African-American art that focuses on the 1960s and ’70s (plus a few white fellow travelers), now at the Brooklyn Museum through February 3. The show, curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, originated at London’s Tate Modern before traveling first to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, and will finish its tour at the Broad in Los Angeles. I’d like to think that if Andrews were still around to see the show, he might revise the view he held in 1971. He might see, in retrospect, that a number of black artists—Bearden being only one among them—were producing work that was much more than just “good and everyday” in quality, and that if their imprint on the art world wasn’t entirely clear at the moment, it has deepened (and continues to do so) to this day. Further, the experience of being black was not incidental to the development of the qualities that give their work its lasting power, no matter whether it enters into their subject matter—as with Bearden, or photographer Roy DeCarava, or assemblagist John Outterbridge—or seems far from obvious, as with the abstract paintings of Alma Thomas or Ed Clark.

What gives much of the work in the exhibition its power is the incessant questioning—and self-questioning—that animates it. If Cézanne’s doubt was the key to his art, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty believed, and anxiety his great lesson, as Picasso said—well, these African-American artists had been given plenty of that to work with, as the example of Andrews shows. Their doubt became an impetus for their art, even at the price of a seeming inconsistency or opacity, and their work is all the richer for it. That’s why, although the arrival of “*Soul of a Nation*” is a cause for celebration, Andrews’s pessimism stayed on my mind as I looked at the show—as the extreme expression of the self-questioning that most of

these artists must have sometimes gone through, but that, at best, spurred rather than stymied their efforts.

I found Andrews’s letter not in “*Soul of a Nation*” or its catalog, but on display in a vitrine in another, much smaller exhibition that happened to overlap with it, “*Acts of Art and Rebuttal in 1971*,” at the Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Gallery at New York City’s Hunter College, where it was put together by Howard Singerman, Sarah Watson, and their students. The show was a look back at a 1971 exhibition organized by black artists, including Andrews, to protest the decision by the Whitney Museum to mount a show that year called “*Contemporary Black Artists in America*” without a single black curator participating in the selection process, or even much follow-through on the museum’s own tepid promise to “utilize the advice of leading Black Art experts wherever feasible.” Museum officials claimed the right, and the duty, to present art according to their sense of its quality, but they never considered using that art to put their own criteria to the test. Their downfall was complacency, which blinded them to their need to seek what one critic at the time called the “due recognition and involvement” of their black peers.

Whether or not the 1971 “*Rebuttal to the Whitney Museum Exhibition*” succeeded, as Andrews and his friends had hoped, in offering art historians a context for “whatever it is that happened this time in history concerning a group of artists identified by their Black skins,” it seems true to me that the work shown in its art-historical reconsideration (with just 10 of the original 47 artists) offered, at best, that good but not outstanding level of effort that Andrews feared might be all that he and his colleagues had to offer. The works often seem to reach for effects—whether satirical, as with Andrews’s work here; meditative, as in the case of Haywood Bill Rivers; or reparative, as in what Dindga McCannon called her “attempt to remember / Colors, shapes, and form... / As I perceived them before / I was old enough to realize / I was in prison”—they can’t quite attain. And I take note that the ones that appealed most to me—Betty Blayton-Taylor’s lyrical-abstract paintings and Richard Mayhew’s richly colored landscapes—are precisely the ones that were singled out for praise, in a 1971 review of the “*Rebuttal*” show, by the conservative New York Times critic John Canaday, for having “nothing to do with whiteness or blackness or anything except art, and this at an admirable level.” Unlike Canaday, however, I wouldn’t take it upon myself to dismiss the idea that this too could be “black art”; rather, I’d try to understand why the tasks of a black art cannot be limited to conveying an image of blackness. I also take note, as Canaday did at the time, that both of these painters were among those who had been selected for the Whitney show but withdrew from it in protest. The problem wasn’t necessarily in the curator’s limited taste; the flaw in judgment was at another level.

Blayton-Taylor isn’t included in “*Soul of a Nation*,” while Mayhew, who was not part of the show in London, has been added in Brooklyn with a painting that is part of the museum’s

collection—a good reminder that even a survey comprising the work of some 60 artists can't be exhaustive in trying to encompass the creative efforts of African-American artists in this period. In fact, even some much better-known figures were mysteriously absent, the photographer Gordon Parks being the first to come to mind. But then it's always possible to quibble about such choices. Besides, the exhibition—organized, perhaps not accidentally, as a collaboration between a white and a black curator, something the Whitney couldn't envision in 1971—succeeds brilliantly in evoking the energy and tumult of a time when social upheaval and an irrepressible passion for change challenged artists to respond creatively, and in diverse ways that are no more easily reconciled now than they were then.

