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AFRICAN AMERICAN ABSTRACTION

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In Mary Schmidt Campbell's biography on Romare Bearden, *An American Odyssey*, she offers a clue about the stakes of the debate on African American abstraction art through a masterful use of what could have seemed like a small anecdote. In 1961, President-elect John F. Kennedy worked out of a suite in the Carlyle Hotel in New York City adorned with an abstract painting on the wall by Bearden, *Golden Dawn*.[1] It was the only painting by a contemporary artist from New York City hanging, a pride of place for which Bearden's then-gallerist and dealer Arne Ekstrom had long labored. This was the start of momentum that powered the rest of Bearden's career when he would move from abstraction to a modulated figuration. Yet in Campbell's scholarship on the intersection of art and politics that shaped Bearden's world, she notes that his name was omitted from the official list of those at the Samuel Kootz gallery which represented Bearden during the prior period. "Kootz, interviewed years later for the Archives of American Art, lists all of the artists who exhibited in his gallery during the 1940s—except Romare Bearden," Campbell notes.[2] It seems like a small omission, but it emblematizes a larger pattern. Writing about African American abstraction requires addressing a paradox: the artists that have been pivotal for the history of modernist abstraction can be elided from it. For decades, it had been difficult to even see the work of African American abstract artists in mainstream histories and exhibitions. Yet it is not possible to fully understand the history of the field of late modernism (or African American art at large) without considering the history of black abstraction.

To make sense of this contradiction, enter the narrative-shifting work by scholars and curators including Ann Gibson, April Kingsley, Kellie Jones, Kobena Mercer, Valerie Cassel Oliver, Okwui Enwezor, Naomi Beckwith, Richard J. Powell, Mark Godfrey, Zoé Whitley, and Darby English that, despite different approaches, provides incontrovertible evidence of the error of those past narrative omissions, nodding briefly to the reasons for them, and making associations between the work of artistic contemporaries both in and outside of the Black Atlantic world. This rigorous, corrective focus on the interventions by black abstract artists has created more than recuperative measures—addressing works that have been overlooked. It has modeled how collective, mutually engaged curatorial initiatives, collecting practices, and artist-based advocacy are required to create the counternarratives needed to understand the full scope of late modernist abstraction itself. The resulting scholarship on African American abstraction in particular, with a few exceptions, converges to amplify a central intervention—that abstraction is not a

mode of a separation from the social world but is a capacious enough strategy to comprise another means through which to address it.

It is hard to begin a discussion about the shift in the discourse around abstraction within African American art without considering the foundations set by Ann Gibson's scholarship from the late 1990s, April Kingsley's exhibition 1980 exhibition, *Afro-American Abstraction: An Exhibition of Contemporary Black Painting* and *Sculpture by Nineteen Black American Artists* at P.S. 1 in New York City, and Sculpture, and the 1991 exhibition, *The Search for Freedom: Abstract Painting 1945–1975* at the Kenkeleba Gallery.[3] Gibson was transparent about the thoroughgoing discursive shift required to properly consider why African American Abstract Expressionist practices had been "discounted," and reflected candidly on her own disturbance upon realizing that, at the time, "no people of color were considered 'major' Abstract Expressionists." In an exemplary move, she took herself to task for producing scholarship that replicated this phenomenon until, she says, art historian Judith Wilson, then one of her graduate students at Yale University, wanted to write on Romare Bearden. Gibson confessed that she "had not until then thought of his relation to Abstract Expressionism as an issue." She continued to reflect on the fact that "[t]he hierarchy was not explained or excused; the artists were simply excluded. And it wasn't because their work wasn't available or because it didn't look like Abstract Expressionism."[4]

Gibson took on the very definition of abstraction as a concept that needed to be dislodged from Greenbergian formalism and influential ideas about "quality" and "presence" that defined it. Gibson's scholarship, too, challenged the history of Abstract Expressionism and its "mythic universalism" and formulation of originality as a form of technical innovation predicated on a "denial of politics." The result is a text that was singularly emphatic in calling out how "decisions about whose art counts and whose art counts the most are decisively determined by social attitudes."[5] The aim was not to "diversify" any so-called canon of Abstract Expressionist artists so much as it was to lay it bare as a cultural product of social construction of the period.

Gibson presaged that at the very heart of the work of many African American abstract artist practices is the need to contend with not only what is considered the purview of a black artistic practice, but to enlarge the subject matter and idea of embodiment that can be considered a rightful part of the practice of abstraction itself. In recent years, this has meant a reconsideration of the very definition of abstraction by scholars both in and outside of the discipline of art history. Literary critic Phillip Brian Harper has, most recently, engaged in this exercise. Harper strategically sidestepped debates about abstraction that have centralized Greenbergian arguments and instead engages with Bertolt Brecht's *alienation effect* that foregrounds both the constructed character of art production and makes it central for the critical edge of a performance of piece of art. In so doing, his study engages with artists such as Fred Wilson and Kara Walker alongside literary works by asking the question, "how can a work clearly ground itself in the real-world racial order as to register as black while at the same time clearly *disassociating* itself from lived reality to register as productively *abstractionist*?"[6]

