



SOMETHING TO LOOK FORWARD TO

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An exhibition featuring abstract art by 22 distinguished Americans of African descent

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GENERALIZATIONS ARE DISTORTIONS, BUT ONE IS OBLIGED TO ATTEMPT THEM nevertheless. The fact that all of these artists are similar in age and work abstractly offers more possibilities than the fact that they share racial characteristics. They come from and live in different places in the world and have very varied approaches to their work, although, being artists, they have that in common. We shall look at each of the twenty-two artists in turn and see what, if anything, turns up.

BETTY BLAYTON'S work outside the studio is highly politicized; inside the studio, the opposite is true—all is inward, personal, even spiritual. Crystal Britton wrote:

Blayton's artwork is coded in the metaphysical. The sphere included in many of her works refers to wholeness, the relationship between man and nature in the most ultimate sense. Thus her work serves as a gateway to higher spiritual levels.¹

Her large oil paintings usually incorporate collage elements in a tondo format, often with cruciform shapes. Many of her abstract forms are organic and appear to refer to the body. They seem to flow into one another and intertwine, though some are stained into the canvas and others applied to its surface. The picture plane is thus simultaneously affirmed and denied. Occasionally a face or buildings may seem to appear, as happens in *Iconograph* or *Tarot*, both of 1970, or in a 1977 monoprint, *Improvisation #5*. Though its demarcations vaguely resemble an African mask, *Dream Symbols*

¹ Crystal A. Britton, *African-American Art: The Long Struggle* (New York: Todtri Book Publishers, 1996), 123.

After *Image*, 1990 (page 30), could be many things in one. Her gentle pastel blue, pink, gold, and rose colorism has held quite consistent over her thirty years of painting very lyrical abstractions.

Blayton's professional life as co-founder and then executive director of the Children's Art Carnival, founder of Harlem Textile Works, and a founding member of the Studio Museum in Harlem, somehow still leaves her time to paint, as well as to be a consultant to the Board of Education of the City of New York and New York State's Arts and Humanities Curriculum Development Committee. She is also a member of the New York City Commission for Cultural Affairs and the Arts and Business Council, and she was a board member of the Bob Blackburn Printmaking Workshop. Born in Williamsburg, Virginia, she studied art at the Brooklyn Museum School, the Art Students League, and City College after receiving her B.A. at Syracuse University in 1959.

FRANK BOWLING'S early subjects were the four horsemen of the apocalypse and dark, angst-ridden depictions of beggars and the life of the London poor. They were painted in London at the Slade School and the Royal College of Art. He had gone to London at the age of fourteen to complete his education. A mid-1960s trip to Guyana, where he was born in 1936, inspired him to paint the memories flooding back of life in his mother's house and store in Bartica on the Essequibo River delta, just in from the Caribbean. Maps of South America, silk-screened images of the house he grew up in, and maps of Africa were set in abstract, richly colored bands (*Mother's House* and *Bartica*born, both 1968).

He has returned to those red, yellow, and green bands in recent years and to the presence of vaguely figurative imagery. They are the colors of the Guyanese flag. Between the bands, the flooded pours of paint washed over these canvases became the paintings themselves by the early 1970s, as he came under the influence of the Color Field painters and their supporter, Clement Greenberg. Their effect on him is clearly visible in *Stretched Pink*, 1980. Bowling's colorism remained true to his birthplace's flag in paintings like *Blaze*, 1975, but the paint surfaces became thick and variegated. Finally by the 1980s, he was adding relief elements to his encrusted, sometimes leather-hard surfaces, as in *Jetty*, 1983, for instance. *Comes Another Horseman*, 1967-97, has the colored bands and the richly worked surface of both periods brought together and up-to-date. This work and paintings to follow, like *Reflection*, 1999 (page 31), are both recaps and affirmations of the vital elements in his work all along. The architectonic structuring seems essential to the vigorous personal force of the surfaces.

Bowling's reputation as a painter was amplified by his activities as an art critic through controversial essays such as "Is Black Art About Color?" and "It's Not Enough to Say 'Black Is Beautiful.'" He also challenged the received wisdom of the time about the necessity for black artists to make their skin color explicit in their work through recognizable subject matter. In his defense of black artists working abstractly, as he was, he encouraged them to embrace their experience as blacks with their own visual as well as musical and literary traditions. He saw that exploring the materials, the methods, and the psyches of black people (basically, exploring Negritude) could

produce an authentic black aesthetic. He was not alone, as artists who took this approach found out.

YVONNE PICKERING CARTER was born in Washington, D.C., in 1939 and has never strayed far from there except in her mind. She received her B.A. and M.F.A. at Howard University; since 1971, she has been teaching at the University of the District of Columbia, where today she is the chairperson of the Department of Mass Media, Visual, and Performing Arts. She is a painter, dancer, and poet who sews her paintings into costumes for her performance works. As she stated in a press release for the July 20, 2002, performance of *Ode to Philip Simmons: Lace, License, Love, Labor, and Appreciation. A Piece* by Yvonne Pickering Carter at St. John's in Charleston, South Carolina:

My work has transformed from the abstract expressionistic idiom to multi-dimensional . . . installation and performance art. Having folded and sewn paper as an integral part of watercolor painting, my current process is to work from the flat watercolors to collage to one-of-a-kind artists' books. My acrylic paintings are sewn into costumes for the performances. I emphasize the use of aqueous media because of the immediacy of the response of the pigments to surfaces. Fluidity and motion stimulate my creativity.

