

FRANK BOWLING

Seph Rodney, 'Finding the Heart of a Nation in Generations of Black Art', Hyperallergic, 14 December 2018

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

In the first gallery of the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition at Brooklyn Museum one is confronted with a Manichean visual scheme. Except for Richard Mayhew's "*Pastoral*" painting, which is itself a muted arrangement of heathery tones, this introductory room is monochrome, black made stentorian situated against shades of white, and white made vivid against ebony. How meaningful this contrast can be is illustrated by two paintings by Norman Lewis. The one that faces the viewer entering through the main doors, "*Processional*" (1965), contains a ground that is black, and an abstract array of interwoven, almost-cubist off-white figures wend across the canvas like an undulant line of figures seen through a fun-house telescope. Then, in another painting by Lewis, this one from 1960, the figures metastasize throughout the background, shrouded in white as if enrobed by it—some of them look like triangles with heads and two feet. Then there is a cross. I knew in that moment that if the story alluded to in the image played out, that cross would soon be on fire. The painting is titled "*America the Beautiful*."

In the very next room which is captioned "*New York: The Kamoinge Workshop and Roy Decarava*" that black-and-white motif continues, but takes on a documentary duty. Here among the works chronicling the lives of Black people are photographs by Herb Randall whose "*New Jersey*" (ca. 1960s) image of a semi-nude Black woman is tantalizing in its furtive angle and framing. Adger W. Cowans's "*Shadows*,

New York" (1961) is intimate in a very different way. Showing the heroically large shadows looming ahead of three figures walking a city block, the photo suggests something about the interior lives of Black people, the dreams they carried that made their lives seem fuller and richer than they may have been in daily practice. Then there is consistently astonishing work of Roy Decarava whose lighting schemes strategically carve his figures out of the darkness that surrounds them. Looking at his portrait of "*Elvin Jones*" (1961), I'm reminded of Rembrandt's paintings, how from across the room you can tell that an image belongs to one or the other artist and the image only becomes more enthralling as one moves closer and discovers fugitive highlights here and there.

When I move to a gallery bannered by the title "*NY Revolutionary Images and Art World Activism*" color begins to tumble into this story that is simultaneously being elaborated by region, by chronology, and by medium. Here Benny Andrews and Faith Ringgold stand out. Andrews's figure in "*Did the Bean Sit Under a Tree*" (1969) caught within a frame that incarcerates him against a US flag that threatens to unroll and smother him, has his fists balled up in a boxer's pose ready for this fight. Andrews's figures are so earnest that they begin to come up off the canvas, built up to become three-dimensional reliefs. Alternatively, Ringgold's "*American People Series #18: The Flag is Bleeding*" (1967) imagines the violence of this republic enmeshing all of its citizens. In her

canvas, the US flag is superimposed on three figures — a petite white woman who stands between and links arms with a black man and a white man — while the red stripes bleed red onto them and onto the white field. This work implies that the nation itself is damaged, and that whatever has damaged it, has, in turn, brought grave harm to Black people. (I would argue it's the psychic Gordian knot of founding a social order on the violent domination of a group of people while, without skipping a beat, declaring we are created equal, endowed with a set of rights from which we cannot be alienated.) The Black man is the only figure who is bleeding from a wound over his heart, and the only one to hold a knife in his free hand.

All of this evocative chromatic movement subtly conveys the development of the Black Power movement that first took frank stock of the stark contrast between the nature of the lives of Black and White people given the concerted violence (political, social, economic, physical) meted out to Black people in defense of White supremacy. The movement turned inward cultivating a story of Black pride and self-sufficiency. Then it turned to face the dominant culture with a language, a set of hybrid aesthetics, and survivalist strategies, and began to flourish on its own terms. When I get to the gallery captioned “*Chicago: OBAC and AfriCOBA*” color becomes a tumultuous commotion. In the work of Wadsworth Jarrell, “*Liberation Soldiers*” and “*Revolutionary*” (both 1972), a small mosaic pattern made of the letter “B” for “beautiful” and “blackness,” in equal measure, makes up the facial features of Jarrell’s figures (Angela Davis and members of the Black Panther Party), but continues spinning out in increasingly large circles like a rhythmic and controlled detonation. This work is both beautiful and percussive. (A visual bonus is noticing that the bandolier worn by Davis and Huey P. Newton is brought into being by Jae Jarrell in his “*Revolutionary Suit*” [orig. 1969] which looks like it would indeed be worn by an urban woman warrior.) Displayed in the same room is Jeff Donaldson’s “*Wives of Sango*” (1971) which also incorporates a mottled color palette to develop faces and bodies, with foil added to make gleaming visual accents in portraits that valorize and lovingly mythologize Black women.

When I follow the show to the floor below, pausing on the staircase landing just a half-floor above Sam Gilliam’s “*Carousel Change*” (1970) to take it in, I can feel the shift in concerns. This section of the show represents a general move by Black artists toward posing questions to their mediums and wrapping their arms around aesthetic interests. The wall texts guide the reader there: “*Delineating the Body*”; “*Rethinking the Surface*”; “*Foregrounding Movement and Action*” show up. But then one could just look at “*Carousel Change*,” a painting that is languorously cool and yet intent about moving out from the strictures of the stretched canvas. I understand intuitively that for these artists freedom would not be, could

not be taken for granted — it would be prodded and poked, dragged and stretched to find out how free being free actually might be. Thus we get in “*Brilliantly Endowed (Self Portrait)*” (1977) Barkley Hendricks posing naked in contrapposto with a hat, socks and sneakers, a toothpick held in his mouth, and his cool gaze looking right back at the viewer, like he would greet you in the street with “Hey baby, what’s happening?” The same deep desire to discover the shape and extent of artistic agency produce Frank Bowling’s long immersive canvases that contemplate atmospheres of color. When I visited the show a second time, a man who happened to be in the same gallery at the same time, looked at “*Dan Johnson’s Surprise*” (1969) and “*Texas Louise*” (1971) for longer than I did, and then sat down on a bench and looked some more. These paintings deserve and reward this attention.

In all its explorations and truth-telling this exhibition is carefully and wisely curated by Ashley James. (It is not obvious how much James has tweaked the exhibition she inherited from Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, the curators at Tate Modern where it was first mounted, or how much it changed in its previous installation at Crystal Bridges.) There are only a couple missteps: one of which is crowding together a group of loosely associated Los Angeles sculpture and assemblage artists: Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, and John Outterbridge in a corner on the first floor. This display has the whiff of a garage sale (though it feels like James just ran out of room). And in the gallery near the end, I finally have Jack Whitten, Alma Thomas, Frank Bowling, Howardena Pindell, and Ed Clark in a room together talking amiably with each other. But Martin Puryear doesn’t belong in that room, and frankly gets in the way of the sibilant, but moving conversation about surface and color and light.

Soul of a Nation is both a smart and a necessary exhibition. It shows the interwoven and complex character of Black artistic production which incorporated distinct regions, artistic movements, schools of practice, political philosophies, and medium-specific concerns during those years between the late '60s and mid '80s when Black political consciousness began to cohere and realize its powers. However, something about the title seems off. I want to suggest that this socially and politically fractured nation state doesn’t really have a soul. That’s too ephemeral a metaphor. One might say this nation has a heart — a beating, pulsating, hammering organ of culture that circulates life-giving blood to other, core, vital organs (civic institutions, economic industry) and distal appendages (local community organizations). This might be a better analogy for the narrative that is articulated here and might more clearly explain why any truthful account made of artistic development in the United States during the latter half of the 20th century must include these artists. They concretize in objects those abstract notions of risk and of freedom — because they have long had skin in the game.