

L.A. Exhibit Salutes City's Elite Black Artists

By: F. Finley McRae

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Native sons and daughters call this show at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles long overdue.

Works by Los Angeles' premier black artists, many signifying the political turmoil that marked the 1960 and 1970s, are finally on display in one of the city's major exhibition spaces.

The works, some 140 by 35 artists -- many of them among the nation's artistic crème de la crème -- are currently on view at Westwood's Hammer Museum in "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980."

Sponsored by Pacific Standard Time, the Getty Foundation's cultural initiative to explore Southern California's post-World War II art scene, "Now Dig This!" is one of more than 60 such regional efforts enabled by a \$10 million grant.

Featuring emotionally gripping pieces by Samella Lewis, John Outterbridge, Charles White, Betye Saar, David Hammons, William Pajaud, Noah Purifoy and Melvin Edwards, among other noted artists, the exhibit, running until Jan. 8, 2012, has raised its flag across a broad cross section of Angelenos and substantial numbers of African Americans. The exhibit drew 2,000 visitors on its opening day.

Curated by Kellie Jones, Ph.D., an associate professor of anthropology and art history at Columbia University, the exhibit opens a window on the genius of artists long denied the acclaim and recognition merited by their works and artistic stature. Eight remaining lectures and performances are scheduled as part of the exhibit, including a Dec. 15 appearance by musician Jason Moran, a 2010 MacArthur Fellow (and **Root 100** 2011 selection), and "Hammer Conversations" with Jones and her father, poet-professor Amiri Baraka, on Jan. 8.

Unlike their white L.A. counterparts -- Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, John Baldessari and Robert Irwin, to name a few -- whose careers blossomed from the late 1950s to the 1980s, most black artists of talent struggled in relative anonymity to eke out a living. The exhibit, according to museum, "chronicles the vital legacy of the city's African-American artists animated by the civil rights and Black Power movements, reflecting the changing sense of what constituted African-American identity and American culture."

Lewis, an internationally regarded printmaker, art critic, scholar and historian, told **The Root** that the exhibit "has a tremendous significance for us. The works of African-American artists," she recalled, "[no matter how outstanding] have never been shown in this city, in this way or with this

kind of respect."

The award-winning author commended Jones on her curatorial effort and said the Columbia University professor has created "an impressive" exhibit. Yet Lewis was also candid in her comments. "We [the African-American artists whose works are exhibited] deserve this presence. They didn't give it to us; we earned it by working very hard for a very long time," said Lewis, who has authored seven books and five films.

Lewis, 87, America's first black Ph.D. in art history, said she was "shocked" when she first saw "four walls in the exhibit devoted just to my work alone. I knew my works were in the show, but I didn't expect that kind of presence." Lewis earned her doctorate in 1951 at the Ohio State University.

By contrast, Lewis said, the city's largest and most noted venue of prestigious exhibits, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, stopped mounting exhibits of African-American artists in the 1960s because it "didn't want [black-themed] political art." The Hammer, she said, now "has done with this one show what LACMA has not done in years." Lewis donated 36 of her pieces to Ohio State's Frank W. Hale Jr. Black Cultural Center.

Otterbridge, 76, continued in the vein of Lewis' comments. "We [black American artists] come from a long, long line of visions and dreams that, over time, became calloused realities, some of which are seen in this exhibit."

For Dale Davis, another artist whose works are now on display at the Hammer, "the exhibit's significance is its strong visual component, which demonstrates that African Americans established an art canon in Los Angeles during the 1960-1980 period, which represents a renaissance for us."

That art canon is important, Otterbridge said, but he emphasized that "our roots go so deep [in the nation's cultural landscape] that you can't see all of them at once. Like almost all African Americans who have achieved despite heavy barriers, we had so few real resources."

The roots, he said, "are our ancestors, their bondage and the sacrifices that paved the way for us to achieve." Many African Americans, Otterbridge said, "have to be reminded that the cultural tension that is part of America does not go away and should never forget that African Americans are more than just a culture."

" 'Now Dig This!' would not have been possible 50 or 60 years ago," Otterbridge said. "During much of that time, we were fighting for this kind of recognition. In those years, we exhibited in supermarkets, on parking lots, wherever we could go and be received, but we've always had a major influence on art in Los Angeles and Southern California since before this became what it is."

Many of these distinguished artists, he said, "were obligated to fight, and this exhibit is a piece of that privilege, because it's a record of the long history of the African-American struggle against oppression and the significance of that struggle for this culture."

Jones, adding her voice to Otterbridge's, said the exhibit "demonstrates the profound African-American influence on art, not just in Los Angeles, Los Angeles County or California but on the nation and the world.

"People have long seen the influence of African Americans on music, entertainment and sports; now, with this exhibit, more people can begin to see the influence African Americans have also had on art," she concluded.

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