The first two stages of her process can be seen in the work here: *Shrine: Collapse #1*, 1979–80, involves mixed media and water color on paper and seems two dimensional though it is twelve inches deep. *Notes and Tracings #A.20*, 1989 (page 32), almost looks like a study for a stage set, with its cut-and-painted units inside a dark Lucite box looking like protagonists in a drama. This three-dimensional object might be considered or utilized as a sculpture, a unique book, or a prop in a performance. Her costume for a performance of *Doors: Entrances, Exits and Trances—Known and Unknown* in 1990 consisted of painted canvas, blue tulle, ribbons, and various other fabrics sewn, folded, layered, and draped over her body and cascading down and over the floor. Actual doors, and those she decorated, symbolized some of the complexities and mysteries of life she voices in her spoken prose-poetry and implies through her actions. “Dandelions, wreaths, water, earth, latches, the unknown, expectation, uncertainty, death, and hope are the sources of inspiration for *Doors*,” according to the artist.²

EDWARD CLARK'S paintings are about two very modern things: speed and light. Rapid motion is conveyed, whether the stroke flashes through and off the canvas (as one did in 1957 when he created the first shaped canvas to accommodate it), or merely seems about to do so. From 1963, when the first strokes passed completely across the canvas, to 1986, when he began to break some off into arcs, his strokes are always marked by the linear activity associated with speed since the first cartoons used them: parallel lines of force. Subtle shading of the main thrust through the center makes it appear tubular. His paint brush is a broom, and he achieves this effect by loading it with lighter hues on either side of a darker one or vice versa. Small daubs of contrasting colors become the force lines zipping through the field. There is a

2 Robert L. Hall, *Gathered Visions: Selected Works of African-American Women Artists* (Washington Anacostia Museum, Smithsonian Institution 1991), 6.

superficial resemblance to Mark Rothko's stacked clouds of color, but they are static, only vibrating with tension where edges meet; they do not move.

The light seems to come in by itself, unbidden except unconsciously in response to the light in the artist's location. He has taken at least ten working trips to places such as Ife, Nigeria; Crete; the Yucatan; Taos; Bahia, Brazil; Sicily; and Morocco. Each series of paintings that resulted from those stays has its own, quite distinctive, colorism. In addition, Clark lived in Paris from 1952 to 1956 and again from 1966 to 1969. Now he tends to spend summers there and winters in New York. There are naturally more New York and Paris paintings than any other series, but even in them, the light is consistent within the series and different from the others. That is clear in the two paintings, *New York City Sands*, 2003, and *Paris Series*, 1987 (page 33), in the exhibition.

Clark is convinced that all the moving around he did, both as a child during the Depression and also later in his life, accounts for the need for motion in his paintings. If he was as sensitive to the light then as he is now, that might also account for his colorism. Born in the Storyville section of New Orleans in 1926, he moved with his family to Chicago in 1933. After serving in the U.S. Army Air Force stationed in Guam, he studied art on the G.I. Bill at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for four years before relocating to Paris to study at the Grande Chaumière. Nicolas de Stael was an important influence on his early abstractions, but when he came to New York in 1956 at the urging of George Sugarman and joined the Brata Gallery, Sugarman's Tenth Street co-op, he fit right in with high-energy, second-generation Action Painting and has remained committed to it ever since.

MELVIN EDWARDS has received twenty-five awards, fifteen major public sculpture commissions, and forty-nine solo exhibitions; sixty-seven critical essays have been written about his work, which is in thirty-five major museums in America and elsewhere. He has been teaching at Rutgers University since 1971 and is a full professor in the Mason Gross School of the Arts there. His research on the art and architecture of Africa and the Diaspora has taken him all over Africa on numerous visits, to Cuba, to South and Central America, and to France and Japan. It all feeds his art, as does the poetry of his wife, Jayne Cortez, and the many poets they both know. He stated nearly thirty years ago:

We must search for our own processes and symbols, if we can't find them in our individual selves, then we must find them in our families and friends, in our cities. . . . We must take ideas from Guyana, Brazil, Jamaica. . . . From the Philippines, New Guinea, India, Ghana, Nigeria; . . . Zambia, Tanzania, etc. They are all ours.³

Africa, which Edwards first visited in 1970, and to which he has probably returned more frequently than to his home state of Texas, inspired the two sculptures included in the exhibit: *Manguana* is used in Zimbabwe when greeting someone "good morning" in the Shona language; *Ukpo. Edo* means "the edo (or Benin) way," like the Appian Way in Rome. For decades he has been engaged in a "conversation" with Ogun — the Yoruba god of fire and metalwork — in sculptures and drawings that come out of his knowledge of and experiences with African and African-American

³ Melvin Edwards, *Mel Edwards* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1978), n.p.

cultures. He is still working at learning some of the hundreds of languages used in Nigeria and has recently established a co-operative studio/farm in Senegal, where he collaborates with the Senegalese artist Souleymane Keita and other African artists he has long known.

The chains incorporated in *Fire Blossom*, 1991, and depicted in *Ukpo. Edo*, 1999 (page 34), have been present in his work since the mid-1960s. They refer to the enslavement of his people, but also to Prometheus chained to the rock and Vulcan's forge, as well as to Ogun. They are often found in his *Lynch Fragments*; the series, begun in 1963 in response to the lynchings still being perpetrated on blacks in America, has continued for various periods to this day. The circles and upright slabs in *Ukpo. Edo* make architectural references like those in his monumental outdoor commissions, some of which include huge fused links of chain as vertical elements.

Structure and color are of equal importance to **SAM GILLIAM**. Even the "draped" paintings of the 1970s, which established his reputation at the forefront of contemporary painting, were highly structured both in their creation and in their mode of display. Paint wasn't just poured haphazardly onto the canvas; it was guided along geometrical folds, pooled into circles and other deliberate shapes, and frequently aligned in stripes. When installed, these shapes and geometries were brought out in the natural fold lines created by gravity and determined by the points of attachment and any additional propping devices he used.

