



## Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

### Art review: 'Now Dig This!' at the UCLA Hammer Museum

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At the UCLA Hammer Museum, "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980" tells an important story that is not so much unknown as underknown.

Many of the individual artists -- Melvin Edwards, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, Charles White and others -- are certainly familiar, while David Hammons ranks among the most important American artists of the last 30 years. What hasn't been the focus before now is the context within which their work developed. "Now Dig This!" lays it out with clarity and compelling insight.

That means, of course, that the exhibition is not simply a compendium of great art. Quality is mixed. Even Hammons is represented mostly by precocious student work (he moved to New York in 1974), interesting primarily for seeing where his subsequent work came from. One of his most potent pieces is a bristling wall assemblage composed from shards of broken records, hair and plaster -- contemporary materials combined to evoke an ancestral African "power shield" -- but it dates from 1983.

The show, part of the region-wide Pacific Standard Time series, opens with a quiet wallop. The Hammer's small entry room juxtaposes just two works -- Edwards' 1965 welded steel sculpture "The Lifted X," all muscular strength laid low by battered industrial forms and grimly suspended hooks, and White's monumental 1964 ink and charcoal drawing "Birmingham Totem," its crystalline mound of splintered wood surmounted by the shrouded figure of a crouching youth.

Edwards spent his formative artistic decade in L.A., moving west after high school in Houston and leaving California for New York in 1966. Initially a painter, he began to weld compact wall-reliefs from salvaged metal objects -- chains, tools, bolts, gears, padlocks, scissors, etc. -- composing intense abstractions that nonetheless recall African masks, Cubist heads and the industrial-strength syntax of Abstract Expressionist sculptor David Smith.

"The Lifted X" ruminates on Malcolm X, the civil rights activist who was murdered as Edwards was at work on a then-unattributed sculpture. Frontal and more than 5 feet tall, almost like a figure on a pedestal, its robust but broken forms seem forever poised between being upraised and hammered down.

White, self-tutored as a kid finding a haven in the galleries of the Art Institute of Chicago and then professionally trained, was widely traveled. By the time he moved to L.A. at 38 his social realist style, influenced by time spent living in Mexico with muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, was in full flower. His drawing, nearly 6 feet tall, ponders one of the most horrific and galvanizing moments in modern civil rights history -- the 1963 Ku Klux Klan bombing of a black church in America's most virulently segregated city, which left 22 people severely wounded and four children dead.

The drawing's mound of architectural splinters is laboriously built up from thin traceries of black ink and firm, rectilinear swipes of charcoal. The overall shape forms a kind of cloaked torso, its head composed from the crouching figure. Nearly hidden, a plumb bob is suspended on a string from the nude youth's index finger. White's sober drawing is an almost shamanistic vision of mystical restoration: The plumb bob, an ancient building tool used to determine accurate verticals, also deftly marks the Birmingham crime as a powerful center of gravity in American social history.

Hammer guest curator Kellie Jones, an art historian at Columbia University, divides the rest of the show into a loose chronology of four themes. The framework is an effective way to orchestrate about 130 paintings, drawings, sculptures and videos by 33 diverse artists.

There are "front-runners," such as Edwards and White, who influenced younger generations in L.A.'s emergent art scene (compare, for example, White's drawing to a self-portrait shrouded in an American flag by Hammons, who was White's student); a large number of assemblage artists, including Outterbridge, Purifoy and Saar, who cobbled together collages and sculptures from discarded and reclaimed objects; artists perhaps better known for the galleries they operated to create exhibition opportunities in a limited art scene; and finally, Post-Minimal and performance artists of the eclectic 1970s.

Los Angeles, as the 1965 Watts rebellion attests, was no safe haven for African Americans. However, the city's burgeoning growth, coupled with the absence of a strong institutional art-fabric, appears to have offered an open-ended sense of artistic possibility for all these painters, sculptors and performance artists.

The show's four groups are not exclusive. Edwards was as much an assemblage artist as Outterbridge, whose rag-man aesthetic is more ephemeral than sculptures of welded steel. The shamanistic undercurrent in White's drawing comes to the surface in Saar's collages, made from windows whose panes offer glimpses into mystical worlds. Alonzo Davis, who started the Brockman Gallery with his brother, Dale, is represented by a large and arresting collage of torn scraps of silvery painted cardboard, which forms an exalted African map within a Marcus Garvey-style environment of red, green and black





The assemblage room is the show's core, providing one-third of the works and echoing forward and backward through time. Purifoy is the standout. Great assemblage is often an alchemical transformation of harsh mortality into noble endurance, and a sensational secular altarpiece by Purifoy suggests a legacy-shrine to a passing Jim Crow era. Stuffed to overflowing with castoff tools, its abundance of old shoes and worn brushes evokes the shoeshine stand, a dignified image of labor at once restricted yet resolute.

Suzanne Jackson, familiar for having run Gallery 32, is also a gifted painter. Liquid acrylic washes -- among the show's few paintings -- merge figures with landscapes in dreamlike spaces, all poised to slip away like desert mirages. Daniel LaRue Johnson merged painting with assemblage, affixing fragments of a broken doll, a hacksaw, a mousetrap and rubber hose onto a large, black field of viscous, tar-like pitch. Made in the aftermath of Bull Connor's notorious Birmingham assault on peaceful civil rights marchers, Johnson injected a jolt of black social consciousness into the exalted status abstract artists then afforded to all-black paintings.

Provocative questions also arise. In 1967, Robert Rauschenberg created a sensation: He produced a monumental print called "Booster" at Gemini GEL, said to be the largest lithograph ever made, which centered around a life-size, medical X-ray self-portrait that removed from art any romantic notion of representing the artist's inner life. Was Hammons aware of Rauschenberg's celebrated project? As a nearby student at Otis, he began his pivotal body prints in 1968, made by pressing his oiled flesh onto paper and sprinkling pigment over the surface. Their ghostly specters of absent figures fuse the surfaces of art and skin.

"Now Dig This!" is a story of artistic integration -- not assimilation, by any stretch of the imagination, but integration broadly understood as the analysis and display of human identity to reach a point of harmony

within a larger American environment. The point is cleverly italicized by including modest examples from significant artists who are not African American -- Mark di Suvero, Ron Miyashiro, Gordon Wagner, Sheila Levrant de Bretteville and 11 more -- but who are identified as contemporaneous colleagues of black artists in the show. It makes for an absorbing narrative.



"Now Dig This! Art in Black Los Angeles 1960-1980," UCLA Hammer Museum, (310) 443-7000, through Jan. 8. Closed Mondays.  
[www.hammer.ucla.edu](http://www.hammer.ucla.edu)

-- Christopher Knight

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*Photos: Installation view with, left, Charles White, "Birmingham Totem," 1964, ink and charcoal on paper, and right, Melvin Edwards, "The Lifting X," 1965, welded steel. Credit: Robert Wedemeyer. David Hammons, "America the Beautiful," 1968, lithograph and body print; Noah Purifoy, "Untitled (Assemblage)," 1967, mixed media; Suzanne Jackson, "Apparitional Visitations," 1973, acrylic wash on canvas. Credit: UCLA Hammer Museum*