

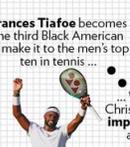
# RYAN LEE

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## NEW YORK

### The Approval Matrix: Sweaty, Stormy, Caffeinated, Coked-Up Summer

Compiled by Dominique Pariso and Chris Stanton | July 14, 2023

		HIGHBROW			
DESPICABLE	<p><b>Violent</b> flash floods hit New York and Vermont.</p>  <p>...While a volcano <b>erupts</b> after intense earthquakes near Reykjavik ...</p>  <p>And the Southwest fries in its <b>blistering</b> new normal.</p>  <p>Ex-Auburn coach <b>blocks top Marines</b> appointment because he doesn't want servicemembers to receive paid leave for abortion travel.</p>  <p>Apparently it's <b>illegal</b> to have powdery fun in the White House.</p>  <p><b>American Horror Story: The Scab</b> will be ready soon.</p> 	<p>George Santos says he's like <b>Rosa Parks</b>.</p>  <p>Right before delivery workers were to get a higher minimum wage, a Manhattan judge <b>shoved a stick</b> in the spokes.</p>  <p><b>Iowa Republicans</b> schedule election caucuses on Martin Luther King Jr. Day.</p>  <p>Innovation in tech has come down to <b>cloning Twitter</b>.</p> 	<p>Yu &amp; Me Books will survive its recent fire, thanks to <b>donations</b>.</p>  <p>At Ryan Lee Gallery, Emma Amos's <i>Odyssey</i>, not shown for 20 years, depicts a <b>century of family history</b>.</p>  <p><b>Crook Manifesto</b>, Colson Whitehead's hilarious, <b>powerful follow-up</b> to <i>Harlem Shuffle</i>.</p>  <p>Ruth Madievsky's gripping debut novel, <b>All-Night Pharmacy</b>.</p>  <p>New <b>rail tunnels</b> are coming ... by 2035.</p>  <p>The <b>Blaise Cendrars</b> show at the Morgan Library.</p>  <p>The <b>Fire Island Dance Festival</b> returns to the beach.</p>  <p>Ukrainian folk-music quartet <b>DakhaBrakha</b> storms the lawn of Caramoor.</p> 	BRILLIANT	
	<p>Travis Scott to debut his album at the <b>pyramids</b> in Giza because he can.</p>  <p>U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service offers reward for creeps who <b>stole piping-plover eggs</b> in the Rockaways.</p>  <p>Reneé Rapp <b>won't be walking</b> at graduation; exits <i>The Sex Lives of College Girls</i> before season four.</p>  <p>Schumer wants the FDA to investigate Prime energy drinks. Boomers will <b>stop at nothing</b>.</p>  <p>The world's largest, gaudiest cruise ship will test its 5,610 passengers <b>against the orcas</b> in 2024.</p>  <p>Jonah Hill stands up for men who think of <b>manipulation</b> as having "boundaries."</p>  <p>People seem to think it's okay now to <b>throw their phones</b> at pop stars.</p> 	<p><b>RIP Ink</b>, the 33-year-old East Village newsstand.</p>  <p><b>Barbenheimer</b> will either save movies or lay waste to us all.</p>  <p>I Sodi, now on Bleecker Street, is <b>bigger and better</b> than ever.</p>  <p>At least AI makes for a <b>good villain</b> in the new <i>Mission: Impossible</i>.</p>  <p>Our beloved <b>Staten Island vampires</b> return to TV.</p> 	<p><b>Rascal noir</b> <i>Lowdown Road</i>, by Scott Von Doviak, drives lightning fast through the summer of '74.</p>  <p>The <b>Borscht Belt Fest</b> comes to Ellenville to celebrate Catskills resort culture.</p>  <p><b>THE SPHERE.</b></p>  <p><b>Frances Tiafoe</b> becomes the third Black American to make it to the men's top ten in tennis ...</p>  <p>... While underdog <b>Chris Eubanks</b> reached <b>improbable heights</b> at Wimbledon.</p>  <p>Ex-Housewives Luann and Sonja's <b>reality version of Schitt's Creek</b> is the best show on Bravo.</p> 		
			LOWBROW		

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## HIGHBROW

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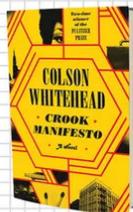


At Ryan Lee Gallery, Emma Amos's *Odyssey*, not shown for 20 years, depicts a **century of family history**.

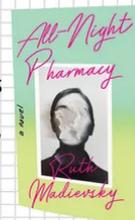


Classical Theater of Harlem's *Malvolio*, an unexpectedly charming sequel to *Twelfth Night*.

*Crook Manifesto*, Colson Whitehead's hilarious, **powerful follow-up** to *Harlem Shuffle*.



Ruth Madievsky's gripping debut novel, *All-Night Pharmacy*.



New **rail tunnels** are coming ... by 2035.



The **Blaise Cendrars** show at the Morgan Library.



The Fire Island **Dance Festival** returns to the beach.



**Ukrainian folk-music** quartet DakhaBrakha storms the lawn of Caramoor.



The **scenic** Rooftop at Pier 17 is the best place to catch a summer concert.

BRILLIANT

# FRIEZE

## Aindrea Emelife's Highlights of Frieze London and Frieze Masters 2022

By Aindrea Emelife | October 14, 2022

American artist and activist Emma Amos (1937-2020) was a beautiful colourist. Dynamic and masterful, she was the only woman to join the radical African American art collective, Spiral, which was co-founded by Romare Bearden in 1963. The more you see Amos' work, the more the rhythmic, figurative and deeply intellectual nuances come out. Born in the segregated South, she looked often to reflect on the experience of Black womanhood, and the work at Frieze Masters examples many instances of her technique – photo transfer for example. Her work was largely ignored until the middle to late 90s, when she showed at Art In General in New York. Her varied experiments in painting and textiles are explosions of colour that wrestle with issues of race and gender. Painting is a political act, and it is poetic with Amos' hand.



Emma Amos, *Waves*, 2000. © Emma Amos; Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

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# ARTnews

 Est. 1902

## Frieze London's 10 Best Booths, From a Gigantic Watch to a Poignant Metaphor for Displacement

By Maximiliano Durón | October 12, 2022



MAXIMILIANO DURÓN/ARTNEWS

One of two major art fairs running this month, Frieze London, along with its sister fair Frieze Masters, had its VIP opening today in Regent's Park. The affair was much more crowded than most fairs have been since events of this scale resumed after a pause caused by the pandemic.

Indeed, much of the talk around the fair was about how long the line to get in was, with some saying they waited at least a half hour. The opening hours were bustling with people, likely because of how many visitors were granted the traditionally exclusive 11 a.m. entry time, and dealers reported strong sales during the fair.

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The work on view this year is strong, and discoveries of artists both young and overlooked abound. Below a look at the best on offer at the fair, which runs until Sunday.

## Emma Amos at RYAN LEE



Work by Emma Amos at RYAN LEE's booth.  
Photo: Maximiliano Durón/ARTnews

It's rare when an artwork of true art historical significance appears at an art fair, so that makes this solo both dedicated to the late, great Emma Amos worth noting. At the center of it is *Work Suit* (1994), made the same year she saw a landmark Lucian Freud retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. In this painting, Amos has placed her face onto that of a nude version of Freud's body. It's a reflection on who's accepted into art history (read: white, straight men) and a sly subversion of the canon.

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This painted version of Freud's body shows up again in other Amos pieces here where she holds a blow-up of it before her body. There are also other self-portraits on view, including *Thurgood and Thelonious*, *Some Names to Name Your Children* (1989), which consists of a floor panel and a triptych showing various falling figures, rendered here in the stark white of marble. They are surrounded by the first names of people like Langston Hughes, Rosa Parks, Thurgood Marshall, Bessie Coleman, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston, among others. To this Amos has added her own cut-out figure, which is installed on the floor.

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### Detroit Institute of Arts Acquires Iconic Emma Amos Painting That Recently Appeared in Retrospective

By Alex Greenberger | August 24, 2022



Emma Amos, *Equals*, 1992. DETROIT INSTITUTE OF ARTS

Following her death in 2020 and a traveling retrospective, the influential painter Emma Amos has received a new level of attention within the country's biggest institutions. Further evidence of this trend arrived this week, when the Detroit Institute of Arts revealed that it had acquired an iconic work by her that had appeared in her retrospective.

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*Equals*, a 1992 painting from a beloved series of works depicting falling figures, has now been added to the DIA's collection via the museum's Center for African American Art. It is the first painting by Amos to be added to the museum's collection, and one of the few from this series to reside with an institution of DIA's caliber. The work was among the highlights of her 2021 retrospective, organized by Shawnya L. Harris, that made stops in Athens, Georgia; Utica, New York; and Philadelphia.

She is not so famous as her white, male compatriot, to put it mildly.

Amos's paintings of falling figures were produced 1988 and 1992, and have been seen as a response to the sense of tumult faced by African Americans like herself. But Amos, whose work often involved clever perspectival shifts and dazzling uses of color, also phrased her explanation for the series in formal terms.

"I liked the idea of using the sky instead of having everybody just standing," she once said. "It meant that you had to see the body in different kinds of ways—not a standing figure, not a lying-down figure, but a figure either in a kind of anxious position but also there could be some joy in flying through the air."

In this work, a woman who may just be a stand-in for Amos herself is shown tumbling before a waving American flag. A photograph of a shack owned by Southern sharecroppers is situated in one corner; nearby is an equal sign that lures the eye toward the plummeting woman. The painting's borders are identified by the DIA as being "African fabric" printed with images of Malcolm X.

Throughout her career, Amos confronted racism, sexism, and class oppression, both in her work and in her lived experiences. At times, she turned to activism, joining groups such as the feminist collective the Guerrilla Girls. She had long struggled to obtain gallery representation, and few works by her entered museum collections during her lifetime.

Still today, few of the top museums in the U.S. own Amos's work. This is the case in New York, where Amos was long based—the Whitney Museum and the Brooklyn Museum have one painting each, while the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have none. Some of these museums do, however, own prints by Amos, which was also a significant part of her practice.

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It's also the case in Georgia, the state where Amos was born. The High Museum of Art in Atlanta has no works by Amos at all.

That all makes the DIA's acquisition of *Equals* a rarity—and a coup.

Calling the work “extraordinary,” Valerie Mercer, a curator who serves as head of the DIA's Center for American Art, said in a statement, “When I first saw this piece while visiting with Amos in her New York City studio in the early 1990s, it immediately drew my attention because of its bold colors and powerful brushstrokes, and its dynamic depiction of bodies in free fall as a microcosm of racial and gender disparities in society.”

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## PMA Stories

### Look Closely: Emma Amos and the Perfect Print

By Laurel Gerber and Thomas Primeau | December 28, 2021

How American artist Emma Amos pushed etching to its limits—and brought *American Girl* to life.



*American Girl*, 1974, by Emma Amos (American, 1937-2020), 2018-145-1 © Emma Amos;  
Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

The first thing to know about Emma Amos's remarkable print *American Girl* (shown above) is that things are not what they seem. In this apparently straightforward image of a reclining figure gazing out toward the viewer, Amos and the printers at the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop pushed the medium of etching to its limit. Above all, Amos's *American Girl* defies the flatness that we typically associate with works on paper: it relies

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on a number of intricate techniques at different stages of the production process that give the final print various, multidimensional layers.

One of the emphases of the exhibition *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey* on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (through January 17, 2022) is the artist's career-long practice of experimental printmaking. Amos began making etchings in the late 1950s as a young student in London and continued to make prints for the next six decades. *Color Odyssey* includes examples of her prints from across these years and explores the ways she used print as a medium for her investigations into the representation of the female figure.

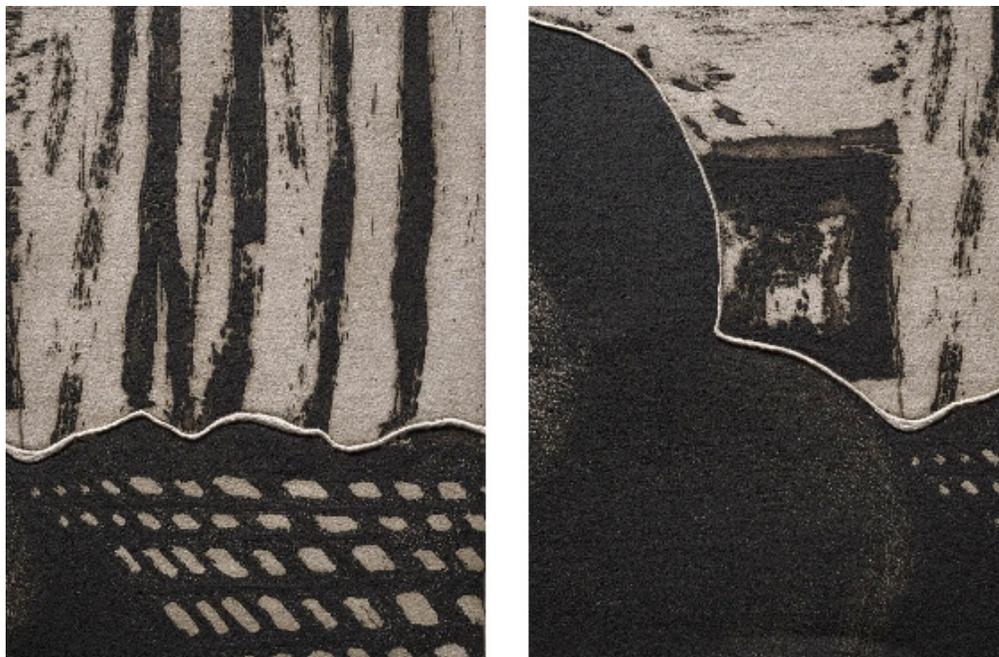


Installation view of *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey* in Philadelphia. Photo by Joseph Hu

One of our galleries in Philadelphia is devoted to the prints Amos made in the 1970s and 1980s, when she was immersed in the activity and community of the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop, a vital space for printmaking during this period. There, she worked with professional printers, collaborating on the production of her printed images. In this context, Amos produced *American Girl* for a portfolio of black-and-white prints by seven artists titled *Impressions: Our World, Volume I*, published by Blackburn. This print entered the museum's collection in 2018, and in this post, we take a deep dive into the making of this fascinating and materially complex work.

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Details of *American Girl* in raking light. Photo by Jason Wierzbicki

In the images above, you can see how Amos and her printer used a process known as “lift-ground aquatint” to create the background’s uneven stripes and textures. In lift-ground, also known as “sugar lift,” the artist paints an image onto the printing plate using a solution of sugar, India ink, and soap. After a series of steps—including immersing the plate in warm water, adding powdery rosin to it, and heating—the surface of the plate is left bare in the areas where the image was painted with the sugary liquid, and coated with a protective ground everywhere else. When the plate is immersed in acid—part of the process of etching—the uncoated metal is “bitten” away, thereby creating irregular surfaces that will hold the printing ink. With this technique, Amos gives variation and alternating textures to the background, which sets off the rich, dark tones composing the figure’s skin, hair, and body.

Although this female figure occupies the lower register of the print and appears in the foreground, Amos blurs the contours of her body, which are hard to make out in the swaths of rich tone. Etching a plate often requires repeated immersions in acid baths in order to achieve sufficiently deep recesses that will eventually hold ink. The longer the plate is exposed to acid, the deeper the metal will be etched, and the more layers of dark, heavy ink will be printed on the paper. The

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ink on *American Girl* appears in a range of thicknesses and contains a variety of patterns, indicating that Amos worked to carefully modify the depth and texture of the plate during etching. The girl's face stands out in the fuzziness of the dark tone, as if giving off its own light, while the dense halo of her hair has its own texture.



Detail of *American Girl* in raking light. Photo by Jason Wierzbicki

Amos contrasts these subtle layers of texture and tone with a striking white line that runs like a fault around the woman's figure and cleaves the composition's lower half from the upper half. This line was produced from the gap between two etching plates, or rather, between two halves of the same plate. That is, Amos further enhanced the topography of the print by doing something rarely seen in the history of print: cutting the plate in two, thereby separating the figure in the foreground from the background.

During printing, she and her printer positioned the two sections of the original plate with a slight gap between them, running them through the press together and printing them on a dampened sheet of paper. Because the sheet was wet and

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the paper fibers malleable, a soft ridge of the white paper was forced up between the sections, creating a wide line, both visual and physical. In this way, Amos made, unmade, and remade the plate before printing it, creating a composite image that incorporates this fracture as its defining feature.

The effect of this procedure on paper is startling. The line swells and recedes around the figure in ways both delicate and jarring. It looks like a visible cut, but it also gives the figure added dimension, setting her off from the flatness of the page. The rift between the two plates is raised in relation to the impressed image, palpably dividing the two halves.

With this line, Amos leaves a glaring material trace of the printmaking process in the composition of the final image. That trace helps alert us to the range of other, more subtle printerly techniques that make up this “American girl.” Amos emphasizes the material process involved in producing her subject, drawing attention to the creativity, inventiveness, and skill required to represent a Black female figure outside the history of its frequent objectification in the white, male-dominated canons of Western art.



*American Girl* in raking light. Photo by Jason Wierzbicki

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## The New York Times

### Best Art Exhibitions of 2021

By Holland Cotter and Roberta Smith | December 9, 2021

Ambitious museum shows in Tulsa, Richmond, and Louisville left an imprint. Jasper Johns, Maya Lin and Latino artists shone. And the high quality of gallery shows of women was dizzying and gratifying.



*Outstanding art shows of 2021 offered works by Emma Amos, Jasper Johns (at two museums) and Alice Neel. Credit: Details from left: Emma Amos and Ryan Lee Gallery; Jasper Johns/VAGA at Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY, Charlie Rubin for The New York Times; Estate of Alice Neel*

### Most Memorable Art and Image-Makers of 2021

The year 2021 was about recovery — slow, partial, tentative, ongoing — from lockdown. Over the summer, museums and galleries rebooted, but with masking and distancing in place. After a year of social isolation, a market trend in easy-to-like figure painting had natural appeal, with portrait shows everywhere. (New York had Medicis and Alice Neel; Hans Holbein and the

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Obamas currently hold court in Los Angeles) But for me, many of the most memorable events were either outside bicoastal centers or in unusual locations and forms within them.

## **The Best Art Shows of 2021 Were in Galleries**

This fall a mood of elation was palpable in certain quarters of Manhattan, namely those neighborhoods dense with commercial art galleries. People giddily commented on the unusually high quality of the gallery scene as if art dealers had recommitted themselves to their calling and were bent on making up for the deprivations of lockdown. Several men had impressive shows — Philip Guston, Beauford Delaney (through Dec. 23), David Salle and Alvaro Barrington come to mind. But what moved me most was the high frequency of outstanding solo presentations of art by women — more than I could possibly mention here, even if I had been able to see them all. The shows touched on all phases of artistic development — early, middle, late — and the cumulative message concerned longevity: women have always been here, dedicating their lives to art.

## **5. Museums Step Up**

It added to the euphoric mood that the winning gallery shows occurred against a backdrop of outstanding monographic museum shows devoted to women, especially on the Eastern Seaboard. In March, New York saw the opening of the Metropolitan Museum's retrospective "Alice Neel: People Come First," an unexpected blockbuster. Three days later, the Whitney Museum opened a midcareer survey of Julie Mehretu's popular paintings organized with the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. This fall brought surveys of the British photo and video artist Gillian Wearing at the Guggenheim Museum (through April 4) and the Modern's large retrospective of the great equalizer of art mediums, Sophie Taeuber-Arp (through March 12). Emma Amos's career is being feted by the Philadelphia Museum of Art (through Jan. 17) and Joan Semmel's by the Pennsylvania Academy of Art in Philadelphia (through April 3). In Atlanta, a retrospective at the High Museum exuberantly titled "Really Free: The Radical Art of Nellie Mae Rowe" honors the extraordinary work of the self-taught artist (through Jan. 9).

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Emma Amos's "To Sit (With Pochoir)," 1981, etching and aquatint with stenciled coloring (on view through Jan. 17). Credit: Emma Amos and Ryan Lee Gallery; Philadelphia Museum of Art

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## HYPERALLERGIC

### The Best of 2021: Our Top 10 United States Art Shows

By Hyperallergic | December 8, 2021

Our favorite US shows of 2021, brought to you by the writers and editors of Hyperallergic.



Emma Amos, "Equals" (1992), acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders, 6 feet 4 inches × 6 feet 10 inches (private collection)

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Thanks to the beloved Hyperallergic contributors located around the country, we are able to bring you a list of 10 knockout exhibitions across several states this year. As someone who did limited traveling in 2021, working with these writers and reading their words on art has expanded my horizons. I hope they can do the same for you. —*Elisa Wouk Almino, Senior Editor*

## 1. Four Solo Artist Exhibitions Across Philadelphia



*Installation view, Emma Amos: Color Odyssey (photo by Joseph Hu, image courtesy the Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2021)*

This fall, there was a bounty of artist retrospectives at museums across Philadelphia. Joan Semmel at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art (PAFA), Suzanne Valadon at the Barnes Foundation, and Emma Amos and Jasper Johns at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. While each was notable and worth seeing on its own right, together they are a tour de force, demonstrating the power of a city's art institutions to offer a wide arrange of material that speaks to many audiences. Touring the shows in one day felt like getting an in-depth education in portraiture, identity, gender politics in modern and contemporary art, and many other things. While some of the shows were smaller than many would've liked, they certainly whetted our appetites for more. More of this excellence, please. Read below for more on the Amos show, which contributor Ilene Dube chose as her favorite show of the year. —*Hrag Vartanian*

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Emma Amos is having a moment, albeit posthumously. The only woman and youngest person to be invited to join Spiral, a New York-based collective of African American artists active in the 1960s and '70s, Amos joins the pantheon of octogenarian and nonagenarian women finally getting retrospectives in major museums. Amos, who died last year, was a professor at the Mason Gross School of Art, Rutgers University, when it was a hotbed of the feminist art movement, a movement she actively participated in. Among the highlights of Emma Amos: Color Odyssey, which originated at the Georgia Museum of Art and was curated by Laurel Garber and Shawnya L. Harris, is "Tightrope" (1994), which employs Amos's signature technique of African textile borders. The artist paints herself in a Wonder Woman costume that peeks out from her painter's smock, her balancing on the tightrope suggestive of the struggles Amos faced as an artist without the privileges afforded to White masculinity.

—*Ilene Dube*

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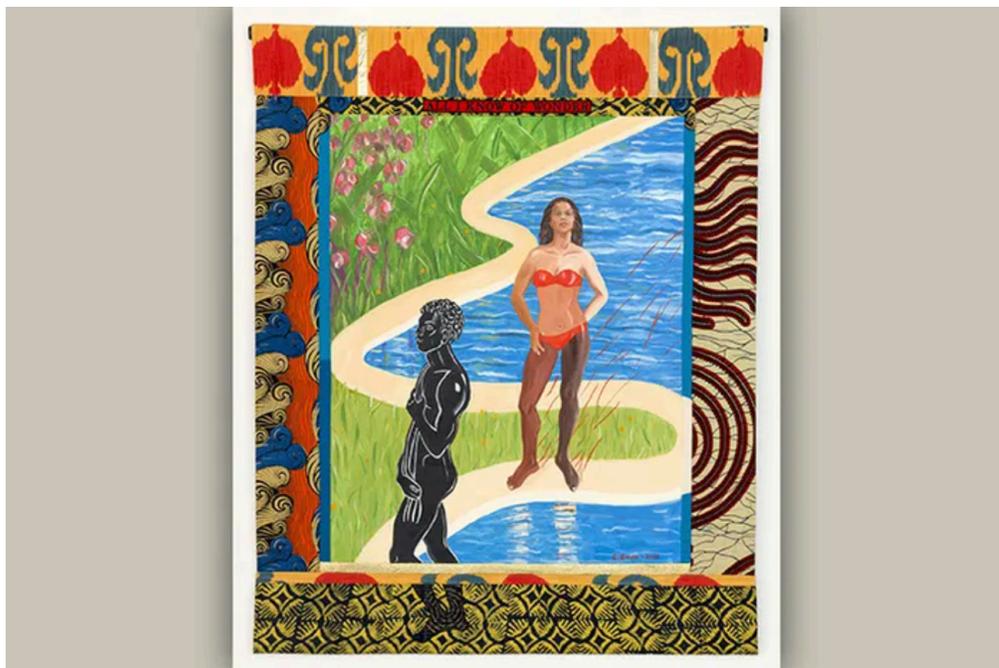
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## The Philadelphia Inquirer

Emma Amos' artwork is celebrated in a traveling retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

By Stephen Salisbury | November 29, 2021

The artist explored race and gender through paintings, weaving, and textiles.



*Detail of "All I know of Wonder," 2008, by Emma Amos. Oil on canvas with African fabric borders. This detail of Amos' 2008 painting shows how skin tone in her work is anything but fixed and straightforward.  
Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York*

It's likely that you'll think of Jasper Johns when you hear mention of an artist born in the South who has created striking paintings of targets and flags and is now the subject of a major exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

And you would not be mistaken.

But there are, in fact, two such artists. Johns, of course, now 91, and among the most celebrated artists of his generation, is one one of them. He's the subject of

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a huge, two-part exhibition now up at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City and the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

The second artist on view at the PMA is Emma Amos, a Black painter and printmaker from Atlanta, who grew up in a household frequented by W.E.B. DuBois and Zora Neale Hurston, and was a member of feminist and activist art groups like Heresies in the 1970s and the Guerrilla Girls in the 1980s, and Black collectives like Spiral in the 1960s.

She is not so famous as her white, male compatriot, to put it mildly.



*"Targets," 1989, by Emma Amos. Acrylic on canvas with hand-woven fabric and African fabric borders.  
Amos Family, courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery.*

In fact, Amos never even had the opportunity to see her work in this current exhibition, her first major solo traveling museum show. She died in May of 2020 at the age of 83 – about a year before “Emma Amos: Color Odyssey” opened at its first venue, the Georgia Museum of Art.

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Now “Color Odyssey,” an exhibit of roughly 60 works, has opened at the Philadelphia Museum of Art for a run through Jan. 17.

That Amos – creator of a powerful body of work as a painter, printmaker, weaver, and textile designer – had not achieved broad acclaim by the time of her death is attributed to two factors: her gender and her race.

The view that she has been excluded from the painterly club is a consensus that has only formed in the wake of #MeToo and Black Lives Matter. Nevertheless, it’s safe to say that Amos was more than aware of the issue.

“It’s always been my contention,” she once told an interviewer, “that for me, a Black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act.”



*“Tightrope,” 1994, by Emma Amos. Acrylic on linen with Kente borders, 6 feet 10 inches — 58 inches. Minneapolis Institute of Art. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

Laurel Garber, assistant curator of prints at the PMA and author of an essay on Amos in the exhibition catalog, said Amos’ “identity as a Black woman artist seemed to be a factor” in her lack of recognition.

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Amos was also a weaver, in addition to her other skills, a craft often seen as one of “the stepchildren of the contemporary art world,” Garber said.

“Weaving has a long history of association with Black makers,” Garber continued. “So it wasn’t just her contemporary practice, but the whole history of that medium” that contributed to her artistic identity.



*Emma Amos with “Head First” (2006). Photo by Becket Logan. © Emma Amos; Courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.*

Shawnya L. Harris, curator of African American and African Diasporic art at the Georgia Museum of Art and organizer of the exhibition, said that for Amos, race was not a straight-forward matter, despite the racial simplicities that dominate the art world.

“She had a very sophisticated sensibility about race,” said Harris. “She shows that race is a very fluid construction. It’s not this stable, firm fixed entity that we try to make it out to be. It’s pretty fluid. I mean, she was in an interracial marriage. And, you know, that whole notion of passing comes up in some of her works.”

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Amos, said Harris, was also “aware of the fact that, as a Black artist, she was automatically going to be expected to produce more political material, you know, even when she didn’t want to so.”

This was a source of annoyance for Amos who told her friend, the critic Lucy Lippard, that “every time I think about color it’s a political statement. It would be a luxury to be white and never have to think about it.”

In other words, race exists in the art world for Black people – but not for whites. Yet, returning again and again to representation of Blackness, Amos presents skin tones that are modulated across a range of hues. Race is not so easily captured, pinned down, or maybe even recognizable, she seems to say.

“In the mid-eighties I noticed that curators from public institutions mostly chose to exhibit paintings of mine showing figures that could be identified as ‘black,’” Amos once wrote. “This pattern made me more determined to use a multicolored mix of skin tones. Every African-American artist, including those whose work is more abstract or who do not paint recognizably ‘black’ figures, has confronted curatorial and editorial definitions of ‘black art’ that both include and exclude works, thus continuing the segregation of images and artists.”



*“X-Flag,” 1992, by Emma Amos. Acrylic on linen canvas, laser transfer photographs, and confederate flag borders. Collection of Meredith Harper, New York. Courtesy Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

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But if race cannot be easily pinned down, the corrosive nature of racism is everywhere in the culture, a point Amos meets head on with a series of great paintings largely completed in the 1990s. Targets (1992) makes use of a characteristic bullseye target and expands it by including two falling figures. X-Flag (1991) deploys the confederate flag as a motif. Work Suit (1994) makes startling use of a photo of Lucian Freud's naked torso topped by Amos' head. Tightrope (1994) presents the artist with the tools of her trade – brushes and breasts.

These works, plus a number of others painted during Amos' miraculous 1990, stand at the heart of the exhibition.

“Someone said once that every 30 years or so, certain ideas resurface and there are these paradigm shifts that occur in culture,” said Harris. “I like to think that it was 30 years before that a lot of the work that is in the exhibition was first exhibited and first created.”

Perhaps Amos “was kind of thinking ahead,” Harris said.

“All these ideas of looking at race, looking at gender, looking at the fluidity of all these categories. We take it for granted now ... but she was thinking about all those ideas way back a long time ago. And so I think its time has rolled around again. And people are revisiting these ideas, even if they use different vocabulary to talk about it.”

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## The New York Times

### The Many Styles of Emma Amos, and Her Drive to Get Free

By Jillian Steinhauer | October 21, 2021

The artist, who died last year, used collage and fabric to break out of painting's confines. Now her works are on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.