The color is always robust and exciting, whether the paint is soaked into the canvas, as happened in the early work, or applied brusquely and thickly, using palette knife or combing device either to plywood-backed canvas, as in *Castle*, 1991, or to cut metal or wooden shaped or multipartite "reliefs," as was more his practice in the 1980s. The most recent work, *Portal*, 2003–04 (page 35), is painted right on the plywood and wooden attachments and introduces letter forms into the image pool.

Gilliam studied art at the University of Louisville, painting figuratively in the northern California manner, and spent a great deal of time listening to jazz. That continued after his move to Washington, D.C., but once exposed to the paintings of Kenneth Noland and Morris Louis, he was converted to abstraction and acrylics. By 1966 he was staining canvases, and by 1968, at the age of 35, he was installing them as they were painted, unstretched, draped from fastening points on wall and ceiling. It seems that in the intervening years he has been through many different phases, but he doesn't feel that his

inherent approach to painting has changed at all; whether the painting is on a structure or hanging free in space, or whether it is a found object or a paper sculpture on a pedestal, it is still a statement... [of] what can be controlled and what is spontaneous and open to allow things to happen. Keeping that freedom and sustaining that momentum is the daily job of the artist.⁴

His innate urge toward three-dimensionality has led him to make sculptures and installations, but when he makes a painting it is invariably frontal, even when that front might extend around four sides of space. The boldness of his move out

⁴ Samella Lewis, *African-American Art and Artists* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 191.

into space not only established his reputation, it also helped establish the Washington Color School as an art-historical entity.

DAVID HAMMONS was born in Springfield, Illinois, in 1943 and grew up in California. He studied at the Los Angeles Trade Technical City College, Chouinard Art Institute, and Otis Art Institute of the Parsons School of Design. He swore a vow of poverty upon embarking on a life of art making, likening it in a 1986 interview to “going into the monastery.”⁵ To that end, Hammons has made art out of snowballs that he sold in Greenwich Village, discarded pint wine bottles favored by street drinkers, Harlem barbershop sweepings, scrap wood, found carpeting he decorated with discarded chicken bones, a basketball hoop mounted high above the street atop a long pole (titled *Higher Goals*), and most recently from dirt drawings made by bounced balls, such as *B Ball Drawing*, 2001 (page 36), in this exhibition. Making art in the street, from the street, frees him from the costly necessities most artists require—an ample studio, art supplies, insurance, conservation concerns—and it frees him to live a semi-nomadic existence if he so chooses.

Making art on the street puts it into people’s everyday existence; doing it on the street in Harlem gives it to a largely black audience. As he said in that 1986 interview: “Those pieces were all about making sure that the black viewer had a reflection of himself in the work. White viewers have to look at someone else’s culture in those pieces and see very little of themselves in it.”⁶ Hammons seems to bounce back and forth between two extremes: formalism and provocation. The formalism, which tends toward the geometric, Pattern and Decoration, and Installation Art aesthetics, usually appears when the work is shown in a museum or gallery, in other words, in a formal setting. The provocative work, with its dual base in Dada and black history (the snowballs and the bottle sculptures, respectively) appears most often on the streets or in informal settings.

GERALD JACKSON is a painter who is very involved with jazz and who transforms this dual allegiance into performance pieces, recordings, and books. He has performed his *Adventures in Ku-ta-ba-wa-do* in such disparate venues in New York as the Donnell Library and the Kamikaze Club. First published in 1973, the limited-edition book, record, and score for it have been translated into Mandarin Chinese. Jackson was born in 1936 in Chicago, but he did not study there or get involved with the distinctive Chicago School approach to painting. He knew he had talent for drawing and worked from that strength. Self-taught, he has steadfastly kept out of the art-world “system,” as he terms it, avoiding most attempts to connect his work with that of other artists. He believes in abstraction and has worked that way consistently, because he sees it as democratic, as an opportunity for the viewer to bring something to it, rather than an imposition of the artist’s intention or emotion on the viewer.

Throughout a long painting career, Jackson’s abstractions have been characterized by two main elements—grids and circular elements—and one constant—rich color that often wrings variations on red/yellow/blue, such as the deep orange/gold/aqua of *Untitled #23/Diptych*, 2003 (page 37), in the exhibition. This painting

⁵ Tony Cokes, Interview with David Hammons, 1986, www.brown.edu/Departments/MCM/people/cokes/Hammons.html (accessed on March 2, 2004).

⁶ *Ibid.*

is austere simplified with only four colors and three shapes, but earlier paintings tended toward much greater complexity, with grids within grids, circles sized from dots to large blobs, and multiple bandings. In his watercolors, space is deeper, matter is streaming, and the compartmentalization, so dominant in the paintings, all but disappears. Circles and swooping lines form loops, overlapping patterns, and swirls. One is put in mind of messily drawn musical scores. Art and “sound” performances are only part of Jackson’s life, however. His Central Park Project, the First International Harlem Festival, the Fine Arts World Academy (which he established and which recently made cash awards to seventeen artists), and finding land on which to build artist-designed housing for artists are some of the projects—actual and proposed—that occupy his thoughts and time.

LAWRENCE COMPTON KOLAWOLE was born Lawrence Compton in Beaumont, Texas, in 1931. Thirty-five years later, while spending a year in Nigeria, he was given the surname Kolawole. He studied art at the California School of Fine Arts (now the San Francisco Art Institute) while working at the San Francisco Museum of Art. After serving in Korea for three-and-a-half years, he moved to New York in 1956, remaining until 1963, painting and showing widely. Then he retreated from the “art world” to Val Verde, California, where he lived and worked for a decade, exhibiting in Paris, Amsterdam, and the major cities in Germany. He went to Munich in 1965 and became a master gilder and antique furniture restorer. The knowledge he acquired there and on his learning journey the following year to Lagos, Nigeria (where he studied African culture, artifacts, and symbols) formed the basis of his new work—symbolic furniture—in the 1970s.

