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Hard Art' Asks Hard Questions About Daring to Be Abstract

MoMA PS1 brings together more than 40 Black artists in a search for their historical and artistic ties.



By Aruna D'Souza

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In the 1960s, abstract art, removed from the world of recognizable objects and people, was often held up as the highest form that art could aspire to.

But while no one seriously challenged Frank Stella, Donald Judd or Robert Ryman about their decision to make abstract painting and sculpture in the midst of the civil rights movement, Vietnam War protests or other roiling issues, things were not so simple for their Black peers.

These Black artists faced resistance on all sides — from the white art establishment, which seemed to expect that they must paint Black themes, and from their peers in the Black Arts Movement, who believed that Black artists should make representational work that would uplift their community. As the playwright Ed Bullins put it, abstraction was "white art in blackface."

"It was just a big wallop against you if you dared to be abstract," the painter Howardena Pindell said in a recent phone interview. Pindell, who initially trained as a figurative painter at Boston University, recalled, "I remember visiting the Studio Museum in Harlem and asking the then-director to look at my work. And he said, you know, you're abstract. Go downtown and play with the white boys."

With its new exhibition, “Hard Art,” MoMA PS1 in Queens brings together more than 40 artists — well-known figures including Pindell, and those who should be better known. It asks the question: What are the threads, historical and artistic, that tie these artists together? And: What might abstraction be able to say about Blackness itself?

Connie Butler, the director of MoMA PS1, said her interest in developing the show came from thinking about “this unexamined history of Black artists engaged with abstraction” in the 1960s and ’70s. She wondered “what would happen if you did it not as a kind of chronological survey, but rather as an intergenerational conversation.”

She and Sheldon Gooch, a member of the curatorial team, drew from early exhibitions of abstract painting and sculpture organized by Black artists. They included “The De Luxe Show” by the artist Peter Bradley in Houston in 1971, one of the first integrated art shows in the United States; “5 + 1,” mounted by Frank Bowling at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1969; and Linda Goode Bryant’s exhibitions at Just Above Midtown Gallery, a hotbed of emerging Black conceptualism in the 1980s.

Many artists in “Hard Art” showed in these exhibitions, including Pindell, Ed Clark, Melvin Edwards, Suzanne Jackson, James Little, Martin Puryear and Senga Nengudi. Their work at PS1 hangs alongside that of Glenn Ligon, Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, Jennie C. Jones and others who in the 1990s and 2000s brought questions of abstraction to bear on how we think about art and Blackness. A recent, post-conceptual generation — among them Aria Dean, Carolyn Lazard, Eric N. Mack, Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Charisse Pearlina Weston — round out the exhibition.

In some cases, there are direct influences: Mack’s use of textiles to make spatial paintings can be traced to draped canvases by Sam Gilliam, Al Loving and Joe Overstreet. The textured surfaces of Mark Bradford’s works echo those of Jack Whitten.

Elsewhere, the relationships are less obvious. “Rindon Johnson made a painting in 2018 that feels like a direct ode to Ed Clark, for example,” Gooch said. Johnson talks about being interested in Clark’s use of tools like janitors’ brooms to create sweeping strokes of paint.

Steven Nelson, the executive director of the Sam Gilliam Foundation and a scholar of African American art, said that the show promises to remind audiences that “Black artistic production in the 1960s and 1970s was far more varied than we remember — there was never one way to make art.”

Suzanne Jackson: “We’re always asked about the political.”



Suzanne Jackson, at the “Hard Art” exhibit at MoMA PS1. Julius Frazer for The New York Times

The painter Suzanne Jackson, who lived in Alaska, California and New York before moving to Savannah, Ga., said her shift toward abstraction was prompted in part by her research into African American history and music once she arrived in the South, and by the development of new acrylic paints and glazes. “Listening to

music every day on the radio, the blues and so-called jazz — really, it's African American classical music — that beautiful music that has its roots in Africa, makes the paint flow differently," she said.

Jackson's work in "Hard Art" uses acrylic embedded with scraps of fabric and other found materials to create free-hanging paint "skins" suspended from the ceiling — canvas is nowhere to be seen. "The paint itself becomes an abstraction," she said.

"Quite often Black artists are not asked about paint and techniques," Jackson added. "We're always asked about the political. And we can't avoid it as part of our lives and our history and our survival in the United States.

"But I think we really want to be considered artists in the studio first, as other people are," she said.

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