The collective spadework required to historicize black abstraction has operated in a strategically recursive pattern. It has chronologically doubled back on history to productively challenge the narrative of late modernism, African American art history, and American art itself. An exemplary model is Kellie Jones's path-breaking 2006 exhibition of African American abstraction, *Energy / Experimentation* at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Set against the backdrop of the civil rights and black nationalist era, its layered significance comes through its location. The Studio Museum, which opened in September of 1968, had been the focal point of the conflict that created a wedge between African American abstract artists in the late 1960s and the broader black community, as well as a largely white mainstream art world. This began with The Studio

Museum's inaugural exhibition of the light installation work by Tom Lloyd, *Electronic Refractions II*, in 1968.[7] The follow-up exhibitions were a solo show of Benny Andrews, an exhibition of AfriCOBRA artists and later in 1969, *X to the 4th Power*, with work by William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam, and Stephen Kelsey and the "X" in the title referencing the untold power of abstraction.

It was the beginning of an intense paradox for the display and reception of African American abstraction. Jones assiduously recounted that downtown from the Studio Museum, "between 1969 and 1975 the Whitney Museum of American Art presented twelve exhibitions featuring black artists—eleven solo and one group. Of that total number, six were one-person shows by artists working abstractly."[8] Yet during this period, African American abstract artists felt the consequences of their visibility by black audiences and were largely met with silence by mainstream scholarship. Jones's *Energy / Experimentation* show cycled back to this moment after segregation to frame and name what was born but not acknowledged in this moment by "a critical mass of practitioners committed to experimentation with structure and materials."[9] She thematically defined the experiments and directions taken by African American abstract artists working between 1964 and 1980: from opticality (Al Loving, William T. Williams) to innovative materials (Fred Eversley and Tom Lloyd) to surface (Haywood Bill Rivers, Frank Bowling, Howardena Pindell).[10]

Darby English's *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* uses a divergent method to scrutinize the fault lines in this neat demarcation between social and "late-modernist abstraction," which he terms "color painting," as African American artists complicated the debate between the placement of the body and the relational in the context of abstraction.[11] He seeks to understand this history as more than a "simple choice between political engagement and apathetic retreat," but to show the "cultural work" of abstraction.[12] Here, English rhymes with Kobena Mercer's argument about painter and critic Frank Bowling, whose colorist framework was about more than opticality, but the very artificial bifurcation between abstraction and a socially constructed sensibility. Mercer focuses, as one example, on the color symbolism in Bowling's painting, *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman*, 1968, with its Ethiopian tricolor scheme that has become known in the context of Pan-Africanism. What is equally visually dominant is Bowling's play on Newman's use of the line which he intersects with placements of floating continents. While Newman lands on a hard-edged line in his series *Who's Afraid of Red, Yellow and Blue?* from 1966, Bowling's lines are mutated, blurry, and bookended by color fields. If Newman longed for a form of abstraction that, in a pre–Clement Greenbergian sense could be about "world turmoil" and not only "art-making itself," as Mercer said, Bowling seemed to signify, with the composition's porous lines hovering above and through continents including Africa and South America, what it will take—a reconsideration of cultural contexts born of a delimited global field (Figure 14.1).[13]

In Mercer's extended study on Bowling and Aubrey Williams and his framework for the edited volume, *Discrepant Abstraction*, he laid out a broader argument for an approach to abstraction that questions the parameters of the field as part of, as Eddie Chambers puts it, "an object lesson" regarding "how much *art history* has yet to be excavated and created."[14] Through it, Mercer offers an example of why it is impossible to understand late modernism without an understanding of black abstraction. It is not only because of the issue of totality—that it would omit a key set of figures and processes. It would prevent a full grasp of what Richard J. Powell and Paul Taylor would consider the "interrogative" of black aesthetic practice.[15]

The corrective focus on African American abstraction, in part born of market forces that Huey Copeland has quite rightly contextualized as a "rampant speculation" with implications for the "discursive forgetting and recovery of such work"—has also enabled an artistic double voic-

Figure 14.1 Frank Bowling (b. ca. 1934), *Who's Afraid of Barney Newman*, 1968, acrylic paint on canvas, 2364 × 1295 × 27 cm. © Tate, London 2019.

ing—works and initiatives have become strategic, embedded salutes to other African American abstract forerunners.[16] As Copeland notes, it was photographer Dawoud Bey who, in 2004, wrote about the new centering of black abstractionist painting practice in his *artnet* article, "The Ironies of Diversity, or the Disappearing Black Artist." Mark Bradford, Jack Whitten, and Rashid Johnson (whose multidisciplinary practice extends to abstraction) have strategically double-voiced their practice when the spotlight was on their own work, leveraging their cultural capital to make a narrative back turn to their undertheorized colleagues. This has been done through tribute exhibitions and embedded tributes in paint, such as Whitten's homage to Norman Lewis as the headwaters of African American abstraction with his *Norman Lewis Triptych*.[17] In the case of Bradford, it translated into an intentional gesture to cede space in both galleries and public discourse to Whitten. In the case of Johnson, it meant a very public salute to Color Field painter Sam Gilliam through the act of curating an exhibition of his early work that Johnson felt that was largely hidden from what work of Gilliam's had become better known.[18]