Chair (page 38) and *Bed*, both of 1973, are regal, ceremonial furnishings, covered with blue tempera, black, and gold leaf symbols devised by the artist in concert with Gisela Frankenberg (1925–1985). Frankenberg was a German linguist and philosopher who worked with Compton Kolawole from 1963 until her death on a “Nummologie” or “logos-logic” of a step-by-step symbolic analysis of humanity, religion, and art. Whatever their meaning, and they are as obscure to us as Paul Klee’s cryptic messages in paint, they are exciting images that enliven the otherwise empty geometrical areas outlined in gold on the artist’s furniture. The result may have profound meaning, but it looks simply austere and elegant.

ALVIN LOVING was born in Detroit in 1935 and studied at the Universities of Illinois and Michigan. After teaching for a while at Eastern Michigan University, he decided to go to New York, where artists like Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland were working with geometry and illusion, as he was. Within a year of his arrival, he was given a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. He was included in the surveys of African-American art that responded to the demands of the Black Power movement, he began showing in respected galleries, and his work was being avidly collected. Variations of the cube, open and closed, singled and multiplied, and made of brightly colored planes, illusionistically arrayed in shaped canvases sometimes of enormous proportions, occupied him until he saw a quilt show at the Whitney in

1972. He remembered his grandmother's beautifully sewn and designed quilts and the importance of quilts in black history, particularly for slaves like his mother's ancestors, escaping on the underground railroad to Canada. He cut up sixty finished octagon paintings and began sewing them in free-form collages of strips and shapes. Eventually these sewn paintings reached out across the wall, up onto the ceiling, and out into the room.

Whether working with paper, cardboard, and/or canvas (backed with plywood or, more recently, Plexiglas) that is interwoven or laminated together, color is never applied with a brush, but dyed into, squirted, sprayed, poured, or shot onto the surface. Very loose and Abstract Expressionistic in the 1970s and 1980s, Loving's work became increasingly geometrical in the 1990s, even returning to the cube itself near the end of the decade. The spiral came in to stay in 1986, after a trip to Cuba inspired a new interest in Santería and African symbolism, which joined with his long-standing fascination with the imagery of weather maps and interstellar space. He sees the spiral as an emblem of constant change within continuity, of growth fused with stability. The presence of a right angle in almost all of his work, as in *Bright Summer*, 1993–94, seems to have disappeared for the moment into checkerboard squares in *Time Trip Part Two #8*, 2003 (page 39). The title refers back to a work of the 1970s, just as the hard-edged imagery of the work refers back to the early cubes, but all of life and matter is constantly spiraling back and springing forward in what Amira Baraka called "the changing same."

RICHARD MAYHEW was born in 1924, near the Long Island Sound, to a Native-American (Shinnecock/Cherokee/Montauk) mother and an African-American father. His dual heritage has been important to the development of his highly personal, yet coloristically abstract landscapes. As a boy he apprenticed himself to one of the painters inhabiting his area of Long Island, James Wilson Peale, learning the basics of drawing and painting. He studied at the Brooklyn Museum School, at the Art Students League, and with Hans Hoffman in New York. After having a solo show at the Brooklyn Museum in 1955, he received a John Hay Whitney Grant to study in Europe, which he did for four years at the Academia in Florence. He returned to New York in 1963, having studied all the landscape paintings he could find in European museums. His exhibitions at the Midtown Payson and Morris Galleries were successful and well received by the critics, but the situation was not good in general for black artists in American mainstream venues and museums. He joined forces with other important black artists such as Romare Bearden and Norman Lewis in 1963 to form the Spiral Group, which was dedicated to civil rights in the art world. Mayhew taught at many art schools, retiring from Pennsylvania State University in 1992 as professor emeritus to live in Santa Cruz, California, where he was the founding director of the Creative Center for the Arts and Sciences.

The landscapes of the 1960s into the 1970s tended to be quite abstract in terms of recognizable shapes and color. Movements were lateral and pushed in and pulled out of space, but titles were needed to ground the imagery in an actual place. In the 1980s, much greater specificity of tree, shrub, path, and sky took over, and the colors were appropriate to each. After his move to California, color became very

intense, with areas of bright green and blue alternating with scarlet trees, yellow skies, and purple hills. The golden yellows and greens of *Desert Song*, 1997 (page 40), are set off by lavender and light purple skies. One senses hills and paths, vegetation and atmosphere, but all is summarized rather than specified. He is concerned with capturing and conveying the spirit of the land as he feels it, having been taught by his Native-American mother how to listen to its whispers. Often his color is pure and brilliantly full of light, as it is in *Hutson Series #1*, 2003, where a blazing red tree is set in a purple and golden earth and backed by a green/yellow sky. Even when quite large, Mayhew's landscapes feel intimate, and even though you might think of Hans Hoffman, Mark Rothko, and Color Field painting in their presence, the religiosity of George Inness and the poetry of Odilon Redon are there as well.

Born in New York in 1927, **SAM MIDDLETON** left to sail the world as a merchant seaman as a young man and never returned. He studied art at the Instituto Allende in Mexico in 1956 and six years later settled in Amsterdam, where he still resides. His early work was very free and Abstract Expressionist (or Tachist) in feeling, filled with explosive splatters and myriad abstract lines, planes, and dots of paint. In the 1970s, the imagery was more controlled, with borders, white space, and fewer elements. There seemed to be more Kandinsky and less Pollock or Matthieu. The color blue began to be more prevalent and has remained so. He often works in mixed media, creating collages using printed letters and painted or patterned paper, amid colored dots, circles, triangles, rectangles of various sizes, and elements that look like musical staves. Progressions of these units, and their lightness and bounce, add to the musicality. Apparently he is very involved with jazz, and the improvisational brush strokes and splatterings of the early work reflect the jazz of the time; the later work feels like the cooler, more cerebral jazz of recent years, because of the cool blues that predominate and the hard edges of the forms.

