



3.3 / Make Big Demands

From Los Angeles: Now Dig This!

GROUP SHOW

OCT 02 - JAN 08

HAMMER MUSEUM

by *crystal am nelson*

Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980, the Hammer Museum’s contribution to the J. Paul Getty Trust’s *Pacific Standard Time* initiative, aims to be the most comprehensive survey of black artists’ contributions to the birth of Los Angeles’ cultural landscape. Curated by Kellie Jones, the exhibition focuses on the mid to late twentieth century, a tumultuous period for the United States and a sensational one for black Americans, from the civil rights movement and the birth of Black Power up to the very beginnings of the culture wars. Across the museum’s second-floor galleries, the show unpacks how black artists mobilized amidst this sociopolitical turmoil and creatively negotiated the very terms “black” and “artist” (and in many cases “female,” as well).

A commissioned mixed-media sculpture by Maren Hassinger and an electric sign by Sam Durant flank the exhibit’s entrance. Made of nautical rope and chain, Hassinger’s *River* (2011) sprawls across the floor in a snakelike S pattern directly in front of the museum gift shop. The references to the treacherous Middle Passage are as unavoidable as the piece itself. Durant’s sign, *End White Supremacy* (2008), demands an end to one of the reasons why these types of exhibitions are developed. Though both works evoke the past, they firmly anchor *Now Dig This!* in the present by posing the question of why, in 2011, must curators continue to mount these types of surveys? It is a question that *Now Dig This!* keeps in play, even as the thematic sections of each of the five galleries continually provide potential answers.

Jones begins the show with a group of artists she calls “Frontrunners,” and her selections are surprising and revelatory, even for viewers well versed in the history of black artists. On one wall hang sculptor Melvin Edwards’ small, welded metal reliefs from his *Lynch Fragment* series begun in 1963. Made over a thirty-year span, these works had all but been forgotten by history until art historian Elvan Zabunyan wrote extensively about them in *Black Is a Color* (Dis Voir, 2006). Edwards’ nearly indiscernible masses of welded metal objects elegantly and disarmingly connect industrial capitalism to the systems of bondage upon which it was built. On the other walls are several large-scale drawings by Charles White, an artist previously unknown to me. A few of his drawings feature cloaked black figures. In one titled *Harriet* (1972), likely in reference to Harriet Tubman, a crimson splatter above a figure’s head evokes the North Star, which Tubman and other slaves used to guide themselves to freedom.

Moving through the exhibition, it becomes clear why Jones chose to begin with and routinely returns to White. One of thousands of blacks who moved west from northern and eastern cities in the 1950s, White taught and mentored most of the artists in the show. The works on view reflect his lessons about the sociopolitical import of art and the power of artists to engage communities in effecting positive change. Betye Saar’s assemblage *Black Girl’s Window* (1969) and

David Hammons's body print *America the Beautiful* (1968) also demonstrate White's influence in cultivating an aesthetic that is the deepest, most provocative visual expression of the black American experience.



Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980. Installation view, the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, October 2, 2011-January 8, 2012. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.



Charles White, *Love Letter #1*, 1971; lithograph with documents; 22 3/16 x 30 in. (56.4 x 76.2 cm). Private Collection. Courtesy of the Hammer Museum.

Part of the exhibition is dedicated to the ethnically diverse support network of White and company, but with its motley assortment of prints and wall sculptures, the room lacks any unifying cohesion beyond the relationship between each piece's creators and the other artists in the show. One item that gives pause is a suitcase that White left in the archive of New York City's Just Above Midtown Gallery, where it sat unopened for thirty years. The suitcase contained many items, including an issue of *LIFE* magazine with Picasso on the cover. Unfortunately, only a few of these items are displayed. Given the suitcase's high historic value, it was disappointing to see Jones treat it as a ready-made, signed by White's student Dan Concholar no less. Yet Jones also achieves something extraordinary by emphasizing Concholar's

signature and the *LIFE* cover over the suitcase's other contents. Her display strategy coyly calls into question historically held assumptions that black artists were working separately from "the rest" of the art world and were intellectually impoverished. Presenting the suitcase as a ready-made places Concholar and White in conversation with Duchamp and the Dadaists. Similarly, the choice of magazine issue winks at White's experiments with modified Cubism, such as *Black Pope (Sandwichboard Man)* (1973) and *Love Letter #1* (1971), which are also on view. Thus, one can't talk about these paintings without also talking about Picasso, whose own appropriation of traditional African art has been problematically canonized.

Now Dig This! is perhaps too heavy on painting and sculpture, with less attention given to new media practices. The early videos of Ulysses Jenkins, a former member of avant-garde media art collective Electronic Café International, offer a small corrective toward the end of the exhibition. Shown on three plasma screens, each with a pair of headphones, the viewing experience is less than ideal. However, *Remnants of the Watts Festival* (1972–73), *In the Spirit of Charles White* (1970), and *King David* (1978) are three important historical documents of the kinds of cultural production happening among many of the exhibit's artists in the wake of the Watts Rebellion. *Remnants* is Jenkins' attempt to offer a sympathetic video image of blacks as a counterpoint to the media coverage of the Watts Rebellion. *In the Spirit* and *King David* capture critical moments in the artistic careers of beloved teacher White and his student David Hammons. These three works, much like *Now Dig This!* itself, are videotaped contestations-cum-testimonies to an under-recognized and misrepresented legacy.

NOW DIG THIS! ART AND BLACK LOS ANGELES 1960–1980 IS ON VIEW AT THE [HAMMER MUSEUM](#), IN LOS ANGELES, THROUGH JANUARY 8, 2012.