"While Gilliam is undoubtedly African American, he is not necessarily a maker of 'black art'—whatever than phrase may mean," Jonathan P. Binstock wrote on the occasion of Gilliam's 2005 retrospective at the then Corcoran Gallery of Art, articulating the reasons for the fraught and at times non-positional placement of African American abstract artists where racial identity is seen as somehow in opposition to a chosen formal approach. Binstock argues that certain works "such as *April 4* of 1969 which Gilliam made on the first anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, and *Three Panels for Mr. Robeson*, a group of three massive Drapes that he hung from the Corcoran's ceiling in 1975 as an homage to the actor, singer, and activist Paul Robeson, resonate strongly in the context of African American history and culture."[19] Binstock's candor about Gilliam—as part of African American art history when the works "resonate strongly" with black culture but as "not necessarily a maker of 'black art'" when creating abstract work without an obvious racial referent—serves to underscore the importance of the framing of Gilliam's work in both landmark exhibitions such as *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, as well as in so-called mainstream histories of abstraction, locating African American artists in many positions in which they should be found. On the subject of Gilliam's work, taking Washington D.C. itself as a site is an important way to use place, decentered New York City, as a way reconsider the narrative of African American abstraction as a way to understand the reception and centrality of both Gilliam and in particular, Alma Thomas.

That abstraction would pose a challenge to both a coherent history of African American art and to the history of late modernism is not a surprise considering the polemical debates that

raged during the Harlem Renaissance, the period before the watershed moment of abstraction in the late 1940s. This debate hinged on an assumption about the instrumentality of African American art for the purpose of racial uplift and gave primacy to representational work. During this period, W. E. B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Alain Locke focused on the pointed, political quality of art to create civic narratives. Part of what created the urgency was not only the cultural stewardship and curatorial viewpoints espoused by Locke's affirmative, cosmopolitan approach to the idea of African American cultural development, but the stance by Du Bois who saw art as what he termed "propaganda," that is to say, inevitably political.[20] In the 1930s and 1940s, early works by Jacob Lawrence and William H. Johnson, for example, did engage with formalist leanings towards abstraction but never left representation and narrative far out of view, using the vehicle of the figure as the primary ground for this experimentation.

Romare Bearden would complicate this neat positionality with his essay, "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," for the 1934 issue of *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life* while he was in college at the start of a career that would take him into and then out of the realm of abstraction. By 1947, as Sharon Patton laid out in her survey of African American art, Bearden would become one of "only four African-American abstract painters … who had solo shows in New York."[21] (The other three were Norman Lewis, Rose Piper, and Thelma Johnson Streat.) Presaging his role as a leader, writer, and editor, Bearden entered the fray regarding the question of the day—what should art by an African American artist be? African American artists, he stated:

> must not be content with merely recording a scene as a machine. He must enter wholeheartedly into the situation which he wishes to convey. … I don't mean by this that the Negro artist should confine himself only to such scenes as lynchings, or policemen clubbing workers. If it is the race question, the social struggle, or whatever else that needs expression, it is to that the artist must surrender himself.[22]

Bearden had no interest in his work functioning as propaganda. He was consumed with, as he put it, "painting the life of my people as I know it—as passionately and dispassionately as Brueghel painted the life of Flemish people in his day."[23] For him, the efficacy of an artwork came from an artist finding their own idiom to convey their vision of the world, and that idiom could be found through an engagement with abstraction.

During the Civil Rights movement and the age of Black Power, how did one qualify the decision to engage with abstraction? Curator Mark Godfrey, having organized the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition with curator Zoé Whitley, described the practice, particularly in the 1960s, as a move away from activism, arguing that work by African American artists in this moment was largely, instead, about "commemoration, evocation, and suggestion, following the example of [Norman] Lewis."[24] Godfrey cited Mel Edwards's defense of abstraction, "one of the most eloquent defenses of abstraction from the whole period," when he stated that "abstraction offered a way of letting the message be the actual change."[25] In so doing, African American abstract artists could challenge what we mean by activism in the first place—whether the aim is enunciation, stating what should be done, or embodiment.

"Is there a Negro Image?" When Bearden became the leader of Spiral, the artist collective formed during the politically pivotal year of 1963 as a response to the March on Washington, this was still a central question. He hosted a gathering in his loft on Canal Street which would lead to the formation of a group of fifteen artists, all men with the exception of Emma Amos. The group took its name, given by Hale Woodruff, to convey the idea of their propulsion and capacious perspective. The question was how these artists could "respond to the Civil Rights Movement through their art, and without having to go the figurative route."[26] Norman Lewis, part of this group and

a prominent figure in the field of Abstract Expressionism, notably included in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, *Abstract Painting and Sculpture in America* (1951), set out that critical question for the group—"Is there a Negro Image?"[27] This added to the Harlem Renaissance debates a new interrogative framework for artists coming out of Abstract Expressionism. The question became: How could abstraction be its own force while speaking to racial life?[28]

It is significant that this question came from Norman Lewis for whom, despite the repetition in scholarship that his work is central, the question remains, "Where does he fit?" in the literature on Abstract Expressionism.[29] Lewis's *Untitled (Circular Procession of Figures)*, 1953, signals why his location in mainstream narratives is so mercurial. On the picture plane, in green, white, and black ground, he set out marks that appear as stick figures moving in a centripetal fashion, surrounded by a haze of a shadowed, blurred space. These figures, extending the format of Lewis's compositions as processionals, are hovering, circling around a black form, a seeming vortex. Lewis rarely made figurative marks this pronounced again. Yet through a compositional outlier, he diagramed the questions that would occupy his focus. Must a figure, grounded in a plane, be the agent that circles and confronts a subject, or can figures themselves spin out into other forms that themselves indexically gesture to events in the world?

