

ART VIEW; Black Artists: A Place in the Sun

By MICHAEL BRENSON
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In a sleepy, uneventful art season, there are the rumblings of an earthquake. After years of being dismissed as not even worthy of consideration, the work of black American artists has become essential to the future of American art and to understanding who we are.

This is true even though black artists continue to encounter tremendous resistance within the institutionalized art world, particularly in New York. It is true even though most people who follow, show and buy contemporary art do not have a clue how rich and complex the art of black Americans is.

The reasons for the change go to the heart of the concerns of many black artists, and they go to the heart of this international and historical moment. In a decade when artists feel free to draw from any artistic tradition, in any era, many black artists have been implicitly raising the notion of a world culture in which African, Asian and South American art have as much of a place as the art of Europe and the United States.

The recent revival of European art has offered a lesson about the kind of art that can now make a difference. There is a widespread feeling among American art professionals that for the last decade West German art has been the best in the world, largely because of its ability to face its most painful history. In the American obsession with Anselm Kiefer, whose paintings expose wounds opened up by Nazism and the Holocaust, there is an indication of an increasing awareness of the weight of our own unresolved past.

Nothing in that past is more painful and unresolved than the history of violence to blacks. Since so many black artists, like Melvin Edwards (whose "Lynch Fragments" are central to an exhibition of sculpture by black artists at the Bronx Museum of the Arts) and Robert Colescott (whose combative, thoughtful paintings are at the New Museum of Contemporary Art), are involved with memory and roots, it is impossible to consider their work without being aware of this history. Avoiding their art means avoiding this history. The appreciation of the art of black Americans and the health of American art may now go hand in hand.

There are many other artistic factors that have helped change the climate. They include a pluralistic environment that has not only helped create a general tolerance for diverse sources and approaches but also encouraged black artists to follow whatever course appealed to them. The sources and approaches of black artists are so diverse that there is absolutely no such thing as black art. The factors also include fascinating developments like the increasing prominence of black and white, which for a long time were not even considered colors. In the abstract paintings of John L. Moore, the pictorial drama often focuses on the way the color black negotiates its way through modernist space. The Maren Hassinger installation now at the Bronx Museum can be seen as a statement about endangered nature, but in the way her seemingly fragile but resilient black cable trees manage to grow out of the most minimal white cement blocks, there is also a personal and art-historical statement. Affirmative Action Is Not the Issue

The issue is not affirmative action. Giving black artists the recognition they deserve has nothing to do with special pleading based on a notion of democracy whereby every group is statistically represented. The work of black artists is not better or more immune from criticism than the art of other people.

What I am talking about is art with an openness that should lay to rest any assumption that if blacks were in a position of power they would support only art that served their narrowest interests. I am talking about art that, at best, has the kind of purpose, humanity and scope that needs to be seen and fought over in major cultural institutions.

Edwards, Martin Puryear, Benny Andrews and the late Romare Bearden have had shows in New York in the last couple of years. The lyrical and vigilant "Lynch Fragments" of Edwards, the sweet-sounding epics of Bearden, the rolling oracular rhythms of Puryear and the ecstatic, battered collages of Andrews are rooted in black experience. But the work of these artists is no more exclusively about that experience than Chekhov's stories and plays are only about Russia. Their art grows out a soil that Americans share. Their artistic fruit belongs to everyone.

Yet there is so little awareness that the fruit is there. There are almost no blacks in the most influential New York galleries. There has been very little institutional attention paid to black artists apart from Puryear and Bearden. There are few major publications on black artists of the kind that established white artists may now expect in their mid-30's. In H. W. Janson's "History of Art," for many years the art history textbook, black American artists were entirely absent.

Even with Bearden, who had shows in 1970 at the Museum of Modern Art and in 1981 at the Brooklyn Museum, institutional attention is little more than lip service. In 1984 and 1985, when Mary Schmidt Campbell - then the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem and since 1987 the

New York City Commissioner of Cultural Affairs - tried to find a publisher for a book about him, she ran into a wall.

"I not only could not get a publisher," Dr. Campbell said, "but some of the responses were mind-boggling. One university press told me that if there was no monograph on a black artist, clearly none deserved to be done." Last year, after Bearden's death, she received a contract from Oxford University Press.