Homage to Robert Motherwell, 1997 (page 41), contains a torn reproduction of one of the American's *Elegies to the Spanish Republic* and Motherwell's signature, the only imprecise forms in the whole collage. The free-wheeling organic wildness of the early 1960s has given way to order and calm and a computer-age look. Middleton is generally considered to be a Dutch artist, but his reputation is fully international and well established with exhibitions in the Americas, Australia, and all over Europe.

MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL came from the deep South (born in 1942 in Jackson, Mississippi), studied in the Northeast (a B.F.A. from Howard University and an M.F.A. from Columbia), and has lived, painted, and taught in the Bay Area of northern California since she was 28. She is a full professor at the University of California, Berkeley, and has been honored with awards and exhibitions of her work in Europe, Africa, and South America, as well as in the United States.

Essentially an Abstract Expressionist who creates large, colorful gestural paintings, she allows recognizable imagery into her painting when "the story" that is in her mind demands it. Her long titles hint at the content, but you have to find out more to fully understand them. O'Neal's *Black Marble Palace* series of the mid 1980s

and early 1990s, for example, comes from a line by the Black King in the Menotti opera, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which her father directed one Christmas when she was a child and in which she played a dancer. When Amahl asks him where he lives, the Black King answers, "I live in a Black Marble Palace with Black Panthers and White Doves." Thus, the architectural elements in some of the paintings in that series are explained, and perhaps the presence of black, animal-like forms, but nothing is literally depicted.

In addition, a major visit to Morocco in 1988, where she was very taken by the heavily clothing-swathed women, the architecture, the desert, and the baths, added palatial and exotic imagery to the mix. Ancient, mysterious traditions, like those currently clashing with modernity in the Middle East, seem as fascinating to the artist as they are to us. O'Neal was ostensibly exploring aspects of sorcery in *Sortilegio*, 2002 (page 42), a large mixed media work on paper. No specific imagery emerges from the dark, blue-black depths of the painting, but the rising-and-falling action seems appropriate for a form of sorcery that is, like the Sirens's call, associated with music and song. "Sortilegio" sets powerful forces at work, it seems.

JOE OVERSTREET'S artistic makeup is comprised of a bewildering number of influences, among them Rembrandt, Impressionism, Alain Locke, Native-American sand painting, Fibonacci, Hale Woodruff, Hans Hoffman, Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, sailboats, African and African-American culture and history, and jazz. Born in Mississippi in 1933, he moved with his family five times between 1941 and 1951, winding up on the West Coast where he joined the Merchant Marines after graduating from high school. Sailing part time, he attended college, set up a studio, and went to the California School of Fine Arts and the California School of Arts and Crafts. In 1958, he moved to New York, met some of the artists mentioned above, and began painting in the Abstract Expressionist style. By the end of the 1960s, Overstreet had evolved a hard-edged geometric style of sculptural paintings pulled taut (stretched) between wall, floor, and ceiling by attached ropes. The ropes might reference lynchings, ship's rigging, or other artists' work, but the paintings themselves relate to New York Geometric Abstraction of the 1960s in general, and to Frank Stella and Native-American sand paintings in particular.

Al Loving recalled that he and Overstreet, William T. Williams, Howardena Pindell, Jack Whitten, Bill Hutson, Ed Clark, and Frank Bowling knew they had something in common by the 1970s, namely that they "had all arrived at a kind of abstraction that emphasized materials," though they never discussed it.⁷ In the 1980s, with paintings such as *Sevilla*, 1984, Overstreet let go of the geometric imagery and his sculpto-architectural structures. Then, after spending five years on a commission for the San Francisco International Airport that consists of seventy-five panels of neon and Cor-Ten steel, Overstreet returned in his *Storyville* series (1987) to the traditional stretched-canvas rectangle, with recognizable, oil-painted imagery. He never enjoyed wielding a paint brush, preferring to develop his own ways of applying paint, and he began to transfer paint picked up on newsprint to the canvas surface.

The results are highly variegated, as in *Meridian Nights*, 2002 (page 43), where the oil is on stainless steel wire cloth, the metal grid clearly visible behind

the paint. This indirect way of painting had been particularly useful in his post-1988 series of paintings inspired by seeing the island prison of Gorée, where African slaves were forced through the “Door of No Return” onto the ships that would take them to the Americas.

HOWARDENA PINDELL seems to move effortlessly between abstraction and representation, between painting and collage, and between the purely aesthetic and the political. But then, there are times when she merges them. She is a world traveler, having visited much of Europe, South America, and Africa at least once, Japan twice, and India at least four times. Pindell uses the postcards collected on these journeys to record her memories of them in large free-form collages that tell of the beauties, both natural and constructed, that she saw, but also of the political history, the religions, and the social inequities prevalent there. She has consistently recycled her life into her art. Her early dot-and-arrow drawings were made directly from the television she was watching, diagramming the action, so to speak. The dots she punched from the paper of everyday life—her check stubs and bills, mail, receipts, exhibition announcements, etc.—were literally sprinkled over the wet surfaces of her paintings, themselves constructed out of canvases, pre-used and new, torn into strips and reassembled into sewn grids. *Japan: Miajima, 1982* (page 44), typically comprised of mixed media and methods of making, is overall monochromatic white with pastel accents (often dry pigment dusted onto wet medium) and colorful collage inclusions. She has been “painting” like this since the 1970s, though occasionally a painting is rich in color. An etching, aquatint, and lithograph print of 1988–89 reveals what might lie behind the many layers of a Pindell painting, and that is something very quilt-like, a feminized, personalized grid. While feminist issues dominated her early work, race and her African ancestry have come increasingly to the fore since the 1980s. The *Autobiography* series explores the personal importance of water, the Middle Passage, her ancestors, and the family ghosts.