Abstractionist practices played a key role in the ongoing debates about what constitutes "black art" which manifested in the exchanges between critic Hilton Kramer, curator Edmund Barry Gaither, and artist Benny Andrews in 1970 and 1971. In his review of Gaither's co-curated exhibition, *Afro-American Artists: New York and Boston*, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Kramer makes a distinction between quality by exulting the work of "abstractions of various persuasions," saluting artists including Norman Lewis, Al Loving, and Alma Thomas. As for the rest of the representational work, Kramer deems it "political propaganda pure and simple" and a failure in terms of artistic accomplishment.[30]

At the heart of the history of race and abstraction is an often-overlooked question: what are the tactics available to an artist when racialized figures do not read as universal? Jacqueline Francis has deftly focused on the relationship between figural abstraction and racial portraiture.[31] In the absence of icons celebrated in public in the mid-twentieth century, she argued that abstraction became a means of deforming this figurative template to make expressive statements. This fraught relationship of the racialized figure in the context of abstractions explains the velocity with which artists such as Bearden, and later David Hammons, for example, came to and then out of abstraction, and why the world of the social entering artist's abstract practice is so collectively hard won.

Richard J. Powell has included Barbara Chase-Riboud within a set of artists who make the case for the marriage of "embodiment"—a race-based idea, a kind of "quintessence"—abstraction which could allow any "artist to avoid racial specificities and corporeal materializations altogether."[32] Indeed, Chase-Riboud offers an example of how artists have taken it upon themselves to argue for this dual positioning to resolve this tension between ontology, race-based expectations, and aesthetic freedom. Chase-Riboud is one such artist who had to contend with the cauterizing, presumptive politics of blackness in the age of Black Power and the urge to rationalize the turn to the aesthetic focus on abstraction. When considering making *The Last Supper*, 1958, a work of figural abstraction, Chase-Riboud credits the encouragement of two mentors to keep her attentive to how she could embrace "concrete reality, liberal socialism, humanism, and emotional content when everything else was going toward cold abstraction."[33] The later 1960s marked her period of a turn to abstraction, often using the lost wax technique to create a series of bronze sculptures where the sheets of wax were thin enough to create a near fluid illusion in bronze. With this process, she created the *Malcolm X* steles, the title referencing the funerary objects to honor an historical figure.[34]

Here we arrive at a unique feature of the field of African American abstraction. It is not only the scholar or curator, but often the artist's own voice that served as a key agent in disrupting the calibrated relationship between race, "embodiment," and abstraction. For example, in Chase-Riboud's work, the titles came after their completion and after Malcolm X's assassination (Figure 14.2). Chase-Riboud called her work "steles" because, she said:

> otherwise people think—or assume—that there is some kind of personification in the sculptures. The sculptures themselves have nothing to do with Malcolm X! They're not meant to represent him; they're not meant to represent civil rights or radicalism or black power or any of those things. They were executed on an aesthetic basis and then dedicated to a historical person.[35]

In an exchange with curator Carlos Basualdo, who adroitly organized the show of these works at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2013, she asserts the potential for this duality. When he argues that "there are elements in the Malcolms that are clearly representative" citing the armor and the textiles as potentially read as hair, her response is playful quick yet, unequivocal—"not on your life."[36]

While the remit of this piece is to focus on African American abstraction, it must be said that Black Atlantic artists working in abstraction often wrote and curated themselves into history. This dynamic was crucial for the development of abstract practices on American soil. One prominent critic who situated the work of African American abstract artists was the Guyana-

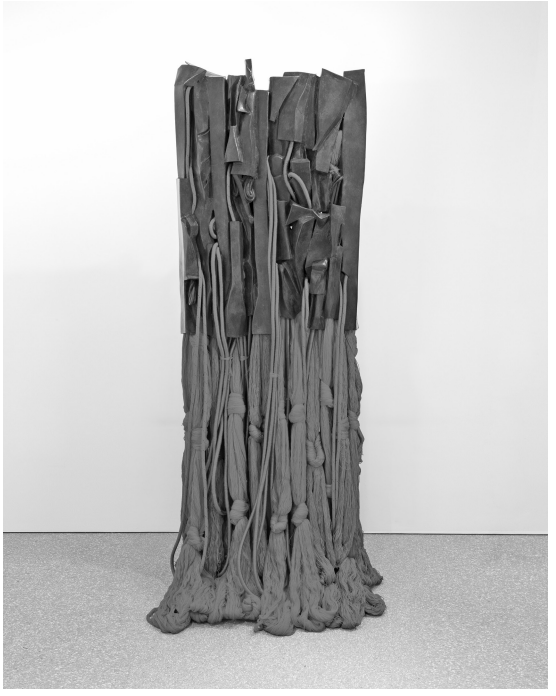

Figure 14.2 Barbara Chase-Riboud (b.1939), *Malcolm X #16*, 2016, bronze with red patina, silk, wool, polished cotton and synthetic fibers with steel support, 233.6 × 81.2 × 76.2 cm. © Barbara Chase-Riboud; courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY.