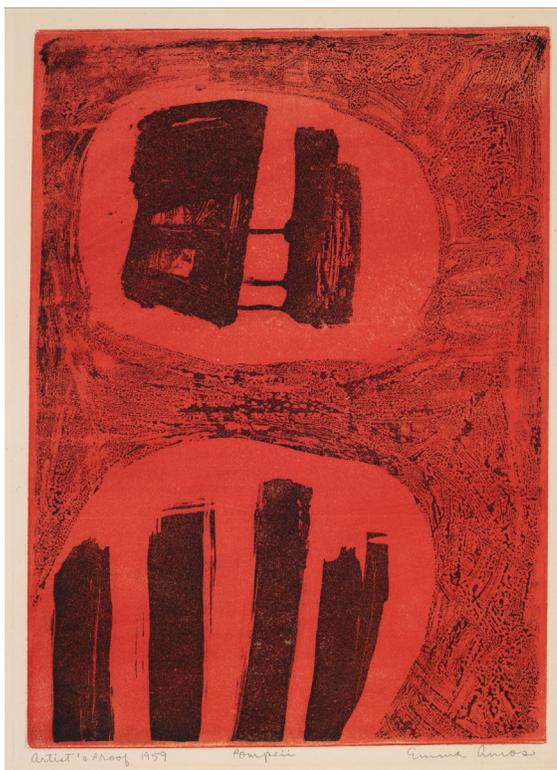
*Emma Amos's painting "Equals" (1992) incorporates collaged images of sharecroppers and Malcolm X, who repeats along a border made of African fabric. (Credit: Emma Amos)*

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PHILADELPHIA — Spend a few hours on social media, and you’ll come across heated discussions about who gets to speak for whom. That makes it a good time for an exhibition of art by Emma Amos, a painter, printmaker and weaver who grappled with age-old questions of identity and authority that feel freshly urgent. “Emma Amos: Color Odyssey,” a survey of her work organized by the Georgia Museum of Art and now on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, comes at an opportune moment.

Yet the show is also a lesson about the role that Amos, as a Black female artist, railed against in her life and has been cast in even after her death last year. Curated by the Georgia Museum’s Shawnya L. Harris, and in Philadelphia, Laurel Garber, “Color Odyssey” contains about 60 works. It is an exhilarating survey, but it is not, as Amos deserves, a major retrospective (see: the Jasper Johns mega-exhibition down the hall). Additional space to allow for the inclusion of at least one large-scale project and a timeline in the galleries would have been a good start.



Amos’s “Pompeii (Red),” 1959, an abstract etching that anticipates her forthcoming experiments with color. (Credit: Emma Amos and the University of Georgia)

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*“Untitled” (1965) was shown in the only exhibition mounted by Spiral, an influential but short-lived Black artists’ collective. (Credit: Emma Amos; Ryan Lee Gallery and Art Finance Partners)*

The lack feels apparent walking through “Color Odyssey” because the exhibition confirms her brilliance. Amos’s work is rigorous and complex, clever and passionate, jam-packed with intellectual and emotional stimulation. She attempted to recast history — art’s, the country’s, her own — from her position as a Black woman. Amos did not just want a seat at the table; she wanted to remake the table itself.

She began as many U.S. artists did in the 1950s: inspired by then-dominant Abstract Expressionism. Her first solo show, which took place in her hometown, Atlanta, featured abstract etchings. One example is on view here, titled “Pompeii (Red)” (1959), and its saturation anticipates her forthcoming experiments with color. The piece accompanies two other abstractions, including an untitled painting featuring a loosely rendered hand amid insistent passages of black, white and gray. Amos showed this painting in 1965 in the only exhibition mounted by Spiral, an influential but short-lived Black artists’ collective; after moving from Atlanta to New York City in 1960, she became the group’s youngest member and sole woman. In that same Spiral exhibition, she also displayed “Without Feather Boa” (1965), a print of herself wearing blue sunglasses and seemingly nothing else.

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*"Without Feather Boa" (1965), a print of Amos wearing blue sunglasses and seemingly nothing else. (Credit: Emma Amos and the Whitney Museum of American Art)*

These two radically different artworks hang side by side at the Philadelphia Museum, where they seem to represent a crossroads for their maker: abstraction or figuration, black and white or color? She chose chromatic representation and never looked back, but she didn't give up her commitment to expressive paint either.

In fact, one gets the sense that Amos never fully broke with anything, whether a style or medium. Her whole career was an additive process of expanding her skills and techniques and then finding ways to combine or complement them. In the 1960s, she worked for a commercial textile designer and, later on, taught weaving — occupations she kept hidden at first because the art establishment looked down upon them as craftwork.

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Amid the trippy counterculture of the '60s, Amos made a series of acid paintings with thick blocks and bands of color that seem to act as barriers. The female figures in those beguiling works morph into confident Black women in prints from the 1970s and '80s. The prints are technically complex: Amos would sometimes combine different methods in a single piece or do something unusual like cut her printing plate to create a thick white outline around a body. Even if you didn't know the ins and outs of her process, though, the multiple, intricate patterns in a work like "To Sit (With Pochoir)" (1981) are dazzling.



*"To Sit (With Pochoir)" (1981). Instead of a male gaze of white bodies, Amos offers us an intimate, female look at realistic Black women. (Credit: Emma Amos and the Philadelphia Museum Art)*

At the same time, there's a conceptual gambit happening here. Many of the figures wear bathing suits, harking back to the bathers motif taken up by modernists like Cezanne and Matisse. Amos replaced the traditionally stylized, nude, white women's bodies with contemporary, partly clothed, realistic Black ones, swapping the voyeuristic male gaze with an intimate female one. By doing so, she inserted Black women into art history and claimed the leisure and implied freedom of the water as her own.

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The question of liberation — how to get free — became a driving force in her practice in the late '80s. You can feel it in the third gallery, where her art erupts with new dynamism and energy. Suddenly, her figures are in motion, whether suspended amid feats of athleticism or falling and floating through the air. The solid ground of reality has given way to expressionistic, metaphorical spaces that might be cosmic, as in the delightfully chaotic triptych “Flying Circus” (1987), or more expressly political, as in “Equals” (1992), which features Amos floating against the backdrop of a waving American flag. The flag’s stars have come unmoored, and the blue rectangle that held them has been replaced by a reproduction of a Depression-era photograph of Black southern laborers. “Equals” suggests that the only way for African Americans to achieve equity and justice is to dislodge the existing paradigm of this country, as Malcolm X — whose image repeats along the top and bottom of the piece — tried to do.



*“Flying Circus,” 1987, an acrylic painting that uses African fabric as borders, which gives it literal texture as well as historical depth. (Credit: Emma Amos and RYAN LEE Gallery)*

It’s not just subject matter that makes such works so potent. Overcoming her reticence (thanks to a stint co-hosting a PBS TV show about craft in America), Amos began bringing fabric into her art, first her own weavings and then

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various kinds of African cloth. She experimented with forming figures from it but ended up using it mostly to accent and frame her paintings, a device that gives them literal texture as well as historical depth. Even as she painted her works effectually, with swooping lines and vigorous brushstrokes, she included fabric and hung them like scrolls or tapestries. Incorporating bold, bright colors and patterns, she infused her pieces with pleasure while tackling serious topics. Amos scrambled all the categories in which she might have fit: craft and art, women's and men's work, African and Western, grave and fun.

The exhibition includes two of her most iconic pieces, "Work Suit" and "Tightrope" (both 1994). Both are wry self-portraits in which Amos borrows imagery from canonical white Western male painters (Lucian Freud and Paul Gauguin, respectively) to comment on the difficulty of her position as a Black woman artist. I had seen them in reproduction but was unprepared for the level of detail and diversity in each one. Amos's best works can hold your attention for a long time, as your eyes and brain attempt to unpack their technical and conceptual complexity.



*"Tightrope" is a wry self-portrait whose corners borrow imagery from Paul Gauguin's paintings. (Credit: Emma Amos and the Minneapolis Institute of Art)*

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Writers in the catalog for “Color Odyssey” identify her approach as essentially a form of collage; in the 1995 book “Art on My Mind,” the scholar bell hooks calls it a “very postmodern quality” that celebrates mixing and miscegenation. However you define it, for Amos, there was resistance and freedom in heterogeneity — an ability to be her multiple selves at once and an opportunity to rethink the tropes and traps of history.

In “Models” (1995), for example, she lines up one of Gauguin’s depictions of his teenage Tahitian wife, Tehamana; an ethnographic photograph of an African woman with printed text around her; and an image of an ancient Greek male nude statue. Bordering them are letters that don’t spell out anything but allude to knowledge. The trio is a challenge to consider how beauty standards are set, but I read it also as a kind of proposition: If the first two have been considered valid objects of study for white men, then the third must be the same for Black women. Twenty-five years ago, Amos posed a question we’re still asking now: Who gets the right to be a subject?

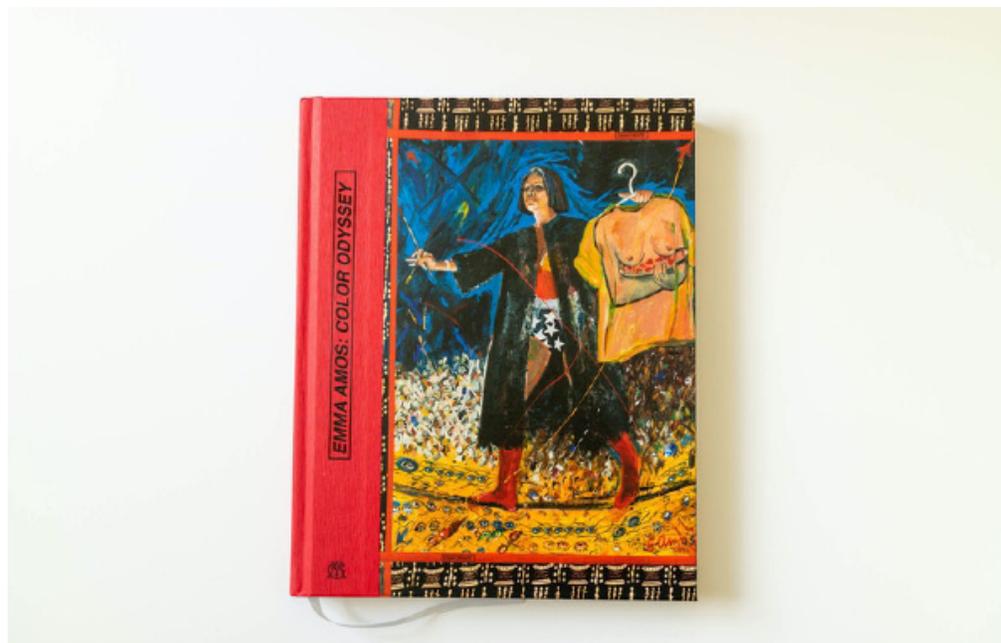
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**BROOKLYN RAIL**

## Emma Amos: Color Odyssey

By Karen Chernick | May 2021



This catalogue, filled with contributions by women in the arts who knew the artist personally, provides a survey befitting the now-unmasked member of the anonymous feminist Guerrilla Girls.

Multimedia artist Emma Amos defied being boxed into just one material or movement. As her contemporaries straddled Abstract Expressionism and Pop, Amos painted polychrome freefalling women, designed textiles, wove rugs, made prints, and transferred vintage photographs to canvases bordered with African fabrics. Her Manhattan studio at 21 Bond Street was packed with the materials she used all at once—defly stitching issues of gender and race into artworks that fused painting, printmaking, photography, and textile.

It's no simple task to fit the life's work of an artist like Amos into a monographic exhibition catalogue. Shawnya L. Harris—curator of the current Emma Amos:

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Color Odyssey retrospective of 60 artworks now at the Georgia Museum of Art and later traveling to the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute and Philadelphia Museum of Art—has been laboring on this project for the past five years (a period overlapping with the final years of the artist’s life). Harris assembled a chorus of voices representing expertise in the diverse materials Amos used and loved, and also who she was as a person: mentor, peer, friend. Except for the foreword, written by Georgia Museum of Art director William U. Eiland, these contributors are exclusively women in the arts who knew Amos personally, in a matter befitting a now-unmasked member of the anonymous feminist Guerrilla Girls.

The first contribution is a short personal passage by landscape painter Kay Walkingstick, who remembers Amos urging her to “load up your brush! We are painters and the art should show that!” She also describes posing for Amos’s *The Gift*, a series of 40 portraits of women artists she’d befriended. “We friends, we women, are gifts to one another,” Walkingstick explains. “We need one another, and we support one another.” Amos famously bolstered her fellow female artists, as many essays describe.

The book also includes a thorough biographical overview written by Harris, with context for some of Amos’s key works. It starts with the artist’s childhood in Atlanta (grounding the exhibition’s starting point in her hometown), and traces her formal art training at Antioch College and London’s Central School of Art before moving to New York in 1960 to get a master’s in art education at New York University. It was there that she met Hale Woodruff, who invited the twentysomething Amos to join *Spiral*—a Black artists’ collective (where Amos was the youngest and only female member). Around this time, Amos explored different painting techniques and wanted to generate popular interest in weaving. She taught weaving in Greenwich Village and Newark, and in 1977 cohosted a TV series about fabric arts called *Show of Hands* for a public station in Boston. By 1980, Amos was a tenured assistant professor at Rutgers’s Mason Gross School of the Arts, where she taught for 28 years.

Another portion of the catalogue is devoted to Amos’s use of fabric, granting it the same level of importance that she did in her artistic practice. “Amos’s decision to obfuscate this high/low art divide by consolidating the so-called ‘fine art’ of painting with the ‘artistry’ of textile making was nothing short of alchemy,” writes art historian Lisa Farrington. “Her use of fabric to create texture

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in her work is a sign of both her African and female birthrights, her maverick nature, her cunning creativity, and, perhaps most appreciably, her feminist consciousness.” An essay on Amos’s printmaking by Laurel Garber, curator of prints at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, explains the artist’s innovations to the medium. In a print titled *American Girl* (1974), for example, she drew a reclining woman on a printing plate and then cut it in half along the figure’s outline. When printed—alongside each other, but not touching—the plates created a dynamic gap along the fracture. Amos also developed a technique with master printer Kathy Caraccio that she dubbed “silk aquatint,” where she applied ink-resistant paint onto a fabric-topped printing matrix to create both translucent and opaque layers.

Layering images is a theme repeated in the following chapter about Amos’s use of transferred photographs in her paintings. “Photography is interesting because it seems not to lie, when of course we know that it does lie, because it’s very selective about what it shows,” Amos said in a 1993 interview. “Painting is assumed to always lie, because we have so many options when we set paint on canvas. The camera [lies] but in a different way and now I’m playing with that theme.” African American history professor Phoebe Wolfskill notes how Amos inserted historic photographs of Black southern communities into different contexts, such as the crosshairs of a painted Confederate flag, allowing them to tell new stories.

As a conclusion, photographer LaToya Ruby Frazier shares a memory of Amos, bookending *Walkingstick’s* opening reminisce. Frazier met Amos in 2007 at the annual College Art Association Conference, as a recent MFA graduate. “I will never forget how Emma responded to me and my art that day,” Frazier writes. “In the only way Emma Amos would be toward a young aspiring artist, in the most loving, generous and graceful way, she insisted that I stay with her in New York.” Days later, Amos marched Frazier into the dean’s office at Rutgers and got the young photographer hired on the spot for a one-year curatorial position.

In this paper-bound capsule that Harris has crafted of Amos’s life and work, the voices of friends and experts are often supplemented by the artist’s own words. Amos is heavily quoted in most essays, allowing the recently deceased artist to speak for herself. One statement in particular recurs like a refrain: “For me, a Black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act.” Mounting a museum retrospective of what she made in that studio and publishing a rich scholarly

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catalogue to accompany it, then, is political, too. As Amos's work slowly gets more institutional attention but she is no longer around to explain herself, this book compiled by scholars who knew her will surely be a foundational reference for understanding her work.

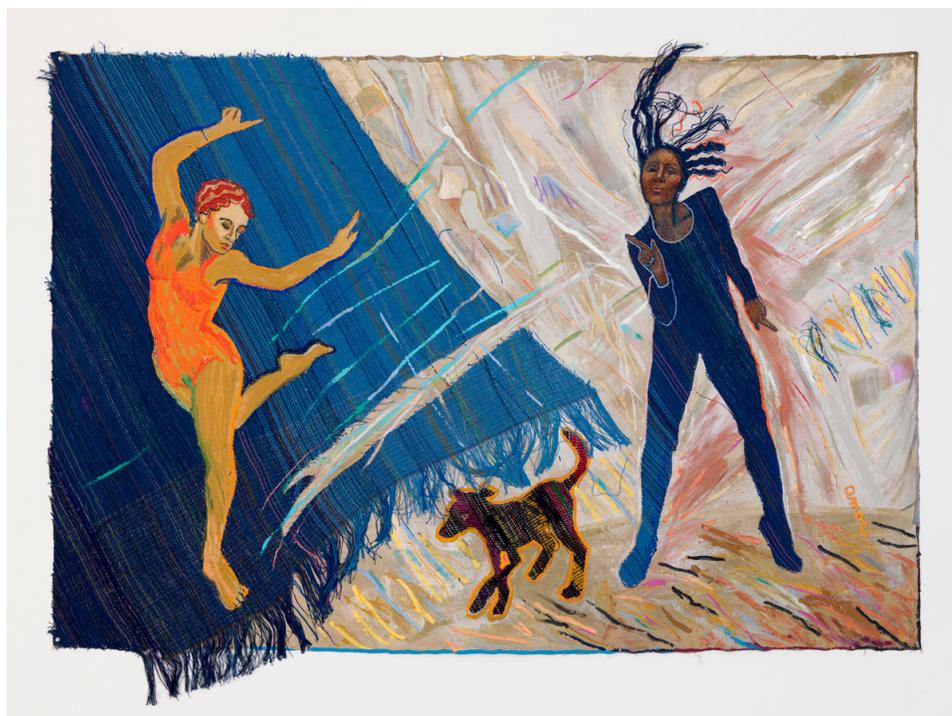
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## ARTNEWS

### How Emma Amos's Art and Activism Powerfully Confronted Racism and Sexism

By Maximiliano Durón | April 30, 2021



Emma Amos, *Black Dog Blues*, 1983.

Over the course of a career that spanned more than half a century, Emma Amos profoundly shifted the course of art history through her varied experiments combining painting and textiles. These works exploded with color, and they brought forth new mediations on what figurative painting could be, reckoning in the process with issues of race and gender. “I try to make a painting resonate in some kind of way,” Amos said in an oral history with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art in 2011.

The influence of Amos, who died last year at 83, now looms large in the art world,

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but that wasn't always the case. She struggled to find gallery representation early on in her career, and for much of her life, she didn't sell many works. Even fewer of her paintings entered museum collections while she was alive. But Amos was never one to give up easily. She used her art to ponder her anxieties about being erased from a canon of which she wanted to be a part, and she joined collectives like Spiral, Heresies, and the Guerrilla Girls, which called out racism and sexism in the art world.

“Emma always talked about the idea that painting is a political act,” said Jeff Lee, cofounder of Ryan Lee gallery in New York, which represents Amos. For Lee, her work “symbolizes the idea of not having a solid foundation—that there’s slippage, that you can be erased from history. That’s something that Emma was always aware of and concerned with. I think that speaks to our contemporary times.”

Since 2016, Amos’s art-historical stature has risen as her work has circulated around the world and more people have been able to see her art firsthand. Her work was included in the landmark traveling exhibitions “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” and “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–1985.” And her work is now the subject of a traveling retrospective, organized by Shawnya L. Harris, which recently ended its run at the Georgia Museum of Art and will open later this year at the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Below a look at Amos’s life and art.



Emma Amos in her studio in the 1990s.

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## Child Prodigy

Amos was born in 1937 in Atlanta to a middle-class Black family that was well-connected with the city's literary and civil rights figures. Her father and grandfather were pharmacists and the family owned a drugstore. Frequent guests to her family's home included W. E. B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, and Hale Woodruff; Maynard Jackson, Atlanta's first Black mayor, was a childhood friend.

Amos quickly took up drawing as early as first grade. "I was what is loosely known as a child prodigy," she said in a 1968 oral history with the SAAA. She learned figure drawing from copying Esquire magazine's World War II-era "Vargas Girls" pin-up girls by Peruvian painter Alberto Vargas, as well as women's clothing ads in the New Yorker.

She left Atlanta at the age of 16 to attend Antioch College in Ohio. Her program allowed her to take classes for half the year and then work for half the year in cities like London, Chicago, New York, and Washington, D.C. "That's where I got to go to galleries and museums, that's when I really got to see the art world," she said. After graduating in 1958, Amos returned to London and stayed another year, earning a second degree in etching from the London Central School of Art in 1959. She returned to Atlanta for a year, where she had her first solo show, and then decided to move to New York, where she was able to secure a job teaching art at the Dalton School.

While in art school, Amos developed a love for printmaking that would continue throughout her career, and one that she actively pursued upon her arrival in New York. She began working with two of the city's print masters, Letterio Calapai and Robert Blackburn. (Kathleen Caraccio, who had worked for Blackburn, would later become her longtime collaborator for printmaking.) And in 1961, Amos began working for the famed textile designer Dorothy Liebes. Those connections would prove influential on her art making.

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Emma Amos, *The Reader*, 1967.

## Balancing Act

Even though Amos is now known best as a figurative painter, she began with a love of abstraction. “She wanted to be a great abstract painter when she first started out,” Shawnya L. Harris, the current Amos retrospective’s curator, said. “She gradually evolved back to the figure by the mid-’60s, during the civil rights movement, and that propelled her forward into figuration.”

In 1964, Amos began a graduate program in art education at New York University. She looked up her old family friend, the artist Hale Woodruff, seeking a mentor. Woodruff reviewed her work and invited her to join Spiral, which had formed in 1963 in the lead up to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Amos would become the youngest and only woman member of the now legendary, though short-lived, group of Black artists that also included Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, and Norman Lewis, the latter of whom would become a lifelong friend of Amos. Spiral had no official singular mandate, and its goal was to ponder how Black artists could work together. Lauren Haynes, who curated a 2011 Spiral survey at the Studio Museum in Harlem, said they were asking

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questions such as: “How do we keep making work in this moment? What does it mean that we have all of these different opinions?”

Though some of the male members might have assumed that Amos was to be their secretary and fetch coffee for them, Amos was quick to assert that she would be these artists’ equal. “That was one of the most political things I ever did. And that wasn’t even very political because it wasn’t a political kind of group,” Amos said in her 1968 oral history.

In 1965, Amos married Robert Levine, who was white, and they had two children, Nicholas in 1967 and India in 1970. Her marriage and raising her children would also become important components of Amos’s art practice going forward. “I think this reconciliation of both imposed, as well as invented, racial identity is something that she always wanted to deal with in her art, because she was dealing with it in her personal life,” Harris said. “It was something that she also felt was a part of the conversation in the art world. These artificial definitions of what Black art is, what women’s art is. She wanted to be able to change the conversation and shake things up and show that our preconceived notions about these things are not always as clear as we want them to be.”



Emma Amos, Two Standing Women, 1966.

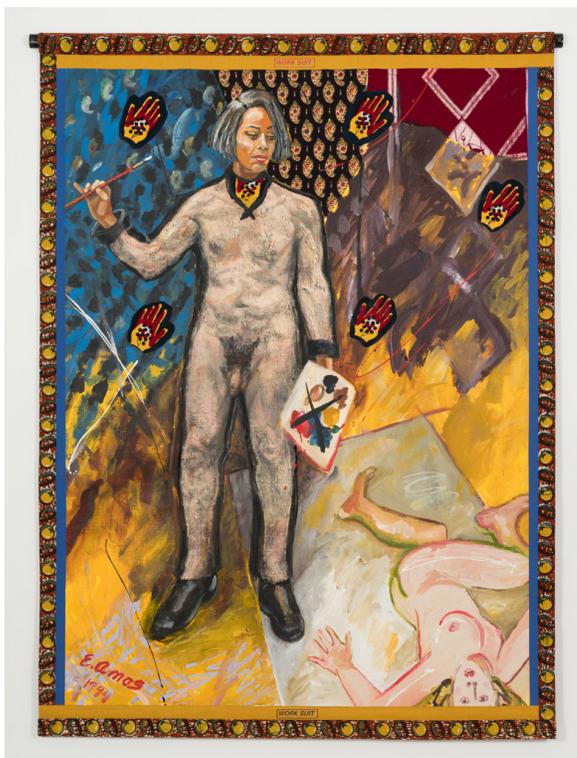
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## Weaving History

At first Amos wasn't sure exactly how to merge her love of painting and craft, especially at a time when critics demeaned practices such as weaving. It wasn't until the late '70s and early '80s that Amos began to connect her weavings and paintings into single artworks. "That was where she really found her niche," Harris said, adding that Amos treated her materials "much like a weaver would. She's weaving them all in together into a whole." Later, in the '80s and into the '90s, Amos began incorporating more printed textiles into the work, drawing on cloths from Ghana, Mali, South Africa, and other places, as well as ones she had woven herself. With its racks of textiles, Amos's studio had the feeling of a fabric store.

As Amos's work turned increasingly figurative, she began to explore issues of gender, race, and the Western art canon in her work, inserting her own image into the work. "Usually, she was a big protagonist in the paintings," Harris



Emma Amos, Work Suit, 1994.

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said. “She would picture herself countering the obstacles of the art world or challenging well-known artists that she may have admired, but then she began to take a second look at what they were actually communicating about women, power.”

It’s clear based on these works that Amos admires artists like Picasso and Gauguin, and that, in a way, she hates what they represent, too. One of Amos’s most famous paintings is *Work Suit* (1994) in which Amos paints Lucien Freud’s nude body. On his white body appears the artist’s own head. Harris added, “She puts on the white body, but you wonder how comfortable she actually would be in it. She’s performing race in her paintings through that physical embodiment.”

Amos felt it was important to make sure that other women artists weren’t also erased from the canon. She served as an editor of the *Heresies Collective’s* journal, which was first published in 1977 and ran until 1993. And he later became a member of the *Guerrilla Girls*, which formed in 1985 and sought to highlight the ways in which women artists were underrepresented in museum collections and on gallery rosters. Amos’s dedication to the cause is also clear in the series “*The Gift*,” made between 1990 and 1994. For it, she made a series of 48 watercolor portraits of Camille Billops, Howardena Pindell, Faith Ringgold, Miriam Schapiro, Lucy Lippard, Mira Schor, May Stevens, and Elizabeth Catlett, among many others. “She talked about the fact that by creating these portraits of them, they can never be negated from history,” Lee, her gallerist, said.

## Mining an Archive

In the early 1990s, Amos’s godfather, George Shivery, passed away and his wife gave Amos a cache of photographs that he had taken of Black Americans in rural Mississippi and Tennessee during the 1930s. She wanted to incorporate these images into her paintings, and that’s when she began to use a photo-transfer technique. In one work, she includes Shivery’s two portraits of a Black man, shown proud in one and laughing in another; over the photo-transferred images, she’s drawn a large X. “She’s not marking them out to say that they’re not important,” Harris said. “She’s saying that they’re viewed as unimportant. She’s both resurrecting them, but she’s also signaling that they are being canceled out, ignored, and erased.”

Shivery’s photographs appeared in numerous other works, like *Equals* (1990),

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which also includes a falling figure, possibly Amos, set against the stripes of an American flag with stars. Falling figures also recur in Amos's output from the era. "I liked the idea of using the sky instead of having everybody just standing," Amos said in her 2011 oral history. "It meant that you had to see the body in different kinds of ways—not a standing figure, not a lying-down figure, but a figure either in a kind of anxious position but also there could be some joy in flying through the air."



Emma Amos, Work Suit, 1994.

The Overseer (ca. 1992), which measures 14 feet wide, is one of Amos's most important works. In the righthand panel, Amos shows herself tumbling, her scream turning from despair to anger along the way. Above Amos's figure is another of Shivery's images, which is also in the left-hand panel. At center is a Confederate flag—another symbol of the disenfranchisement and erasure of the Black community in the South, Harris said—with two white women sitting in a blanket. Bisected by the left and center panels is the namesake overseer. Harris called the work an "attack" on white authority figures—"her paintbrush becomes a weapon to counteract racism that is often embodied in that symbol of the flag."

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## Fostering New Generations

For much of her life, Amos worked as a teacher, sharing her knowledge with generations of students and the public. She taught textile weaving and design at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts in the 1970s, as well as in the East Village. Between 1977 and 1979, she cohosted, with Beth Gutcheon, a series called Show of Hands that looked at the connections between art and craft and aired on public television in Boston.

In 1980, she became a professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, eventually serving as visual art department's chair from 2005 to 2007; she retired from teaching in 2008. "I think a good teacher in painting and drawing and any other kind of making and doing is so much how you treat the students and how you try to make them feel that you are not above them," she said in her 2011 oral history. "You are working with them, and you're trying to make sure that they don't stumble on things and get, you know, to feel that they can't do something."

She added later, "When I hear that one of my students is having an exhibition somewhere, I take my little behind there. I want to see and I want to support them. And that might be all I can do with them, you know."



Emma Amos in her studio with Valued (2006).

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## ‘An Incredibly Positive Person’

Like many others who didn’t identify as white and male when she was active, Amos experienced all kinds of adversity. But even in spite of that, her work continued to nurture her artistic talents, shifting constantly and changing art history along the way, even when the mainstream didn’t notice that she was slowly shaping it behind the scenes. “She was ever-evolving, and always growing and changing,” Lauren Haynes, the Spiral show curator, said. “I think that is, to me, a key factor for an artist who has the lasting power of their work, like Emma Amos did—someone who can constantly push and test and grow their work, and not just be comfortable sitting in one place.”

It’s clear now that a wider public is beginning to take note of Amos’s accomplishments. Fashion designer Duro Olowu created a collection that served as a tribute to Amos’s work, which he first encountered after seeing “Soul of a Nation” at Tate Modern in 2016. Since then, he has sought out her work at the various museums he’s traveled to since—even if it is still hard to find her work on display in most major museums. For Olowu, Amos’s work is a testament to the perseverance it takes to sustain an art career, particularly for a Black woman: “I hope that it inspires younger artists that artists like Emma Amos or Senga Negundi have kept their practices going despite non-recognition. It’s a legacy she would have been very proud of, and somehow, I have a sneaky feeling that she was, because that’s the only way you could continue to make incredible work.”

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**Atlanta. News. Now.**

## Emma Amos retrospective opens at Georgia Museum

January 26, 2021 | By Rosalind Bentley



After celebrating her 80th birthday at her Manhattan studio about four years ago, artist Emma Amos recalled something important about her future.

The corrosive effects of Alzheimer's disease hadn't yet erased the thought, and it was pleasing. She'd spent more than six decades as a working artist and she was finally going to have one of the things she'd truly wanted; a retrospective of her life's work, a journey that began in the 1940s in the shadow of the Atlanta University Center. The retrospective, slated for early 2021 at the Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia, would be a sort of homecoming.

Feminism and exclusion, race and racism, in the art world and beyond were themes she'd brought to life again and again in vibrant acrylics, oil paint, watercolor, ink, African textiles and black-and-white photography. Her demand that viewers consider those themes was sometimes blunt.