Pindell was born in 1943, in Philadelphia, and was raised with a high sensitivity to matters of gender and racial injustice. She earned her B.F.A. at Boston University and her M.F.A. at the Yale University School of Art and Architecture in the 1960s. An associate curator of prints at the Museum of Modern Art during the 1970s, she left in 1979 to teach at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, and have more time for her art. Pindell’s early solo shows were at feminist galleries, such as A.I.R. in New York, but later she exhibited in mainstream outlets in the United States and Europe. She has executed six major public art commissions; her work has been collected by most of the major museums in this country, and she has received numerous awards and honorary degrees.

HELEN EVANS RAMSARAN has been exhibiting for at least two decades in museums and galleries in America, Europe, and Asia, but she has only recently been included in book-length surveys of African-American artists. Born in Texas in 1943, she has always been independent. Her sculpture does not slip easily into categories, and she makes subtle but important changes in her work in response to what she learns on

her journeys to Africa, Europe, Japan, and Latin America. These experiences of different cultures, she writes, “have served as inspiration points in my artistic journey . . . [and] altered my perspectives and perceptions.”⁸ Small bronzes retrace the pathways and recall the enclosures in African villages where she learned how important paths were to the organization of basic architectural elements. In 1988, a Zimbabwean newspaper reporter, Mugabe Makusha, announced in the *Harare Herald* that an “American learns from gurus of Stone.” But she learns from the gurus of many countries. What she does not use in her sculpture, helps in her classes at John Jay College, where she has been teaching sculpture, ceramics, and portrait sculpture since 1974.

Secluded in the Grove, 1998 (page 45), definitely shrine-like, seems to be afire. But the “flames” could also be leaves; the bronze does not tell us. Carl Hazlewood wrote in the statement accompanying *Nexus II: Transformation/Transfiguration*, an exhibition at New York’s Skoto Gallery in 2001, that Ramsaran’s “shrines, amulets, and other objects are infused with strange metaphysical significance; they seem like fossilized detritus left over from some timeless religious ritual.”⁹ Even as far back as 1969, when she fabricated *Life Cycles* out of fiberglass, a metaphysical symbolism seemed to flow along the abstract forms. The end is like the beginning, a circle to pass through. Along life’s passage are many ups and downs, but there is a symmetry to it all.

JOHN T. SCOTT was born in New Orleans in 1940. Some of his earliest memories are of hearing jazz played and sung in the city’s bars and brothels, its entrancing sounds pouring out into the street for all, even children, to hear. One of his best-known sculptures, *Doorway for the Blues*, 1992, is all about that experience. Scott constantly makes analogies between what he does as an artist and what jazz musicians do. He sees his process as one of improvisation, even though he is making large-scale painting and sculpture. Once he got movement into his work, he felt he was capturing the spirit and soul of his people, whom he sees as ever in motion as though responding to music heard in their heads. “They move and they dance with their eyes and their hands,” he says.¹⁰ It happened in 1983 when he was invited to work in George Rickey’s upstate New York studios. Rickey’s encouragement to use kinetics was coupled with an African myth Scott had read, which said that when early African hunters killed an animal, they turned their bows over and used the arrows to play music to the spirit of the animal sacrificed to feed their families. That image, he realized, was a diagram of wave physics: any line between two points has length, frequency, and amplitude, and when something is connected to it, it will move. “Ever since that time,” he says, “I’ve been mining that concept. I had the movement of our people.”¹¹

Scott’s *Composition for George Lewis*, 2000, is painted bronze with moving parts—the horizontal elements crossing the wire diameter of the central circle.¹² The movement is gentle, responding only to ambient air movements, and the monochrome color is unusual. Most of Scott’s pieces are gorgeously multicolored, as if each small facet were a musical note drawn in a different color. *Fragment Dance*, 1990 (page 46), is also unusual for Scott in its lack of movement, though movement is certainly implied by the forms and indicated in the title. Dance and jazz go hand and glove in New Orleans, home of the “second line”—walking, dancing, and playing music to accompany the dead to their graves and then to celebrate the

8 Helen Evans Ramsaran, “Personal statement,” in *Entitled: Black Women Artists Virtual Gallery*, www.entitled-bwartists.com/artist/helen_ramsaran_resume.html (accessed on March 2, 2004).

9 Carl E. Hazlewood, “Nexus II: Transformation/Transfiguration.” Transcript of statement accompanying Nexus II exhibit, Skoto Gallery, November 2001, www.nyartsmagazine.com/59/nexus.htm (accessed on March 2, 2004).

10 Kalamu ya Salaam, “Visual Jazz—An Interview with and Portfolio of Paintings by John Scott,” *African American Review* 27, no. 2 (1993): 257.

11 *Ibid.*, 258.

12 George Lewis [1900–1968] was a jazz clarinetist who lived and played in New Orleans when many other musicians left for Chicago or New York, and he was very important to the Dixieland jazz boom of the 1950s and 1960s in New Orleans.

dead's successful "passing over" afterward. The spirit of New Orleans feeds his art. "If you're not working for your village, then you're kind of lost."¹³ He studied art at Xavier University and went to Michigan State University for his M.F.A. Like George Lewis, he returned to New Orleans afterward and never left, beginning a lifetime of teaching where he once learned, at Xavier. He has been given numerous awards, including the John D. MacArthur Fellowship in 1992, and has been entrusted with over a dozen public sculpture commissions.