born abstract painter Frank Bowling. Bowling, whose journey took him from colonial British Guiana to London as part of the Windrush generation—a decade when the demographic and social structures of Britain changed with the immigration of West Indians from the Anglo-Caribbean prompted by labor shortages in the United Kingdom—settled in New York City by 1966. In his work as a critic, his main contribution was to argue that "abstraction need not be disunited from content, especially as it intersects cultural experience and historical subject matter," and he would anticipate what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. would later call "signifying."[37] The long-entrenched paradox that has led curators and scholars to parse the practices of black abstract artists also animates the history behind Bowling's initiative to organize the 1969 exhibition, "5 + 1" at The State University of New York at Stony Brook with artists Al Loving, Jack Whitten, William T. Williams, Daniel Johnson, and Edwards as a response to his exclusion and that of his black abstractionist peers from mainstream exhibitions. As Jones has argued, his critical contributions were not only "equal to his confrontation with 'American painting,'" but "shaped Bowling as an intellectual and as an artist."[38]

It is productive to pause on how Okwui Enwezor situated Bowling in the field through a blunt assessment of the historical record. "The fact that we so rarely encounter his work in museums' permanent collections bespeaks the blindspots that still bedevil institutional judgements and collecting decisions," Enwezor stated and continued: "there is no doubt, despite the limited international visibility accorded his work so far and the works of his generation of artists, that Bowling in his peerless work is first among equals in the field of post-painterly abstraction."[39] He did not need to state what is behind the omission, namely the tension that complicates the social/formalist split. Instead, he argued that, "Bowling's critical importance in this current discourse—like his contemporaries such as Jack Whitten and Sam Gilliam—extends beyond the formal inventiveness of his painting practice."[40] To situate Bowling in a "transnational and intercultural perspective," Enwezor engaged in multidirectional historical spadework.[41] As if a meta-method, he focused on Bowling's map painting—"the early cartography of Bowling's colonial memory"—so as to retrace the development of his practice, from his travels and family origins, to the routes of abstraction itself and the work of artist Gerhard Richter and even the abstract sublime of a J. M. W. Turner.[42] For Richter, the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp operates as a feature suffused within the picture plane; for Bowling, Guiana's history not only of slavery, but colonial structures of indentured labor, has been "inscrutably imprinted" in Bowling's work.[43] Enwezor's scholarship, inserting Bowling in the field where he belongs, is nothing short of a diplomatically leveled narrative riposte for the field of late modernism.

The recent re-contextualization of Howardena Pindell offers another case study for the need to re-narrate African American abstraction. Her work has had a dual positioning—her politics and her social concerns have long been treated as separate from her formal decisions. As co-curators Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver argued in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains To Be Seen*, their 2018 exhibition of the artist's work in various media which opened at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, "this made for two parallel conversations around her practice, one formal and one contextual." The landscape for Pindell became bifurcated. "[C]ritical theorists attempted to think through the burgeoning conceptual frameworks of politics-as-aesthetics and vice versa," while "the formalist properties of her work were neglected."[44] The way to resolve this, Beckwith and Oliver argued, is to let the "these formal innovations extend into a mode of rethinking the social and political context of their making."[45]

The belatedness of this critical reassessment of African American abstract art has also framed the significance of collecting practices such as the Joyner / Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art. Pamela J. Joyner and Alfred J. Guiffrida, at the vanguard of the resurgence of interest in abstraction by African American artists—including Mark Bradford, Romare Bearden, Frank Bowling,

Ed Clark, Leonardo Drew, Charles Gaines, Theaster Gates, Samuel Levi Jones, Norman Lewis, Glenn Ligon, Richard Mayhew, Alma Thomas, William T. Williams and more—have seen the need to contextualize their collecting efforts through scholarship both penned and commissioned by Courtney J. Martin to serve as a narrative correction and even a modulated form of activism.[46] Without a sense of African American abstraction's historic debates, one misses not only the full relationship between the social and the abstract world in the history of late modern art, but the role of collecting for this compound work—scholarship, exhibitions, and collecting practices—that has excavated this history and made it known.

For some time, it was thought that the fraught, politicized location of so-called outsider art was another factor occluding the discussion of abstraction within the history of African American art and modernism. Now studied and celebrated artists including Thornton Dial, Lonnie Holley, Joe Minter, Purvis Young, and the female collective Gee's Bend quiltmakers were understood as working in what could, for some, be considered compositionally abstract methods. Their works, collected by William S. Arnett, founder of the Souls Grown Deep Foundation, are now distributed to institutions from the High Museum in Atlanta to the Metropolitan Museum of Art.[47] In the case of these particular artists, all were self-taught and living with severe socioeconomic challenges. Yet instead of retreading the ground of past arguments about whether the artists "lack formal training or knowledge of mainstream histories of art," made their discussion in the history of late modernism appropriate, Cheryl Finley's essay in *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South* offers an important methodological move in asking an unstated, crucial question—what did the artists' intrapersonal relationships and their knowledge of other artistic traditions offer to modernism?[48] Here, Finley points not only to the better acknowledged West African traditions in quilting, but the gestational context of the civil rights as crucial for understanding the art making as we see in the quilting traditions of Gee's Bend.[49] In so doing, she asks how we can expand the narratives that we consider central to late modernism itself, eschewing the idea that their distance from modernist discourse precludes their discussion in the mainstream.