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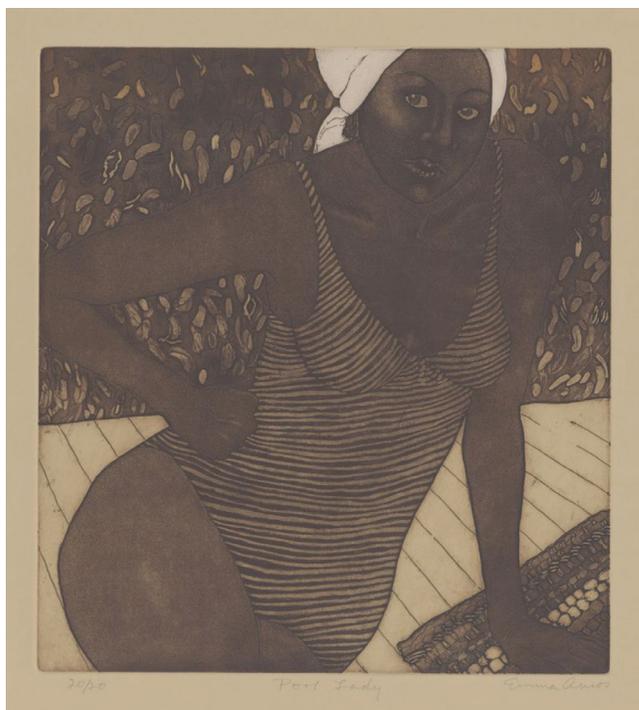
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She might inset a photo of a sharecropper's cabin or an image of people of varying hues, into the center of the Confederate battle flag to question the Civil War's origins and legacy, or the construct of race itself. A 5-foot apron painted and appliqued with images of herself, Pablo Picasso and African tribal masks might ask who was the more significant artist, Picasso or the unnamed Africans whose works inspired some of Picasso's masterpieces? Or her pieces asked viewers to reconsider their assumptions, such as her etchings of Black women lounging poolside. Were the images acknowledging the difficult fact most Black people can't swim? Or were they simply celebrating curvaceous Black bodies?

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Some or none of that could be true. What is certain is that Amos considered walking into her studio, as she is often quoted as saying, as a necessary “political act.”

In her eighth decade and long retired from her job as chair of the Rutgers University School of Art, Amos saw some of the world’s great galleries buying her work at last. She was not unknown, yet, popular recognition on a large scale eluded her.

“She told me how proud she was to have her work come home to a Georgia museum and invited me to meet her there,” her older brother, Larry Amos, said recently.

But the decline in her health was swift. Her studio shuttered for good before the pandemic took hold last spring and she was moved to an assisted living facility in New Hampshire.

“Emma Amos: Color Odyssey” is scheduled to open on Jan. 30, at the Georgia

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Museum in Athens, with more than 60 works by Amos. The artist will not be there. She died in May from complications due to Alzheimer's.

Given the continuing danger of the coronavirus, it's unlikely her 85-year-old brother, a retired attorney in Louisville, Kentucky, will see the exhibition in person before it closes on April 25. Yet, the show, conceived and curated by Shawnya Harris, curator of African American and African Diasporic Art at the Georgia Museum, will welcome the public despite the pandemic.

It is, many say, a long overdue honor for an artist who challenged a mainstream art world that historically excluded artists such as herself or rarely viewed them as peers without need of qualifiers such as "Black" or "female." Her work has been included in larger group exhibits over the years and in smaller solo surveys, but the Georgia Museum show marks a significant moment in the growing appreciation of her art and importance as a creator.

"It wasn't that long ago that some of her major works were still in her studio and not yet in a major museum collection," said Emily Hanna, senior curator for the Arts of Africa and the Americas at the Birmingham Museum of Art. "Museums were slow to see her importance."

The Birmingham museum holds one of Amos's best-known pieces, "Measuring, Measuring," which interrogates European standards of beauty and who gets to define who and what is beautiful. In many ways Amos had to do something similar: claim her own space and set her own standards for success.

"For Black women artists of Emma's time, you have to look at what careers are open to you as a woman, then you delete," said Lisa Farrington, Associate Dean of Fine Arts at Howard University, a longtime close friend of Amos' and scholar of her work. "Then you look at what careers are open to you as a Black person and you delete. Then you look at what careers are open to you as a Black person and a woman and you delete. So where does that leave a Black woman who wants to be an artist? Emma said, 'I'm doing it anyway.' Then to succeed in a field most people don't think is important; that takes lot of courage."

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## ‘Enormous positive influence’

In the 1991 self-portrait “Will You Forget Me?,” Amos depicts herself plunging downward. It’s hard to tell whether the blue and gray streaks behind her represent clouds and sky, the torrents of a waterfall or the passage of time. Her dress, of gold African wax-print fabric, and her dark brown hair are caught in the rush. Her hands, held above her head, clasp a sepia portrait of a young Black woman posing primly. The woman is dressed in the fashion of the 1920s. She is India Amos, the artist’s mother, who, along with Amos’ father, Miles Amos, set their daughter on an artistic path in the 1940s.

The slights and indignities of segregation were then the order of the day. Nevertheless, Black families created culturally rich worlds and the Amos’ were no different. Amos’ grandfather, Moses, was the first licensed Black pharmacist in Georgia and owned Gate City Drugstore on Auburn Avenue. Miles Amos also became a pharmacist and opened Amos Drug Store on Ashby and Hunter

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streets (now Joseph E. Lowery Boulevard and Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive).

Until it closed in 1969, the Ashby Street drugstore was a community hub not just for the neighborhood, but for Black intellectuals, professors and literary stars. W.E.B Du Bois was a frequent visitor to the store and the nearby Amos home in the 1930s and early 1940s while he was a professor at Atlanta University, now Clark Atlanta University. Morehouse College President Benjamin Mays would stop by as well. Booker T. Washington was a hunting buddy of Amos' grandfather. Occasionally, Zora Neale Hurston visited, as would Martin Luther King, Jr.

“The impact of having leading Black educators, civil rights activists and sociologists in our home was an enormous positive influence on Emma and me,” Larry Amos said.

So was the proximity to Spelman, Morehouse, Clark and Morris Brown colleges as well as Atlanta University. The Amos siblings attended Spelman's nursery school. When Emma Amos started drawing at about five years old, first by tracing images from magazines her father brought home from the drugstore, her parents didn't discourage her. India Amos had attended Fisk College when artist Aaron Douglas started painting his now famous murals about Black life on the walls of the campus library. The sepia portrait that would later inspire “Will You Forget Me,” was taken just a few years before he began.

By the time Emma Amos was 11 years old, her parents asked famed muralist Hale Woodruff, then on faculty at Atlanta University, to tutor her. He balked, saying she was too young. But their paths would cross years later.

Determined her daughter get formal training, Amos's mother turned to Ruth Hall Hodges, chair of the art department at Morris Brown College. Hodges did not balk. Not yet a teenager, Amos sat in on undergraduate art classes.

“Even in the 1940s, very few parents were envisioning their child's life as an artist,” said Akua McDaniel, former chair of Spelman's art department and the first director of the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art.

But given the family's association with creatives, McDaniel said she believes India Amos “felt comfortable urging her daughter to pursue life as an artist.”

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While still a student at Booker T. Washington High School, Amos entered Atlanta University's seminal art competition, "Exhibition of Paintings, Prints and Sculpture by Negro Artists of America," founded by Woodruff in 1942. It was held annually until 1970. Though Amos would not place until she competed again years later, the high school foray was a significant step. Some of the 20th century's most important Black artists and photographers found the competition one of the few reliable venues to get their work shown and purchased: Roy DeCarava, Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence, Lois Mailou Jones, Norman Lewis and Charles White among them. Aaron Douglas who painted the Fisk College murals was one of the first judges of the annual competition.

In their segregated world, Amos' parents saw possibilities for their daughter the mainstream art world had yet to envision. As she grew, Emma Amos fought to clear her own path.

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## 'Blood money'

Prior to legal integration, Georgia had a policy of reimbursing Black college students for part of their tuition if they chose to attend an integrated out-of-state graduate school. Larry Amos said his father called the policy, “blood money,” and refused to apply for the program.

Though her views on segregation and race matured while she earned art degrees at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, and the Central School of Art and Design in London, Emma Amos’s beliefs “were born in the Jim Crow South,” her brother said.

“I see this anti-segregationist tension and Emma’s reaction thereto in much of

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Emma's work," Larry Amos said.

Take for instance her 1994 piece, "Confederates." She has taken a group photo of three people, a white woman, a Black man and a light-skinned Black woman. The latter is Amos. The faces of the other two figures are intentionally blurred. She's centered the picture on a painting of the Confederate battle flag. Amos was eight years old when the Ku Klux Klan resumed burning crosses atop Stone Mountain. Deep fear of miscegenation among some Southern whites fueled the hate group. The "Confederates" piece calls out that fear. Amos was more direct in the 1995 painting, "About Whiteness." It depicts a lynching scene from the 1915 movie "The Birth of a Nation," a film credited with the Klan's 20th-century resurgence. Below that image, in the center of a red bull's eye, a nude Black man seems to sweep a blonde white woman in a flowing white gown off her feet. The pair have been crossed out with a large red "X."



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Those themes weren't as prominent in her early career. Her first small solo show of drawings and etchings in Atlanta at the Alexander Gallery in 1960 (made possible in part by Buckhead art patron and founder of the then Atlanta Art Festival, Caroline Becknell) embraced abstract expressionism. That same year she earned an honorable mention in the Atlanta University art annual competition for an etching titled, "Reeds," said Tina Dunkley, former director of the Clark Atlanta University Art Museum.

Amos soon enrolled in graduate school at New York University. By then, Woodruff was teaching there. Through him, Amos was invited to join the Spiral collective. They'd meet to talk about what it meant to be Black artists in a time of civil rights struggle and whether their work should even be bound by racial categories. There was also talk of how difficult it was for them as Black artists to get gallery representation and sell their works for their true worth.

Though there were more established Black women artists who'd tried to join, Amos was the only woman invited to be part of the group of Black male artists that included Woodruff, Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis and others.

"She felt they chose her because she was the 'safe choice,'" said Harris, curator of the Georgia Museum retrospective.

Amos taught at a private school for a while then began working for the textile designer Dorothy Liebes, who encouraged her to use the weaving and fiber skills she'd learned in college. Designing fabric was art, not craft, and Liebes was heralded for her mastery. Firmly planted in New York, Amos married, had two children and began painting scenes of domestic life, but eventually the lessons from Liebes and Spiral fused.

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“I think the civil rights movement made me more critical about what I was doing,” Amos told the author and cultural critic bell hooks, in the 1995 book “Art on My Mind.” “I could not in good conscience paint just lovely pictures with brushy strokes without having some of the pain and angst of the thing that I wanted to say about women, Black women in particular.”

## ‘Falling Figures’

Margaret Spriggs remembers walking into Hammonds House Museum in the West End sometime around 1993 and being wowed. Above her hung a bright canvas depicting a woman falling through space. Bordered by African wax-print cloth, the piece hung loosely, almost floating.

“I related to it as a female because sometimes it feels like you’re falling into something and you don’t know what will be at the bottom when you get there,” Spriggs said.

The piece was from Amos’ “Falling Figures” series, which included “Will You Forget Me?” Spriggs’ husband, Ed Spriggs, was the founding director of Hammonds House and former director of the Studio Museum of Harlem. He was proud Hammonds’ House was a stop on the tour “Emma Amos: Paintings

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and Prints, 1982-1992.” The falling figures, often women but sometimes men, tumbled through space, though not necessarily to a doomed fate. The ground was never visible, reflecting the deep uncertainty and sense of loss many Americans felt during the Reagan era, the artist once said.

“The falling women left a lot of people perplexed and wondering why all the women were falling, but Emma had her iconography hooked up,” Ed Spriggs said. “Emma was interested in freeing the woman’s image and giving her a place in the world. She was very clear about that.”

Even so, Amos didn’t embrace integrated feminist movements until well into the 1980s. She joined the Heresies Collective which advocated for better representation for women in the art world. Then, she donned a hairy, black, gorilla mask and joined the Guerrilla Girls, an arts activist group which publicly called out museums on billboards, in media and performance pieces, for their lack of female representation in exhibitions and staffing. Part uniform, part disguise, the masks, which each member wore, were like armor.

But at Hammond’s House that night, Amos smiled and greeted friends from the old neighborhood.

“There was a feeling she had been overlooked locally,” Ed Spriggs said. “People knew about the family because of the drug store. By the time she got to Hammonds House, her reputation on the East Coast was more established. Like Faith Ringgold, she was known as a storyteller. Hammonds House was like a homecoming for her.” As part of the 1996 Olympics’ public art program,

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Amos returned to Atlanta to install a major tribute to civil rights leader, the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy Sr., in Mechanicsville. Titled “We Will Not Forget,” the installation, in Abernathy Plaza, includes symbols of his life: a mosaic couch represents his family life; a bronze pulpit represents his profession as a minister and a crumbling bronze wall symbolizes the barriers of racial injustice he and Martin Luther King Jr. broke down together. The installation remains.

‘I did’

Once it leaves Athens, the retrospective will travel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York. Harris, curator of the Georgia Museum show, remembers visiting Amos years ago in her studio. Many of the artist’s early works languished, propped up against walls.

“I was like, ‘Wow, who did that?’” Harris said. “And she was like, ‘I did. It’s my early work. Nobody would be interested in that now. Nobody would buy it.’”

Yet, the power of Amos’s vision holds.

Last year fashion designer Duro Olowu, whose clothes Michelle Obama

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frequently wore, told British Vogue that Amos's work inspired one of his recent collections. YouTube bloggers have devoted episodes to the artist. And in the last four years at least 18 major museums have acquired her work including the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the British Museum. In Georgia, her pieces are part of the permanent collection at the Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, the Clark Atlanta University Museum, the Georgia Museum and the Morris Museum of Art in Augusta.

Within the art world Amos critiqued so fiercely, there are signs of systemic movement. Major institutions such as the National Gallery of Art and the High Museum, hired their first, full-time, Black female curators within the last year. The Guggenheim appointed its first, Black deputy director and chief curator.

Some might attribute the changes to the racial reckoning that seized the country after the killing of George Floyd. It's hard not to imagine how might Amos render this moment were she alive. Of course, there would be masterful splashes of color. But would the figures plunge or would they rise?



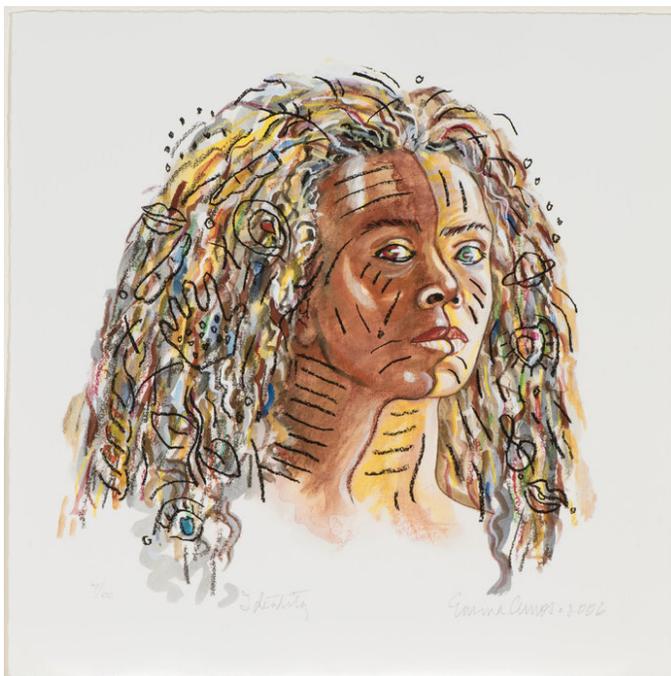
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## Emma Amos Died Just Before Her Retrospective But Her Art Is Alive As Ever

by Susan Stamberg | January 13, 2021



This is Emma Amos' moment. Her themes — gender and race — press on our minds now. For six decades Amos explored them in prints, paintings and fabrics. She died May 20, just months before a retrospective of her work, “Emma Amos: Color Odyssey,” is to open at the Georgia Museum of Art, in Athens. Complications from Alzheimer's took her at age 83, but she knew the show was in the works.

That picture above is a self-portrait. Here's her photograph.

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Emma Amos, 2006, Becket Logan

Curator Shawnya L. Harris says Amos came from an educated, middle-class Atlanta family. Her grandfather and father were pharmacists in the drugstore they owned. Amos was, “asked to create a work showing what she and her art were about.” Identity is her response. The colors of the face reflect her heritage: “African, Cherokee, Irish, Norwegian, and God knows what else,” she once said. Eyes (one blue, one brown — watching), gloves (minstrel show stereotyping), fingers pointing (more watching) are objects that crop up throughout her pieces. “All the things that are imprinted on her are things that energize her work,” says Harris.

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Emma Amos, Seated Figure and Nude, 1966

Another racial exploration. The sitting woman's face, shoulders, arms and legs are a rainbow of browns with a punch of pale. "She always wanted to show the diversity within blackness," curator Harris says. The nude along the right hand edge is darker, still multi-colored. And she's walking off the canvas. Walking into invisibility. Becoming part of the margin.

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Emma Amos, Equals, 1992

(c) Emma Amos/Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

Here, the Emma Amos woman is falling through space. It's another self-portrait. Falling, another theme. The curator says her several images of people falling are "not always about hopelessness." But I see helplessness, lack of control, anxiety.

And look where she's falling: against a background of stripes of the American flag, and floating stars with watchful eyes. The photo is of sharecroppers, with a flatbed pulled by mules. It's all framed with pieces of African cloth printed with the image of Malcolm X, dedicated fighter of systemic racism. The painting is called Equals — see the floating equal sign — the two red lines. "Maybe suggesting," says curator Harris, "how the struggle for equality shows up differently over time."

In the 1960s, Amos told a reporter she didn't "believe in such a thing as a Negro artist." She felt she was an artist first, Black second, and wanted to be known for her artistry, not her skin color, or gender. Women were rare in art circles then. Amos thought galleries rejected her because she was a woman. Over the years, especially starting in the '80s when she encountered feminism, her attitudes changed, and her work got more political.

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Emma Amos, Does Black Rub Off?, 1992  
Collection of the Morris Museum of Art, Ga. (c) Emma  
Amos/Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

Sometime in the '90s, Amos was horrified by a Vogue magazine photo of white models in blackface for a photo shoot. Does Black Rub Off puts horror on her paintbrush, asking, says Harris, “is Blackness about color, or culture, or mutable over time, or something that is fixed?”

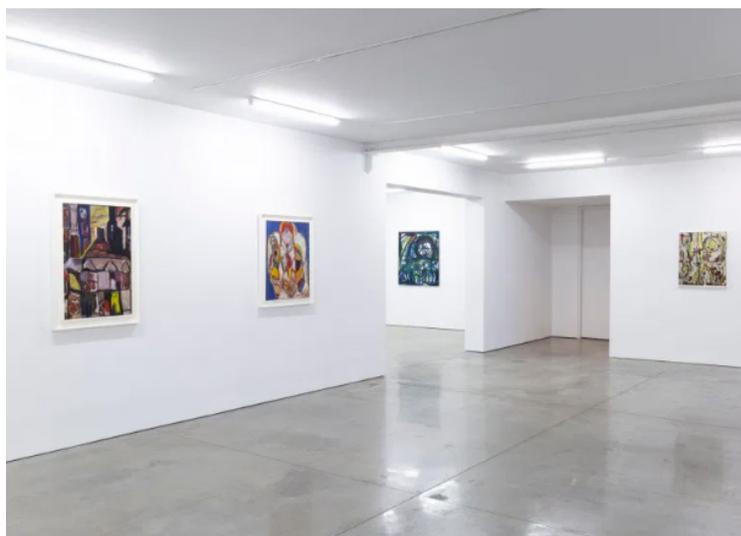
Emma Amos, born southern and Black in 1937, with artwork now in the collections of the National Gallery and Museum of Modern Art, spent her life raising such questions in strong, sure shapes and beautiful, subtle colors.

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HERBERT GENTRY, "White Buffalo," 1963 (57 X 53 inches / 144.8 x 134.6 cm). | © Estate of Herbert Gentry, Courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery



Installation view of "Herbert Gentry: Paris and Beyond, 1949-1978," Ryan Lee Gallery, New York, N.Y., Nov. 14, 2020-Jan. 23, 2021. | Courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery

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HERBERT GENTRY, "Mask (Woman with Child),"  
1959 (oil on linen, 32 x 25 1/2 inches / 81.3 x 64.8 cm).  
| © Estate of Herbert Gentry, Courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery

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## Artist Emma Amos on Her Falling Series: I Liked the Idea Somebody Was ‘Trying to Catch You’ or ‘Holding Onto You’

by Victoria L. Valentine | November 6, 2020



IN THIS MOMENT OF CHALLENGES, uncertainty, and promise, Ryan Lee Gallery is presenting a timely exhibition of works by Emma Amos (1937-2020). “Emma Amos: Falling Figures” brings together figurative paintings that depict bodies in free fall—indeterminable states of abandon, loss, anxiety, rescue, and trust.

This exhibition is the first dedicated to the falling figure motif in her work, beginning with her Falling Series (1988-1992) produced three decades ago.

On Nov. 26, 2011, Amos spoke to Patricia Spears Jones about the Falling Series during an oral history interview for the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art. They were in conversation in the artist’s loft studio on Bond Street in New York City. Amos said:

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“I liked the idea of using the sky instead of having everybody just standing. So I also had a feeling that we were going into a bad period. And I’m not sure whether that was the proper metaphor, but it seemed to be right because I could use the figures as escaping or use the figures as going to a better place, depending on the color or who was holding who or whether it was two or three characters going by.

“I liked the idea that if you were falling through the air, that there would be somebody who was trying to catch you or there was somebody holding onto you, so there was two of you together. It just seemed to be an interesting idea, and also to think of the body, as to how you would turn it, where was it going. Were the people afraid? Did they look unhappy? And in general, nobody ever looked unhappy in this series.”

Many of the paintings presented at Ryan Lee are being shown publicly for the first time. A digital catalog accompanies the exhibition. The publication includes citations from the bell hooks, Lucy Lippard, Thalia Gouma-Peterson, and the artist herself. A few of their observations of the Falling Figures works are featured below.

This gallery show follows the passing of Amos earlier this year and explores a significant aspect of her practice in advance of a major upcoming museum exhibition. The traveling retrospective, “Emma Amos: Color Odyssey” opens in 2021 at the Georgia Museum of Art. CT

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EMMA AMOS, "Into the Dangerous World I leapt (Blake) & The Design Falls," 1988 (acrylic on canvas with hand-woven fabric and African fabric borders Diptych, top 33 x 65 inches / 83.8 x 165.1 cm; bottom: 33 1/4 x 67 1/2 inches / 84.5 x 171.5 cm). | © Emma Amos, Estate of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery



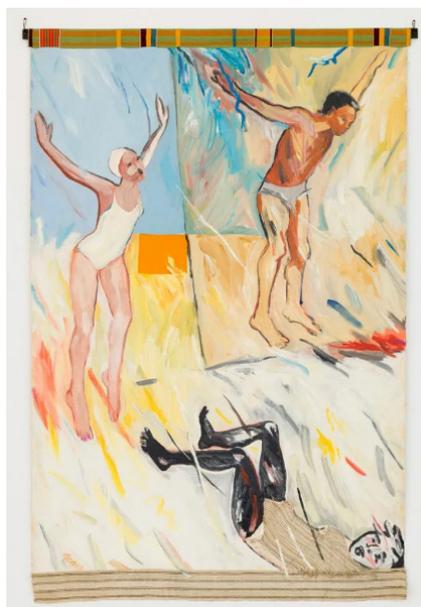
Installation view of "Emma Amos: Fallen Figures," Ryan Lee Gallery, New York, N.Y., 2020. | Courtesy Estate of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery

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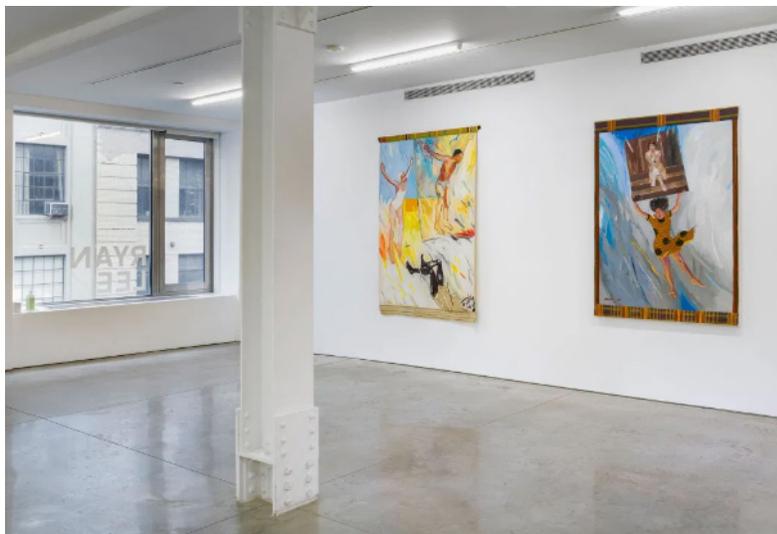
EMMA AMOS, "Clouds of Joy," 2002 (acrylic on canvas with African fabric borders, 66 3/4 x 43 3/4 inches / 169.5 x 111.1 cm). | © Emma Amos, Courtesy Estate of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery



EMMA AMOS, "Tumbling After," 1986 (acrylic on canvas with hand-woven fabric and African fabric borders, 74 x 49 1/2 inches ? 188 x 125.7 cm). | © Emma Amos, Courtesy Estate of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery

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Installation view of "Emma Amos: Fallen Figures," Ryan Lee Gallery, New York, N.Y., 2020. | Courtesy Estate of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery



EMMA AMOS, "The Root of All Evil, Art Against Apartheid, 1989 (acrylic on canvas with African fabric borders, 30 x 24 1/2 inches / 76.2 x 62.2 cm). | © Emma Amos, Courtesy Estate of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery

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EMMA AMOS, "The Overseer," circa 1992 (acrylic on canvas with photo transfer, hand-woven fabric, and African fabric borders, Triptych, Overall: 84 x 168 inches / 213.4 x 426.7 cm). | © Emma Amos, Courtesy Estate of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery

“Charting in her early work the social construction of the artist’s identity in relation to the private world of kin and family, of loved ones chosen outside the realm of the familiar, the dangerous. Placing her own image in paintings and prints that depict a world where she could ever “belong,” Amos resists objectification and subordination. Subversely announcing her subjectivity via the imaginative appropriation of the space of power occupied by white males, she emerges from the shadows to call attention to subjugated knowledge. In painting *The Overseer*, she links repressive white supremacy to attempts to control and define images of whiteness and blackness.”

— bell hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 1995

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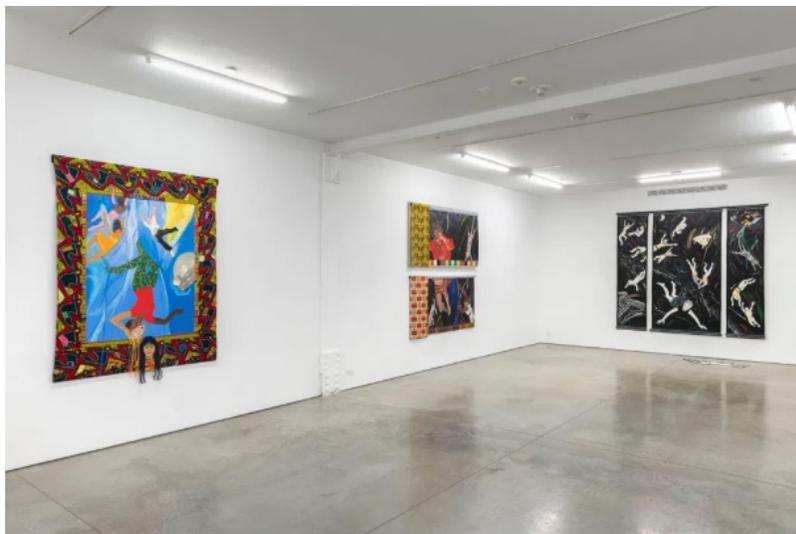
EMMA AMOS, "Women and Children First Howardena's Portrait," 1990 (acrylic on canvas with hand-woven fabric and African fabric borders, 74 x 71 1/2 inches / 188 x 181.6 cm). | © Emma Amos, Courtesy Estate of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery

"Amos is still working with falling figures. But the people eventually became "not just figures, but real people," recalling some earlier work. "I do feel there is nothing new. We are running out of text that is ourselves and we modulate slowly over a period of time." While much of her time now is spent making watercolor portraits of women artists, there are still overlaps with the "falling series." [Here picture is her friend Howardena Pindell.] "I'm certainly not saying women artists are beginning to fall or artists are going to help. But our civilization, our way of life, our values, our values, are up in the air. I would like to move away from them as a metaphor for civilization, flying through the air and being disconnected," she says, "but somehow I just can't end it."

— Lucy Lippard, *Floating, Falling, Landing* (1991)

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Installation view of "Emma Amos: Fallen Figures," Ryan Lee Gallery, New York, N.Y., 2020. | Courtesy Estate of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery



EMMA AMOS, "Thurgood and Thelonious, Some Names to Name Your Children, 1989 (acrylic on canvas with hand-woven fabric, paper collage, and African fabric borders; Triptych, Overall: 83 x 82 inches / 210.8 x 208.5 cm). | © Emma Amos, Courtesy Estate of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery

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EMMA AMOS, "Targets," 1989 (acrylic on canvas with hand-woven fabric and African fabric borders, 57 x 73 1/2 inches / 144.8 x 186.7 cm). | © Emma Amos, Courtesy Estate of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery

“Having leapt into the dangerous world, Amos saw other endangered people of many colors hurtling through space, becoming targets (Curtains, Targets, 1989) falling into a brilliant red Sky (Red Sky Falling, I, II, III, 1989), holding on to each other for help (Catch, 1990). But in spite of great uncertainty and grave danger for all these falling people, the colouristic brilliance of the paintings provides an element of hope and the ever-present frames of woven or printed African cloth add a tangible context, something for the figures to hold on to. They are the margins which remained firm, as a center collapses.”