So it cannot be surprising when Kinshasha Conwill, the present director of the Studio Museum, says that black artists still live with a fear of being invisible. "If you look at black artists over 40," she says, "I think that every one of them has an archive. They are determined not to disappear."
The Lure of the New: Hostile to Black Artists

Why has it been so hard for black artists to get their due? Certainly for many years the climate was against them. The Formalism of the late 1950's and 60's adored the inviolable flat surface and insisted on discussing art in artistic terms alone. In Minimalist sculpture, with its streamlined surfaces and industrially made hard-edged shapes, the weight of history seems to have been lifted. Most work by black artists is hand made, and the surfaces bear the stamp of time. Part of the importance of Puryear is his ability to take the clean economy of Minimalism and through his understanding of diverse crafts and cultures give it roots in personal, sculptural and racial memory. His work argues for a view of history that moves backward and forward together.

For black artists, the postwar American tradition of the new was hostile. At the Museum of Modern Art, there was essentially one artistic genealogy, one artistic chain of being. The Whitney Museum of American Art assumed a concept of newness that depends heavily upon two postwar metaphors - the brand new slate and creating oneself from scratch. In the course of recognizing and encouraging art in which the present and future seemed to be everything, something was always left behind. The tradition of the new is about possibility, but it is also about erasure.

Part of what was erased was just about every artist for whom memory, history and roots were indispensable. The criticisms raised about black artists - that their work will not sell, that it is all alike and, most important, that it lacks quality - reflect a limited view of what art should be. The criticism that black artists lack quality is ridiculous. Whenever you find a deep feeling for materials, a wariness of categories, a layered sense of daily life and enormous visual curiosity - as you do in the work of many black American artists - you are going to find, at the least, an esthetic sensibility. Signs of Change: Three New Shows

The signs of change are clear. Last fall, Puryear was selected to represent the United States at this year's Sao Paulo Biennale: He is the first black artist to be the sole representative of this country at a major international exhibition. Lorna Simpson, a young artist whose photographs and texts are intended to expose the defensive and misguided assumptions people often make about body language and gesture, was included in "The BiNational: American Art of the Late 80's," which opened in Boston last fall and is now touring West Germany.

Already in 1989 Edwards and the performance and video artist Adrian Piper have had their first important New York gallery shows - in SoHo, where June Kelly, Bearden's manager for many years, opened a gallery last year. She is on her way to becoming New York's first prominent black dealer.

And there may never have been more major New York exhibitions devoted to black artists. A touring Robert Colescott show, organized by the San Jose Museum of Art in 1987, is at the New Museum of Contemporary Art (through April 22). In his raucous, unstable paintings, Colescott takes racial cliches, such as the "happy darkie" or the black family content with poverty and potatoes, and paints them in ways that make you laugh - even though you have more than a sneaking suspicion that the joke is on you.

This is an oddly unhistorical show for an artist so involved with history. It is essentially a 10-year survey in which the development of the work is unclear, and there is no biography in the catalogue. But it does make the point about Colescott's desire to give blacks their place in art history.

In the paintings for which he is best known, black people show up in the strangest places, replacing the pregnant bride in Jan van Eyck's "Wedding Portrait," or the female nude that shocked the French public in Manet's "Dejeuner sur l'Herbe" - a nude that Manet had himself appropriated and changed - or George Washington in the German painter Emanuel Leutze's "Washington Crossing the Delaware."

"Traditions and Transformations: Contemporary Afro-American Sculpture," at the Bronx Museum of the Arts (through May 27), brings together the sculpture of 11 artists, including Puryear, Sam Gilliam, Howardena Pindell and Houston Conwill. This statement of the vitality of sculpture by blacks is reinforced by the more adventurous "Pillar to Post," an exhibition of work by emerging artists, many of them black, at Kenkeleba House on the Lower East Side (ending today). "The Appropriate Object," a traveling show at the Albright-Knox Art Gallery in Buffalo (through April 23), includes seven artists, among them Hassinger, Richard Hunt, Oliver Jackson, Alvin Loving and Betye Saar. Like the Bronx Museum show, it calls attention to the absence of dogma among black artists and to the passionate interest in the art of Africa and Asia.

