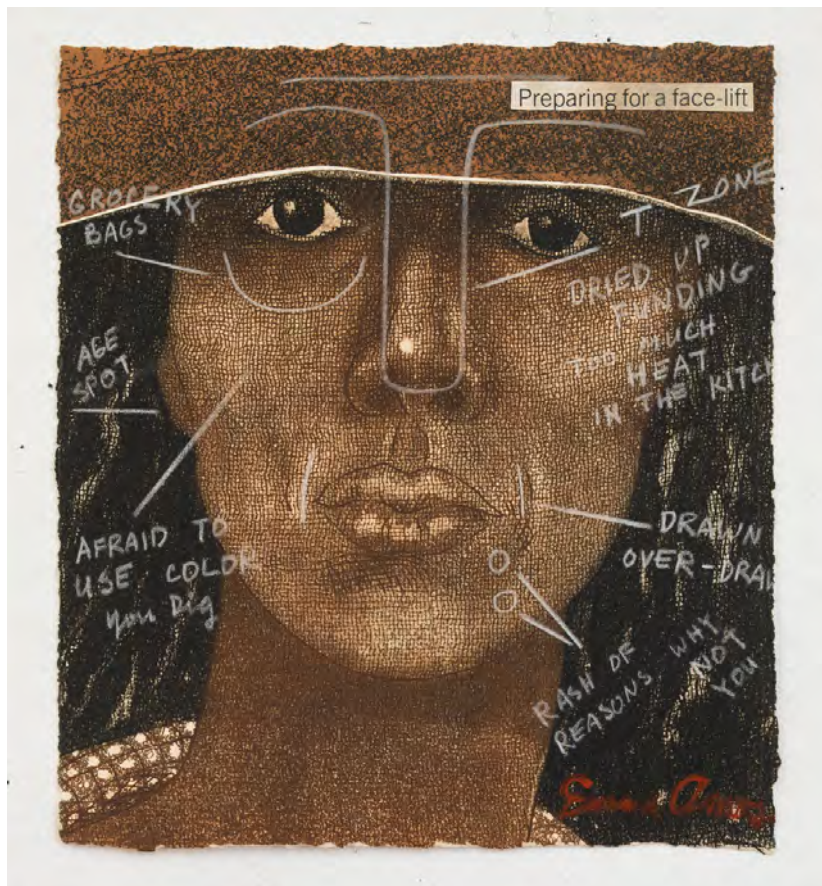


To Be Black, Female and Fed Up With the Mainstream

By HOLLAND COTTER APRIL 20, 2017



Emma Amos's "Preparing for a Face Lift" (1981) in the show "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985" at the Brooklyn Museum.

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One reason for the [hullabaloo](#) around Dana Schutz's painting of the murdered Emmett Till in the current Whitney Biennial is the weakness of the work. It looks half-baked, unresolved. Like a lot of recent "political" art, it doesn't try for a weight suitable to, and therefore respectful of, its racially charged, morally shattering subject. The result, to use one writer's words, is "a tasty abstraction designed purposefully or inadvertently" to evoke an image of "common oppression."

Actually, those dismissive words weren't written about the Schutz painting. They were written in 1970 by the African-American critic Linda La Rue about the vaunted cross-cultural embrace of the second-wave feminist movement. The writer eyed with deep distrust the movement's assumption that it could speak with authority for all women, including black women.

Ms. La Rue's words are in the catalog for the exhibition "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85" at the Brooklyn Museum. And her critical perspective is one that to a large degree shapes this spare-looking show, which takes a textured view of the political past — a past that is acquiring renewed weight in the immediate present when the civil rights gains, including feminist gains, of the past half-century appear to be up for grabs.

Whether those gains have ever *not* been up for grabs is a question to consider, though the show asks more specific historical ones. Such as: What did women's liberation, primarily a white, middle-class movement, have to offer African-American women in a country where, as late as the 1960s, de facto slavery still existed; a country where racism, which the movement itself shared, was soaked into the cultural fabric? Under the circumstances, to be black, female and pursuing a career in art was a radical move.

The show starts in the early 1960s, with the formation in New York City of the black artists' group [Spiral](#), composed mostly of established professionals — Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff — who debated the pros and cons, ethical and aesthetic, of putting art in the service of the civil rights movement. In all the talk, at least one political issue seems to have been passed over: the group's gender bias. Among its 15 regular members, there was only one woman, the painter [Emma Amos](#) — then in her early 20s and one of Woodruff's students — who would go on to make important political art.

