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Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power

Curated by: Mark Godfrey, Zoé Whitley

Exhibition schedule: Tate Modern, London, UK, July 12–October 22, 2017; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, AK, February 3–April 23, 2018; Brooklyn Museum, NY, September 7, 2018–February 3, 2019.

Exhibition catalogue: Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, eds., *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, exh. cat. London: Tate Modern, 2017. 256 pp.; 200 color illus. Hardcover \$39.95 (ISBN: 9781942884170)

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Installation view: Sam Gilliam, *April 4*, 1969, acrylic on canvas, 110 x 180 in. (279.4 x 456.6 cm), Image courtesy of David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles.

In the Tate Modern summer blockbuster, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, viewers move through twelve energetic rooms, featuring more than 150 works by over sixty-five artists.¹ The exhibition explores how black artists responded to the cultural and political changes propelled by the black nationalism that emerged in the two decades following civil rights victories of the early 1960s. Its sweeping overview advances two principal narratives. First, a shared spirit of collectivism, exchange, and experimentation united the divergent critical strategies of black artists working during this period. Second, and simultaneously,

there is an underappreciated breadth of critical imagination around the ways that blackness serves as racial identity and a conceptual category, as a wellspring for art practice, politics, and the many relationships between them. These arguments seek to summarize, and also to synthesize, the contributions made by comparatively focused surveys of African American art that cover this historical period, such as *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964–1980* (2006); *Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960–1980* (2011); and *The Freedom Principle: Experiments in Art and Music, 1965 to Now* (2015). This exhibition aspires to situate the insights from these surveys within a wider set of debates and strategies for engaging black experience through the visual arts.

Most of the rooms in the exhibition employ three overlapping thematic designations: group affiliation, local context, and formal strategy. For example, the show begins with the Spiral collective in New York, and in particular with its concern for the painterly, photographic, and racial economies of black and white. In addition to highlighting how local and national political contexts brought the artists in each room together, the exhibition draws attention to the different exhibition spaces where the artists showed their work. In Spiral's case, the show presents a preexisting network of friends, who, in the context of the March on Washington, engaged in dialogue about the role of the black artist through the creation of a new group and exhibition space.

Viewers return to work produced or shown in New York at many points in the exhibition. The exhibition brings together the work of artists that engaged in Color Field abstraction and Minimalism featured in an exhibition titled *5+1* that was curated by the sole British painter in the exhibition, Frank Bowling. It contrasts these experiments with the formalist, affectively dense photography of the Kamoinge Collective, led by Roy De Carava. The final room of the exhibition gives pride of place to the material and conceptual ingenuity of the artists who include David Hammons, Randy Williams, Howardena Pindell, and Senga Nengudi, who were supported by the experimental commercial gallery Just Above Midtown.

The exhibition features three additional rooms: two devoted to work from artists from Los Angeles and the other to Chicago. Early on in the exhibition, viewers encounter the sculptural assemblage of Watts-era Los Angeles, with its skillful reappropriation of the violent and stereotypical imagery of its era. This room is followed by the joyful dynamism of the Chicago collective Africobra and its chromatic, community-centered work. Another room reunites work from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibition *Three Graphic Artists*. This includes a selection of paintings by Charles White, drypoint etchings by Timothy Washington, and body prints by David Hammons.

The remaining rooms—about mural movements, the rhetoric of Black Power, black portraiture, further experiments in abstraction, and a Betye Saar solo show—benefit the exhibition by departing from the above formula. The mural room facilitates conversation between the Chicago *Wall of Respect*, 1967, and the New York collective, Smokehouse Associates, 1968–70. Devoting space to the rhetoric of Black Power provides for a fascinating interaction between two of the grounding art historical coordinates of the exhibition. Faith Ringgold's *DIE*, 1967, is framed here as an unflinching portrayal of a race riot. While *DIE* is first seen in the context of the clenched fist of Elizabeth Catlett's *Black Unity*, 1968, raised in solidarity, the reverse side of her sculpture reveals two faces derived from African sculptural forms, juxtaposed with Ringgold's canvas by the curators so that they bear witness to the unfolding devastation. The portraiture room is the only instance in the show that casts a wider net around black representation by including black and non-

black artists, specifically Andy Warhol and Alice Neel, in conversation with the art of this period. This not only encourages looking at broader artistic contexts and networks for the work produced in the show, but it also suggests that the personas cultivated by the subjects of portraiture are artful expressions in themselves. Lastly, the later rooms allow visitors to trace the diversity of approaches that exist within the oeuvre of some of the most innovative artist protagonists in the exhibition, by revisiting the work of Saar, Bowling, and Hammons, among others.