Despite the differences in imagery and approach, all three exhibitions underline the importance of Abstract Expressionism for black artists. It is the last major American artistic development that was inclusive and international, and in which the hand of the artist was crucial. It is the last

American artistic development with space big enough and deep enough for everyone to enter. And Abstract Expressionism perceived gesture and improvisation not simply as expressive acts but as ways of tapping fundamental energies and feelings. The Rich Diversity In Black Art

The impossibility of categorizing black artists can be suggested by Piper's "Cornered," a video installation at John Weber Gallery (through March 25); Piper, whose orientation is Conceptual, is also included in "Art as a Verb: The Evolving Continuum," an exhibition of black artists involved with media other than painting and sculpture, at the Studio Museum through June 18. She is determined not to allow the art world to be a refuge or escape from political reality. In her videotaped address, she discusses the mixed racial blood of many white Americans, pressuring all viewers to consider their response to blackness and whites to consider what it is like to live inside a black skin.

One point that has to be made about these shows is that they are not in major museums. Another is that this kind of visibility is new. But they do reflect the continuing broadening and growth of black artists. Those who began making art during the civil rights movement are now in their 40's or 50's. There are more and more black artists coming out of art school, and they have more and more achievements of black artists on which to build. Melvin Edwards, An Eloquent Voice

The welded steel sculptures of Melvin Edwards are informative about the kind of intelligence and imagination that black artists offer. They also suggest that black artists may be far more eloquent than whites in dealing with the history of white violence to blacks.

Edwards was born in Houston in 1937 and went to college in California. He has traveled widely in Europe, Africa and the Caribbean. He has been teaching art in universities almost nonstop since 1964 and has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. In 1970 he had an installation in the downstairs gallery of the Whitney Museum of American Art. He has shown around the United States and has realized large sculpture commissions in several cities.

Yet he remains largely unknown. When Dr. Campbell mounted an Edwards show at the Studio Museum in 1978, the lack of response shocked her. "It was like nothing, like the show didn't happen," she said. "It was scary. It was chilling." Edwards's iconography is provocative. His public works include chains as tall as people, his arches and post and lintels suggest pre-industrial architecture, his disks the sun and moon. His ongoing series of "rockers" swings out of the rocking chair of his grandmother Cora. His "Lynch Fragments" are his most private and familiar works. They include chains, hammers, vises - objects identified with the labor of and violence to slaves. "Mel is from the South," Kinshasha Conwill said, "where lynching is a reality."

The "Lynch Fragments" have gone through three phases: 1963-66, 1973 and 1978 to the present. There are now well over 100. They are small reliefs, as big as a face, never so large that they could not be held in the hand. Many have African titles. Some of the tools in them are found, some created. These dense chunks of steel are welded together, sometimes slowly, sometimes, it seems, improvisationally, into constructions that hector, rage, seduce and sing.

The sculptures reflect the interest in welded steel and abstraction during the civil rights years in which they were conceived. They also reflect the wish of many black artists to take images that debased blacks and make them defiant. The frontality and projecting horseshoes, links, nails and stakes help make the "Lynch Fragments" confrontational. You cannot look at these almost indestructible forms without feeling the weight of the history branded into them.

In another important reversal, it is not Western art that validates African art, which was essentially the case in the "Primitivism" show at the Museum of Modern Art in 1984, but rather the purpose and power of African art that validate the methods and formal concerns of the West. Without welded steel sculpture and modernist abstraction, the "Lynch Fragments" would not exist. But these sculptures function like African fetishes and masks. They are perceived as functional, as objects to protect, heal, celebrate and accuse.

These works have a great deal to do with transformation. Edwards's understanding of the language of sculpture enables him to take emblems of personal and racial history and shape them into statements of affirmation. The struggle to make sense of the rawest emotional stuff is something just about everyone can relate to. The sculptural intelligence and psychological courage establish a common ground that makes the particular subject matter unforgettable. Like so much first-rate art, the "Lynch Fragments" of Mel Edwards are about remembering and overcoming. Resistance Won't Disappear Overnight

Huge problems remain. Resistance to black artists will not disappear overnight. When large institutions become more receptive to their work, it is important that sources of financing do not turn their backs on those institutions that have been responsive to the work all along.

For black artists there is the memory of Bob Thompson, who seemed in the 1960's to be trying to paint all the history of art into one whole, and Jean Michel Basquiat, whose figures and texts float uneasily between the history of art and the street. They are the only two black artists who were immediately treated like stars, and they were dead before they turned 30. Among many black artists, there has to be some wariness of trusting a star-hungry system in which blacks have been largely ignored. It cannot be easy. But the work is out there, it is filled with joy and invention, and we had better deal with it.