— Thalia Gouma Peterson, *Reclaiming Presence: The Art and Politics of Color in Emma Amos's Work*, College of Wooster Museum of Art catalog, *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints 1982-1992*

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Installation view of “Emma Amos: Fallen Figures,” Ryan Lee Gallery, New York, N.Y., 2020. | Courtesy Estate of the Artist and Ryan Lee Gallery

## BOOKSHELF

A digital catalog was published to accompany the “Emma Amos: Falling Figures” exhibition at Ryan Lee Gallery. In addition, a catalog will be published to accompany the forthcoming exhibition “Emma Amos: Color Odyssey.” “Emma Amos: Paintings and prints 1982-92” documents the artist’s 1993 solo exhibition at the College of Wooster Art Museum in Wooster, Ohio. Paintings by Emma Amos were recently featured in two major museum exhibitions. “Soul of the Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” was published to document the landmark traveling exhibition. Two publications were produced to coincide with “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85,” a Sourcebook featuring an invaluable collection of historic articles about Black women artist’s activities, insights, challenges, and triumphs navigating the art world, along with New Perspectives, a collection of original essays.

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## The New York Times

### 2 Art Gallery Shows to See Right Now

By Jillian Steinhauer | October 21, 2020



Emma Amos's "The Overseer" (circa 1992). Credit Estate of Emma Amos and Ryan Lee Gallery

Part of what I've found difficult to handle about this year has been the constant uncertainty. Between the pandemic, national politics and climate change, much of life is in dizzying flux. Ryan Lee's Emma Amos exhibition "Falling Figures" captures this feeling better than any other art I've seen since March. And most of the work was made between 1988 and 1992.

Ms. Amos, who died in May at 83, was a doggedly inventive artist. She used figurative painting, textiles and print media — sometimes all three in one piece — to represent the complexity of her identity as an African-American woman and to push back on the ways that Black life has been treated in white Western art. One of her motifs was the theme of the current show: figures falling or flying through abstract space, which is often painted with expressionistic jags and

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In “Will You Forget Me” (1991), the artist grips a portrait of her mother. Credit Estate of Emma Amos and Ryan Lee Gallery

The characters in these works seem caught in physical and existential states of suspension. Many have their mouths open in expressions that suggest wonder as much as alarm — or, in the case of the artist’s self-portrait in “The Overseer” (circa 1992), a scream of righteous rage. Sometimes their bodies seem to float upward more than down, like the ghostly white figures in “Thurgood and Thelonious, Some Names to Name Your Children” (1989), who appear caught in a cosmic swirl. Rarely alone, they often look at or reach out for others — in “Will You Forget Me” (1991), the artist grips a portrait of her mother — suggesting that falling is not a solitary but a social experience.

Patterned pieces of hand-woven and African fabric appear in every piece, appended as clothing and used for framing; they add stability and exuberance. Although she never loses sight of the startling fear of tumbling into the unknown, Ms. Amos also contends that it offers a possibility worth celebrating: that of breaking free.

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## VOGUE

### Duro Olowu On The Enduring Allure Of Feminist Artist Emma Amos

By Doru Olowu | 23 September 2020



© Emma Amos; courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

“I hope that the subjects of my paintings dislodge, question, and tweak prejudices, rules, and notions relating to art and who makes it, poses for it, shows it, and buys it.” So said the late Emma Amos in a statement about her work.

It is hard to capture in words the essence of the powerful and poignant paintings by the African American artist and feminist, who died in May. By addressing sexism, racism and stereotypes around Black feminism, her paintings offer the kind of resilience and optimism for change that is so relevant and important now.

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I remember being captivated by the artist's use of bold, vivid colour in her fantastic paintings, collages and prints the first time I stood in front of one of her large early canvases. It was the opening of the exhibition 'Soul of A Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power' at Tate Modern in 2016. The painting was 'Eva the Babysitter' (1973), a beautifully composed and executed portrait that features Amos's daughter as a child. The emphasis, however, is on the babysitter, who is helping to care for the child and in doing so helps the artist find time to paint.



Emma Amos, *Baby*, 1966. © Emma Amos; Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, NY and the Studio Museum in Harlem, NY. Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

Amos's life-long ability to powerfully challenge sexism and racism in her work, as well as her pioneering and striking use of colour, fabrics and photo montage, went on to inspire my spring/summer 2021 collection. Her sensational palette of bold oranges, blues, browns, yellows, greens and reds in paintings such as 'Sandy and Her Husband' (1973) and 'Baby' (1966), both of which I encountered at her gallery, Ryan Lee Gallery in New York, as well as 'All I Know of Wonder' (2008), have influenced the often juxtaposed painterly and panelled stripes, cockerel prints and embroidered pieces in my clothes for spring. (The collection also features relaxed tailoring and modern practical draping, sharp details and touches of bold colour.)

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Emma Amos, *Sandy and Her Husband*, 1973. © Emma Amos; Collection of the Cleveland Museum of Art, OH. Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

I was inspired to learn a little more about Amos, and I found evidence of endless enthusiasm and creativity. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, Amos attended segregated schools before entering Antioch University in Ohio where she studied art. She came to London for her fourth year abroad to study painting, weaving and printmaking at the London Central School of Art.

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Emma Amos, *Tightrope*, 1994. © Emma Amos; Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York

In the 1960s, while living in New York, Amos became the youngest and only female member of Spiral, an important African American collective of artists founded by Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff. She later joined the legendary feminist artist collective, Guerrilla Girls.

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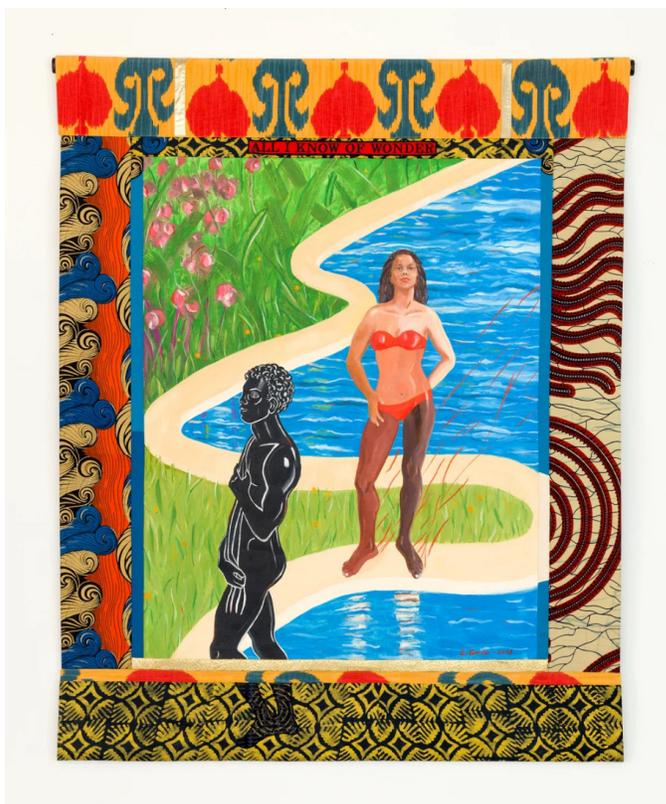


A look from Duro Olowu's SS21 collection, inspired by Amos.

She supported herself and her family as an illustrator, rug designer and teacher. The latter was her second calling: starting as assistant professor at the Mason Gross School of Art at Rutgers University in New York in 1980, she retired as professor in 2008. Still, although she made an impressive body of work between the 1970s up until a few years before the end of her life this year, Amos never really gained the renown of her male contemporaries.

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Emma Amos, *All I Know of Wonder*, 2008. © Emma Amos; Courtesy of the estate of the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

While designing my collection, I found myself reflecting on the fact that many of the same issues of race and gender inequality Amos experienced and confronted in her work, throughout an almost 60-year-long career, are still sadly very much issues that plague society today.

And as we experience a chaotic and uncertain world, I believe it to be important to emphasise the role of clothes as uplifting and effortless armour. Clothes that hopefully allow women to negotiate this new way of living with self-confidence and style. Ms Amos certainly did.

*Emma Amos 'Falling Figures' is at the Ryan Lee Gallery, New York, until 24 October 2020. Viewing is by appointment only for contactless exhibition viewing; contact [info@ryanleegallery.com](mailto:info@ryanleegallery.com).*

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ART SY

## THE ARTSY VANGUARD 2020: GETTING THEIR DUE

ISIS DAVIS-MARKS | SEPTEMBER 11, 2020



Emma Amos, *The Overseer*, ca. 1992, RYAN LEE

The Black women in Emma Amos's works have agency: Diverging from their art-historical forebears, they don't just lie passively on chaise lounges, but rather, they act. They incite important discussions of racism, sexism, and colonialism. In the 1994 painting *Tightrope*, for example, Amos depicted herself on a high wire, balancing precariously while holding up a T-shirt emblazoned with the likeness of Teha'amana, Paul Gauguin's teenage Tahitian mistress—drawing attention to the much-lauded artist's colonialist and predatory practice.

As a painter and printmaker, Amos, who died this past May at age 83, used a combination of bold colors, words, and textiles to create dynamic figurative works. In addition to her independent practice, Amos was a member of the historic African American artist collective Spiral Group, and was also one of the anonymous feminists behind the Guerrilla Girls.

In 2018, her painting *Flower Sniffer* (1966) was acquired by the Brooklyn Museum. Around the same time, her work was featured in two important traveling exhibitions that highlighted revolutionary Black art, "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" and "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85." Amos is due to be celebrated in her first museum retrospective in 2021, beginning at the Georgia Museum of Art before traveling to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York. This September, she is the subject of a solo show at New York gallery Ryan Lee. Amos foresaw that her due recognition would come late. In a 1995 interview with bell

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hooks, the artist said of gaining art-world acclaim: “It’s not going to be me, or, if so, it’s going to be a late splurge on the order of what happened to Alice [Neel], Elizabeth Catlett, or Faith Ringgold.”



Emma Amos, *Fanny Mae*, 1965, RYAN LEE & Emma Amos, *Tightrope*, 1994, RYAN LEE

## The Artsy Vanguard 2020

The Artsy Vanguard 2020 is our annual list of the most promising artists shaping the future of contemporary art. This year, artists are organized into two categories: *Newly Emerging*, which presents artists who’ve gained momentum in the past year, showing at leading institutions and galleries; and *Getting Their Due*, which identifies artists who have persevered for decades, yet only recently received the spotlight they deserve. Now in its third edition, the feature was developed by the Artsy staff, in collaboration with our network of international curators and art professionals.

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## Curator Shawnya L. Harris is Planning a Major Museum Retrospective of Emma Amos, Forthcoming in 2021

by Victoria L. Valentine | JULY 9, 2020

AN UNPRECEDENTED RETROSPECTIVE dedicated to Emma Amos (1937-2020) has been in the works for five years and is forthcoming in 2021 at the Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia in Athens.

Amos was a progressive painter. From the beginning, she explored and challenged race, class, and gender norms, both in her work and career. Over six decades, she made works that referenced color-field painting, employed photo transfer techniques, and were trimmed in African fabrics.



Emma Amos in her studio, circa 1990s. | © Estate of Emma Amos, Courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery

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Always willing to push herself in new creative directions, vibrant color, figuration, and a conceptual approach were constants. She interrogated art history and often inserted herself into her work, using her own experiences to shed light on universal themes.

“I hope that the subjects of my paintings dislodge, question, and tweak prejudices, rules, and notions relating to art and who makes it, poses for it, shows it, and buys it,” Amos said in her artist statement. “The work reflects my investigations into the otherness often seen by white male artists, along with the notion of desire, the dark body versus the white body, racism, and my wish to provoke more thoughtful ways of thinking and seeing.”

She was the youngest and only female member of Spiral, the African American collective co-founded by Romare Bearden in 1963. She was also associated with feminist groups. Amos was one of the few black women active in Heresies and she also said she was a member of the Guerrilla Girls.

Born in Atlanta, Amos spent most of her work life in New York. She was in the sunset of her career when she joined a Ryan Lee gallery in 2016, was represented in a series of high-profile group exhibitions at major museums, and experienced a spate of new institutional acquisitions. The artist was largely unaware of the late attention, however. Her death in May, at age 83, followed several years battling Alzheimer’s disease.

Efforts to showcase and explore her work continue posthumously. In the fall, Ryan Lee in New York is mounting its third solo exhibition. Soon after, an in-depth examination of her life and work is forthcoming in her home state. Curated by Shawnya Harris, “Emma Amos: Color Odyssey” is expected to open in January at the Georgia Museum of Art. The retrospective will feature about 60 works spanning 60 years, drawn from the artist’s estate, museums, and private collections, and will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalog.

I reached out to Harris, the museum’s Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson Curator of African American and African Diasporic Art, via email to learn more about the exhibition, how she came to focus on the work of Amos, and what she hopes to highlight and reveal about the artist and her practice:

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EMMA AMOS, "Baby," 1966 (oil on canvas, 46 1/2 × 51 inches). | © Estate of Emma Amos, Whitney Museum of American Art/Studio Museum in Harlem

*The following are excerpts of her responses, lightly edited for length and clarity.*

**I met Emma Amos around 2009, while I was working and in graduate school.**

SHAWNIA HARRIS: I met Emma Amos around 2009, while I was working and in graduate school. I had known about her since my undergraduate days (particularly vivid are works such as "Equals" and "Tightrope") and was always curious about what happened to her. I contacted her then gallery, Flomenhaft, to find out about her work and they allowed me to contact her for a full studio visit. We talked about a small exhibition while I was working in North Carolina (as director of University Galleries at North Carolina A&T State University) but it never transpired.

**In 2015, I began working on her as the subject of a more expanded exhibition.**

SH: When I started working at the Georgia Museum of Art in 2015, she immediately came to mind. In 2016, our museum awarded her our Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson Award and I began working on her as the subject of a more expanded exhibition. I wanted to pull together several decades of her work to show her progression as an artist.

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I noticed that there was a focus on Emma Amos, “the only woman in Spiral,” but many individuals knew little about her career, techniques or ideas. Luckily, I had accumulated several images of works over the years and had the beginnings of a checklist. That list has evolved as Amos’s work has been embraced by new audiences through several important exhibitions and previously unknown works have surfaced.

*I noticed that there was a focus on Emma Amos, “the only woman in Spiral,” but many individuals knew little about her career, techniques or ideas.*

**I did know that she was developing Alzheimer’s in the last few years. I have felt gratified in knowing that we spent time together in the years prior.**

SH: I stayed in touch with Emma herself until around 2013, 2014. After that my experience was largely mediated by her studio and gallery since her memory and mobility began to worsen by that time. Unfortunately, she was not able to receive the Thompson Award in person (her daughter, India received it in her stead) but she was cognizant that she had won the award.

In terms of the artist’s health, I did know that she was developing Alzheimer’s in the last few years. Ryan Lee Gallery, Emma’s former studio assistants, and her family have been very helpful in providing information and assisting in the process. But I have felt gratified in knowing that we spent time together in the years prior, because as much as she developed complex work, she was warm and generous. When I came to New York, for work or otherwise, I knew I had to stop by and see “Emma.”

**She remembered not even being able to visit museums in Georgia due to segregation.**

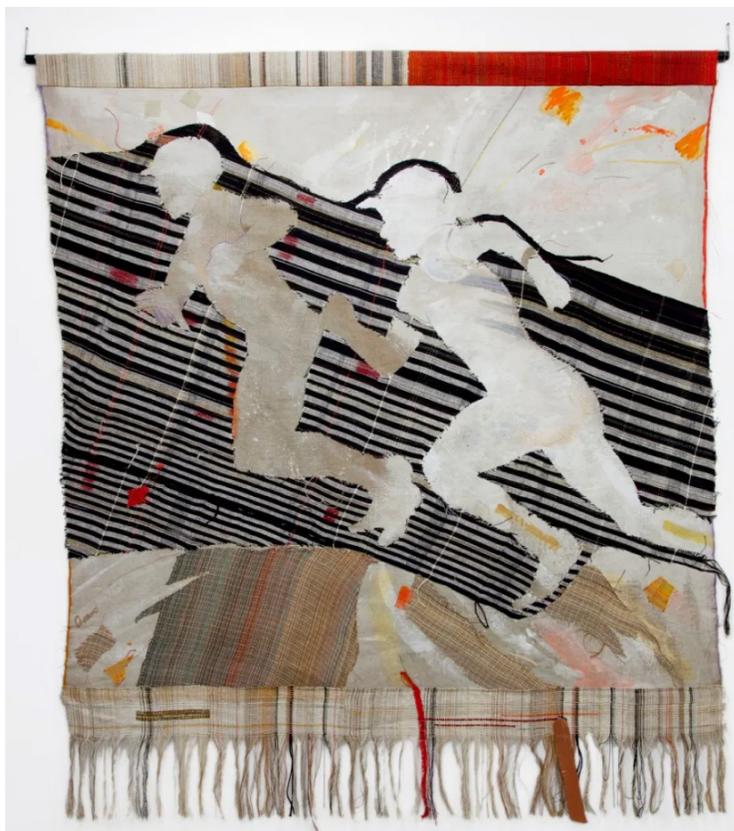
SH: It was interesting. I remember I did visit Amos later in 2016 and she talked about how she remembered not even being able to visit museums in Georgia due to segregation. She said she missed Georgia though and missed the family and friends she had there, although she was not sure who was still around at that point. So the planned retrospective had personal meaning to her.

**She was an experienced textile artist as much as she was painter and printmaker.**

SH: When I first started working on Amos, I found that the literature and reviews stressed her interest in figuration and some attention to her time in Spiral. Maybe a little to her appropriation of African textiles. But Amos was an experienced textile artist

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EMMA AMOS, "Streaks," 1983 (acrylic on canvas with hand-woven fabric, 85 x 75 inches). | © Estate of Emma Amos, Private Collection (Beth Rudin DeWoody), The Bunker Artspace

as much as she was painter and printmaker. When I first visited her studio, the first thing I saw were textiles and some remnants of her own weavings. Even certain works on paper gave way to discussions of texture and pattern. So for Amos, I got the sense that her odyssey in exploring color (visual or metaphoric) was that it had to be tangible, like fabric, for people. Textiles were not simply decoration.

*When I first visited her studio, the first thing I saw were textiles and some remnants of her own weavings. Even certain works on paper gave way to discussions of texture and pattern.*

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**Her later work began to investigate what we now understand as “intersectionality.”**

SH: Her evolution as an artist coincided with the push for acceptance in mainstream art circles for African American artists but also other debates: the merits of seeming feminine ‘craft’ forms versus a more male dominated ‘fine’ art scene focused on minimalist painting; a prevalent ‘black aesthetic’ which favored figuration over abstraction. Her later work began to investigate what we now understand as “intersectionality” in the art world right about the time that the term moved into feminist discourse in the late 1980s with thinkers such as Kimberle Crenshaw and bell hooks. hooks, in particular, was a close friend and collaborator.

**Amos inherited a body of images from her late godfather and she begins to use them in her work through a process of photo transfer.**

SH: In the early 1990s, Amos inherited a body of images from her late godfather, George Shivery. Shivery was a painter and sculptor himself who worked for years as a social worker for the parole division of the state of New York. He photographed rural blacks in Mississippi and Tennessee during the 1930s. She begins to use them in her work through a process of photo transfer. Amos was interested in this idea that photography does not lie so it gave her a vehicle for generating new ideas in her work.

In “Equals” (1990), she shows herself falling into (or emerging from) what looks like is a U.S. flag, but the “stars” are represented by an image of a rural cabin with black people in front of it. A big red equal sign connects her identity to that of the photograph. Other stars are scattered and represented through star-shaped collage elements of other stars and eyes. It is bordered by more African cloth with the image of Malcolm X. So Amos equates herself to the history of those blacks from the South who inhabit the landscape represented by the American flag while still framed by cloth which represents “Africa.” Through her intervention, Amos also invents her own identity.

**In “Tightrope,” she shows her precarious situation as a woman trying to be all things to herself and others.**

SH: “Tightrope” (1994), like “Equals,” is another memorable work by Amos. In the mid-1990s Amos created a series of works where she challenged the limitations she believed were imposed on her and other women artists. Her visual strategy was much like hip-hop sampling where she mixed her identity with recognizable images from popular culture and figures from art and cultural history. In “Tightrope,” she shows her precarious situation as a woman trying to be all things to herself and others, thus she is a “wonder woman.” She is wearing a black housecoat (linking her to domesticity) which

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EMMA AMOS, "Tightrope," 1994 (acrylic on linen with African fabric borders, 82 x 58 inches). | © Estate of Emma Amos, Courtesy the estate of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York

partially covers her costume, but she is still an artist (paint brushes in hand). She walks the tightrope where she becomes almost a circus act performing all of these roles.

She "upholds" a tee shirt with the torso representing Gauguin's muse and child bride who is also reproduced in each corner of the painting and pointed out with red arrows. Amos loved artists like Gauguin as painters, but she struggled with the colonizing male gaze and exploitative use of women and brown peoples in their work. As an artist, she wanted to reclaim power over the canon of images and narratives handed to her and other people. In a bit of irony, she "X's" herself out in this and other paintings, suggesting that she is unheard and often ignored.

*Amos loved artists like Gauguin as painters, but she struggled with the colonizing male gaze and exploitative use of women and brown peoples in their work.*

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## **It is the first time that works from every decade are represented in one exhibition**

SH: The exhibition is a retrospective. Although I would not say it is comprehensive, it covers over six decades of her work (late 1950s-2010s). I do not believe it is the largest in terms of the number of works, but it is the first time that works from every decade are represented in one exhibition. The exhibition will open at the Georgia Museum of Art on January 30, 2021, and it would end on April 25, 2021, should the current pandemic not have further impact on our plans. From there, it travels to the Munson Williams Proctor Art Institute in Utica, N.Y., followed by the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

## **We look forward to doing this publication because the last known catalog done on her was almost 30 years ago**

SH: We are currently developing the publication which will include main essays by Lisa Farrington (Howard University), Phoebe Wolfskill (Indiana University, Bloomington), and Laurel Garber (Philadelphia Museum of Art) and I. Although no publication can completely capture every aspect of an artist, we look forward to doing this one because the last known catalog done on her was almost 30 years ago (and is out of print!). With the interest and attention there is to her work, I wanted to create an “update” that could be the jumping off point for more in the years to come. In addition, it will have previously unpublished works and images of the artist.

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ART SY

## 5 Artists on Our Radar This July

Artsy Curatorial and Artsy Editorial | JULY 6, 2020



Emma Amos, *Baby*, 1966

The late Emma Amos is perhaps best known for her tenure in the short-lived but history-shaping Spiral Group (as the only woman). However, she was also a member of the Guerrilla Girls, an editor of the feminist Heresies Collective's journal, and a powerhouse painter in her own right. Amos, who died this past May at the age of 83, was born in 1937 in Atlanta and began her formal studies at 17. She moved to New York in her early twenties, where she worked for textile artist Dorothy Liebes and pursued graduate studies at NYU.

The 1966 work *Baby* demonstrates Amos's focus on color. As she told art historian Lucy Lippard in 1991, "Every time I think about color, it's a political statement. It would be a luxury to be white and never have to think about it." In *Baby*, the blocks of color vibrate against one another, demonstrating the power of contrast. Later works, such as

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Emma Amos, *Memory*, 2012

*Memory* (2012), are more explicit nods to Amos's interest in textiles, which she gained through Liebes. The work hangs down from a horizontal rod; the domestic scene is framed by a decorative border. Diagonal swaths of pattern create a floor and a rug, and a Black woman stares at the viewer, with smaller figures (perhaps memories of past selves) dotting the canvas.

In 1995, Amos somewhat presciently discussed the trajectory of her career with writer bell hooks. On gaining traditional, blue-chip success, she said, "It's not going to be me, or, if so, it's going to be a late splurge on the order of what happened to Alice [Neel], Elizabeth Catlett, or Faith Ringgold." Amos died as interest in and recognition of her work began to flourish. In 2021, the Georgia Museum of Art is hosting a retrospective of her work, and the show is slated to travel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Munsons-Williams-Proctor Art Institute in Utica, New York. Although this will be the first major solo museum show of her work, Amos was recently featured in blockbuster exhibitions such as "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" and "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85," and her work is included in the permanent collections of major institutions.

—Sarah Dotson

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## The New York Times

### Emma Amos, Painter Who Challenged Racism and Sexism, Dies at 83

By Holland Cotter  
MAY 29, 2020



The artist Emma Amos with her 2006 work "Head First." Her paintings often depicted women flying or falling. Credit Becket Logan

Emma Amos, an acclaimed figurative artist whose high-color paintings of women flying or falling through space were charged with racial and feminist politics, died on May 21 at her home in Bedford, N.H. She was 83.

The cause was complications of Alzheimer's disease, said the Ryan Lee Gallery in Manhattan, which represents her.

A key event in Ms. Amos's career came in 1964. A 27-year-old graduate student in art education at New York University, she was invited to join a newly formed artists group called Spiral.

Its members, all African-American, included Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis

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and the muralist Hale Woodruff — midcareer artists with substantial reputations. Organized in response to the 1963 March on Washington, the group was formed to discuss and debate the political role of black artists and their work.

As an emerging artist seeking exhibition and teaching opportunities, Ms. Amos had already experienced racial exclusion within the larger art world. Now, as the only woman admitted to Spiral, she learned that gender was also a liability to acceptance within the black art community.

In an article published in Art Journal in 1999, she recalled that although she felt honored to be part of Spiral, she thought it “fishy” that the group had not asked older, established women artists to join. “I probably seemed less threatening to their egos,” she said, “as I was not yet of much consequence.”

The art world, she concluded, was “a man’s scene, black or white.” And she knew that for her, art and activism would be inseparable.



Ms. Amos's 1966 painting “Baby.” Credit Emma Amos/Ryan Lee Gallery, New York

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Emma Veoria Amos was born on March 16, 1937, in Atlanta from a lineage that was, by her own account, “African, Cherokee, Irish, Norwegian and God knows what else.” Her parents, India DeLaine Amos and Miles Green Amos, were cousins. Her father, a graduate of Wilberforce University in Ohio, was a pharmacist; her mother, who had a degree in anthropology from Fisk University in Nashville, managed the family-owned Amos Drug Store.

Her parents traveled widely within Atlanta’s black intellectual circles. At home, Ms. Amos and her older brother, Larry, met Zora Neale Hurston and W.E.B. Du Bois. (She would later paint portraits of them standing with her father.)

At age 11, she began taking art lessons. She showed notable promise and, as a teenager, had work exhibited at Atlanta University (now part of Clark Atlanta University).

In 1954, at 17, she enrolled at Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where she majored in art and learned weaving. After graduation and further study in London, she settled in New York City. There she worked for Dorothy Liebes, the innovative textile designer; studied printmaking with the artists Robert Blackburn and Letterio Calapai; and entered graduate school at N.Y.U.

Her Spiral invitation came through Mr. Woodruff, who had taught in Atlanta and knew her family. She remained a member until the group disbanded in 1966.

By that time, she had completed her graduate degree; married Robert Levine, a writer and early computer consultant; and begun a long teaching career — first at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Art in New Jersey, then at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J., where she remained until retiring in 2008.

Skeptical of the overwhelmingly white feminist movement, she held back from involvement in feminist politics until 1984, when the writer Lucy R. Lippard urged her to join the Heresies Collective and contribute to its journal. Heresies was, Ms. Amos wrote in Art Journal, “the group I had always hoped existed: serious, knowledgeable, take-care-of-business feminists giving time to publish the art and writings of women.”

She soon joined other feminist groups, including Guerrilla Girls, a collective whose anonymous members appear in public wearing gorilla masks to deliver scathing critiques of art-world racism and sexism.

Ms. Amos’s paintings from the 1960s and ’70s often depicted, in bright Pop colors, scenes of black middle-class domestic life, a subject little explored in contemporary art at the time. Her work from the following decades became increasingly personal and formally experimental, combining painting, print media and photographic technology.

In the 1992 painting “Equals,” a woman — Ms. Amos herself — is seen floating in free fall against the backdrop of a giant American flag. Replacing the flag’s field of stars is a photographic image of a Southern sharecropper’s shack. The composition is framed in patches of African fabric alternating with printed portraits of Malcolm X.

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In the symbolic self-portrait “Tightrope” (1994), the artist wears a black painter’s smock over a Wonder Woman costume. Balancing on a tightrope, she holds paintbrushes in one hand and, in the other, a shirt with an image of bare breasts copied from one of Paul Gauguin’s exoticizing images of the Tahitian women he used as models and sexual partners.



Ms. Amos’s “Tightrope” (1994), a symbolic self-portrait. Credit via the estate of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York

The startling “Worksuit,” from the same year, is a full-length nude self-portrait in which Ms. Amos depicts herself with a male body. The image of the body was lifted directly from a 1993 nude self-portrait by the artist Lucian Freud. Where Mr. Freud’s figure stands in a bare studio, Ms. Amos places herself in an environment of vertiginously tilting planes and swirling color patterns, as if to suggest that old orders of power and identity — sexual and racial — were shifting and giving way.

Although long recognized as an important figure in contemporary American art, and frequently exhibited, Ms. Amos gained mainstream museum notice only within the past few years. In 2017 she was featured in two important surveys: “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” organized by the Tate Modern in London, and “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85,” which originated at the Brooklyn Museum. In 2018, she appeared in “Histórias Afro-

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Atlânticas” at the Museu de Arte de São Paulo and the Tomie Ohtake Institute in São Paulo, Brazil.



“Will You Forget Me” (1991). Credit Emma Amos/Ryan Lee Gallery, New York

A career retrospective, “Emma Amos: Color Odyssey,” is scheduled to open at the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens, Ga., in 2021, and travel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, N.Y. Her work is in the collections of several American museums. In 2004 she was given a lifetime achievement award by the Women’s Caucus for Art.

Ms. Amos is survived by a daughter, India Amos; a son, Nicholas Amos; two grandchildren; and her brother. Her husband, Mr. Levine, died in 2005.

The fact that Ms. Amos’s art complicates, rather than narrows, notions of identity, racial and otherwise, makes it pertinent to the present moment, when binary thinking of all kinds is under scrutiny. At the same time, her careerlong belief in art as a form of ethical resistance carries new weight when the promises of the civil rights era seem again under threat.

“It’s always been my contention,” she once said, “that for me, a black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act.”

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## ARTFORUM

### Emma Amos (1937–2020)

MAY 22, 2020



Emma Amos at the Art Salon Show, 1979. Courtesy: Ryan Lee.

Emma Amos, a pioneering artist best-known for her vivid figurative paintings exploring gender, race, and power through an inventive approach to color and form, has died at age eighty-three. The cause was Alzheimer's disease, according to a statement by New York's Ryan Lee Gallery, which represents the artist. Over a nearly six-decade career that encompassed both figurative and abstract painting as well as printmaking and weaving, Amos drew from art history, current affairs, and her own life, helping fill the representational void surrounding African American identity and heritage in art institutions and beyond. Influenced by Abstract Expressionism and the civil rights movement, Amos began painting in the early 1960s and, in 1963, became the sole female member of Spiral, a short-lived but momentous group of African American artists in New York City who explored the role of blackness in art.