Broaching this topic of abstraction in the broader Black Atlantic context of the Caribbean, Krista A. Thompson deftly identifies the tension surrounding abstraction as echoing some of the same themes faced by African American artists in the 1960s. Thompson cites the controversy about the biennial exhibition, *NE3* at National Art Gallery of The Bahamas (NAGB), in 2006 over the inclusion of works by conceptual and abstract artists.[50] She took on the idea that came out in the critique of the show, that "the visual grammar of conceptual or even abstract art cannot translate an experience of Caribbeanness."[51] Thompson's focus was on the response that the "foreign" language of nonrepresentational art was seen as "incompatible" with the local art context in Nassau, Bahamas, arguing against the idea of the neutrality of the category of the dominant "picturesque" mode in photorealist Caribbean art by underscoring its ties to ways of seeing born of colonial rule.[52] Thompson cites the stark example of Dionne Benjamin-Smith's print, *"No Abstract Art Here,"* No. 3 from the *Real Bahamian Art, 1–4* series which emblematizes the idea of the defensive posture (Figure 14.3). Overlaying a "familiar picturesque 'Bahamian scene'" of men on a boat in the sea are the stenciled words which Benjamin-Smith has placed a hot pink phrase "like a graffiti artist on a clean wall, 'no abstract art here,'" citing a line from a photorealist artist in the Bahamas.[53] The print literalizes the significance of abstraction in the Caribbean as part of a "counter-picturesque" to upend the dominance of "illusionistic" representational images of the islands which historically supported tourism at the behest of British colonial rule.[54]

Recently, artists including Julie Mehretu and Mark Bradford have made such decisively social and racially charged material the content of abstraction that it is easy to overlook the historic-

Figure 14.3 Dionne Benjamin-Smith (b. 1970), *No Abstract Art Here*, No. 3 from the *Real Bahamian Art, 1–4* series. (Original Painting by Dorman Stubbs) 71.1 × 91.4 cm. Digital print on watercolour paper (In the Collection of Dawn Davies / Nassau, The Bahamas). © Dionne Benjamin-Smith.

ity and power of these debates that began in the twentieth century. In Mehretu's early works, her marks on migratory characters huddled together as if to create community, cities, and then terrain, which she considers internalized geographies.[55] These socially defined marks on her acrylic-silica surfaces were metaphorical answers to her spatial meditations rooted in diaspora migrations: no matter where we stand, we are never fully deracinated from the space we once knew. Bradford's work is a productive about-face, deliberating connecting his formal practice to the social world. As Christopher Bedford argued, "[h]is rejection of the traditional methods of painting issues not from an objection to the formal characteristics of those materials but from a rejection of those materials as diametrically at odds with the vital social dialectic he maintains between his chosen subjects and the materials he elects to use."[56] Bradford engages with the discourse about what material can be considered appropriate for the history of abstraction, what abstraction as a practice should be able to speak about within the broader context of life.

On a visit to Bradford's studio, he and I listened to a clip of a speech that John F. Kennedy delivered in 1963 about the role of the artist for justice in a democracy, one delivered a few years after Romare Bearden's work adorned the walls of his preinauguration suite in New York City. "If sometimes our great artists have been the most critical of our society, it is because their sensitivity and their concern for justice, which must motivate any true artist, makes him aware that our Nation falls short of its highest potential. I see little of more importance to the future of this country than full recognition of the place of the artist."[57] Bradford felt that Kennedy had said it all. Yet what was left unsaid in my conversation with Bradford was just how much the work of African American abstraction has expanded our expectations of the kind of artists to which Kennedy's idea applied.

Hanging nearby were two works by Bradford in process in which sociopolitical, racially charged news of the day and the past had entered the frame. Executed the with regularized, stenciled text, Bradford was laying out what would become *150 Portrait Tone* (2017). The canvas centers and repeats a searing detail from an event in July 2016 outside of Minneapolis: the murder of Philando Castile while in his car by a police officer while his fiancée, Diamond Lavish Reynolds, sat inches to the car to his right, while she spoke to Castile, pleaded with a police officer, prayed to God and consoled her 4-year-old daughter in the back of the car while streaming the event that had turned deadly on social media as a form of protection. Around the corner, in another part of the studio, was a work, *Pickett's Charge*, set to leave for his exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden set on display for four years, from November 2017 through 2021. It was compositionally inspired by the Confederate assault known as the end of the Battle of Gettysburg in the American Civil War. To make his monumental work of collage and décollage requires a physical process of building and stripping. The paper, piled and glued, has a visible thickness such that tearing it with embedded twine, on which Bradford would tug straight across the picture plane, reveals layers below. It had taken decades to excavate the history of late modernism such that these historical social events could be the subject of work by an African American abstract artist without controversy or explanation.

