

ART REVIEW | 'L.A. OBJECT AND DAVID HAMMONS BODY PRINTS'

Reading Fragments From an Incendiary Time

By HOLLAND COTTER

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Of the hundreds of New York gallery shows this fall, "L.A. Object and David Hammons Body Prints" at Tilton must rank near the top. The show, which closes on Nov. 22, is certainly one of the best I've seen in the city in the past year. Visually it's loaded and nervy, an energy rush. And it's something of an historic event. It cracks open doors, both on an understudied episode in recent American art and on a significant artist.



Photographs from Tilton Gallery

Above, "Boy With Flag," a 1968 body print by David Hammons.

The artist is of course Mr. Hammons, whose career is one of the most stimulating and influential of the last four decades. Although he is best known for his ephemeral objects and short-term installations, often on themes related to African-American life, his early work took the more concrete form of one-of-a-kind prints based on impressions he made of his own body.

A few of these prints have turned up regularly in museum shows over the years. Most he sold or gave away soon after he produced them in the 1960s and '70s, when he was living in Los Angeles. Many have rarely, if ever, been exhibited since. Last summer Tilton Gallery's owner, Jack Tilton, went to Los Angeles to track down some of the long-unseen prints. The search had him knocking on doors at the homes of original owners, often in out-of-the-way neighborhoods. One owner would refer him to another until, over a few months, he rounded up the 30 prints now in the gallery. They make a rich and provocative ensemble.

Mr. Tilton's search led him to something else too, namely the contemporary art that formed the context for Mr. Hammons's years in Los Angeles: from 1963, when he arrived from his hometown of Springfield, Ill., to 1974, when he moved to New York City. Examples of this work make up the second half of the Tilton show.

Much of it fits into a movement, sometimes called California Funk, that involves assemblage inspired by, among other things, beat culture, jazz, Dada and Simon Rodia's extravagant found-object monument, "Watts Towers." Although Ed Kienholz and George Herms, both in the Tilton show, were the movement's most visible exponents, African-American artists played a vital role.

A few, like Melvin Edwards and Betye Saar, became national stars. Others, like Ed Bernal, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, Timothy Washington, Daniel LaRue Johnson



(who now lives in New York) and the brothers Dale and Alonzo Davis (who founded the important Brockman Gallery in Los Angeles), had primarily localized careers but generate a stellar glow in this show.

In many cases the African-American work announces itself as such. It was, after all, emerging at an incendiary time, when the civil rights movement was turning into the Black Power movement and an atmosphere of political emergency was giving racial self-definition, in life and in art, an ever sharper edge.



Mr. Outterbridge and Mr. Washington, in very different ways, made repeated references to African art. The welded sculpture that Mr. Edwards was making in 1963 would soon become his “Lynch Fragments.” Mr. Purifoy’s “Watt’s Uprising Remains,” which has charred books as its primary component, was a direct response to its political moment.



So were Mr. Hammons’s prints, which incorporated their own version of assemblage, the biggest component being the human body. In each print, all or part of a figure, usually the artist’s, is directly imprinted on paper that has been covered with oil and sprinkled with powdered pigment. The form is elaborated through movement in the initial printing, or with the use of multiple impressions. To those basic elements Mr. Hammons added others: silk-screened forms, painting and collage ingredients, including cloth, wallpaper and twine.

Photographs from Tilton Gallery

From top, “His and Hers,” a metal sculpture by Melvin Edwards from about 1963, and two untitled body prints by David Hammons. Both are at the Tilton Gallery.

Although some prints suggest the influence of Romare Bearden, most have a look entirely their own, a distinctive mix of popular graphics, black vernacular art, performance art and the emotional weight of Goya’s prints. Humor, particularly in satirical riffs on ethnic stereotyping, prevents any clear-cut reading. Yet the simple fact that the imprinted bodies are black bodies, and self-portraits, makes the racial politics volatile and profound.

Especially in their performative aspect, the prints point to the increasingly conceptual direction Mr. Hammons would take after moving to New York. And just as his work went on to inspire artists in several countries, the assemblage movement that had helped form his career — and was by no means confined to Los Angeles — had its own broad influence. Artists like Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy are among its many younger beneficiaries.

Still, exhibitions of the West Coast assemblage movement are few and far between. For that reason alone — sheer pleasure is another — every curator of modern and contemporary art in town should be making room in their schedules to see the Tilton show before it closes. So should every young art historian. An immense, barely tapped history, singular and plural, is here waiting to be told.

“L.A. Object and David Hammons Body Prints” continues at the Tilton Gallery, 8 East 76th Street, Manhattan, (212) 737-2221, through Nov. 22.