SYLVIA SNOWDEN, born in Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1942, studied art at Howard University with James Porter, David Driskell, and Lois Mailou Jones, receiving her B.A. and M.F.A. there before and after study in Skowhegan, Maine, and in Paris. She has lived, taught, painted, and exhibited in Washington, D.C., and vicinity for about forty years. Her early work made clear social statements about the racial oppression she felt and saw all around her, focusing on the white woman, specifically the DAR (Daughters of the American Revolution), as the target of her anger. She also explored the volatile area of sexual stereotyping of black men and women in the 1970s, but later, like Willem de Kooning, whose work would seem to have been an important influence for Snowden, her figurative expressionist paintings became so anatomically unspecific that they can easily be seen as abstractions. She exhibits under both categories, which makes sense because when work is very painterly and dense, as her work is, it is easy to read unintended imagery into it, like seeing faces in clouds. A figure could conceivably be in the eye of the beholder of *G*, 1992 (page 47), because many of her figurative expressionist works have similarly outflung and lengthy limbs, but it may also disappear into the thickened acrylic, oil pastel, and ink media.

Snowden paints large and with very deep impasto, leaving relief-like surfaces of coruscating paint, brilliant in color. She customarily paints on the floor, on sheets of paper attached by canvas, or simply on canvas, using enormous brushes, trowels, and her hands to manipulate the thickened paint. But when she created her tribute to her son, Malik, for a solo exhibition at the Corcoran, *Malik, Farewell 'Til We Meet Again*, 2000, she used objects he owned, and the imagery was eminently readable. Her teenage son had been tragically killed on a Washington street, and visitors spoke of how her "love for Malik comes alive" in the installation. One described how

Malik himself comes alive, from his little ice skates moving rhythmically around in tight circles on a platform, to his bike all covered in bright blue acrylic and soaring into the air, just as it must have when Malik rode it to triumph, to the dozens of pairs of very large athletic shoes, encircling a last physical reminder of the strapping young man Malik had become.¹⁴

MILDRED THOMPSON (1936–2003) led a fascinating life. A practicing artist by first grade, illustrating fairy tales and decorating school blackboards, she was also learning to play the piano and other instruments. She continued expanding her knowledge in both areas for the rest of her life, taking up printmaking, sculpture, photography, and filmmaking in turn. She learned to play African and Asian instruments, played

13 Ibid., 273.

14 Posting to Forum for Academic Discourse, September 17, 2000, www.csudh.edu/dearhabermas/adfo5.htm (accessed on March 2, 2004).

guitar in a band called We Do Blues, wrote songs, and, in the 1990s, began composing electronic music. Thompson also wrote and illustrated many children's books, traveled world-wide, and lived for long periods in various German cities, Paris, New York, Washington, D.C., Tampa, Los Angeles, and finally, Atlanta. She studied art at Howard University, in Skowhegan, Maine, and at the Brooklyn Museum School before moving to Germany to study at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg with Emil Schumacher and Paul Wunderlich. By the time she was twenty-five, her work was in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, and the Kunsthalle in Hamburg. She found she could support herself through sales of her art in Europe, but in America she had to hold teaching jobs because gallery shows and sales were scarcer. Until 1982 when she went completely abstract, she made non-representational paintings, but her drawings and prints were based on, or illustrations for, myths, poetry, fairy tales, and psychological studies.

On her own, Thompson learned about, in turn, Greek myths and literature, psychology, the Old Testament, the King James Bible, and the Martin Luther Bible, in a search for the roots of fairy tales. Then she began studying Rudolph Steiner's Anthroposophy, the teachings of P.D. Ouspensky, and finally Theosophy. In 1977, she produced an etching series, *Death and Orgasm* and began looking into the role of women in fairy tales, developing an illustrated lecture, "Females, Fairy Tales, and Fantasy," which she delivered on many college campuses around the country. In 1979, she became the photographer on film projects with Marie-Genevieve Ripeau, and she also discovered Evelyn Underhill's writings on mysticism. In 1982, her work now fully abstract, she began researching the properties of visible and invisible rays, Einstein, and quantum physics. Abstract paintings like *The Birth of Light*, *Making the Invisible*, 1988, *Quaver*, 1989, and *Magnetic Fields/Diptych*, 1990 (page 48), resulted from these interests. Later, when she was composing electronic music and researching sound, she painted *Heliocentric* and *Music of the Spheres*. Many of her canvases are very large, like *Magnetic Fields*, which is eight feet wide, and she completed mural projects as well. Her work is generally characterized by vibrant color, a great deal of linear activity, and a joyous streaming, swirling spontaneity. She created over five thousand paintings, sculptures, prints, and drawings in addition to songs, electronic compositions, films, and illustrated books.

JACK WHITTEN was born in 1939 in the South, in Bessemer, Alabama, and studied there, first at Tuskegee Institute, then at Southern University in Baton Rouge, before heading north to study art at Cooper Union in lower Manhattan. Living in New York ever since, he and his wife Mary, a paper conservator, spend their summers on the island of Crete, where they built a second home. Whitten has been exhibiting his paintings in group and solo shows since the mid-1960s. The early work was highly charged, emotional Abstract Expressionism based in self-exploration. In 1970, he made "a deliberate and conscious decision to start experimenting with the possibilities of paint without imposing the added burden of psychological implications."¹⁵ He began carving tools he called "developers"—rakes, spatulas, combs, squeegees—that he would use to create each painting, the tool determining the kind of mark that would cross the surface. Other accidentally located and deliberately placed objects below

15 Letter to Henry Geldzahler, February 8, 1983, in *Jack Whitten—Ten Years 1970–1980* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1983), 4.

the canvas as it lay on the table or floor interrupted those marks, making others by default, and the tools uncovered previous layers of paint lying below the topmost one as they were pulled through the thickened pigment. The idea was to capture space and energy in paint instantaneously with the swipe of the tool, while depicting nothing. He called the 1970–80 paintings “energy fields,” and they glowed with the light of a television or radar screen.