Notes

1 Mary Schmidt Campbell, *An American Odyssey: The Life and Work of Romare Bearden* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 2018), 196–197. I would like to thank my colleagues Kobena Mercer, Richard J. Powell, and Krista A. Thompson, and Eddie Chambers, in particular, whose comments were extraordinarily useful and affirming while writing this short piece.
2 Campbell, 168.
3 See Ann Eden Gibson, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), April Kingsley, *Afro-American Abstraction: An Exhibition of Contemporary Black Painting and Sculpture by Nineteen Black American Artists*. Exh. cat. (Long Island City: MoMA P.S. 1, 1980), and *The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting 1945-1975*. Exh. cat. (New York City: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1991).
4 Gibson, x-xi.
5 Gibson, xx- xxviiii.
6 Harper acknowledges that black abstract artists have not been indebted to this Brecht-influenced analysis. Phillip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 4.
7 It is often repeated that the show was dismissed by the black community as "irrelevant." Grace Glueck, "Less Downtown Uptown," *New York Times*, July 20, 1969.
8 Kellie Jones, "It's Not Enough to Say 'Black is Beautiful,'" in *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 397-426.
9 Jones, "To the Max: Energy and Experimentation," in *Energy / Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980* (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006), 14.
10 Ibid. Here Jones also foregrounds not just a delineation of their practices, but what Campbell has called an "aesthetic collegiality." See Mary Schmidt Campbell, "Sam Gilliam: Journey Towards Red, Black, and 'D'", *Red & Black to 'D: Paintings by Sam Gilliam* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1982), 9.
11 Darby English, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* (Chicago, IL, and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5. See Huey Copeland, "One-Dimensional Abstraction." Review of *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, by Darby English. *Art Journal Open*, July 30, 2019.
12 Ibid., 8.
13 Kobena Mercer, "Charting the Atlantic Sublime," in *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (Munich: Prestel, 2017), 47, 50–51. See Barnett Newman, "The Sublime is Now," *The Tiger's Eye 1*, no. 6 (December 1948): 51–53, republished in *Art in Theory, 1900–2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Woods (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003). Clement Greenberg,

"Modernist Painting," in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian, vol. 4, *Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1993). This was previously published in *Forum Lectures* (Washington, DC: Voice of America, 1960).

14 Mercer, *Discrepant Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006). See Eddie Chambers, "The Difficulties of Naming White Things," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism 12* no. 2 (2012): 186–197 and Huey Copeland, "Feasting on Scraps," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism 16*, no. 2 (2012): 198–212.

15 See Paul C. Taylor, *Black Is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2016), 5, 27. Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History* (London: Thames & Hudson), 2003. At the very heart of the work of many black abstract artists is the need to contend with not only what is considered the rightful purview of a black artistic practice, but to enlarge the subject matter that one can consider a rightful part of the practice of abstraction itself. In recent years, this has meant an enlargement of the very definition of abstraction, largely by scholars outside of the discipline of art history. See Phillip Brian Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture* (New York: New York University Press), 2015.

16 Huey Copeland, "One-Dimensional Abstraction." Review of *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, by Darby English. *Art Journal Open*, July 30, 2019.

17 Jack Whitten has made his indebtedness to Norman Lewis plain: "I have been chasing the idea of the unit, as the plastic underpinning of abstract painting, for the past 50 years. Norman Lewis knew about the unit and spoke of it as a single gesture or point. My early 1960s's visits to Norman Lewis' studio on 125th Street [were] a highlight of my life as a young artist. We spoke about painting, and we spoke about 'The Problem.' His insistence on the Black artists' freedom to investigate pure abstraction without the intervention of social narrative continues to nourish my commitment to abstract painting. His mentorship was a gift of cosmic proportions." See lot notes for Jack Whitten, The Norman Lewis Triptych 4th Set, 1986, in Christie's, New York, Post-War and Contemporary Art Afternoon Session, November 13, 2014, sale 2893, lot 541.

18 *Sam Gilliam: Hard-Edge Paintings 1963–1966*, Los Angeles, David Kordansky Gallery, March 28-May 11, 2013. Curated by Rashid Johnson.

19 Jonathan P. Binstock, *Sam Gilliam: A Retrospective* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), 3.

20 W.E.B. Du Bois, "Criteria of Negro Art," *The Crisis* 32, no. 6 (1926): 290.

21 Sharon F. Patton, *African-American Art* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 161.

22 Romare Bearden, "The Negro Artist and Modern Art," *Opportunity* 12, no. 12 (December 1934): 371–372.

23 Stella Paul, *20th-Century Art: A Resource for Educators* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1999), 115.

24 Mark Godfrey, "Notes on Black Abstraction," in *Soul of a Nation*: *Art in the Age of* Black *Power*, eds. Godfrey and Whitley (London: Tate Publishing, 2017), 175. Also see Margo Crawford's discussion of what she has called "strategically" Abstract Art in *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-First-Century Aesthetics* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

25 Godfrey, "Abstraction in Tryin' Times," in *Four Generations: The Joyner/Guiffrida Collection of Abstract Art* (New York: Gregory R. Miller &, Co., 2016), 93.

26 Kellie Jones, "Witness: A Conversation with Kellie Jones on Art and Culture," Interview by Deborah Willis, *Transition* 114, no. 10 (July 2013): 37–46.