Born in segregated Atlanta in 1937, Amos studied drawing at Morris Brown College at age eleven. Her parents encouraged her artistic pursuits: Amos's mother hoped she would study with Atlantan muralist Hale Woodruff, but the opportunity never arose, and he moved; her father introduced her to intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois and Zora Neale Hurston (a frequent

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guest). Amos would later paint Du Bois, Hurston, and other important figures alongside her father, asserting the importance of her own ancestry. At sixteen, she enrolled in Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where she studied art history. She spent a year learning abroad in London, and in 1960 she moved to New York, where she started making prints in the workshops of Robert Blackburn and Letterio Calapai. She also began apprenticing with master weaver Dorothy Liebes, who infused in Amos a lifelong affinity for craft; many of her paintings incorporate photography and textiles, and from 1977 to 1978, she hosted an arts and crafts television show, *Show of Hands*.

In 1964, Amos began a graduate program in arts education at New York University, where she finally met Woodruff, who introduced her work to members of Spiral—Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, and Norman Lewis among them. After looking at color etchings she had made, they invited her to join, and she became the group's youngest and only female member. (In 2011, Amos said in an oral history that the collective rejected other female artists, including Vivian Brown and Faith Ringgold.) Spiral disbanded two years after its founding in 1965, the same year Amos married Bobby Levine, a writer and early computer enthusiast. Although it only lasted two years—divergent perspectives on black art, while originally generative, eventually led to irreconcilable differences in philosophy and artistic approach—the group has recently received new attention in traveling shows like “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” organized by London’s Tate Modern in 2017. Amos was included in that survey, as well as in the Brooklyn Museum’s “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85” that same year. In addition to her work with Spiral, Amos edited for *Heresies*, the feminist art journal, and, according to Ryan Lee Gallery’s statement, belonged to Guerrilla Girls, the trailblazing feminist activist group that protests injustice in the art world.

The pernicious whiteness of that world would be taken up repeatedly in Amos’s work. “Every time I think about color, it’s a political statement,” she told Lucy Lippard in 1991. “It would be a luxury to be white and never have to think about it.” An artwork titled *The Tightrope*, 1994—in which Amos balances over a field of eyes, holding a shirt decorated with a naked female torso and a plate of mango blossoms from Paul Gauguin’s *Two Tahitian Women*, 1899—“allegorizes the artist’s precarious and unstable relation to the modernist canon she appropriates,” wrote Chloe Wyma in a January 2018 *Artforum* review of an exhibition of Amos’s work at Ryan Lee Gallery.

In 1988, Amos began her “Falling Series,” complex, often multiframe paintings that emphasize the dynamism of bodies plunging through space, sometimes exceeding the limits of the rectangular canvas. “I liked the idea of using the sky instead of having everybody just standing,” she said. “I also had a feeling that we were going into a bad period. And I’m not sure whether [falling] was the proper metaphor, but it seemed to be right.” Two years later, she began “The Gift,” 1990–94, a series of forty-eight watercolor portraits of women in the art world, among them Elizabeth Catlett, Lucy Lippard, Lorna Simpson, Lorraine O’Grady, and Amos’s daughter India, the gift’s recipient.

In 2008, Amos retired from her professorship at Rutgers University’s Mason Gross School of Art, where she had taught since 1980. Like that of many black artists, her work has only recently enjoyed widespread attention from critics and institutions. Amos’s paintings are included

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in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Studio Museum of Harlem, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Brooklyn Museum in New York, as well as the Cleveland Museum of Art. In 2021, a retrospective of the artist's work will open in her home state, at the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens.

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## ARTNEWS

### Whitney Museum Acquires Works by Emma Amos, Ed Clark, Many More

by Claire Selvin

APRIL 9, 2019



Emma Amos, *Baby*, 1966, oil on canvas.

©EMMA AMOS/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND RYAN LEE GALLERY, NEW YORK

The Whitney Museum of American Art in New York said today that it has acquired 300 artworks over the past six months, going back to November of 2018. With the new additions, 60 artists—including Nina Chanel Abney, Barbara Hammer, Simone Leigh, Mary Weatherford, and Ed Clark—will enter the museum’s collection for the first time.

A few of the works joining the Whitney’s holdings are Abney’s *White River Fish Kill* (2017), five collages by Jean Conner, four multimedia pieces by Clarissa Tossin, Diamond Stingily’s video *How Did He Die* (2016), three photographs by Ruth Orkin, and José Lerma’s painting *Beso de esquina* (2003).

Several of the acquisitions—by Carolina Caycedo, Lena Henke, Christine Sun Kim, Guadalupe Maravilla, and others—figured in recent exhibitions at the Whitney.

Also part of this robust group are pieces by Diane Arbus, Nan Goldin, David Hammons, Jasper Johns, Mark Rothko, Emma Amos, Wu Tsang, David Wojnarowicz, and Grant Wood, among

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other names already represented in the museum's collection.

Scott Rothkopf, the senior deputy director and chief curator of the Whitney, said in a statement, "We're thrilled that many of our recent acquisitions, particularly by artists new to the collection, arose through our reenergized emerging artist program. This continues our historical commitment to acquiring works by contemporary artists directly from our groundbreaking exhibitions and allows us to extend our dialogue with these artists as stewards of their work."

David Breslin, curator and director of the collection, added, "Our new acquisitions permit us to present new art histories, especially when we put those works on the Whitney's walls so soon after acquiring them."

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## HYPERALLERGIC

### The Colors of the Sixties

Thomas Micchelli

APRIL 6, 2019

*Spilling Over: Painting in the 1960s* at the Whitney Museum expands the common understanding of a pivot point in American art, while basking unapologetically in the pure pleasure of looking.

The eighth floor of the Whitney Museum of American Art, as David Breslin, the Director of the Collection, sees it, is “a place for surprises.”

The elegant spaces of the museum’s top floor, catching the light off the river through its skylights and glass walls, have felt enchanted ever since it opened in 2015 with the Early Modernist “Forms Abstracted” section of the new building’s inaugural exhibition, *America Is Hard to See*.

Breslin and Curatorial Assistant Margaret Kross have continued that magical sensation with the small but impactful *Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s*. With just 18 works, one per artist, it expands the common understanding of a pivot point in American art, while basking unapologetically in the pure pleasure of looking.

In a brief conversation during the press preview, Breslin told me that it was his intention to anchor the show with the works of a few household names, most notably Helen Frankenthaler, whose majestic “Orange Mood” (1966) imposes itself on the room, a cauldron of yellow, orange, and gold bordered by ice-cold slices of ultramarine, while surrounding them with paintings that might be less familiar but no less dazzling. Every one of the works in this show is worth contemplating for a good long time.

For the purposes of the exhibition, the 1960s begin in 1959 and wrap in 1972. Its focus on the use of color during a decade marked by Clement Greenberg’s advocacy of the reflexive flatness of Color Field painting, which ultimately led to the dematerialization of the object, would seem to invite every manner of curatorial crisis, from academicism to superficiality to solipsism, and Breslin did state in his opening remarks from the podium that the show could have easily tumbled into disaster.

As a formal property, color is simultaneously specific, amorphous, and generic — a chameleon that changes its form and objectives from work to work. To choose it as a theme for an exhibition demands that the selection walk a fine line between logic and intuition, while seeking a quantum of forgiveness that it can never approach telling the whole story.

The title of the exhibition, *Spilling Over*, comes from a statement by Bob Thompson, whose entrancing “Triumph of Bacchus” (1964) hangs to the left of Frankenthaler’s “Orange Mood”:

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I paint many paintings that tell me slowly that I have something inside of me that is just bursting, twisting, sticking, spilling over to get out. Out into souls and mouths and eyes that have never seen before. The Monsters are present now on my canvas as in my dreams. (Gylbert Coker, *The World of Bob Thompson*, The Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979.)

This is hardly an expression of a cool '60s aesthetic. In fact, the majority of the works in the show run hot — if not in color temperature, then in commitment.

The exhibition launches with Kenneth Noland's large stripe painting, "New Day" (1967), which streaks past you as soon as the elevator doors open. With its glowing oranges, yellows, reds, and blues, it is the appropriate messenger for what is to come.

But, in keeping with the eighth floor's penchant for surprises, the other two works in the entrance lobby are among the coolest in the show. One of them is Carmen Herrera's virtually blank painting in white and green, as its matter-of-fact title, "Blanco y Verde" (1959), affirms. Composed of two canvases, one atop the other, the only shape that appears in the painting is a green triangle rising a couple of inches above the seam.

(The triangle's location at the juncture between the two canvases uncannily mirrors the squeezed space created by the two balls in Jasper Johns's similarly structured "Painting with Two Balls," which he made in 1960, the following year. Herrera's green triangle looks like a before-the-fact feminine riposte to Johns's sardonic sendup of painterly machismo.)

The Herrera faces "Plum Nellie, Sea Stone" (1972), a purple-and-white painting by Robert Reed, an African-American artist who taught at Yale from 1969 to 2014, the year of his death. The near-monochrome keeps in check the near-anarchy of the painting's style, which darts from expressivity to geometry, stratagem to accident.

Watery, Frankenthaler-esque pools of variegated green provide a base coat, which the artist loads up with waves of blackish violets. These elemental forces churn, spin, spatter, and crash around an inexplicably blank rectangle floating diagonally across the composition's center — we are looking into a literal void.

Around the outside edges of the roiling purple, coolly executed graphite lines divide the surface between raw canvas and coats of clear acrylic medium. It's a wholly absorbing work, indicative of both the compositional clarity and formal complexity of Reed's art.

Reed is one of seven artists of color in the show, and from a historical standpoint, their works are the most revelatory due to decades of institutional biases and blind spots (though, for the record, there are no artists of Asian heritage, and the gender ratio is six women to 12 men).

Around the corner from the entrance, Sam Gilliam's "Bow Form Construction" (1968) signals the most formerly diverse room of the exhibition, with abstraction, figuration, pictograms, and hybridization bouncing off one another in imaginative curatorial adjacencies.

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Hybridization is embodied in two works that couldn't be more different: Gilliam's hulking draped canvas and Alex Katz's "Edwin, Blue Series" (1965). "Bow Form Construction" is stained in blue, green, blush, and maroon, like a gigantic Veronica's veil, and hung from two mounts on the wall. A fusion of painting and sculpture, it thrusts itself into real space in a gesture that, in the year of Martin Luther King's assassination, bespeaks both grief and power.

Katz's portrait of the poet and critic Edwin Denby is a cutout on composition board attached to a second board painted monochrome blue. Executed with a delightful fluidity that's lost in the artist's trademark style, the portrait's layered dimensions flip back and forth between illusionistic and abstract space. Katz's cutouts — a form he explored widely the '60s — are rarely mounted on a separate panel; here, the bas-relief created by combining a painted cutout with a monochrome field delivers a jolt of teasing ambiguity.

Kay WalkingStick's "April Contemplating May" (1972) hangs adjacent to the Katz; with its solid-green negative shapes, self-referential painting-within-a-painting (the artist's "Pieces of Sky" from 1970), and orange, abstracted nude, the work revels in an invigorating in-betweenness that roams a flickering plane between Pop and Color Field painting — the same territory occupied by Frank Bowling's "Dan Johnson's Surprise" (1969) on the opposite wall.

Bowling's huge painting (115 15/16 × 104 1/8 inches) is covered in mists of sprayed and poured acrylic, through which a map of South America emerges in three iterations across the composition's horizontal midline. You would be tempted to think that the imagery is a response to Jasper Johns's enigmatic map paintings, but the work's purpose goes deeper than that.

According to the wall text, Bowling, who was born in Guyana, "made a series of paintings between 1967 and 1971 that combine abstraction with continental shapes in order to explore histories of colonization and the African diaspora" — the formal and political are irreducibly linked. (The title, however, does not refer to a William Walker-style colonizer of Latin America, as you might think, but to a friend and fellow artist whose work was chosen for the Whitney Annual — the precursor to the Biennial — the year the painting was made.)

Marcia Hafif's "72., March 1965" (1965) hangs on a narrow wall beside the passage between this room and the skylit main gallery. The painting's absolute symmetry comprises a central blank, four-pronged shape reminiscent of a gyroscope or jack, its vertical spine reaching the top and bottom of the canvas, while its horizontal arms fall short of the two sides.

The shapes forming the composition's left and right sides are painted solid orange and green, respectively. The pigment of these two planes, especially the orange, quaver with increasing frequency the longer you look at them. The rigidity of the symmetrical design is subverted by color alone.

The potency of pigment encountered in Marcia Hafif is carried into the main gallery with Josef Albers's red-and-orange "Homage to the Square: 'Wait'" (1967); Richard Anuszkiewicz's "The Fourth of the Three" (1963), a red, blue and green grid; and Ellsworth Kelly's blue and green lozenges on a red field, "Blue Green Red" (1964). The Kelly is the simplest in layout, but the

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most optically activated, with the three colors throbbing as rapidly as a racing heart.



Emma Amos, "Baby" (1966), oil on canvas, 46 1/2 x 51 inches (© Emma Amos, courtesy the artist and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York)

"Gamma Delta" (1959-1960) by Morris Louis and "Gran Cairo" (1962) by Frank Stella, hung side by side, complement each other, with the yawning space between Louis's gullies of poured paint playing off Stella's densely formatted concentric squares. Of all the artists in the exhibition, Stella strikes me as the single odd choice. I think of his work in terms of form and structure, while color feels, if not quite like an afterthought, then more external than intrinsic.

The Frankenthaler, mentioned earlier, faces these works from the other side of the room, with Thompson's "Triumph of Bacchus" on the left and, on the right, Emma Amos's simmering "Baby" (1966), in which a flatly painted young woman in round sunglasses is depicted against an abstracted, hotly colored backdrop. There is also a pair of legs, each painted a different shade of brown, on the upper right. These mysterious forms, together with the yellow, orange, blue, and green shapes surrounding them, could easily be read, as in the WalkingStick, as a painting-within-a-painting.

This wall pulls off the trickiest conceit of the show, which is that, in the right context, color can rule as the sole baseline. With their similar palettes, the three paintings work as a team despite their divergent styles and imagery, and even enlist the Albers on an adjacent wall, whose colors blend enticingly with the Amos, as a fellow traveler.

The remaining two works in the show, Miriam Schapiro's "Jigsaw" (1969) and Alvin Loving's "Septehedron 34" (1970), point to a postmodern future in their break from Clement Greenberg's orthodoxy of reflexive flatness. While geometric on its face, Shapiro's sharply angled

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planes cannot help but protrude and recede, creating shelves and recesses, while Loving's shaped canvas takes up the challenge of making all seven sides of a heptahedron visible at once.

Radiating in brushy oranges (the evidence of the hand itself a compelling departure in the geometric realm) and fluorescent pink, with crisp edges of electric yellow, green, and blue defining the heptahedron's facets, Loving solves the problem by painting imaginary apertures that create the illusion of space — a verboten move in the critical climes of 1970 — revealing the form's interior and the backs of the hidden sides.

*Spilling Over* runs through the end of August. It's a perfect summer show that you will want to visit again and again. Its abounding freshness clears your eyes and lifts your spirits, so that everything around you, in and out of the museum, looks clear, bright, alive, and new.

*Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s continues at the Whitney Museum of American Art (99 Gansevoort Street, Meatpacking District, Manhattan) through August 31. The exhibition is organized by David Breslin, DeMartini Family Curator and Director of the Collection, with Margaret Kross, curatorial assistant.*

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## ARTNEWS

### 9 Art Events in New York: Sky Hopinka, Graciela Iturbide, Nancy Spero, and More

The Editors of ARTnews

MARCH 25, 2019

TUESDAY, MARCH 26

#### **Talk: Matthew Porter at Aperture Foundation**

At this event, photographer Matthew Porter will talk about his new book *The Heights*, which comprises 25 images of vintage cars in midair. These images, which are from the artist's "flying car" series, look like stills from action movies, only more surreal. The works also serve as studies of the automobile's relationship to the history of American industry.

*Aperture Gallery and Bookstore, 547 West 27th Street, 7–8:30 p.m. Donations \$5*

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 27

Opening: "Useless: Machines for Dreaming, Thinking, and Seeing" at Bronx Museum of the Arts

Focusing on objects and activities without obvious functions or uses, this exhibition will bring together a selection of machines created by artists. The works on view were not constructed for scientific purposes, but are intended instead for spiritual and emotional fulfillment on the part of their viewers. Among the artists whose works are featured in the show are Jairo Alfonso, Fischli/Weiss, William Kentridge, Adriana Salazar, and Johanna Unzueta.

*Bronx Museum of the Arts, 1040 Grand Concourse, 6–8 p.m.*

#### **Opening: Affordable Art Fair at Metropolitan Pavilion**

The biannual Affordable Art Fair returns to New York this week with the aim of offering works priced well below those at art fairs like the Armory Show and Art Basel, with rates that fall between \$100 and \$10,000. Among the exhibitors set to sell their wares at the event are Art Angler (New York), Cube Gallery (London), Galerie Duret (Paris), and Gallery Art Plaza (Seoul). Performances, tours, and artist talks are also on the agenda for the fair's run. Admission will be free on Friday from 6 to 8 p.m.

*Metropolitan Pavilion, 125 West 18th Street, 6–9 p.m. Tickets \$70 online/\$80 at the door*

THURSDAY, MARCH 28

Exhibition: Graciela Iturbide at Throckmorton Fine Art

This exhibition surveys more than 50 years of work by the acclaimed Mexican documentary photographer Graciela Iturbide, whose art is currently the subject of a retrospective at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Though the show includes photos the artist shot in India, Italy,

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and the United States, its focal point is pictures taken in Iturbide's home country. Among the works in the show are highlights from her photo essay *Juchitán of the Women*, which was completed over the first half of the 1980s and intimately documents matriarchal culture in the Mexican town of Juchitán de Zaragoza. "I have always said that my camera is a pretext to know the culture, its people, and the way of life," the artist said. "My photographs are not political or feminist but I am when I need to be."

*Throckmorton Fine Art, 145 East 57th Street, 3rd Floor, 11 a.m.–5 p.m.*

### **Performance: Ni'Ja Whitson at Danspace Project**

Part of the title of the artist Ni'Ja Whitson's forthcoming interdisciplinary work *Oba Queen Baba King Baba* is derived from the Yoruba word "Oba," a term that refers to something along the lines of a genderless king. Whitson's piece fuses movement, poetry, jazz, textiles, and video art in the creation of a work that takes inspiration from the personal narratives of queer and trans children of preachers. The piece is being performed by the NWA Project, a company Whitson runs in partnership with the performer Kirsten Flores-Davis.

*Danspace Project, 131 East 10th Street, 8 p.m. Tickets \$15/\$22*

### **FRIDAY, MARCH 29**

#### **Exhibition: "Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s" at Whitney Museum**

This exhibition, which features works drawn from the Whitney's collection, brings together eye-poppingly hued paintings from the 1960s and early 1970s. The show looks broadly at the role color painting played in the era, and it will feature monochromes, figuration, and much more with the aim of offering a multifarious view of the formal and political approaches artists took at the time. Among the works on view will be the vivid geometric abstractions of Alvin Loving, the majestic canvases of Ellsworth Kelly, and the vibrant figurative scenes of Emma Amos.

*Whitney Museum, 99 Gansevoort Street, 10:30 a.m.–10 p.m.*

### **SUNDAY, MARCH 31**

#### **Exhibition: Nancy Spero at MoMA PS1**

For her first major institutional show since her passing in 2009, this survey of work by artist Nancy Spero, which traveled from the Museo Tamayo in Mexico City and is curated by artist Julie Ault, includes more than 100 pieces created over the artist's six-decade career. Known equally as an activist and an artist, Spero was a founding member of the first women's cooperative gallery, the SoHo space *Artists in Residence*; the PS1 show aims to shine a light on Spero's full output, from her Vietnam War-era paintings of sexualized weaponry to her photo-based pieces about the status of women in society.

*MoMA PS1, 22-25 Jackson Avenue, Queens, 12–6 p.m.*

#### **Opening: Dash Snow at Participant Inc.**

The late artist Dash Snow is mythologized by some as a folk hero of a certain brand of 2000s-era New York art-world rebelliousness—an attitude that now feels distant from the city's current cultural landscape. A peer of artists Ryan McGinley and Dan Colen, Snow, who died at age 27 in 2009, is remembered for his freewheeling lifestyle and for his art, which often made use of collage and sometimes included the artist's bodily fluids. This exhibition focuses on Snow's

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formidable archives; on view will be photographs and ephemera related to his practice.  
*Participant Inc., 253 East Houston Street, Ground Floor, 7–9 p.m.*

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## In 'Black Identities,' Minneapolis Institute of Art draws a map to a better world

By Alicia Eler

February 28, 2019

**"Black Identities" aims to start a dialogue about how we view art, and the artists themselves.**

The world has been re-envisioned at the Minneapolis Institute of Art. To prove it, Mia has hung a painting of a world map in which all the continents and oceans are bathed in a hazy peach-orange. Africa and Australia are highlighted in white, and South America is outlined in black. Europe and North America are hardly visible.

This is "False Start," a hulking, luscious 7- by 17½-foot painting by British-Guyanese artist Frank Bowling that grounds "Mapping Black Identities," a new show aimed at starting a conversation about the complexities of black identity in a museum setting.

The show, which includes work by more than 30 artists, pushes back on the historically flat depictions of blackness often found at encyclopedic museums such as Mia, focused largely on oppression and struggle. Occupying two galleries on the third floor, it offers a healthy mix of abstract and figurative painting, sculptures and photography, with a film/video screening coming this summer in a neighboring gallery.

"This exhibit is a way to honor black artists, black history — a simple action towards creating inclusion and belonging here at Mia," said curatorial fellow Esther Callahan, part of a team that put together this show after gathering input from across the entire 440-employee institution.

"Everyone works here for the same reason — a love of art," said curatorial assistant Keisha Williams. "I think it is really a painful thing to not see yourself represented and not have a voice in the curatorial process. As a biracial black woman, I rarely see myself represented, especially in an encyclopedic museum."

Williams and Callahan, who joined Mia last August, decided to change things. They organized a Curatorial Advisory Committee that embraced all departments in Mia, including facilities, accounting and visitor information.

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## Mapping Black Identities

When: 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tue.-Wed. & Sat.; 10 a.m.-9 p.m. Thu.-Fri.; 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sun. Ends March 15, 2020.

Where: Minneapolis Institute of Art, 2400 3rd Av. S., Mpls.

Admission: Free.

Info: 1-888-642-2787 or [artsmia.org](http://artsmia.org).

Museumgoers will notice that the labels on artworks in this exhibition look different. In addition to the usual curatorial note, they include quotes from the artists to humanize the work.

In this way, the show also challenges people who say they “don’t get” contemporary art. The artists’ quotes are a way to start a dialogue with anyone who wants to engage.

## A dialogue with all

The first room sets up a fascinating conversation between black male abstract painters and female painters who happen to depict black masculinity.

Along with the Frank Bowling map, there’s a Sam Gilliam “drape painting” — a canvas covered in color and hanging loosely, rather than stretched flat like a traditional canvas — across from a triptych painting of a black male character by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, and Emma Amos’ “Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray’s Photograph — 1926),” a back and side angle view of the titular character, nude.

The second gallery is a mix of sculpture, photography and mixed media. A Nick Cave “Soundsuit” decks out a human character in colorful patterned fabric, with circus ornaments and toys jutting out from its body on metal rods. There’s a selection of Charles Gaines trees painted in acrylic, and several other representational works focused on hair.

Deana Lawson’s lush photograph “Eternity,” a stylized, glamorous portrait of a black woman awash in a room of purple, is a collaboration between the artist and her subject, rather than a photographer’s solo creation. As a symbol of femininity and motherhood, the photo references the so-called “Mitochondrial Eve,” the “mother of all humans” whom geneticists have established as living 200,000 years ago.

On the accompanying label, Lawson is pictured with her own old-school camera and this quote: “With a history of certain voices not being included in the history of art, I think it is time to claim that space, to have bodies who might not have been celebrated within the institution.” It speaks not only to the exhibit’s goal of rewriting art history, but of giving artists a voice rather than just having an institutional white box of black text explain their work.

Much of the art was acquired in the past three years, as part of an initiative led by Gabriel Ritter, head of Mia’s contemporary art department. One of his goals is to expand the museum’s collection of works by women, people of color and LGBTQ+-identifying artists.

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The selection of works in the show is also strategic: 60 percent are from the collection, 30 percent are promised gifts and the rest are on loan, including the Gilliam piece, which was borrowed from the Walker. Ritter hopes to add the two other pieces on loan — Kevin Beasley’s “Queen of Night,” a hybrid assemblage artwork of found objects, and Kwame Brathwaite’s 1970 “Black Is Beautiful” poster — to Mia’s ever-growing contemporary collection.

Contemporary art is the museum’s youngest department with just under 400 objects, amid a permanent collection that holds 90,000 artworks.

Williams hopes that visitors “will start to see these depictions of black artists and art, and think of it as ‘art’ and not exclusively ‘black artists.’ We really wanted to represent an intersectional exhibition that talks about race, age, sexuality. I think people can find connecting points, and it doesn’t matter if you are black.”

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## The New York Times

### Radiant and Radical: 20 Years of Defining the Soul of Black Art

By Holland Cotter

SEPTEMBER 13, 2018

It will be a happy day when racial harmony rules in this land. But that day's not coming any time soon. Who could have guessed in the 1960s, when civil rights became law, that a new century would bring white supremacy tiki torching out of the closet and turn the idea that black lives matter, so beyond obvious, into a desperate battle cry?

Actually, African-Americans could have seen such things coming. No citizens know the national narrative, and its implacable racism, better than they do. And no artists have responded to that history-that-won't-go-away more powerfully than black artists. More than 60 of them appear in the passionate show called "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" now at the Brooklyn Museum, in a display filling two floors of special exhibition space with work that functioned, in its time, as seismic detector, political persuader and defensive weapon.

This exhibition, which originated at the Tate Modern in London, asks basic questions about art. What's its purpose? To deliver a message? Cause a ruckus? Stand there looking pretty? And who is it for? The knowledgeable few? A wide public? These questions were in the air at the time much of this art was being made, beginning in the early 1960s when 15 African-American artists who called themselves the Spiral Group gathered in New York City. Their work opens the show on the museum's fifth floor.

Some of the group's members — Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis — already had substantial careers. Others, like Emma Amos, the sole female member, were just out of art school. Crucially, several had been at the 1963 March on Washington and were fired up with the idea of infusing art with political content, and in making work that would be, in some way, distinctively black.

For artists who worked with figures, this wasn't a stretch. Alston and Bearden were already depicting scenes of black life, and political protest was part of that life. For Lewis, the choice was tougher. He was committed to Abstract Expressionism, a movement interested in myth and emotion, not marches. Through it he had gained a foothold in a highly segregated mainstream art world. To mix politics with aesthetics was to place himself outside that world. He took the risk.

His 1960 painting "America the Beautiful" appears, at a glance, to be a scatter of flame-like white shapes on a black field; with slow looking the white shapes reveal themselves to be burning crosses and Ku Klux Klan hoods. Similarly, "Processional," from 1965, looks like an

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abstract horizontal flow of gestural uprights, though it was inspired by photographs of the Selma-to-Montgomery march of that year.

In short, during the two decades covered by “Soul of a Nation,” ending in the early 1980s, the choice of whether, and how, to make art “black” was a lively issue. And the show — organized by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, curators at the Tate, and overseen in New York by Ashley James, an assistant curator at the Brooklyn Museum — is, among many other things, about the varied and inventive solutions artists came up with.

Certain early responses feel almost counterintuitive. In the same years that Lewis was injecting topical stories into abstract painting, Roy DeCarava was experimenting with making photographic portraiture abstract. The face of the young woman in his famous image “Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, D.C., 1963” has the weight of a monument. But a shot of John Coltrane from the same year has an aura-like blur, and a picture called “Face Out of Focus” is a featureless glow, undefined by race or gender.

By the late 1960s, the national temperature had shot from civil rights-era hot to Black Power torrid, and you see the change in art. After galleries of black-and-white Spiral paintings and shadowy DeCarava photographs come a punch of color and instantly readable symbols.

Elizabeth Catlett’s 1968 mahogany sculpture of a giant raised fist, “Black Unity,” sits in the center of the first Black Power gallery, backed by a 1967 painting by Faith Ringgold of a hemorrhaging American flag, “American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding.”

In a corner stands a bullet-riddled wood door, a memorial by the artist Dana C. Chandler Jr. to the Black Panther leader Fred Hampton, killed in 1969 by the Chicago police as he slept in his apartment.

Like many black artist-activists of the day, Mr. Chandler’s career developed largely within an urban African-American neighborhood, his being the Roxbury section of Boston. And most of the work on the museum’s fifth floor is arranged by city. At roughly the same time Mr. Chandler was working in Roxbury, Emory Douglas, the Black Panther’s minister of culture, was designing eye-grabbing polemical posters in the San Francisco Bay Area.

And in the Watts section of Los Angeles, a cluster of extraordinary assemblage sculptors — Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy — were piecing together references to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Aunt Jemima and African masquerades.

In the Los Angeles work, hard distinctions between representation and abstraction are moot, as they are in a lot of art made in Chicago by members of AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), who specialized in pattern-intensive dazzle. One of the show’s inspired sights is a pairing of hand-painted revolution-themed dresses by the AfriCOBRA artist Jae Jarrell with pointillist portraits of Angela Davis and Malcolm X by her husband, Wadsworth A. Jarrell.

Theirs is activist work not just because of its political content, or because its Pop energy makes

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you want to get up and dance, but also because it's so clearly designed, with its polish and flair, to infiltrate mainstream institutional space. And it sure does look fabulous here.

Down on the fourth floor, regional divisions drop away and the representation vs. abstraction debate plays out. Advocates on one side insisted that art, to be black and powerful, had to declare its politics forthrightly, which abstraction could not do. Those on the other side argued that to confine black artists to a particular formal mode or racialized content was to perpetuate the art world's existing segregationist model. The stakes were high, the debate could be bitter. But the results were win-win. What we see in the show itself is not suppression but florescence.

Of many examples of figurative work, three witty, chill paintings from the 1970s by Barkley L. Hendricks, who died last year at 72, including a life-size nude self-portrait called "Brilliantly Endowed (Self-Portrait)," are as assertively commanding as portraiture gets. The same can be said, on the abstract side, of William T. Williams's 1969 painting "Trane." With its tilting, crashing compositional lines, it's of a visual equivalent to John Coltrane's harmony-bending — which is to say harmony-releasing — free jazz.