Black and white dominated then and continues to be a strong presence in all of Whitten’s work. Color creeps in at the edges of *Brilliant Corners for T.S. Monk (aka Around Midnight)*, 1998 (page 49), which is comprised of the tesserae-like squares of pigment that have dominated his surfaces since later in the 1980s. Paint is applied to a plastic covered surface, cut into small squares and peeled off for application to a painting surface. Modular pointillism, Mondrian set free, abstract impressionism—whatever it may be likened to, this process has been liberating for Whitten, who long enjoyed adding “found” elements to his surfaces. The sculptures he also makes as a kind of vacation from painting, and often when he is in Crete on actual vacation from his heavy teaching schedule, are made of carved wood with found objects in the tradition of African aleatoric artistry. Rarely shown, they are both ritualistic and highly personal.

WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS was the first, and for a long time the only, African-American artist included in Horst W. Janson’s ubiquitous textbook *History of Art*. Born in Cross Creek, North Carolina, in 1942, Williams grew up in Queens, New York. He attended New York City Community College before studying art at Pratt Institute (B.F.A.) and then Yale University (M.F.A.). His paintings have always been abstract, at first showing the inevitable influence of Josef Albers’ Bauhausian teachings at Yale in hard-edged, geometric imagery. He began to open up to the people and things of the everyday world by the end of the decade; he started to title paintings in honor of family members and important black people and to make mixed media constructions incorporating linoleum and other commonplace materials. His decorative, high-key colors and the playful geometric interaction of forms seemed a perfect complement to the jazz he loved to hear and had playing at his openings.

In the 1970s, Williams’ colorism shifted down-key into a moodier, almost sultry mode, with pearlescent beiges and purples, maroons and greens. Planes were defined by their edges and directional changes in the brushwork rather than by black or white lines and color changes, so the surfaces are uniform and the facture variegated. In the later 1970s, his brushwork became increasingly personal, even signatory, as it became more and more active and important. He was painting wet into wet, dragging paint into, through other paint and dripping it down, dark against light or vice versa, while thinking of the foliage and ground surfaces, the hills and dales of his native North Carolina. As can be seen in *Du Drop*, 1979, there are intimations of landscape, but no depictions, just rhythmic strokes aligned within vertical registers ranked regularly or irregularly above one another. One is put in mind of African strip-cloth fabric construction.

Then, in 1984, his own hand becomes the processing tool and the image as he handprints the paint onto the surface in serried ranks, often black hands (or

brown) lighted as if from behind by white. All the hands have fingers spread and up, as if imploring or praising a god, and, conversely, all stream off below as though sliding down the surface. (As sensitive as he is, Williams undoubtedly knows that when the hands of sugar cane-cutting slaves in the Caribbean became too infected from work-related gouges and wounds to function, they were cut off, and the worker left to die.) In any event, hands are so eloquent. How important to the enjoyment of jazz by the non-players! How crucial to the life of the laborer, forced or not! And to an artist! *Harlem Hearts*, 1999 (page 50), represents a return to letting the paint itself produce the image, due to its process of drying in layers, cracking open to reveal colors below. Here he seems to be taking his hands literally out of the picture. The rich, clear color is also somewhat of a return to earlier concerns, and yet the painting steps forward into new territory.

FRANK WIMBERLEY was born in 1926 in Pleasantville, New Jersey, and studied at Howard University with James Porter, Lois Mailou Jones, and James Wells. He lives in New York and Sag Harbor, where he is part of a community of black artists, intellectuals, and professional people who have been gathering there since the 1920s, enjoying Nineveh Beach and the beautiful shoreline and waters of Shelter Island Sound. In fact, African Americans have been calling Sag Harbor and its hills home since the 1600s. Wimberley and his wife Juanita have been vacationing there since the early 1960s, and they built a house of their own design there in 1965. "The Wimberleys' skylit, modernist home became a magnet, especially for young members of the community," according to Jim Richard Wilson. "Set away from other houses, it was filled with art and the sound of jazz."¹⁶ The artists there, such as Greg Coates, Nanette Carter, Alvin Loving, and Harlan Jackson, began showing together in the early 1970s, and their importance to culture in the Hamptons was acknowledged in an exhibition at the Guild Hall Museum in 1979, *Eastville Artists*.

Wimberley began showing his work in the late 1960s and has been in about a hundred solo and group exhibitions since then. His work is included in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Art Institute of Chicago as well as numerous other public, corporate, and private collections. His paintings are Abstract Expressionist in technique, warm and sunny in feeling, rich in color, and not at all self-conscious or rhetorical.

Occasionally he works monochromatically, as happened with *The Drawing*, 2002 (page 51), a 60-by-60-inch predominately bluish white canvas invaded by faint linear markings that could recall graffiti scratched on an old European wall, except that nothing is decipherable. One thinks of the self-styled Abstract Expressionist photographer, Aaron Siskind, here and in a work from ten years earlier, *Black with White*, 1992, of mixed media on paper. The latter work even carries something of a photographic quality, whereas *The Drawing* is in the tradition of scrawl-writing painting established by Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly. But Wimberley brings a distinctive, gentle sensibility to all that he touches, stemming perhaps from his color choices or the softness of his brushwork. Works on paper and some prints are structured as collages, and many of the paintings seem collage-like in their incorporation of abutted incident and overlapping forms.

¹⁶ Jim Richard Wilson, "A Place By the Sea," interview with Juanita Wimberley, 1999, www.sage.edu/divisions/arts/Rathbone/Essaye~1.htm (accessed on March 2, 2004).

SO WHAT LINKS THESE ARTISTS? What is common ground? Certainly an interest in their African heritage, however strong or direct its effect on their work. Generally rich color and solid structure characterize their forms. A boldness, I am almost tempted to say fearlessness, when it comes to handling materials and confronting the empty picture plane or sculptural space. An intensity that seems unusual. But is it? Do I have these feelings because I like the work of so many of these artists and have known it for many years? Is it because the person (or persons) who selected the work happens to like what I like? Would I have responded otherwise to a different selection with the same parameters? Would you?

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