By the time [Spiral](#) dispersed in 1965, the social mood of the country was tense. Black Power consciousness was on the rise — you'll find a detailed account of its growth in the exhibition "[Black Power!](#)" at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture — and art was increasingly a vehicle for racial assertion. The multidisciplinary Black Arts Movement took form in Harlem and spread to Chicago. There it spawned a subsidiary group called AfriCobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) which, with its interweave of black nationalism, spirituality, free jazz and brilliantly colored patterning, had a wide, sparks-shooting embrace. Yet it attracted relatively few female participants. Two — the prolific printmaker Barbara Jones-Hogu, and the fashion designer Jae Jarrell, who painted directly on her clothes — are in the show.



Where We At's "Cookin' and Smokin'" poster, from 1972. Dindga McCannon and Collection of David Lusenhop

By the 1970s, feeling the pressures of racism from outside the African-American world, and the pressures of Black Power sexism within it, female artists formed their own collectives, without necessarily identifying them as feminist. One of the earliest, called Where We At, was initiated in Brooklyn in 1971 by Vivian E. Browne, Dindga McCannon and the redoubtable Faith Ringgold. After organizing what it advertised as "the first Black Women's art exhibition in known history," the group turned its second show into a benefit for black unwed mothers and their children.



"Faith Ringgold (right) and Michele Wallace (middle) at Art Workers Coalition Protest, Whitney Museum," 1971. Jan van Raay

The practical generosity of that gesture said a lot about how a distinctive African-American feminism would develop. Black collectives were embedding themselves, at street level, in communities, running educational workshops, scrounging up funds for day-care centers, and making inexpensive art — graphically striking posters, for example. “Our struggle was primarily against racial discrimination — not singularly against sexism,” said the painter Kay Brown, a Where We At member.



Betye Saar's "Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail," 1973.
Betye Saar and Roberts & Tilton, Culver City, Calif.; Private collection

Her measured words barely hint at the hostility felt by some black artists toward a mainstream feminist movement that in their view ignored the black working-class poor and sometimes its own racism. And anger sometimes comes through in the work. It does in the fierce hilarity of a short 1971 film called “Colored Spade” by Betye Saar that flashes racial stereotypes at us like rapid-fire bullets, and in a funky 1973 assemblage called “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail,” by the same artist, which turns a California wine jug with a “mammy” image on one side and a Black Power fist on another, into a homemade bomb.

As the 1970s went on, black women began to participate, with their guard always up, in feminist projects like the all-woman A.I.R. Gallery and the Heresies Collective, at least until they were reminded of their outsider status. At the same time, they found a warm welcome at Just Above Midtown, a Manhattan gallery opened by Linda Goode Bryant in 1974 to show black contemporary art. Archival material related to this remarkable space, which closed in 1986, fills one of the exhibition’s several display cases and makes fascinating reading, as does a vivacious interview with Ms. Bryant by the critic Tony Whitfield reprinted in a “Sourcebook” that serves as an exhibition catalog.



Lorraine O'Grady's "Mlle. Bourgeoise Noire Costume," 1980.
2017 Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; James Estrin/The New York Times

Major pieces by artists whose careers Ms. Bryant helped start and sustained— Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O'Grady, Howardena Pindell— appear in galleries devoted to the late 1970s and '80s, when an unprecedented amount of mixing was in progress. A multiculturalist vogue brought women and African-American artists into the spotlight. In a kind of parody of tolerance, the Reagan-era culture wars attacked artists across gender and racial lines. So did the H.I.V./AIDS epidemic.



Blondell Cummings performing
"Blind Dates" at Just Above
Midtown Gallery in New York in
1982.
Estate of Lona Foote; Howard Mandel
and Special Collections and University
Archives

The show ends with heirs to the Just Above Midtown generation. Some of them — Lorna Simpson, [Carrie Mae Weems](#) — we know well. Others, like the great dancer [Blondell Cummings](#) and the Rodeo Caldonia High-Fidelity Performance Theater, we need to know more about. And the exhibition, organized by Catherine Morris of the museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art and Rujeko Hockley, a former curator at the Brooklyn Museum now at the Whitney Museum of American Art, at least encourages us to learn.

And it leads us to at least one broad conclusion: that the African-American contribution to feminism was, and is, profound. Simply to say so — to make an abstract, triumphalist claim — is easy, but inadequate. It fails to take the measure of lived history. The curators of “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85” do better than that just by doing their homework. They let counternarrative contradictions and confused emotions stand. The only change I would make, apart from adding more artists, would be to tweak its title: I’d edit it down to its opening phrase and put that in the present tense.

We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85
Through Sept. 17 at the Brooklyn Museum; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

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