And everywhere, there's politics that doesn't name itself. There's a politics of process: Ed Clark painted many abstract pictures flat on the floor with a janitor's broom; Jack Whitten textured the painted surface of his great dark 1970 pyramidal "Homage to Malcolm" with his Afro comb. (A survey of his sculptures is at the Met Breuer through Dec. 2.)

There's a politics of material. You find it in Melvin Edwards's delicate-dangerous "Curtain (for William and Peter)" made from barbed wire and chains, and in David Hammons's unfurling 1975 "Bag Lady in Flight," its winglike form collaged from plain paper bags ornamented with grease stains and patches of hair collected in Harlem barber shops.

And there's a politics of performance. An example comes at the close of the show in photographs of a performance piece organized in 1983 by the artist Lorraine O'Grady for an African-American Day Parade in Harlem. For the occasion, Ms. O'Grady hired 15 dancers to carry empty gold-painted frames along the parade route and photograph bystanders through them.

That gesture gave casual snapshots the preciousness of formal portraits. It brought art directly into the community and turned the community into art.

Ms. O'Grady titled her performance "Art Is ..." and, indeed, since the 1980s, the definition of "black" art has continued to expand, and debates about it — what it encompasses, who can use it, whether it should exist as a category at all — continue. In response to a backsliding nation, we're now in a second Age of Black Power. The political stakes are as high as they ever were. When it comes to "black" art, debate what it means, but go with Ms. O'Grady's ellipsis.

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## ‘SOUL OF A NATION’ OPENS IN NEW YORK WHERE MANY OF THE EXHIBITION ARTISTS WERE ACTIVE DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS, BLACK POWER ERAS

Victoria L. Valentine

September 14, 2018

HOW SHOULD AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS respond to the Civil Rights Movement? The question was central to the organization of Spiral, the New York artist collective formed in 1963 in advance of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The 15-member group including Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Reginald Gammon, and Emma Amos, the youngest and only female member, was short-lived, yet pivotal. Spiral mounted only one exhibition in 1965 and dissolved later that year.

The issues Spiral artists debated—how to best express themselves at a time when matters of race and rights were dominating the national discourse—reflect the organizing themes of “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” which opened today at the Brooklyn Museum. The exhibition spans 1963-1983 and considers the challenges artists faced in their quest to make art that was formally and materially complex, but that also spoke to their experiences as African Americans.

At the Brooklyn Museum, “Soul of a Nation” features more than 150 works of art by about 60 artists spanning a wide range of mediums, from painting, sculpture, and photography to clothing and performance. Amos, Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Frank Bowling, Sam Gilliam, David Hammons, Barkley L. Hendricks, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams, are among the artists represented in the exhibition. Works are arranged based on a variety of themes, including regional groups and aesthetic styles, such as Spiral, the Chicago collective AfriCOBRA, L.A. Assemblage, and East Coast Abstraction.

The groundbreaking survey opened at the Tate Modern in London in 2017 and traveled to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark., earlier this year. The debut of “Soul of a Nation” in New York is particularly significant because it marks the first time the exhibition is being presented in a city where many of the participating artists were based, their work was produced, and significant events around institutional politics and the state of opportunity for black artists occurred.

Spiral’s sole exhibition, “First Group Showing: Works in Black & White” (1965), was presented at 147 Christopher Street in the West Village, the space where they regularly gathered.

The Studio Museum in Harlem became a locus for artists of African descent when it was established in 1968, though the path in the early years wasn’t smooth as opinions about the

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politics of art and race varied widely and were brought to bear on what was exhibited. Among its many historic shows, the museum mounted AfriCOBRA's first two exhibitions in 1970 and 1971.

The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) came together in January 1969 with a goal to increase the representation of African American artists in museum collections and exhibitions and also to promote the hiring of blacks in leadership and curatorial roles at New York art museums. Members included Bearden, Lewis, Benny Andrews, and Cliff Joseph.

A week after its formation, BECC protested outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art where the exhibition "Harlem on My Mind" was on view. The group also demonstrated in front the Whitney Museum of American Art during its presentation of "Contemporary Black Artists in America" in 1971. The show grew out of pressure from BECC and featured 28 artists. The Whitney declined to hire a black curator, however, which was also among the group's demands. In response, they protested—24 artists pulled out of the Whitney show, and BECC mounted a counter-exhibition with their work. BECC was also in communication with the Museum of Modern Art during this time, between 1969-1971, about diversifying its practices.

Founded in 1974 by Linda Goode Bryant, Just Above Midtown (JAM) exhibited works by Senga Nengudi, Hammons, Lorraine O'Grady, and Howardena Pindell, among others. Initially located at 50 West 57th Street, JAM is the first gallery in a major gallery district dedicated to showing the work of African American artists. The influential and experimental black-run space eventually moved downtown, operating out of two more locations before closing in 1986.

Artworks by the artists who prompted and participated in these transformational events and activities are displayed in "Soul of a Nation." In the exhibition catalog, the broader historical context of the groups and movements that defined the period is further explored. In addition, in London and in Bentonville public programming, artist talks and panels were organized to coincide with "Soul of a Nation."

The Brooklyn Museum plans a similar slate of community events, including a daylong opening celebration with a symposium (which will be live-streamed) and evening dance party tomorrow, Saturday, Sept. 15. The symposium includes conversations among the exhibition's curators with critics, scholars, and artists such as Gilliam, Ringgold, Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell, and David Driskell, and photographers Beuford Smith, Ming Smith, and Herb Robinson. Further programming is scheduled over the course of the exhibition, which is on view through Feb. 3, 2019, before traveling to The Broad in Los Angeles.

## BOOKSHELF

Edited by curators Mark Godfrey and Zoé Whitley, "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" was published to accompany the exhibition. The catalog features essays by the curators, explores major movements and moments from Spiral to FESTAC, and includes written recollections from Samella Lewis, Edmund Barry Gaither, David C. Driskell, Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell, and Linda Goode Bryant.

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EMMA AMOS, "Eva the Babysitter," 1973 (oil paint on canvas, 127 x 86.4). | Courtesy of Emma Amos, the Amos Family, and Ryan Lee Gallery

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## ‘Black Radical Women’ Exhibition At The ICA Seeks To Correct The Record

by Maria Garcia

AUGUST 03, 2018

In her 1971 mural “For The Women’s House,” artist Faith Ringgold painted women of different ethnicities partaking in tasks that were at once mundane and yet also required radical ambition: driving a bus at a time when women were banned from doing so in New York City, playing basketball for a professional team decades before the inception of the WNBA, being a doctor, mothering a child of a different race freely and without judgment. The 8-foot by 8-foot mural imbues solidarity — women of varying skin colors co-existing and thriving.

Ringgold’s mural is the powerful opening to “We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965 to 1985,” now on view at Boston’s Institute of Contemporary Art until Sept. 30.

“For The Women’s House” was created in 1971, when Ringgold had already established herself as a prominent voice of black artistry and activism, and yet she struggled to find a home for the piece. After her own alma mater, City College, turned it down, Ringgold asked herself — as she later told her daughter, the critic Michele Wallace — “Do you want your work to be somewhere where nobody wants it, or do you want it to be somewhere it is needed?”

Ringgold took the idea to the Women’s House of Detention on Rikers Island, where she interviewed the incarcerated women and asked what they wanted to see. The result is a painterly manifestation of intersectionality, a call that has caught on in the age of internet “wokeness” and performative activism, but that women of color — and specifically black women — have been exhorting for generations. The truth seems obvious to us now: that the liberation from the patriarchy and the liberation from systemic racism are bound in each other. You can’t fight against one, while being tethered to the other.

And yet, the second-wave feminism of the ‘60s, ‘70s and ‘80s operated under an imaginary and hazardous concept of racial color-blindness. All women are the same in the fight for gender equality, went the conventional wisdom of the day.

Except, they’re not.

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Emma Amos' "Sandy and Her Husband," created in 1973. (Courtesy Brooklyn Art Museum)

To pretend one doesn't see race, is to invalidate the hatred and systemic discrimination black women must navigate for simply existing.

While the mainstream feminist movement of the time focused on social issues, such as work-place and reproductive rights (as opposed to the legal obstacles -- like suffrage and property rights that first wave feminism tackled), black women organized, too. But their movements, including the Womanist fight, intersected with the fight against systemic racism.

At the ICA right now, art offers a corrective — not just for the art canon, but for history. These are the voices once stifled and ignored. Emma Amos' painting "Sandy and her Husband," of an interracial couple happy, in love and safe in their own home, reminds us just how daring and subversive it is to be carefree while black in this country. Lorraine O'Grady's performance piece "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Goes to the New Museum," in which she dressed in a gown of white gloves and crashed museum parties, illustrates how these women were on the forefront of form and the avant-garde. They were there. They were loud. But no one listened.

Who are we ignoring now?

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## ARTNEWS

### CLEVELAND MUSEUM ACQUIRES KEY EMMA AMOS PAINTING

Andrew Russeth

JUNE 22, 2018



Emma Amos, *Sandy and Her Husband*, 1973. CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

Last month, the Brooklyn Museum revealed that it had purchased Emma Amos's early self-portrait *Flower Sniffer* (1966), which is one of the stars of the touring exhibition "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85." When that show was on view at the Brooklyn Museum last year, as a loan from the artist, it hung next to another Amos painting, *Sandy and Her Husband* (1973), a double portrait of a couple dancing in a room with that earlier work hanging on the wall. Now the Cleveland Museum of Art said that it has acquired that work.

*Sandy and Her Husband* will go on view at the Cleveland Museum in the fall, after it appears in the final stop of "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85," which runs at the Institute for Contemporary Art in Boston from June 27 through September 30.

The Amos work will find a home amid a number of other choice double portraits at the

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Cleveland Museum, a representative for the museum noted, pointing to pieces like Wadsworth Jarrell's Heritage (1973), Alice Neel's Jackie Curtis and Ritta Red (1970), and Sylvia Sleigh's Vincent Longo and Pat Adams (1962). (The museum is also the repository of one the great group portraits of the 20th century, Florine Stettheimer's Sunday Afternoon in the Country, 1917, which features the artist's mother and Marcel Duchamp among its subjects.)

Those hoping to see a group of Amos paintings en masse, mark your calendars: the Georgia Museum of Art in Athens has a retrospective planned for 2021.

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## CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART HAS ACQUIRED A SIGNIFICANT PAINTING BY EMMA AMOS

Victoria L. Valentine

JUN 20, 2018



EMMA AMOS (American, 1938-), "Sandy and Her Husband," 1973 (oil on canvas, 44.25 x 50.25 inches). | The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund

TWO EARLY PAINTINGS by Emma Amos are featured in "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85" (April 21–Sept. 17, 2017), the groundbreaking group exhibition organized by the Brooklyn Museum. "Sandy and Her Husband" and "Flower Sniffer," a 1966 self-portrait by Amos, are displayed side-by-side in the show.

After the Brooklyn Museum recently announced its acquisition of "Flower Sniffer," news comes that the Cleveland Museum of Art is adding "Sandy and Her Husband" to its collection. The Cleveland Museum of Art announced several new acquisitions on June 17, including Amos's "Sandy and Her Husband" (1973), which was purchased directly from the artist's collection.

"Sandy and Her Husband" is a significant painting made during a period when Amos's figurative images focused on color and composition. Dancing cheek-to-cheek with their eyes closed,

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Amos depicts a couple lost in the moment. It's a romantic scene, but the couple is not quite alone. Amos has cleverly inserted herself into the private, domestic moment by reproducing her self-portrait. A painting within a painting, "Flower Sniffer" hangs on the wall behind the couple.

Emma Amos has cleverly inserted herself into the private, domestic moment by reproducing her self-portrait. A painting within a painting, "Flower Sniffer" hangs on the wall behind the couple.

OVER THE PAST 60 YEARS, Amos has consistently pushed herself in new directions, working in a variety of formats including paintings, prints, and textile-based works. Her work "explores African American identity and culture, particularly celebrating women's presence within that heritage."

Born in Atlanta, Amos received an undergraduate degree from Antioch University in Yellow Springs, Ohio; earned a diploma from the London Central School of Art; and after moving to New York, got a masters degree in art education at New York University in 1966. She taught briefly at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts, before becoming a professor at the Mason Gross School of Art at Rutgers University. She remained at Rutgers for nearly 30 years, retiring in 2008.

Amos participated in Spiral, the artist collective co-founded by Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Charles Alston, and Hale Woodruff, who invited her to join. Active from 1963-65, Spiral came together in the wake of the March on Washington for the purpose of discussing the role, if any, of artists in advancing civil liberties and establishing a creative forum in which to discuss their work. Members of the aesthetically divergent group spanned two generations.

"We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85" is described as "the first exhibition to highlight the voices and experiences of women of color—distinct from the primarily white, middle-class mainstream feminist movement—in order to reorient conversations around race, feminism, political action, art production, and art history in this significant historical period." The exhibition introduces the work of Amos in the context of Spiral. She was the youngest and only female member of the collective, which hosted its sole show in 1965.

A traveling exhibition, "We Wanted a Revolution" opens next week at the Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, where it is on view June 27-Sept. 30, 2018.

Later this year, after the exhibition concludes, "Sandy and Her Husband" will be exhibited in the contemporary galleries at the Cleveland Museum of Art. CT

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## ARTNEWS

### Brooklyn Museum Adds Works by Emma Amos, Beverly Buchanan, Betty Tompkins, and Many More Women Artists to Its Collection

BY ANDREW RUSSETH POSTED 05/29/18 5:17 PM



Emma Amos, Flower Sniffer, 1966. COURTESY BROOKLYN MUSEUM

Over the past roughly year and a half, the Brooklyn Museum has been staging a bounty of feminist exhibitions and events under the banner “A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum,” and today it detailed 96 acquisitions that it has made as part of the initiative.

Among the artists who have work entering the museum’s collection are Beverly Buchanan, the pioneering practitioner of Post-Minimalism and Land Art who was the subject of a revelatory retrospective, “Ruins and Rituals,” in 2016; Emma Amos and Betye Saar, who both figured in the expansive survey “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85,” which ends its run at the Albright-Knox in Buffalo on Sunday; and the Guerrilla Girls, who had more than four dozen of their posters acquired.

Not only is the list of artists impressive, many of the works that have been acquired are substantial. Betty Tompkins’s early Fuck Painting #6 (1973)—a jaw-dropping, carefully rendered closeup of

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exactly what its title suggests—was given by the artist-couple Robert Gober and Donald Moffett in 2016, and Saar’s 1973 assemblage *Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail*—a key work in “We Wanted a Revolution”—was added through funds from Elizabeth A. Sackler, the museum’s contemporary art committee, and the William K. Jacobs, Jr. Fund.

And here’s one more treasure now held by the museum: *Flower Sniffer* (1966) by Emma Amos, an intimate 50-inch square self-portrait that was another standout in the “We Wanted a Revolution” show, which was acquired through the Jacobs, Jr. Fund in 2017. (Now the question is whether a museum will be able to acquire *Sandy and Her Husband*, 1973, the double portrait of a dancing couple that features that paint painting hanging on the wall; in “We Wanted a Revolution,” it was presented as a loan from Amos.)

“The Brooklyn Museum is excited to have added numerous works from ancient times to the present to its collection over the past year and, after a concerted effort to broaden our historic narratives, among them are nearly a hundred works by women artists, all of whom have contributed significantly to our times,” Anne Pasternak, the museum’s director, said in a statement today.

Other artists who had work acquired during the run of the “Year of Yes” program included Eleanor Antin, Nancy Azara, Andrea Bowers, Judy Chicago, Mary Beth Edelson, Lauren Ewing, Nona Faustine, Harmony Hammond, Deborah Kass, An-My Lê, Nikki S. Lee, Marilyn Minter, Park McArthur, Diane Neumaier, Miriam Schapiro, Dread Scott, Joan Semmel, Sylvia Sleigh, Joan Snyder, Nancy Spero, Jana Sterbak, May Stevens, Athena Tacha, Adejoke Tugbiyele, June Wayne, and Martha Wilson.

Since these acquisitions were made over the past 18 months or so, many are already available for perusal on the Brooklyn Museum’s website.

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## The New York Times

### On the Hunt for Artistic Gems at Frieze

Roberta Smith

MAY 3, 2018

ROBERTA SMITH | ART REVIEW

## On the Hunt for Artistic Gems

Frieze has lost some sheen, but there's still a lot shining.

ART FAIRS ARE in the uncomfortable position of being the bane of the art world's existence and among its primary staffs of life. In the face of this contradiction, Frieze New York, on view through Sunday on Randall's Island in an improved tent structure, is arguably the most resourceful.

It has lost some of its sheen and a few clients to Tefaf, the Dutch fair now in its second year at the Park Avenue Armory. Frieze's response to Tefaf — whether by choice or circumstance — seems to have been to skew younger and a bit squarer.

This year, nearly 40 of Frieze's more than 190 participants are first timers — a turnover that the fair says is normal. Nonetheless, some of the newcomers are galleries that Frieze would probably not have considered in previous years; but here they are, putting their best feet forward. The result is a fair that feels less groomed, more democratic and global — something of a relief — especially in its lively Spotlight section, where dealers have devoted solo shows to neglected postwar artists from around the world. It also has more ups and downs. There's plenty good to look at; you just have to seek it out.

Frieze's redesigned quarters forsakes the endless Quonset hut effect of its original



"Seated Figure and Nude" (1966), a painting by Emma Amos at Ryan Lee's booth.

Frieze New York  
Randall's Island

white, gently snaking structure for five connected, wider tents with low-peaked, modernist roofs, shorter aisles, a greater variety of vistas and entrances on the sides, instead of at the ends. Initially it can be confusing, so it's best to pick up a fair map before setting forth.

Facing the North entrance, 303 Gallery has orchestrated a scruffy yet white-on-white presentation centering on "Blind Spot," a stack of sparsely graffitied cubes by Eva Rothschild. Tracey Emin has some new paintings at Xavier Hufkens that blend Cy Twombly, Julian Schnabel and Georg Baselitz, but are actually startlingly good. David Zwirner has devoted half his space to a beautiful selection of Josh Smith's paintings of Death in colorful robes suggest something livelier. Gavin Brown's enterprise has a stark presentation of photographs collected and arranged in six big framed gangs by the great filmmaker Arthur Jafa. Presented on a single wall overlooking a noticeably empty gray-surfaced floor, they include images of art (van Gogh, Cady Noland), well-known faces (Marilyn Monroe, Martin Luther King Jr.) and terrorist acts. They meditate on black lives and black bod-

CONTINUED ON PAGE C18

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C18 THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, MAY 4, 2018

ROBERTA SMITH | ART REVIEW

## On the Hunt for Artistic Gems

CONTINUED FROM PAGE C13

ies. The range is virtually omnivorous, indicating, as I overheard someone remark, "a mind on fire."

Playing off Mc Jafa's work is Leigh Ledare's more personal, erotic gangs of found images, displayed horizontally at the Box. And in between (literally), at Kai Matsumiya, is a kind of palette cleanser in the junior Frames section; a display of Rainer Ganahl's wonderfully random photographs of art world lectures being given by such luminaries as the art historian Linda Nochlin and the performance artist Andrea Fraser.

Solo shows definitely have the edge this year, although a drawing survey at Canada, selected by the artist Jason Fox, may entice, and a major Bruce Nauman sculpture is great to see at Hauser & Wirth, despite overwhelming the rest of the display.

Want to see a new fiery view of nature by the talented painter Shara Hughes? Try Rachel Uffner's booth. A sublime sculpture made mostly of wire, wool and air by the extraordinary Sonia Gomes? Head to Mendes Wood DM. A big found kilim textile embroidered with riverlike currents of silver and gold thread by Raqs Media Collective? Follow the money to the Frith Street Gallery.

Looking for other new talent? Consider the conceptual sculptor Cameron Rowland and the object-oriented painter Torey Thornton at Essex Street, and at Josh Lilley, dark tapestry-like works by Tom Ashok, a British painter. Promising young painters who happen to be women? Farah Attasi's riffs on Picasso at Ghebaly Gallery, and Gracie DeVito's fairy-tale paintings, sometimes with rippling edges, at Tif Sigfrida, a gallery that, in what may be a sign of the times, has just relocated to Athens, Ga., from Los Angeles.

Showing a giant card table and two folding-metal chairs by Robert Therrien,



PHOTOGRAPHS BY GEORGE OTTE

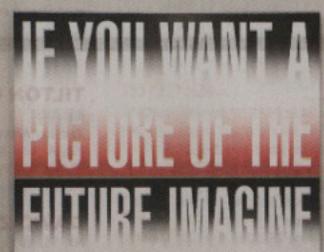



Gagosian Gallery provides the fair's best sellie op. Runner-up is Kan-Yong Lee's "Corporal Term," (2014) at Gallery Hyundai, a tall, stripped tree trunk with its roots embedded in a cube of dirt as sharp-edged as Tony Smith's proto-Minimalist black box. The best use of large scale: Charles Harlan's booth, presented by JTT and Kayne Griffin Carcaran, in the Focus section. His "Birdbath" is a bright blue fiberglass baptism pool, tilted downward, as if toward hell, by an old-fashioned, handmade bird bath.

The new design allows the categories to be more concentrated, which could be more actively exploited. The unity of the Spotlight section, for example, is thrilling. You are surrounded by galleries presenting so-

**Freeze New York**  
Through Sunday at Randall's Island; freeze.com.

los of little-known or underappreciated



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Gagosian Gallery provides the fair's best selfie op. Runner-up is Kun-Yong Lee's "Corporal Term," (2014) at Gallery Hyundai, a tall, stripped tree trunk with its roots embedded in a cube of dirt as sharp-edged as Tony Smith's proto-Minimalist black box. The best use of large scale: Charles Harlan's booth, presented by JTT and Kayne Griffin Corcoran, in the Focus section. His "Birdbath" is a bright blue fiberglass baptism pool, tilted downward, as if toward hell, by an old-fashioned, hand-made bird bath.

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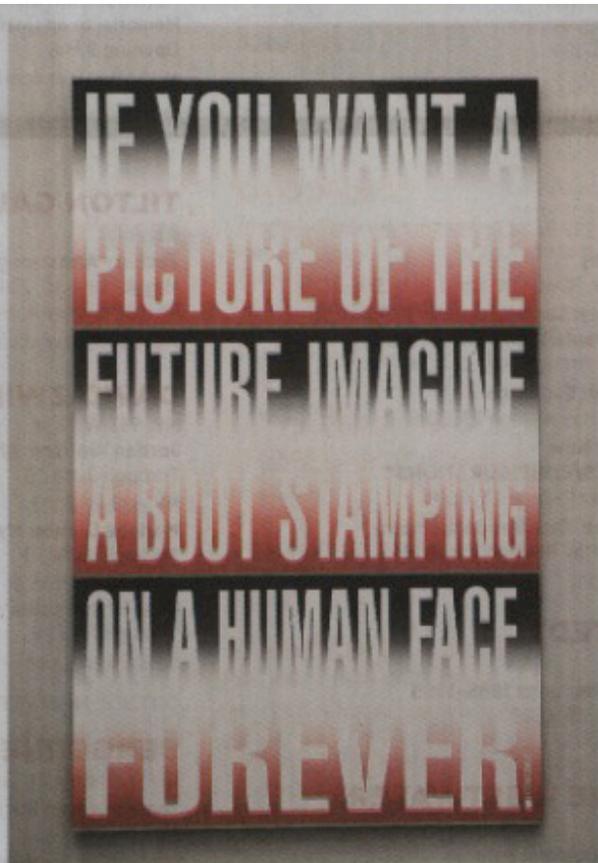
#### Frieze New York

Through Sunday at Randall's Island; frieze.com.

los of little-known or underappreciated postwar artists, like a seminar in the flesh. Ryan Lee Gallery is presenting unfamiliar 1960s figurative paintings in saturated color by Emma Amos. They have important analogies with Faith Ringgold and Bob Thompson's works from that same era. At Weiss Berlin, four beautiful soft-edged abstractions made since 1980 by Edward Clark. At Lyles & King, the penis paintings of Mira Schor from the late 1980s and early '90s still shock. At Partners & Mucciaccia, Carla Accardi's vine-like abstractions from the 1950s fill out her Arte Povera achievement, while the pale abstractions of Helen Lundberg (one looking like a variation on Superman's logo) hold forth at Cristin Tierney gallery. And Jhaveri Contemporary from Mumbai, will introduce you to the luscious semiabstract figurative paintings of Mohan Samant (1924-2004), whose motifs are sometimes reinforced by delicate bent wires that float above the canvas, resembling drawing in ink. If it's older material that moves you, Donald Ellis's devastating display of North Plains Indian ledger drawings is arguably the fair's best show, near the Spotlight section.

Frieze, which originated in London, has energetically pursued what seems to be the main art-fair defense, which is to add enough bells and whistles to look as little like an art fair as possible. Maybe even act like a temporary museum. It has an active program of lectures and panels as well as an education program and docents, and great food.

This year it inaugurates an Artist Award, sponsored by the Luma Foundation and chosen by a jury from open-call submissions. The winner is Kapwani Kiwanga, a Paris-based artist whose outdoor installation, titled "Shady," is made of large swathes of colored semitransparent agriculture fabric layered on steel frames. It conjures a confusing set of associations, including barriers, escape routes, makeshift shelters, stage sets and Minimal art. Also new this year is "Live," a series of performances ta-



king place in various booths and spaces.

As if this weren't enough, it has established its first themed exhibition, a tribute to Hudson (1950-2014), the visionary art dealer whose gallery, Feature, gave first shows to some of the art world's current best sellers, including Takashi Murakami, Charles Ray and Raymond Pettibon. This is more than a little ironic, since Hudson rarely participated in art fairs. In addition, Feature was one of the great feeder galleries of the late-20th century: The kind of place whose discovery of new talent has long been essential to the operation of the big galleries that are in turn essential to the fairs. And also the kind of place that rising rents — not to mention the art fairs themselves — threaten to put out of business.

It needs to be said that 190 booths feels too big for Frieze, making it a little too much like the Armory Show. Tefaf by comparison has just over 90 participants. But it is equally worth pointing out that the five separate structures of Frieze's new design have built into them the opportunity to downsize, something that all art fairs should consider.

Clockwise from top, works by Tal R at the Cheim & Read booth; Kun-Yong Lee's "Corporal Term," a stripped tree trunk with its roots embedded in a cube of dirt, at Gallery Hyundai's booth; Mary Heilmann's "Pink Crush" at the 303 Gallery booth; the 303 Gallery's presentation centers on "Blind Spot," a stack of sparsely graffitied cubes by Eva Rothschild; Barbara Kruger's "Untitled (IF YOU WANT A PICTURE)" at the Sprüth Magers booth; "Shady," an outdoor installation by Kapwani Kiwanga.

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## ARTNEWS

### Island in the Sun: Collectors Flock to Frieze New York for High-Temperature Opening

Annie Armstrong

MAY 2, 2018



Works by Emma Amos on offer in the booth of Ryan Lee Gallery, New York, at Frieze New York 2018.  
(c) Emma Amos, courtesy of the artist and RYAN LEE, New York.

The long-awaited arrival of spring in New York coincided with the VIP preview of the seventh edition of the Frieze New York art fair, and it was quite warm. There was a hallucinatory haze over Randalls Island as collectors, dealers, curators, and various other art types mingled under the sweltering tents. The dazed mood was bolstered by the fair's new layout, a casino-like series of rooms that one could get lost in for hours, sifting through the offerings of nearly 200 galleries that ranged from Arthur Jafa photo works at Gavin Brown's Enterprise to a spectral Pierre Huyghe light ballet at Marian Goodman.

Thaddaeus Ropac, which has galleries in Salzburg, Austria, Paris, and London, quickly sold a Georg Baselitz painting for \$850,000, a Jack Pierson for the same price, and an Emilio Vedova for \$500,000. Max Hollein, the newly minted director of the Met (who, as it happens, was born in Austria) was chatting in the booth midday, not far from some huge Robert Longos, as he

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made the rounds.

Nearby, Los Angeles's David Kordansky Gallery had, by mid-afternoon, already sold a vast majority of its booth, a solo presentation of characteristically discomfiting works by the Norwegian-born, L.A.-based photographer Torbjørn Rødland that carried price tags between \$14,000 and \$28,000.

New York dealer Anton Kern, who was showing works by Lara Schnitger, praised the "more cleaned up and spacious" setup of the fair, and added that there didn't seem to be "the regular frenzy." Perhaps it was the temperature. "The heat might be making people indecisive," dealer Alex Logsdail said at his Lisson Gallery booth. "I don't think I would be in a buying mood right now."

Nevertheless, sales proceeded apace, including at Lisson. Andrew Kreps Gallery, of New York, said that it had parted with four of its Bruno Munari works for prices between \$25,000 and \$45,000. Pace Gallery sold 27 David Hockney works, made variously on his iPad (\$26,000 each) and by analog means (\$40,000 to \$56,000). "These works are more affordable than what's currently in the gallery," Pace's press rep Hanna Gisel said, referring to the blockbuster show by the British giant that is now on view at its West 25th Street branch and noting that they were ideal for collectors entering the field. (They might also be attractive to those who can't swing the price of the marquee Hockney being sold at Sotheby's later this month: it carries a \$20 million-to-\$30 million estimate.)

David Zwirner, which has galleries in New York, London, and now, Hong Kong, said that it parted with all of its paintings of the grim reaper by Josh Smith and several drawings by Raymond Pettibon. Those two offerings were actually located in two separate booths—one in the standard Galleries section and another in a section dedicated to the late, storied New York art dealer Hudson, whose many prescient discoveries included Pettibon. That special section, titled "For Your Infotainment: Hudson and Feature Inc.," also included drawings by the inimitable Tom of Finland, which sold quickly in the range of \$10,000 to \$25,000.

At Chelsea's Mitchell-Innes & Nash, two paintings by Eddie Martinez sold in the \$40,000 range, and one larger painting brought in \$100,000. Jack Shainman Gallery, which has two Chelsea locations and another in Kinderhook, New York, sold several pieces by Hank Willis Thomas, as well as works by Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, Becky Suss, Enrique Martinez Celaya, and Geoffrey Chadsey.

Collectors had apparently not been deterred by the weather. Among those on hand were Dennis Scholl, Joel and Sherry Mallin, Don, Mera, and Jason Rubell, Frank Moore, Adam Lindemann, Aaron and Barbara Levine, and AC Hudgins, and they were joined by a bevy of museum curators and directors, from MoMA's Laura Hoptman and the Studio Museum's Thelma Golden to the Whitney Museum's Scott Rothkopf and Chrissie Iles and the Brooklyn Museum's Anne Pasternak.