27 Norman Lewis cited in Jeanne Siegel, "Why Spiral?," *ARTNews* 65, no. 5 (September 1966): 48–51, 67–68.

28 See Kellie Jones, "It is Not Enough to Say "Black is Beautiful"': Abstraction at the Whitney 1969–1974,' in *Discrepant Abstraction* (Cambridge, MA: Institute of International Visual Arts, 2006), 154–182.

29 Norman L. Kleeblatt with Lucy Partman, "The Edge of Abstraction: Norman Lewis and the Joyner/Guiffrida Collection," in *Four Generations: The Joyner/Guiffrida Collection of Abstract Art* (New York: Gregory R. Miller &, Co., 2016), 15.

30 Hilton Kramer, "Black Art and Expressionist Politics," *New York Times*, June 7, 1970, 107. Also see Patton, 269.

31 See Jacqueline Francis, *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012). Kellie Jones looks at the implications of this for artists from the 1950s through the 1970s "many of these artists were rejected by more militant practitioners and institutions that believed figuration was a more useful way to combat centuries of derogatory imagery centered on people of African descent." See Jones, "To the Max: Energy and Experimentation," 15.

32 Richard J. Powell, "Walking on Water: Embodiment, Abstraction, and Black Visuality," in *Represent: 200 Years of African American Art in the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, ed. Gwendolyn DuBois Shaw (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2014), 1.
33 As quoted by Peter Selz, "Barbara Chase-Riboud's Sculpture," *Callaloo* 32, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 860–878, previously published in *Barbara Chase-Riboud Sculptor* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999).
34 Barbara Chase-Riboud quoted in *Barbara Chase-Riboud: The Malcolm X Steles*, ed. Carlos Basualdo (New Haven, CT: Philadelphia Museum of Art in association with Yale University Press, 2013), 11.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 13.
37 See Godfrey, 175, and Jones, "It's Not Enough to Say 'Black Is Beautiful,'" 175. Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). Bowling did so, as Jones notes, by using the term "signify" in a review of the work Mel Edwards.
38 Kellie Jones, "It's Not Enough to Say 'Black Is Beautiful,'" 166.
39 Okwui Enwezor, "Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction," in *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, 24.
40 Ibid., 26.
41 Ibid., 26.
42 Ibid., 38.
43 Ibid., 32.
44 Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, "Opening Thoughts," in *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen*, eds. Beckwith and Cassel Oliver (Chicago, IL, Munich, and New York: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2018), 27.
45 Ibid., 27.
46 Martin, *Four Generations: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art*. For more on work that remains to be done in the field, see the recent exhibition by Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina, "Magnetic Fields: An Introduction," in *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today* (Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017) and "Mildred Thompson: The Atlanta Years, 1986 – 2003," at the Spelman Art Museum in 2019, co-curated by Andrea Barnwell Brownlee and Melissa Messina.
47 Cheryl Finley, "Introduction: Troubling the Waters," in *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2018), 13, 99.
48 Finley, 15.
49 For more on the tension between abstraction and quilting, see Amelia Peck, "Quilt/Art: Deconstructing the Gee's Bend Quilt Phenomenon," in *My Soul Has Grown Deep: Black Art from the American South*, 53–91.
50 Krista A. Thompson, "'No Abstract Art Here': The Problem of the Visual in Contemporary Anglo-Caribbean Art," *Small Axe* 11, no. 2 (June 2007), 119–137.
51 Thompson, 120.
52 Ibid. For an in-depth analysis of the function of the "picturesque" in representations of the Caribbean and its impact on art from the region, see Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006).
53 Thompson, 122.
54 In an essay devoted to a select set of debates within the history African American abstraction, not African diasporic abstraction as a whole, it is still worth underscoring that a range of artists whose practices of abstraction in the Caribbean warrants a larger treatment, not least of which are works by artists including Kendal Hanna, Wilfredo Lam, Aubrey Williams, and the work of the Foyer des Arts Plastiques in Haiti.
55 Julie Mehretu quoted in Catherine De Zegher, "Julie Mehretu's Eruptive Lines of Flight as Ethos of Revolution," *Julie Mehretu: Drawings* (New York: Rizzoli, 2007), 18. I address this aspect of Mehretu's work more broadly in Sarah Lewis, "Unhomed Geographies: The Paintings of Julie Mehretu," *Callaloo* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 219–222.
56 Christopher Bedford, "Against Abstraction," in *Mark Bradford*, ed. Bedford (Columbus, OH, and New Haven, CT: Wexner Center for the Arts; Yale University Press, 2010), 19. Also see "Mark Bradford: The Art of Productive Dissent," in *Mark Bradford: Tomorrow Is Another Day*, eds. Bedford and Katy Siegel (New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2017).
57 John F. Kennedy, "Annotated draft of Kennedy's Convocation speech prepared by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.," John F. Kennedy Library, President's Office Files, Speech Files, Box 47. www.amherst.edu/library/

archives/exhibitions/kennedy/documents#Final "Mark Bradford: The Art of Productive Dissent," in C. Bedford and K. Siegel, eds., *Mark Bradford: Tomorrow is Another Day,* New York: Gregory R. Miller & Co., 2017.

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