

FRIEZE.COM

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

In 1972, writer Amiri Baraka's album, *It's Nation Time*, sounded a revolutionary call towards a new theory of blackness, one of self-determination drawn beyond the parameters of national boundaries. Chanting, singing, and screaming his poetry over African drums and free jazz, Baraka (a founding member of the interdisciplinary Black Arts Movement, which emerged in New York) asked his listeners: 'Can you imagine something other than what you see? Something Big, Big and Black. Purple yellow red and green (but Big, Big and Black).' This idea of nationhood, both at odds with the conventions of the American Dream and opposed to a separatist ideal of 'nation', gives colour to Tate Modern's first survey of African-American art, 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power'. Focusing on black artists between 1963 and 1983, the exhibition accounts for art made at the intersection of the Civil Rights movement and the widespread revolutionary actions it inspired. Contemplating the show's ambition to reflect the diversity of artistic positions taken up by these artists, it opens up a space to discuss, and even think anew, the prevailing questions around the political responsibility of art today.

Beginning with the Spiral group, 15 artists who formed in the context of the March on Washington Bridge for Jobs and Freedom in 1963, the exhibition frames a broad selection of artists who took different directions in relation to aesthetics, politics and art-making in a time of extraordinary turbulence. Centring on Romare Bearden, whose initial proposal to produce collages collaboratively was rejected by other members of the Spiral Group, the first display presents a series of collages that capture the jazz-infused angst of his beloved Harlem neighbourhood. Bearden's bold photostats, like *Dove* and *Conjure Woman* of 1964, employ a richly graphic intermix of figures and faces, interiors and exteriors, textures and surfaces - an ode to the spirit of black modernity. Cultivating an artistic language all their own, the Spiral group's unwillingness to surrender aesthetic considerations to political protest (some attended the March on Washington and heard Dr Martin Luther King's famous 'I Have a Dream' speech), sets the mood for a socially-charged narrative of black art. Part of what makes this work so compelling is its entanglement with the everyday lives of ordinary people. It drew on everything from the violent presence of the Klu Klux Klan (captured in Norman Lewis's harrowing abstractions resembling KKK ceremonies) to the restorative nature of folkloric traditions (rendered brilliantly in Bearden's photostats that channelled supernatural myth).

On the other side of America, a different generation of artists would begin to develop a radical formation of blackness, detached from strategies of representation. A year before Melvin Edwards would create his famous *Lynch Fragments* in 1963, Ronald Stokes, an unarmed member of the Nation of Islam, was shot by police in Los Angeles - his death drew Malcolm X to the city. It was during this period of intense civil unrest and police brutality that Edwards's powerful welded steel sculptures, David Hammons's mythic body prints and John Outterbridge's constrained-yet-chaotic assemblages came into view. Resisting a chronological hang,

## weiss berlin

'Soul of a Nation' attempts an expansive reading of these diverse works, setting its sights on periodized clusters of like-minded artists. They are framed either by geography (West coast - East coast) or approach (legible figuration - abstract expressionism). Leaping from story-to-story and room-to-room, the show traces a porous timeline that outlines the rise of black power as an ideological frontier. Sometimes it seems the symbolic role of representational painting falls short of the constitutive political motivations of art making - an inherently social practice. 'Black Heroes', the only room that includes some non-black artists, leads with a series of portraits memorialising Black America's hall of fame, boxer and activist Muhammad Ali's gaze pierces through Warhol's 1978 screenprint. It is worth noting how most of these artists (including the modernist Beauford Delaney and New York portraitist Alice Neel) aspired to represent the black community for different reasons, and some even sought to take on history painting by centring on ordinary black people. By this time, of course, the racial imaginary had emerged in other spheres of image-making, avant-garde filmmakers (such as Edward Owens and William Greaves who feature in the accompanying film programme) and video artists (like Ulysses Jenkins), had sought to represent 'other' formations of identity that interrogated questions of gender, myth-making and African-American experience.

The interdisciplinary nature of new media seems distant from any narrative of black art composed almost exclusively of objects. One room centred on 'Los Angeles Assemblage' draws together a group of artist who used strange and desperate fragments of material, vernacular, and popular culture to create work of social critique. A witness to the Watts Rebellion of 1965, Noah Purifoy gathered materials from the streets to craft objects that recalled traditional African sculpture, while Betye Saar's objects fused African and native-American religious practices with the racist symbolism of popular culture. From the perspective of comparative modernities, this might have been an interesting opportunity to introduce the parallel movement of black British art (Guyana-born British artist Frank Bowling was based in New York at the time), whose work also called upon similar notions of pan-Africanism and diaspora, or more relevant still, some of the new media practices, literary and musical experiments informing black radical consciousness. Many of these LA-based works were infused with a non-Western spirituality that spoke to the transcendence of black life through time and space: Saar (the subject of a single room) had meditated on questions of cosmology and astrology, inviting viewers to participate in leaving spiritual offerings at the foot of the work; Senga Nengudi performed African spirituals under a freeway, dressing concrete pillars in different pantyhose to represent male and female characters. Somehow, these speculative and ambiguous expressions of the black spirit seem to evade the narrative of 'political' art that clings to formal objects (the stunning abstract art of the early '70s), or democratic art (articulated by figurative movements such as Chicago artists collective, AfriCOBRA).

Walking through 'Soul of a Nation' one is able to read, rather than sense, the influence of the wider cultural landscape of the Civil Rights era: John Coltrane's free jazz in the abstract expressions of New York painters; Amiri Baraka's poetic visions echoing in the Organization of Black American Culture's feel-good murals; Marvin Gaye's prophetic lyrics pulsating through Barkley L. Hendricks' achingly cool 1974 painting, *What's Going On*. Despite its broad and all-together brilliant inclusion of artistic voices spanning the time, the exhibition seems to lack the musicality that once seemed to bridge aesthetics and politics. One of the most vital ideas to emerge from the exhibition chases the ongoing discussion around questions of abstraction and figuration, forms that would seem to promote opposing political projects. In rooms dedicated to 'East Coast Abstraction' and the subject of 'Improvisation and Experimentation', the exhibition elegantly revives critical histories of black non-figurative art. Though many artists refused to adopt shared positions on the subject, some critics claimed abstraction could not connect to black lives, while other arguments spoke to the incapacity of the black body to signify universal meaning.

The exhibition ends with a focus on the New York gallery Just Above Midtown (JAM), which had opened in response to the dearth of commercial representation for black artists and their relative invisibility within institutions at the time. The advanced programming of JAM's founder Linda Goode Bryant (former Director of Education at The Studio Museum in Harlem) set the black-owned gallery down a fascinating path forged by a unique commitment to selling innovative and non-figurative art by black artists, including abstract expressionist painter Norman Lewis and conceptual artist Lorraine O'Grady. Redefining itself with every project, JAM resisted looking at art through a sociological lens, presenting everything from performance and concerts to presentations of politically motivated work of artist

## weiss berlin

such as Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg alongside black artists. Pointing to the gallery as an open-ended platform, the experimentation of new forms in 'Soul of a Nation' brings an unexpected end to a stately exhibition of considerable breadth. While it sometimes seems as though the fear of overlooking 'vital' works of canonical art would weigh heavy on the impending historicization of the exhibition itself, the show successfully confronts the inevitable challenge of imposing a broader socio-historical narrative onto a period of radical non-conformity. Even if the aesthetic and political motivations do not always converge, we may still look to how black art has become inseparable from the broader moment of political inflection, but we should also look beyond what we see.