Justine Ludwig, the new director of Creative Time, was at David Lewis's booth, admiring Barbara Bloom piece about Steinway pianos, and Jeffrey Deitch was snapping photos of the Jafa

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works at Gavin Brown. An energetic Jerry Saltz gushed over the works by the self-taught Forrest Bess lining the walls of Parrasch Heijnen's booth, priced at about \$200,000 apiece. (In a nice confluence, works by Bess's onetime dealer, Betty Parsons, were on display at Alexander Gray Associates.)

And speaking of artists, just a few of those on hand were Thomas, Natalie Frank, and Rainer Ganahl, whose "seminar/lecture" photos were on view at Kai Matsumiya. The series, which the artist has been working on since the mid-1990s, documents seminars and lectures—both the speakers and audience reactions, which at times can be dryly comedic. Works are priced between \$9,000 and \$24,000.

In the sweltering blur certain celebrity spottings had almost the feel of seeing a mirage. There was model Soo Joo and—could it be?—Scarlett Johansson. And designer Raf Simons. And there was former New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, sporting a pin-striped suit with an American flag pin.

A supersized folding table and chairs by Robert Therrien were the subject of many a selfie at Gagolian's main booth, and word spread briskly about other highlights: a full booth of 1960s Emma Amos works (the lone woman member of the Spiral group) at Ryan Lee and three stunning abstract Ed Clark paintings at Weiss, Berlin.

In the Spotlight section, near the Ryan Lee booth, Royale Projects from Los Angeles had another rediscovery: a suite of early work, from 1964–65, by the artist Clinton Hill, causing some people reading the fair's signage to think the gallery hailed from that neighborhood in Brooklyn. Hill spent time around Morris Louis and Helen Frankenthaler in the '60s, and the work, with its bright colors and stain-like technique, reflects that. This particular cache of pictures was recently discovered by the estate, un-stretched. The gallery now represents Hill's estate, and had the paintings stretched. At Frieze, they were well-received; Royale had sold several pieces on the fair's first day, to collectors in London and California, for between \$95,000 and \$125,000.

But it was the heat that dominated most conversations. By the middle of the afternoon, Frieze sent an email to exhibitors and said they were working on it. It was cooler outside, and there was a Stella Artois bar in one section serving up cold chalices of beer. No one seemed overly displeased. "There's really great energy here," one dealer told me dryly. "That must be what's making it so hot."

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## THE CUT

### 5 Must-See Artists at Frieze New York This Weekend

Mary Dellas

MAY 1, 2018



Emma Amos, "Seated Figure and Nude" 1966, oil on canvas (c) Emma Amos, courtesy of the artist, VAGA, and RYAN LEE, New York

New York's most highly anticipated art fair will open its doors to the public this Friday, May 4. For the seventh edition of Frieze New York, more than 190 galleries from over 30 countries are exhibiting at the Randall's Island Park venue. The works of renowned artists like photographer Tina Barney, painter Emma Amos, and multimedia contemporary Tracey Emin will remain on view until this Sunday. For the first time, Frieze New York will present "Live," a platform for interactive works and performances, like Lara Schnitger's "Suffragette City," previewed below. Scroll through to read more about five of the Cut's favorite works from this year's Frieze art fair.

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## **Tina Barney: *Joan Didion***

New York-native Tina Barney's large-scale, vibrant photographs of the social elite took the art world by storm in the 1970s, when she was living in Sun Valley, Idaho. Upon returning to New York in the early '80s, Barney earned herself a spot in the Whitney Biennial and just a few years later in 1991, she was invited to showcase her work in solo exhibition at the MoMA. This photograph of Joan Didion will appear alongside a few more of Barney's works in the Paul Kasmin Gallery booth.

## **Emma Amos: *Seated Figure and Nude***

Emma Amos began painting and drawing at age 6, when she was living in Atlanta, Georgia, with her parents in the 1940s. As an emerging artist in the '60s, Amos became the only female artist invited to join Spiral, a collective of African-American artists, including Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Charles Alston. Her work is included in the permanent collection at the MoMA. At Frieze, Amos's work will be displayed in the Ryan Lee Gallery booth.

## **Tracey Emin: *I Never Asked to Fall In Love — You made me Feel like This***

Tracey Emin is best known for her confessional and autobiographical works, which she produces in a variety of media, from painting and drawing to photography, video, and sculpture. In the '90s, the British artist produced some of her most famous works — namely, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With* 1963–1995 (1995), and *My Bed* (1998), both of which are part of Tate Modern's permanent collection. *I Never Asked to Fall In Love — You made me Feel like This*, is one many works inspired by Emin's love life. This painting will be on display in the Xavier Hufkens booth at Frieze.

## **Lara Schnitger: *Leg Avenue***

Lara Schnitger is a dutch painter, sculptor, and performance artist. She works with a variety of materials including the quilted linen seen in *Leg Avenue* (above). *Leg Avenue* is a part of "Suffragette City," Schnitger's parade-like performance that will show in Frieze New York's first ever "Live" series on May 2 at 5 p.m. Marchers will carry *Leg Avenue* and more linen works, along with Schnitger's sculptures, banners, and tapestries — all of which bring together fashion, feminism, and female sexuality.

## **Torbjørn Rødland: *The Song of the Wind and the Trees***

Norwegian photographer Torbjørn Rødland is best known for his disturbing, grotesque depictions of everyday moments — he once photographed a pregnant woman holding a razor against her stomach. *The Song of the Wind and the Trees* is one of the Los Angeles-based artist's more pleasant photographs, and it will be showcased in the David Kordansky Gallery booth this weekend.

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THE ART NEWSPAPER

## Artist profiles: the names you should know at Armory

James H. Miller, Victoria Stapley-Brown, Gabriella Angeleti, Sarah P. Hanson, Helen Stoilas, Ivy Olesen

MARCH 8, 2018



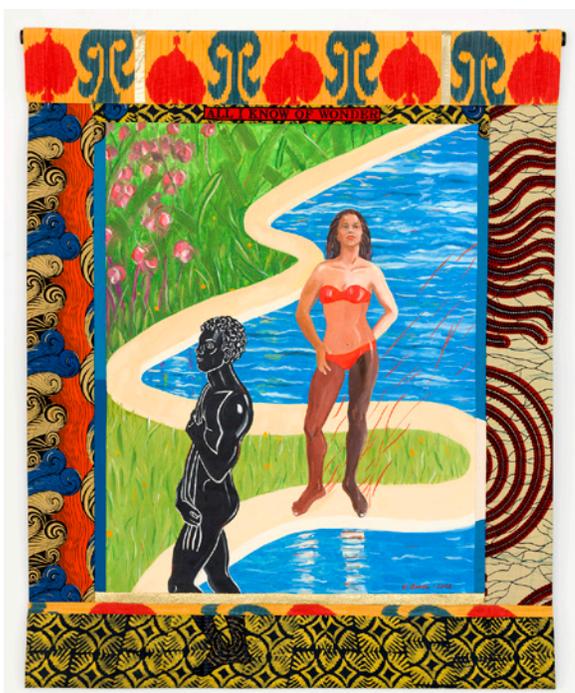
(c) Photo: Becket Logan. Courtesy of the artist and Ryan Lee Gallery, New York

Emma Amos (b. 1938), showing with Ryan Lee Gallery, New York. Born in Atlanta and now working in New York, Emma Amos was the only woman included in the 1960s black activist collective Spiral. Amos has consistently pushed her practice across five decades—she introduced phototransfer and collage in the 1990s—while remaining committed to questions of the body. Ryan Lee is presenting *Work Suit* (1994), for example, in which Amos depicts herself wearing Lucian Freud’s “skin” to inject both social and formal instability into his white-male brand of realism.

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# ARTFORUM



Emma Amos, *All I Know of Wonder*, 2008, oil on linen, African fabric, 70 1/2 x 55 1/2". © Emma Amos/VAGA, New York.

JANUARY 2018

## Emma Amos RYAN LEE

In *Tightrope*, 1994, Emma Amos paints herself as a circus performer. In star-spangled underwear and a black duster, she tiptoes on a high wire over a woozy crowd of blurred faces and headless eyeballs. In her left hand are two paintbrushes; in her right, she holds a T-shirt emblazoned with a pair of pendant breasts over a platter of red mango blossoms. This fragment of a body belongs to one of the subjects of Paul Gauguin's *Two Tahitian Women*, painted during the disaffected Frenchman's Pacific sojourn in 1899. Amos's vicious brushstrokes and high-key colors burlesque Gauguin's colonial primitivism with humor and ferocity, and she disciplines these energies with a border of printed African cloth, studded at each corner with a photo transfer of Gauguin's painting.

The tightrope walk allegorizes the artist's precarious and unstable relation to the modernist canon she appropriates. Born in 1938, Amos was the youngest and only female artist in Spiral, a collective of African American artists founded in 1963 for "the purpose of discussing the commitment of the Negro artist in the present struggle for civil liberties, and as a discussion group to consider common aesthetic problems." About these shared commitments and aesthetics, the group's fourteen members—among them Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, and Norman Lewis—never reached consensus. In a 1966 roundtable, Amos stated, "I don't believe there is such a thing as a Negro artist." Even before the formation of Spiral, she had found work as a textile designer and had begun integrating handwoven and, later, store-bought kente cloth and batik fabrics into dense, multitextured figure paintings. Eight of these works, spanning the past four decades, were on view in "Black Bodies." *Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray's Photograph - 1926)*, 1995, pays tribute to the African American entertainer, athlete, and civil rights activist blacklisted for his Communist affiliations and opposition to US

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imperialism. Amos's painting after Murray's nude photograph rhythmically retraces Robeson's muscular back and buttocks across a field of gestural brushstrokes. Robeson's body is contained within several frames: bracketed on one side by stacked reproductions of Murray's photograph, and on the other by photo transfers of a Roman frieze. The three images—sculptural, painterly, and photographic—are insulated by a thick border of black-and-white geometric fabric.

"Every time I think about color, it's a political statement," Amos told Lucy Lippard in a 1991 interview. "It would be a luxury to be white and never have to think about it." In *All I Know of Wonder*, 2008, a woman in a red bikini stands near a winding shoreline, casting her gaze out to the viewer. Her body is partitioned into segments painted in different skin tones. A nude male figure stands in the foreground. Painted onyx black with gleaming white highlights, he appears polished and sculptural. While the two oddly coupled bodies—one reified, the other radically unresolved—make a sibylline statement about the racialization of color and the patchwork character of identity, the title evokes a short poem by an aging Marsden Hartley: "The earth is all I know of wonder. / I lived and was nurtured in the magic of dreams / bright flames of spirit laughter / around all my seething frame." Whether she was thinking about Hartley's poem, "the seething frame"—be it a physical body or a limit circumscribing an artwork—seems spookily apposite, capturing something of the layered densities of Amos's textiles and the sensuous, embodied figures within.

—Chloe Wyma

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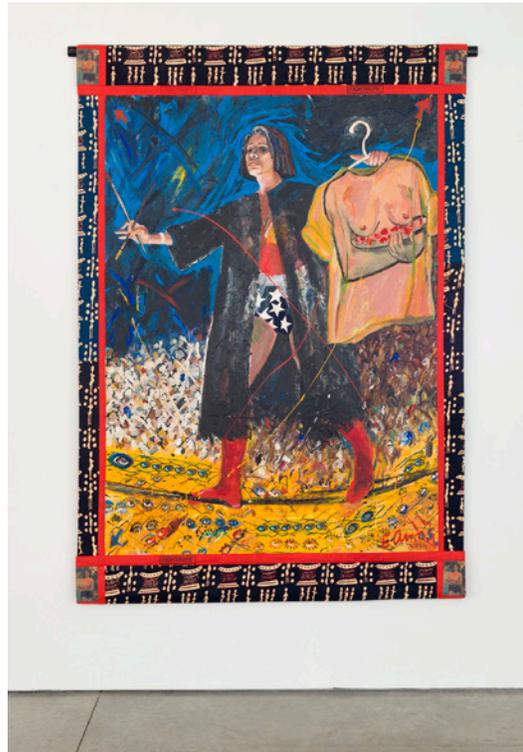
## The New York Times

### What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER, WILL HEINRICH and JASON FARAGO  
NOV. 21, 2017

#### Emma Amos

*Through Dec. 16. Ryan Lee, 515 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-397-0742, ryanleegallery.com.*



Emma Amos's "Tightrope," a self-portrait from 1994, at Ryan Lee Gallery. All rights reserved Emma Amos/Licensed by VAGA, New York, via RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

The Obamas' recent selection of artists to paint their official portraits drew attention to the rich tradition of African-American figurative painting. One artist in this lineage is Emma Amos, the only female member of Spiral, a collective founded by African-American artists in 1963. (Ms. Amos's work is also included in the recent benchmark exhibitions "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" at the Tate Modern in London and "We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85" at the Brooklyn Museum.) "Black Bodies," her current show at Ryan Lee, offers a sampling of four decades of her work.

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Black bodies are central to this show, as the title suggests, but Ms. Amos often takes a stealthy approach to the subject. “Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray’s Photograph — 1926),” from 1995, is a portrait that celebrates the great African-American actor and activist Paul Robeson — but also the photographer who captured his image in an era when heroic black figures were less visible in art — while “Maybe If I Stand on My Head” (1999) depicts a man doing a headstand, alluding to the physical and psychic contortions people with dark skin must endure in a racialized society.

Near the entrance is “Tightrope” (1994), a self-portrait that includes tiny reproductions of Gauguin paintings in its corners. Here Ms. Amos points to the difficulties of being a brown-skinned (female) artist working in a tradition that generally objectified black and brown bodies. Under a dark, somber robe in the self-portrait, however, Ms. Amos is wearing a Wonder Woman costume. It is an empowering and feminist gesture but also a reminder of what it feels like for anyone to scale obstacles in the pursuit of becoming a successful, or even practicing artist.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

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## THE NEW YORKER



The political is poetic for this New York artist, who, at seventy-nine years old, is absurdly under-known. Eight large paintings, made across four decades, ring buoyant variations on a theme: “Black Bodies,” as Amos has titled her show. Hung like banners, and often incorporating African fabrics and Amos’s own weavings, they picture athletic, dancing, heroic, and comic figures, with twisty references to art history and racial imbroglios. One adapts a nude photograph of Paul Robeson, taken by Nickolas Muray, in 1926; in another, Amos appears as Wonder Woman, holding up a T-shirt that bears an erotic image by Gauguin. Coming to comprehend the artist’s slow-burn meanings is like learning to dance.

Through Dec. 16.

Ryan Lee  
515 W. 26th St.  
Chelsea

212-397-0742

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# ARTNEWS

## 9 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

BY The Editors of ARTnews POSTED 10/16/17 11:23 AM



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 21

### Opening: Emma Amos at Ryan Lee

Ryan Lee in this show surveys the art of Emma Amos, an artist and educator known for her vivid figurative works that explore issues of African American identity and narrative, often through the lens of both art history and popular culture. There's recently been a renewed interest in Amos's work, which appeared in the Brooklyn Museum's "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85" show; this is her first solo exhibition since that show opened. Classic paintings by the former Spiral group artist, including 1994's *Tightrope*, which shows Amos clad in a Wonder Women suit and a black robe, will be shown alongside newer pieces. *Ryan Lee, 515 West 26th Street, 2-4 p.m.*

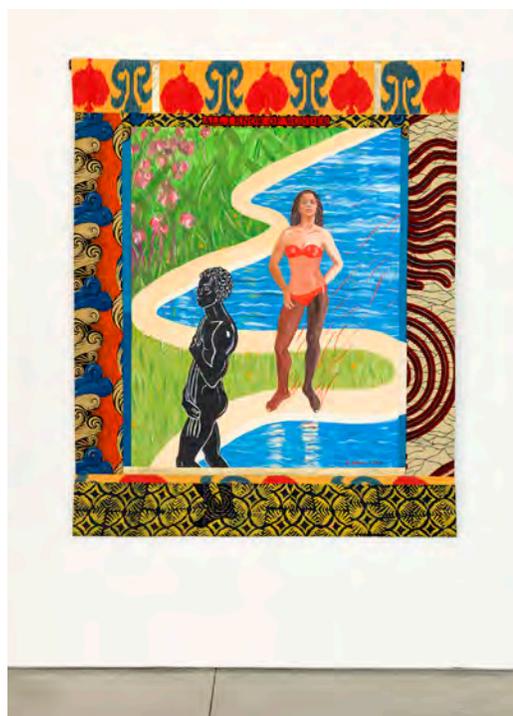
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artnet® news

## Editors' Picks: 20 Things to See in New York This Week

Thursday, October 19–Monday, December 16



### 11. "Emma Amos: Black Bodies" at RYAN LEE

Ryan Lee presents a selection of historic as well as never-exhibited recent works by colorful figurative painter Emma Amos, the youngest and sole female member of the African-American artist group Spiral, active in the 1960s.

**Location:** RYAN LEE, 515 West 26th Street

**Price:** Free

**Time:** Opening reception, Saturday, October 21, 2 p.m.–4 p.m.; Tuesday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–6 p.m.

—Sarah Cascone

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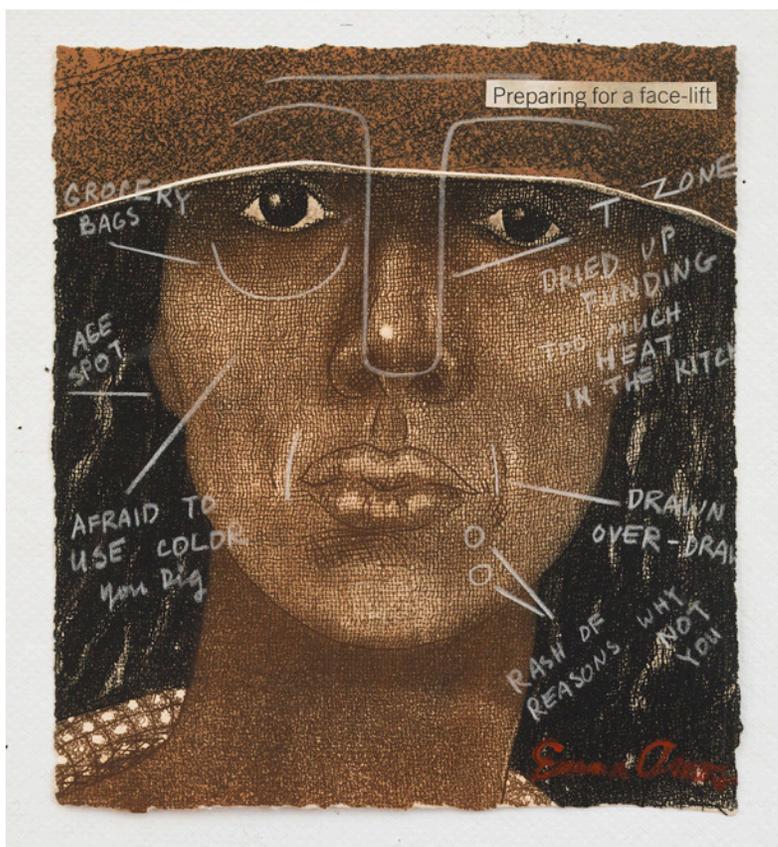
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## The New York Times

### 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. Credit All Rights Reserved, Emma Amos/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY, and Ryan Lee, New York

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.

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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.

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.

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.

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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.

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.

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](http://brooklynmuseum.org).

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## Art in America

**Emma Amos**  
**at Ryan Lee**  
through Apr. 9  
515 West 26th Street



This exhibition of Emma Amos's paintings from the 1980s, which explore the representation of black bodies and painting modes traditionally embraced by white male artists, strike a contemporary cord. In her "Athletes and Animals" series (1983-85), dynamic basketball players, swimmers, and runners compete alongside majestic large cats and primates. Dispelling any evocation of racial stereotypes, Amos's *Josephine and the Mountain Gorillas* (1985) pictures the artist's apparent avatar, the famed entertainer and activist Josephine Baker, as she breaks through an Ab-Ex ground with two loyal gorillas following in her wake. The show, titled "True Colors," mines many prescient sociopolitical issues, and Amos's engagement with textiles, often hand-woven, yields exuberant paintings that are political, personal and triumphantly out of the margins. —Julia Wolkoff

Pictured: Emma Amos: *Josephine and the Mountain Gorillas*, 1985, acrylic and hand woven fabric on linen, 48 by 90 inches. Courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

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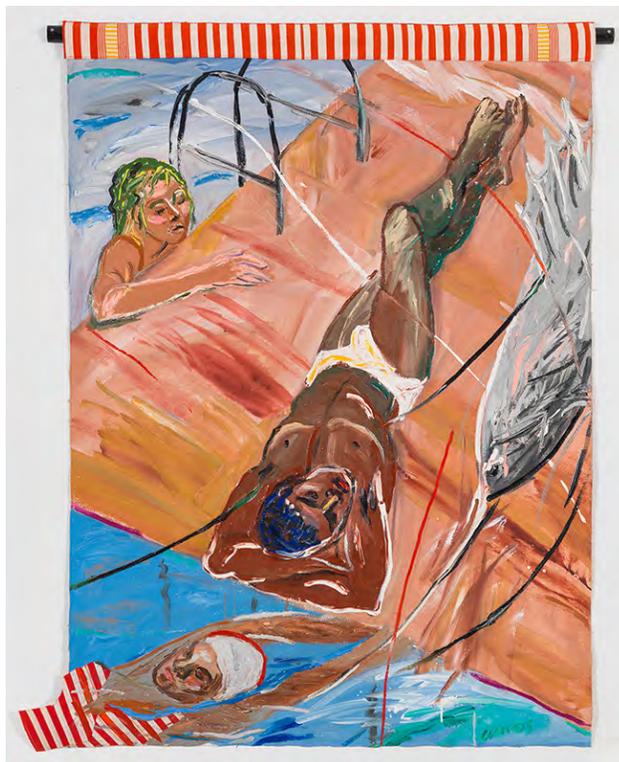
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## Interview

ART

### TRUE COLORS

By Rachel Small



By the 1980s, Atlanta-born artist Emma Amos had lived in New York for two decades and had been the youngest and only female artist in Spiral, a Civil Rights era collective of African-American artists. It's then that Amos conceived her leitmotif "figure in flux"—men and women rendered in wispy brushstrokes and often framed with swatches of patterned fabric, their fragile appearance serving as a metaphor for their trace in a whitewashed history. She chose subjects who held a tenuous stake in cultural memory: her *Athletes* series (1983-85) draws parallels between black athletes and animals for both their agility and exploitation; and *The Falling Series* (1989) portrays black entertainers and other figures tumbling through fragmented backgrounds. This month, New

York's Ryan Lee gallery will display about a dozen works, revisiting Amos's innovative depiction of the black body at a timely moment. "I hope people will be able to see the works for what they are," says Amos, "and what they can reflect of the times in which they were made, and how they resonate in the present."

AMOS'S THE RAFT, 1986. ACRYLIC ON WOVEN LINEN, 56 X 36".

"EMMA AMOS: TRUE COLORS" IS ON VIEW AT RYAN LEE GALLERY THROUGH APRIL 9.

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# Studio

Summer/Fall 2011

## Emma Amos: Spiral Icon

By Lauren Haynes, Assistant Curator



Emma Amos; *Flower Sniffer*, 1966. Photo: Becket Logan Courtesy fo the artist (c) Emma Amos/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, and RYAN LEE, New York.

*“I like that people can read their own meanings into my paintings and that those readings may be quite different from mine.” – Emma Amos<sup>1</sup>*

In late April, I had the amazing opportunity to visit the studio of visual artist Emma Amos (b. 1938). Amos is a painter, printmaker and weaver who has exhibited in museums and galleries worldwide for almost fifty years. Amos was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. She lived there until she went off to school—first to Antioch College in Ohio and then to graduate school in London and later at New York University. Since then, Amos has lived in New York. In addition to her career as a visual artist, Amos is also a teacher; she taught at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University for twenty-eight years and served as Chair of Visual Arts for two years. Although Amos has retired from teaching, she has not retired from making art. Not only

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is her studio filled with work she has created over the years, it is also filled with materials she is currently using on new works. She has been in the same incredibly organized studio in NoHo for twenty years. The walls of the space are filled with artwork—her own and by other artists she has known and whose work she appreciates, including Norman Lewis (1909–1979) and Nellie Mae Rowe (1900–1982). While in Amos’s studio I was able to see artwork she’s created from the mid-1960s to the present, including works in progress. Most of Amos’s paintings since the late 1980s have been acrylic paintings on linen, surrounded by a border of African fabric. Amos and her studio assistants were in the process of picking the border for a recently completed painting during our visit.

Much of Amos’s work is figurative. Amos has a series of works featuring bodies moving through water (“The Water Series”), a series of bodies falling through the air (“The Falling Series”) and a series that juxtaposes images of athletes with those of animals. She began working on these series in the mid-1980s and continues to add to them today. While in her studio, I was able to see images of an artwork called *The Gift*. In the early 1990s, Amos painted fifty-five watercolor portraits of her female artist friends. Together, these paintings make up *The Gift*, which includes no male artists because, as Amos told me at the time, “There were enough images of them.”

During our studio visit, we also discussed Amos’s involvement in the legendary Spiral group and the Museum’s exhibition *Spiral: Perspectives on an African-American Art Collective*, which will be on view from July 14 to October 23, 2011. The Spiral group was a collective of African-American artists that met once a week from the summer of 1963 to 1965 to discuss the role of black artists in the civil rights movement. Founded by Charles Alston (1907–1977), Romare Bearden (1911–1988), Hale Woodruff (1900–1980) and Lewis, Spiral’s membership eventually expanded to fifteen. Amos was one of the youngest and the only woman. Woodruff, who was also from Atlanta and a professor at New York University while Amos was in graduate school, invited her to join. “I was the only woman and I was the youngest member, when they did invite me,” Amos says. “I’m not sure they invited other people by looking at their work, but they were very nervous about having a woman in their group, and they wanted to make sure I was a real artist and not a dilettante or something. I think they asked me to join the club (which met once a week for discussion) instead of the women they knew, because those women represented some sort of threat, and I was only ‘a little girl.’”<sup>22</sup> During our visit, Amos talked about how much she enjoyed being in Spiral and how she spent the meetings yelling, laughing and arguing just like everyone else. Other members of Spiral were Calvin Douglass (b. 1931), Perry Ferguson (active New York, New York, mid-60s), Reginald Gammon (1921–2005), Felrath Hines (1913–1993), Alvin Hollingsworth (1928–2000), William Majors (1930–1982), Richard Mayhew (b. 1934), Earl Miller (b. 1930), Merton D. Simpson (b. 1928) and James Yeargans (1908–1972). Although the Spiral group only showed together a limited number of times, their legacy has made a mark on art history and influenced generations of artists. The Studio Museum’s 2011 exhibition *Spiral: Perspectives on an African-American Art Collective* takes an exhibition of the same name organized by the Birmingham Museum of Art as its starting point, and then brings selections from the Studio Museum’s permanent collection and significant works from New York-area collections, including rarely seen paintings from the mid-1960s by Amos and the Studio Museum’s iconic Bearden photo projection, *Conjur Woman* (1964).

*Spiral: Perspectives on an African-American Art Collective* was organized by Emily G. Hanna and Amalia Amaki for the Birmingham Museum of Art (December 5, 2010–April 17, 2011). Organized

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*by Studio Museum Assistant Curator Lauren Haynes in collaboration with Hanna, the Studio Museum presentation of Spiral will be on view July 14 to October 23, 2011.*

1. Emma Amos, Artist Statement, <http://emmaamos.com/about/statement> (accessed May 5, 2011).
2. bell hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right: Making History Visible," in Emma Amos Paintings and Prints 1982–1992, (exhibition catalogue) (Wooster, OH: The College of Wooster Art Museum, 1993), 19.

By Jeanne Siegel

## Why Spiral?

Negro artists, well known and neophyte, meet as a group in New York to discuss the contradictions facing them in modern America

When I asked each of the 13 men and one woman that make up the present membership of the Spiral group what Spiral stands for, I got 14 conflicting answers. One of the reasons for the disparity is that unlike most artists' circles, its *raison-d'être* was not primarily an esthetic one, nor was it formed for the traditional purpose of exhibiting together and making public statements. As if the problems that confront all modern artists are not enough, Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Felrath Hines, Norman Lewis, Alvin Hollingsworth, Merton Simpson, Earl Miller, William Majors, Reggie Gammon, Hale Woodruff, Perry Ferguson, Calvin Douglass, James Yeargans and Emma Amos—a dynamic and totally divergent group ranging in age from 28 to 65, that includes a court clerk, art dealer, floorwaxer, Ph.D. candidate and restorer of old masters—first began meeting three years ago to discuss what they considered a far more vital issue: what should be their attitudes and commitments as Negro artists in the present struggle for Civil Rights.

At a glance the issue seemed clear enough, but it provoked many searching questions. Should you participate directly in the activities of the Movement? Do you have special qualities to express as a Negro artist? What is your value as an artist who is both an American and a Negro? What do you have in common with other Negro painters? What should your role be in the mainstream of art?

In other words, they felt an urge to say something, but they didn't know what, how or where to say it. They also knew that something set them apart from other painters, but they weren't sure if that "something" had a tangible form that could be transmitted through art. They referred to this possibility as "the Negro Image," and they suspected that, although unquestionably intertwined with other issues, it had to be clarified before other problems could fall into place.

**Norman Lewis:** I am not interested in an illustrative statement that merely mirrors some of the social conditions, but

**Author:** Columbia-trained art-historian Jeanne Siegel is completing a thesis on Negro artists in America.



Emma Amos [left], Perry Ferguson, Alvin Hollingsworth [right].

in my work I am for something of deeper artistic and philosophic content.

**Hale Woodruff:** I agree with Norman Lewis. I am not interested in some "gimmick" that will pander to an interest in things Negroid.

**James Yeargans:** We should look to our past for a distinct identity. The Negro artist should take something out of the present upheaval as part of his expression. The Negro has a deep cultural heritage to be explored.

**Charles Alston:** I have come to the point where I wonder whether most of the expression I observe in Negro



Romare Bearden: *Mysteries*, detail, 1965, collage. Cordier & Ekstrom, New York

ARTnews Sept. 1966



Romare Bearden [right] and Reggie Gammon.

painting might not be only reflections of a dominant culture and not truly indigenous. The Negro artist might have a more personal "thumbprint."

**Romare Bearden:** I suggest that Western society, and particularly that of America, is gravely ill and a major symptom is the American treatment of the Negro. The artistic expression of this culture concentrates on themes of "absurdity" and "anti-art" which provide further evidence of its ill health. It is the right of everyone now to re-examine history to see if Western culture offers the only solutions to man's purpose on this earth.