With collaboration as its focus, the exhibition skillfully encourages connections between works on display. Melvin Edwards's *Curtain (for William and Peter)*, 1969, with its play on minimalist theatricality layered against allusions to shackled bodies, is hung around the corner from *Nu Nile*, 1973, by William T. Williams, one of the artists named in Edwards's title. Williams's steely, rippling colors evoke a vastly different mood, in both their reference to the sheen of a hair product and in their painterly handling. But the pairing of these works invites us to see an underlying logic in an embrace of abstract vocabularies. Through strategies of repetition, the artists conjure performative black bodies that draw attention to racial viewing as a fraught affair, with exchanges of surveillant and soliciting gazes.

Another unforgettably textured exchange of formal, affective, and political intentions occurs in the first room of the exhibition, which is devoted to abstraction, between two elegiac works: Jack Whitten's *Homage to Malcolm*, 1970, and Sam Gilliam's *April 4*, 1969, which invokes the assassination date of Martin Luther King Jr. in the prior year. Gilliam's references to blood and bruising encourage a reading of the canvas as forensic evidence. As the allusions to King's sacrificial body double as the index of the painter's body, Gilliam pressures what it means for the expressionistic canvas to index a movement. Whitten's work, meanwhile, is built from a deep green, blue, and red cutout, which conjures snakeskin, superimposed over a larger triangular canvas saturated with smoky black pigment. The shape is arresting, and the sculptural handling of paint invites a viewing experience more haptic and intimate than the scale of the work would first suggest. It belongs in conversation with Gilliam and also invites a dialogue with the black paintings of contemporaries such as Reinhardt and Stella.

The exhibition is accompanied by a generously illustrated and thoroughly researched catalogue that includes three sections: short entries about artworks and contexts, two longer essays by each of the curators, and a final section with historical reflections provided by artists and art professionals. The first section, called "Spiral to FESTAC," provides encyclopedic summaries of the different collectives. Entries by both curators, as well as contributions by art historian Susan Cahan, provide reproductions of related ephemera alongside illustrations of the artwork that was included in the show. This was an important supplement to the ephemera that was presented in the exhibition—like the Kamoinge Collective *Black Photographers Annual* publication, as well as magazine stories about the mural movements—that greatly enriched the context provided to visitors. The last section, "Recollections," creates an additional archive of personal experiences about the art and exhibitions around which *Soul of a Nation* is organized. As it marks these exchanges and provides a space to view rarely seen works alongside textbook staples, *Soul of a Nation* will serve as a valuable resource for general audiences and art historians alike.

In addition to its role as a reference—enunciating the contours of a wide field of cultural activity whose heterogeneity extends into our own moment—the exhibition takes on the role of critical and historical reappraisal with less success. This is because the curators chose to

scaffold this diverse selection of artwork on an interpretive binary of figuration versus abstraction. At the level of exhibition experience, this seesawing between rooms implicitly reduces the manifold genres and strategies on display into one of two underlying types. Such a binary cannot do justice to the painting on display, and it serves the sculpture and photography even less.

The middle section of the catalogue, “Essays,” justifies the figuration-abstraction framework by drawing attention to the complexity of two sets of historical conditions foreclosing the creative space of black artists. In the first essay, curator Mark Godfrey argues that there was an internal dismissal of abstraction by black artists who felt it was important to make work that was legible to a political cause. In the second essay, co-curator Zoé Whitley argues that there was also an external dismissal of figurative work by an art world that put its critical energies behind abstraction. Whitley convincingly demonstrates that figuration, when chosen by the artists in this exhibition, attests to the diversity of the lived experiences of blackness and deconstructs the rhetorical and political meanings that circulate around black bodies. Whitley convincingly shows that, “in figuration’s insistent redress of negativity and invisibility, representation was in fact fundamental to a conceptual programme.”²

