

ARTFORUM

“Witness”

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
200 Eastern Parkway
March 7–July 6 2014

“Witness,” as its title proclaims, is a bold admixture of radical voices attesting to the spirit and conscience of the 1960s. The decade has often been revisited as a period when artistic earnestness and social efficacy prevailed in spite of an increasingly commercialized market. Rarely has the result been as intriguing as in this exhibit, which brings Pop art, Abstract Expressionism, neo-Dada, and the Black Arts Movement into conversation.

Outliers of canonical movements command center stage, from Robert Indiana’s brash *The Confederacy: Alabama*, 1965, to Norman Lewis’s *Double Cross*, 1971. Sam Gilliam’s *Red April*, 1970, is a shimmering curtain of pastels punctuated by splashes of blues, yellows, and a prodigious use of red. Part of a series about the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the riots that followed, Gilliam’s large painting lures the viewer into its fluid veil of color only to press discomfort with the violent application of vermillion. Philip Guston’s return to figuration in works such as *City Limits*, 1969, whose comically charged Klansmen have been dually interpreted as symbols of protest and apolitical reflections of the artist’s inner self, makes sense in this context. The slick oil residue of a body lingers on David Hammons’s *The Door (Admissions Office)*, 1969 a symbolic threshold of Jim Crowism.

The stars of this show are rarely seen works that include Melvin Edwards’s *Chaino*, 1964, Pauline Boty’s *Countdown to Violence*, 1964, Jack Whitten’s *Birmingham*, 1964, Jae Jarrell’s *Urban Wall Suit*, 1969, and Joe Overstreet’s *Justice, Faith, Hope and Peace*, 1969. Reminiscent of scholarly reassessments of ’60s art in the ’90s, the exhibition, curated by Teresa Carbone and Kellie Jones, manages to incorporate works that are often marginalized because they do not fit neatly into established art-historical movements. Here, however, elegant visual connections, such as those between Elizabeth Catlett’s 1969 lithograph *Negro es Bello II*, and Indiana’s *Black Yield Brother 3*, 1963, allow familiar formal idioms—seriality and the use of popular signage among others—to reemerge in light of a shared engagement with the central issues of their time.



Jack Whitten, *Birmingham*, 1964, aluminum foil, newsprint, stocking, oil on plywood, 16 5/8 x 16".

— *Andrianna Campbell*