The fundamental divide among black artists at the time is simple enough to describe: It was between those who, agreeing with Canaday (such are the ironies) that “black art” had to imply overtly racial subject matter, looked to create a race-conscious art in service to the broader black community, and those for whom art implied formal ambitions unconstrained by ethnicity. Sometimes this came down to something as simple as the split between figurative and abstract art that is the focus of the catalog essays in “*Soul of a Nation*,” perhaps more than in the show itself. One might be tempted to say that the abstractionists aspired to a kind of universality, but beware: It was one of the abstractionists, Frank Bowling, who shrewdly pointed out (also in an article published in 1971, a crucial year for debate on such issues, and not coincidentally the subject of an important recent book, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, by the art historian Darby English) that the idea of an art founded in a common black experience depended on an unfounded generalization, and that “we have not been able to detect in any kind of universal sense The Black Experience wedged-up in the flat bed between red and green.” In contrast to those calling for the assertion of a proud racial identity were those who defended the singularity of the artist, who—as another of the artists in “*Soul of a Nation*,” Raymond Saunders, had written a few years before, in a polemical exchange with the writer Ishmael Reed—“has to do for himself what is necessary for his own development, fulfilling himself as an individual.”

At a theoretical level, this conflict is probably irresolvable. Since the individual can no more exist without the nurturance of a group than the group can exist without the resourcefulness of the individuals who maintain it, the ultimate assertion of the superiority of one over the other will always be in vain. And yet the struggle to resolve this conflict is the very stuff of art.

Admitting my own leanings toward the abstractionist camp—some of the highlights in “*Soul of a Nation*,” for me, were abstract works by Howardena Pindell, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams—does not prevent me from finding many of the overtly race-centered figurative works just as impressive. I'd particularly like to have seen more from Wadsworth Jarrell and Jeff Donaldson, both of whom were part of the Chicago-based AfriCOBRA group. Immersing

their imagery in vibrant patterning and (as Donaldson wrote) “Color color Color color that shines, color that is free of rules and regulations,” their art is every bit as formally driven as that of the abstractionists. Indeed, something that “*Soul of a Nation*” does not sufficiently show is how many artists went back and forth between abstract and representational modes. But if I had to pick a single artist to sum up what's so inspiring about this vast exhibition—which I can't—it would probably have to be Barkley Hendricks, a figurative painter whose work was all about “the beauty, grandeur, style of my folks,” and who scoured the old masters and modernists alike for clues on how to paint as stylishly as his subjects—which is simply to say, the people around him—dressed. His work was not about protest or propaganda; Hendricks made himself the court portraitist of everyday life.

The test of a great group show is a special kind of dissatisfaction: It makes you want to see more by the artists it includes than it can muster. Luckily, there were concurrent solo shows by some of the artists in “*Soul of a Nation*”—not only presenting more work but also bringing it up-to-date with more recent work. At the Museum of Modern Art, you can still see (through January 13) “*Charles White: A Retrospective*,” which showcases the work of one of the elders in “*Soul of a Nation*,” an artist whose style was rooted in the social realism of the 1930s. I find his work heavy-handed, but—mindful of the fact that he is deeply admired by artists of the caliber of David Hammons (whose early work is in “*Soul of a Nation*”) and Kerry James Marshall—I intend to look again more carefully.

The Met Breuer's recent exhibition “*Odyssey: Jack Whitten: Sculpture, 1963–2017*,” was somewhat misleadingly titled, since it not only showcased the rarely seen work in three dimensions by the artist (who died earlier this year) but also provided a concise survey of his paintings—the really outstanding part of his oeuvre. Rather than attempt to review the show in the little space I could give it here, I prefer to quote Bowling—a significant art critic as well as a painter—because what he wrote of Whitten's work in 1971 is just as true now as it was then: “The pictures are so new and mysterious that only intuition tells me this down home brother has it in his hands, his mind, his psyche. His mind reading back to me is laughter. His very body action makes every mark without a mistake, even though painting is full of mistakes.” Whitten's exhibition was a knockout.

In “*Soul of a Nation*,” Virginia Jaramillo is represented by a suavely seductive 1971 painting that shows nothing more than a couple of meandering red lines singing out against an uninflected green ground; the two lines somehow manage to contradict their own evident fixity on the canvas to proclaim an essential freedom of movement. As seen at the newly opened Chelsea outpost of London's Hales Gallery in an exhibition titled “*Foundations*,” her new works, by contrast, have clearer, more solidly architectonic, mostly rectilinear structures, but also more variegated surfaces. I'm kind of amazed that I've never before seen a one-person show by Jaramillo, an artist born in 1939; this one was impressive, and I don't intend to miss the next.