The approach to the abstract work, however, loses out significantly in this dialectic. Godfrey’s essay about a category that he calls “black abstraction” employs Whitley’s logic in reverse. Godfrey repeatedly reads a “kind of symbolism” in the work of abstract artists: one that variously celebrates community, explores spirituality, and contests racism.³ The problem with this reading is not that it misidentifies themes present in the work; instead, it misplaces the critical and historical value of the work in its attainment of “abstract concepts” over the artist’s handling of visual materials.⁴ Godfrey’s essay attempts to argue for an understanding of black abstraction as capacious as its artists’ various engagements with black culture and experience. However, his readings struggle to find a middle ground between projecting what blackness is and exploring what blackness, as an artistic resource, can do. This risks reifying the very representational imperative for black artists that he tries to escape, a performative bind that Darby English has referred to as the perpetuation of “black representational space.”⁵

This kind of abstraction, in which a sentimental narrative risks smoothing out the animating contradictions of a wide set of politics and practice that the exhibition strives to highlight, cannot be separated from wider institutional processes of abstraction. That is, the strategies developed by the artists included in *Soul of a Nation* developed in relation to, and themselves addressed, the historically oppressive and exclusionary practices of art institutions. If it is “timely to look at these [aesthetic strategies] afresh,” as the exhibition proposes, then it is also time to consider the institutional politics of the Tate Modern, in which British political contexts are largely omitted within the exhibition narrative of inclusion.⁶ In Europe, *Soul of a Nation* is the second large exhibition about American blackness in the 2016/17 season, alongside the Musée du Quai Branly exhibition, *The Color Line: African American Artists and Segregation*. Despite dazzling objects and ambitious cross sections of cultural production, there was little to no space taken within the curatorial framework of either show to critically examine how the conditions of artistic production illuminated by these American artists relate to the artistic projects of black artists working in Europe, historically or at present. This summer, to explore what an abstract blackness meant to British art, one could instead visit the Tate Britain *Queer British Art* exhibition, to find that the over-policing of the black body in England throughout the twentieth century made it a privileged erotic site in the white queer imagination. Or, to explore how black

British communities transformed legacies of colonial violence in art produced during the 1980s, one could visit the outstanding traveling exhibition *The Place is Here*, hosted by South London Gallery. But these exhibitions should not have to, nor can they, substitute for a missed curatorial opportunity to enunciate the stakes of historicizing the work of black American artists in Britain at this current juncture.⁷

When *Soul of a Nation* soon travels to the United States, it will face viewing audiences that have, through the exhibitions listed in the introduction to this review, greater exposure to the work of many of the artists that it explores. This will be especially interesting in the context of the Brooklyn Museum, which just wrapped up its 2017 breakthrough exhibition, *We Wanted a Revolution, Black Radical Women, 1965–85*. Unlike *Soul of a Nation*, *We Wanted a Revolution* shows that it is possible to narrate a history of alternative exhibition spaces and collective practices following the civil rights era by enriching our understanding of the gender politics of the era. Although *Soul of a Nation* acknowledges these survey exhibitions of the last decade as part of its curatorial inspiration, its broad overview and emphasis on heterogeneity above all distinguishes it as a survey of a different order. It will be necessary to supplement the curatorial foundation in order to adequately frame the complexity of the many kinds of work on display. It will also be a challenge to recreate the palpable buzz and engagement of museumgoers for which the London iteration of the exhibition will be remembered.

Notes

During the planning stage of the exhibition, I corresponded with the curatorial team of *Soul of a Nation* about the identity of a Beauford Delaney portrait included in the exhibition.

1. I would like to thank J. V. Decemvirale, PhD candidate in art history at the University of California Santa Barbara, for the productive discussions we had about this exhibition after visiting together in the summer.
2. Zoé Whitley, “American Skin: Artists on Black Figuration,” in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Modern, 2017), 225.
3. Mark Godfrey, “Notes on Black Abstraction,” in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, 155.
4. Godfrey, “Notes on Black Abstraction,” 165.
5. Darby English, *How to See A Work of Art in Total Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007).
6. Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, “Introduction,” in *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, 19.
7. For a stirring discussion about the relationship between progress narratives in institutions and processes of economic abstraction, see Huey Copeland and Frank B. Wilderson, III, “Red, Black, and Blue: The National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Museum of the American Indian,” *Artforum* 56 (September 1, 2017), <http://www.artforum.com/inprint/issue=201707&id=70457>.