Charles Alston



Norman Lewis

**Norman Lewis:** Our group should always point to a broader purpose and never be led down an alley of frustration. Political and social aspects should not be the primary concern; esthetic ideas should have preference. Is there a Negro Image?

**Felrath Hines:** There is no Negro Image in the twentieth century—in the 1960s. There are only prevailing ideas that influence everyone all over the world, to which the Negro has been, and is, contributing. Each person paints out of the life he lives.

**James Yeargans:** Is there a White Image?

Charles Alston: *Nobody Knows*, 1965, 40 inches high.

Norman Lewis: *Procession*, 1964, 57 inches high.  
Willard Gallery, New York





Felrath Hines: untitled, 1964.

## Spiral

**Felrath Hines:** There is not. There are just varying means of expression.

**Norman Lewis:** If we had been allowed to pursue our own image historically, it would have been a Negro Image.

**Felrath Hines:** There are Jewish painters who, like Chagall, paint Jewish subject matter, and some who don't.

**James Yeargans:** The word "image" is ambiguous. I would like some explanation of it . . . I have brought one of my paintings that I feel was inspired by certain rhythms that are peculiar to my experience as a Negro.

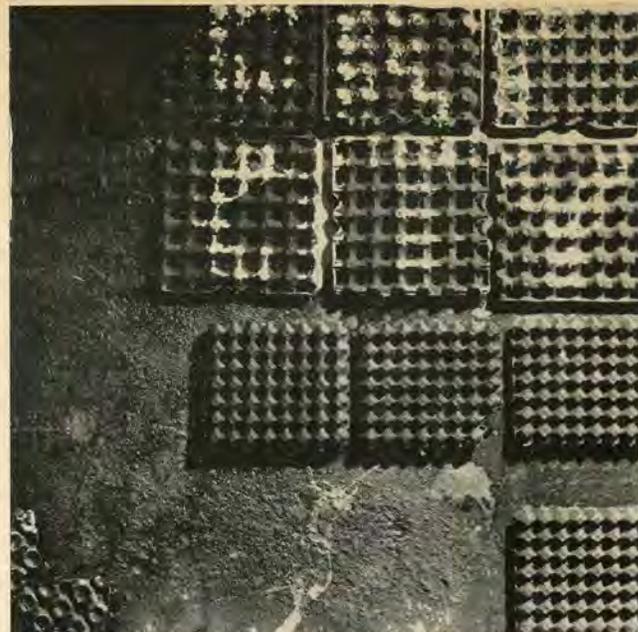
**Norman Lewis:** I feel that Franz Kline in his paintings with large contrasts of black against white and Ad Reinhardt in his all-black painting might represent something more Negroid than work done by Negro painters.

**Perry Ferguson:** I suggest that there is no such thing in America as a Negro Art.

**James Yeargans:** I prefer the word "Afro" to Negro. We can speak of an Afro-American Art.

**Alvin Hollingsworth:** I wonder why it should be necessary to seek one particular image. Even the exponents

Alvin Hollingsworth: *Cry City*, 1963, 48 inches high.  
Dintenfass Gallery, New York



of Pop Art paint in divergent ways. When I was a child I used to think Bob Gwathmey was a Negro.

**Romare Bearden:** You can't speak as a Negro if you haven't had the experience.

In spite of their doubts and different opinions, they still hoped to evoke in their paintings the "signature," the personal "thumbprint" that they had talked so much about. This was not merely a concept of subject matter, but closer to the formal quality that is found in jazz. Jazz, they feel, grew out of the grassroots of Negro culture. In a concerted effort to bring out this "Negro-ness" they tried to eliminate traditional Western ideas from their minds. Romare Bearden suggested that certain new esthetic ideas of such African writers as Diop and Senghor should be discussed. Merton Simpson, a dealer in primitive art, lectured on African sculpture. They studied geometric tribal designs found on huts, textile patterns, Zulu shields.

In the spring of 1964, for their first group exhibition, they flirted with the idea of "Mississippi, 1964" as a theme



Emma Amos: *Without Feather Boa*, 1965, etching, 30 inches high.

Reggie Gammon: *Freedom Now*, 1964, 40 inches high.

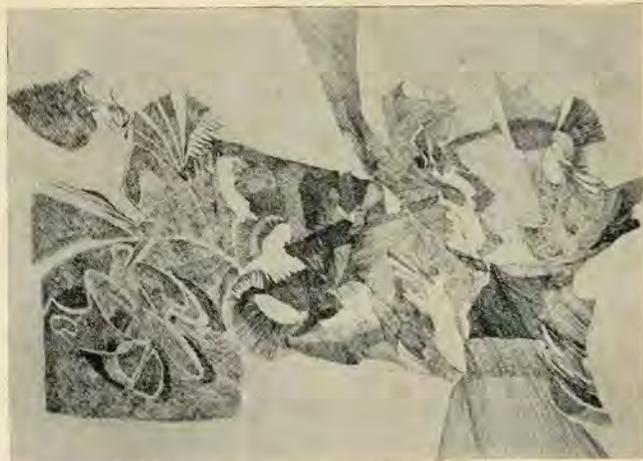


Merton Simpson: *Victim*, 1965, 30 inches high.



Earl Miller: untitled, 1963, collage, 12 inches high.

William Majors: *Ecclesiastes VII*, 1965, etching, 14½ inches high.



and then rejected it as too pointedly "social protest." In its place, they chose an esthetic limitation—to restrict their palettes to black and white—which, they felt, carried symbolic overtones. Bearden created a group of collages that drew on his memories of the South, Harlem, ritual jazz. "I use subject matter," he said, "to bring something to it as a Negro—another sensibility—give it an identity." Giant faces were faceted into abstractions that left no doubt about the artist's desire to depict the nobility of the Negro in a fractured society.

Although Bearden returned after 20 years to the Negro image, themes of the human condition had never ceased to concern him. If we compare the recent collages to his paintings of the 1940s, the difference lies in a certain spirit of detachment that the artist has achieved since the era when "social protest" was current. A product of the W.P.A., he speaks nostalgically of the days when all the Negro artists lived in Harlem and he and Jake Lawrence had studios next door to each other on 125th Street. Today Bearden, a social case-worker when he isn't painting, worries

about the fact that the Negro artist has so little rapport with his own community.

Charles Alston, a cousin of Bearden, who also got his start with the W.P.A., says, "Bourgeois Negroes have always striven to participate in the mainstream, always tried to achieve the mainstream's values, a car, a fur coat . . ."

Although in the heat of the moment he has created paintings like *Starved People*, of Klansmen and poor whites—"those people," according to the artist, "who make the rules, the victims"—such canvases are not typical. "The themes that I am working on today," Alston says, "for example, *The Family*, a mural for the lobby of the Harlem Hospital, or *Nobody Knows*, a portrait of a blues singer, have concerned me throughout my career." He feels now, "Spiral was too weighted on the side of the Cause . . . too involved in self-conscious themes."

Perhaps most deeply affected was the sensitive and talented Norman Lewis. His subject, tiny forms in clusters that suggest migrations of people or birds in space, hasn't changed, but what was delicate and diffuse became sharp-

[Continued on page 67]

Alvin Douglass: untitled, 1963, soap and lyester on masonite, 36 inches high.



James Yeargans: *No Room at the Hotel*, 1965, 28 inches high



emma Amos (born in Atlanta in 1938) always knew she would be an artist. As a woman of African descent she dared to dream to be a professional painter and printmaker. After graduating from Antioch College in Ohio, Central School of Art in London and New York University (NYU), she honed her skills at Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop, and worked as a designer/weaver for textile master, Dorothy Liebes. While attending NYU, she was asked to join *Spiral*, a group of black artists that included Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff and Charles Alston. Amos originated and co-hosted *Show of Hands*, a crafts show for WGBH Educational TV in Boston in 1977-79, and later became a Professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

Blurring the distinction between "high" and "low" art, Emma Amos's explorations in different media—etching, monoprints, silk collagraphs, photography, painting, fibre, sewing—result in seamless works of art. Amos incorporates fibres and printed cloths which, when combined with gestural strokes of paint, create fields of color and texture that enmesh drawn and painted figures and photographic images. In her paintings, she exploits the tensions between photographic and painted illusion. She has always found photography "interesting because it seems not to lie when in fact it

does—it's very selective about what it shows." Moreover, bordering her paintings with African fabrics, Amos sews, appliques, embroiders and occasionally quilts with her own weavings, Kente cloth and batiks. Her large canvases hang unstretched, evoking, at once, the form of European prestige tapestries and the African diaspora.

and scholarship about modern and contemporary art, have galvanized Emma Amos. She understands that cultural production affects social values and norms—how we view others and ourselves. In other words, art matters.

Amos's exhibition, *Changing the Subject*, 1994, at Art in General, New York, was a watershed event, for it marked

publicly a maturation of her political content and aesthetic virtuosity. Amos's signature style, growing out of the late 1980s to early 1990s, is an amalgam of an often highly charged political critique and a dynamic color field that acts as a backdrop for her multi-vocal dialectic surrounding issues of representation. With historical and political references that center upon race and gender in the series *Changing the Subject*, Amos notes, for example, in *Tightrope*, 1994, that she "looks autobiographically at race, sex, and identity." Her interest in herself as a pictorial subject continues from earlier work. Yet, in this painting she aligns her identity not only with women of color but with all women. The title easily conveys the idea of people who precariously juggle the demands life and society



*One Who Watches*, acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders and photo transfer, c. 1995; 52" x 42". Photograph by Becket Logan.

During the course of her artistic career, Amos has been deeply involved in feminism and the politics of culture. Collaboration and friendships with women artists, involvement with feminist publications like *Heresies* and *MEANING*, and awareness of the exclusion of women and people of color from the critical discourse

thrust upon them—matriarchs, mothers, wives, impoverished people and people of color. In *Tightrope*, Emma, who wears an American flag/"Wonder-Woman" leotard (obscured by a black negligée), is both warrior and seductress; the attributes of true womanhood are veiled by popular conceptions of womanhood.

Next, there is the subject of exclusion. X's proliferate in *Tightrope* and other paintings. The "X"-mark denotes cancellation, deletion, invisibility, absence and error. X's represent for Amos, "how hardly anyone gives a damn what I say as an artist or what black people have to say."

"X" also refers to Malcolm X (who continues to be an esteemed black political figure in Africa and the U.S.) and what "X" symbolized—a canceling of the slave-name and the legacy of slavery. Further examination of *Tightrope* reveals another subject: colonialism. Amos, the tightrope walker, achieves delicate balance holding artist brushes in one hand and a shirt depicting "Mrs. Gauguin's" breasts in the other. Red arrows in the corners of the painting point to the pictorial source of Amos's shirt: the late nineteenth century artist Paul Gauguin's *Two Tahitian Women with Mangoes*, 1899. After reading Gauguin's journals, Amos comments, "I considered him anew and imagined he must have abused Te Ha Amana, the thirteen-year-old second 'Mrs. Gauguin,' whom he bought from her father to be his model, housekeeper,

concubine and intermediary to the island's people." Would Gauguin be the famous post-Impressionist artist if it were not for the assistance and presence of Te Ha Amana, and for Tahitian culture? Te Ha Amana's plight serves as an inspiration for several other paintings in this exhibition, including *The Overseer*, 1992, *One Who Watches*, 1995 and *Malcolm X, Morley, Matisse and Me*, 1993.

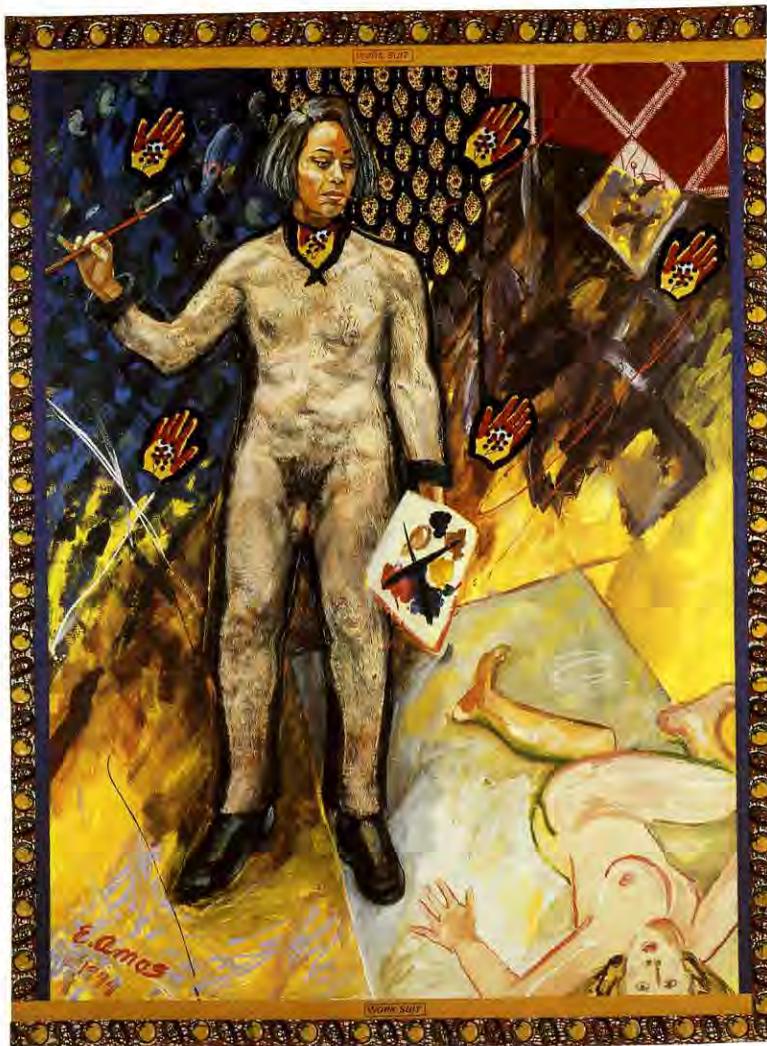
Amos issues a scathing criticism of the exploitation of cultures that Westerners have deemed "primitive" in the development of modernism. Black urban vernac-

ular is incorporated in the title *Yo Man Ray Yo*, subverting the "high" art status of Man Ray's photograph, *Noire et Blanche*, 1926, upon which it is based. Ray's photograph clearly illustrates the idea of contemplating the primitive. In Amos' painting, the African mask in *Noire et*

out the terrain of the black body. In the United States, the African American is the late modern primitive. The legacy of Josephine Baker and *Le Revue Nègre* continues to Hip-Hop. Black culture is the essential signifier for cultural modernism and post-modernism. At issue is agency.

Who controls or possesses the black body as an object of desire and economic exploitation affects how we comprehend black culture.

By referencing masterpieces of modern art history Amos focuses particularly on primitivism and the global subjugation of people of color and women in *Malcolm X, Morley, Matisse and Me, Overseer, Work Suit* (based on a nude self-portrait by Lucien Freud) and *One Who Watches* (based on Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892, that, in turn, refers to Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, 1863). In *Work Suit*, Amos inversely appropriates the ubiquitous Western image of the male artist holding his palette of paints and brushes with a nude model—usually a reclining woman—before him. Amos's allusions to this and similar canonical works address "the covenant of silence about the prerogatives that white artists have." That sym-



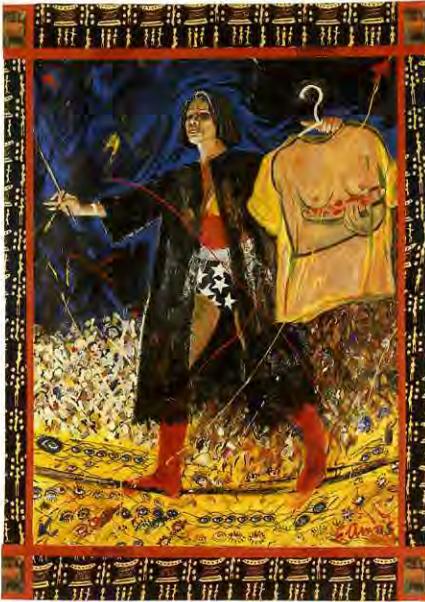
*Work Suit*, acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders and photo transfer, c. 1994; 74 1/2" x 54 1/2". Photograph by Becket Logan.

*Blanche* is replaced with the head of a young, beautiful African American woman. The black woman—unlike the mask—surreptitiously gazes back at the white woman. Black passivity and anonymity are transformed by a meaningful glance and a real black person.

Not only the Tahitians of Gauguin, the Africans of Picasso, Braque and Matisse, but the African Americans of Mapplethorpe and countless other artists demonstrate how the black body continues to stand for sensuality and sex, possession and power. Primitivism lingers in mapping

bol of power, the objectification of women, especially black and brown women, refers to the close relationship between colonialism and modernity and post-colonialism and post-modernity. This history of art confirms Amos's own experiences.

In these recent paintings, Amos addresses racism in the professional art community. A particular grievance is against institutions that exhibit or collect only those works by African American artists that show identifiable black figures. Such curatorial choices have compelled Amos to depict a multicolored mix of skin



*Tightrope*, acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders and photo transfer, c. 1994; 82" x 58". Photograph by Becket Logan.

tones and white subjects in her paintings. In response to art market restrictions, some African American artists have censored themselves. As she has remarked, "By calling attention to problems of self-censorship and the compartmentalization of artists by race and gender, I was, and still am, rebelling against the expectation that a black woman does paintings only of and about black people."

Postmodernism typically emphasizes a work of art's representation of social and political history and related issues that take precedence over aesthetics and technical skill. For Emma Amos, they are equally important. Moreover, postmodernist art is not represented by any one avant-garde style. Consequently, Amos can choose without jeopardizing artistic credibility. Her sequence of paintings is anecdotal, but the objective of each is the same: to argue constructively against norms in the field of art as well as society. Her responses are reactive and reflexive; she ably uses her paintings as a means to analyze and assess cultural production, authorship, meaning and consumption. Amos is quintessentially postmodern because she questions the validity of canonical traditions and institutions that for so long have been biased against the inclusion of women and artists of color, especially blacks. By insisting on her own particular perspective, she risks the critical longevity of her work. However, she

states, "I accept the idea that my art will become dated. I don't believe work is timeless, but the nuances of meaning may be lost unless you know the history." Look closely at these paintings and remember.

Sharon F. Patton

*Sharon F. Patton is the Director of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, and is the author of African American Art (Oxford University Press, 1998).*

#### SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2000 *Blackness in Color: Visual Expressions of the Black Arts Movement*; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY (book/catalogue).

*Dream Worlds: New Surrealism at the Millennium*; Attleboro Museum, Attleboro, MA.

1999 *Seeing, An Overview*; Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, PA (solo).

*Looking Forward, Looking Black*; Elaine Jacob Gallery, Detroit, MI, and Hobart & William Smith College Gallery (catalogue).

*Re-Righting History: Work by Contemporary African-American Artists*; Katonah Museum, Katonah, NY (catalogue).

*A Coloring Lesson*; Walter Bischoff Galleries, Deutsch-Amerikanischen Zentrum, James F. Burns Institut, Stuttgart, Germany (solo).

*A Conversation: Emma Amos and Builder Levy*; A.R.T., New York, NY (solo).

*Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African-American Identity*; Newark Museum, Newark, NJ.

*Odyssey Series, and A Reading at Bessie Smith's Grave*; Civil Rights Museum (solo).



*Tribal Headdresses Twentieth Century*, oil on linen canvas with African fabric borders, c. 2000; 34 3/4" x 43 1/2". Photograph by Becket Logan.

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# EMMA AMOS

## Art as Legacy

By Lisa E. Farrington

Beyond the customary assessments of Emma Amos's (b. 1938) art as vivid, kinetic, and often acerbically witty figurative portrayals, lies a personal leitmotif that has not before been examined. A continual thread that runs throughout many of Amos's compositions relates to what is termed in psychoanalysis as "The Family Romance"—a phenomenon that links artists (from the ancient Egyptian innovator Imhotep to the modernist Picasso) with their pasts as well as their futures, and with a family legacy that can either be real or invented or a combination of both, as is the case with Amos. Before undertaking such an examination, however, it is necessary to review Amos's life and work, to provide a foundation on which to base a discussion of the artist's espousal of the theme of "art as legacy" or genealogical process.

Emma Amos once said: "For me, a black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act."<sup>1</sup> This frank and pithy observation aptly signifies what it means to be perennially at the mercy of race and gender bias in the art community—a state of affairs that persists, despite the fact that revisionist art history and curatorship, intended to address the invisibility of women and minorities in the canon, is now a half century old. Minority male artists continue to face racial obstacles; majority women artists are yet confronted with sexual bias; and women artists of color must regularly contend with both forms of chauvinism (which makes Amos's unremitting resolve and longevity as an artist—not to mention her visionary creativity—so extraordinary<sup>2</sup>).

After a prodigious childhood of art study (taking classes in fine arts at Morris Brown College at the tender age of eleven), the Atlanta-born Amos enrolled in Ohio's Antioch College. There from 1953 to 1958 (B.F.A.), Amos studied fine arts and textile weaving under the art department chair and stained glass master Robert Metcalf. Although Amos never pursued the art of stained glass, the strong emphasis on linear contours and the often iridescent palette of her mature works suggest that she absorbed much from this discipline. Amos also spent a total of two years year abroad studying at the Central School of Art in London (receiving her diploma in 1959), where she learned etching techniques under Anthony Harrison and studied painting with the British abstractionist William Turnbull.<sup>3</sup>

By the early 1960s, Amos had relocated to New York to join two prestigious printmaking studios: Letterio (Leo) Calapai's

studio, which was part of Stanley William Hayter's Paris Atelier 17, and Robert (Bob) Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop. Making her first attempts to breach New York's mainstream art scene in the hope of securing a commercial dealer, she encountered that implacable wall of exclusion that so many young artists experience.<sup>4</sup> She also discovered that artists of color were additionally handicapped, being, as she put it, "not in that East Hampton clique."<sup>5</sup> In other words, since "who you knew" was as operative a concept in the art world as it was in the corporate world, African-Americans (who, at the time, rarely had access to elite collectors, dealers, curators, and the like) were perennially marooned just beyond the perimeter of New York's art inner circle.

Amos persevered, taking printmaking with Bob Blackburn, Riva Helfond, and Anthony Harrison (who was in New York teaching at Columbia University). She received her M.A. in 1965 from New York University, where she became reacquainted with a family friend who was a professor there, the famed WPA muralist and founder of the Atlanta University art department, Hale Woodruff. She also gained entrée into Spiral—the now-legendary Civil Rights art group co-founded by Woodruff, Romare Bearden and other prominent African-American artists.<sup>6</sup> In May 1965, two years after Spiral's founding, the group mounted its first and only exhibit, "Black and White," in a rented gallery space at 147 Christopher Street. Works in the show were limited to a black and white palette in deference to the Civil Rights crusade. Amos was represented by an etching (now lost) entitled *Without Feather Boa*—a nude portrait bust of the artist staring indifferently at the viewer from behind a pair of dark sunglasses.<sup>7</sup> The work's title—an allusion to an absence of feminine accoutrements—and its matter-of-fact nudity allude to the sitter as a "soldier" of the Civil Rights crusade and, in the artist's words, "as a woman without beauty but with confrontational power."<sup>8</sup>

Although the exhibit was successful, Spiral was plagued by internal philosophical conflicts. A number of members wanted to express their social engagement without losing their individual artistic identities; others advocated a centralized formal philosophy, following the example of the Impressionists. There also was disagreement over whether the group should be interracial. Members wrangled over everything from aesthetic standards to the dangers of

"ghettoization" that might result from all-black shows (Amos avoided black exhibits until it became apparent to her that these were sometimes the only venues for black artists<sup>9</sup>). Nevertheless, Amos thrived intellectually in the group and especially remembers conversations that revolved around Pan-Africanism and its French incarnation, *Negritude*, and the extent to which African-American artists might participate in this global initiative.<sup>10</sup>

From Bearden she learned about African-American artists she was unfamiliar with, such as the celebrated modernist Jacob Lawrence. She was exposed to the idea that one's status as a minority and one's role as an artist could (and perhaps should) be corollary facets of one's artist's persona, and to the notion that "black art"—art that made a political statement and served the Civil Rights agenda—had value and purpose. While somewhat resistant to the deliberate creation of "black" art, she came to accept that ethnicity could have a place in creative decision making, while not necessarily dominating that process. She believed, for example, that jazz was an ideal artistic exemplar of African-American cultural identity, and that Spiral might have survived longer, and perhaps had greater impact, if its members had been able to conceptualize a visual arts program that was in some way comparable to jazz—unique to the black community and yet expansive enough to encompass myriad individual tastes and styles.<sup>11</sup>

A recent work, *Let Me Off Uptown* (2000; front cover), epitomizes her lasting engagement with this "jazz" credo. Dominated by a blue palette, similarly hued Kente cloth trim, and gold metallic glitter, *Let Me Off Uptown* is an exuberant celebration of the music, dance, and culture of jazz. Diminutive clothed, nude, and semi-nude couples tumble, leap, and whirl together in a quivering frenzy amidst disembodied pointing fingers that direct the viewers gaze. Most rousing in this eclectic mix of bodies is its diversity—of ages, complexions, poses, and costumes. For example, miniature dancers wear fifties bee-bop outfits, swimsuits, leotards, body stockings, tailored dress suits, and sixties thigh-high boots and mini skirts. A few dance nude with fully clothed partners; blacks cavort with whites; and youths are teamed with elders.

This glittering array of revelers surrounds the main attraction—a large-scale "swinging" couple swathed in a green circle that serves as a spotlight. Dressed in a well-cut black suit, bright yellow shirt, and slick brown dancing shoes, the middle-aged male figure holds aloft his straw hat, revealing a balding pate. He is partnered with an attractive younger woman who wears a sexy red dress, strappy high-heels, and whose tightly curled blond hair and gleaming café-au-lait complexion provide dazzling visual foils for her older, darker partner. Conspicuous in this painting, in addition to the age gap that is breached by the central couple, are the wide-ranging skin tones of all the dancing figures, from dark brown to peaches-and-cream; which brings us to the topic of color—one of the most salient characteristics of Amos's oeuvre.

If one were to attempt to codify Amos's aesthetic modus operandi, the apposite classification would have to be "colorist," in the tradition of Titian and Delacroix. Her incandescent palettes and use of multihued fabrics are veritable

monuments to the artist's prodigious sense of color. Yet, for Amos, color is imbued with an undeniable agitprop agenda:

Every time I think about color it's a political statement. It would be a luxury to be white and never to think about it.... We're always talking about color, but colors are also skin colors, and the term "colored" itself—it all means something else to me. You have to choose, as a black artist, what to make your figures....butterscotch, brown, or really black. White artists never have to choose....<sup>12</sup>

Amos's sensitivity to color was acquired in childhood when she and her playmates ruminated on their own differing complexions. When they asked their parents to explain this phenomenon, Amos remembers that they were told tales of miscegenation—disclosures that hinted at sexual assaults on enslaved and colonized women of color the world over—which made a significant impact on Amos, as her work bears out. As one historian put it, "Color has a very personal significance for all African-American people and this significance also underlies Amos's work."<sup>13</sup> Indeed, Amos anticipates the arrival of a quixotic moment in our culture when the word "color" might refer only to the elements of the rainbow, or to her palette, and not to the politics of race.

Amos has, nevertheless, enjoyed being a painter of "color"—reveling in the ever-changing skin tones of her people. Before she could afford to hire models, she used herself for this purpose, altering her own fair complexion at will for each painting. As she once explained, "I can make myself look a lot blacker.... I'm always handy and I just look in the mirror. It's fun because I can do lots of variations on me.... Black is beautiful ... and that's something to remark upon and to make a record of."<sup>14</sup> Her representation of many complexions in *Let Me Off Uptown* exemplifies this outlook. It also accurately characterizes the diverse devotees of jazz seen in Harlem, to which "Uptown" refers. Finally, the painting serves as a belated response to the dilemma that Amos and other Spiral members faced in their attempts to codify a visual program that would parallel jazz music.

Prior to Spiral's demise in 1965 (soon after the close of its exhibit, when escalating rents caused the group to lose its Greenwich Village gallery and meeting space<sup>15</sup>), as a member of what was otherwise an all-male confederacy, she was aware, even as a young artist, of the conspicuous absence of other women: "I thought it was fishy that the group had not asked Vivian Browne, Betty Blayton Taylor, Faith Ringgold, Norma Morgan, or any other woman of their acquaintance to join. I was probably less threatening to their egos, as I was not yet of much consequence."<sup>16</sup> Amos quickly came to realize that the New York art scene was "a man's scene, black or white." Even her participation in Spiral was often limited to that of an observer, particularly when, as she put it, "the old boys settled into age-old fights with each other" (although she did feel that, when offered, her opinion was valued).<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, Amos felt isolated from other African-American women artists, with whom, for the most part, she was unacquainted. Amos recalls that, within the context of Spiral discussions, even a

distinguished artist like Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1915), the internationally renowned sculptor and printmaker, was referred to as “the wife of Charles White,” an African-American artist to whom she was married briefly during the 1940s.<sup>18</sup>

During the 1970s Amos taught textile design at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts, and weaving on her own looms (she owned eight) at Threadbare, a yarn and weaving shop on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. Amos prospered as a weaver, likely due to the nascent Feminist Art Movement and its attention to fabric art and artists. Even so, Amos knew better than to advertise herself as a weaver in fine arts circles, where conventional art hierarchies persisted: “Well, I certainly knew not to admit that I was a weaver because people held it against me. It was just a smart thing to keep your mouth shut and not to admit it.”<sup>19</sup>

Historically, as Amos was obviously aware, women artists who worked with fabric were rarely viewed as more than artisans, no matter how innovative their designs or intricate their techniques. However, in the late 1970s, when Amos became co-host of a WGBH Boston television series on crafts entitled “Show of Hands” (for which Amos herself wrote the pilot), she resolved her “weaving” dilemma. The series, which aired in thirteen episodes over a period of about eighteen months, featured local Boston woodworkers, ceramicists, weavers, and stained glass, quilt, and jewelry makers. The experience, though ephemeral, offered Amos a lasting solution to being a “closet” weaver—it inspired her to incorporate handcrafts into her paintings—an aesthetic decision that would mark all of her future work.<sup>20</sup> Over time, Amos’s ability to obfuscate the high/low art divide by consolidating the so-called “fine art” of painting with the “artistry” of textiles became nothing short of alchemy and the fulcrum of her signature style.

Through the years, Amos has traveled the globe in search of the fabrics that she integrates into her paintings and her multimedia prints, which include silk collagraphs and hand-cut stencil prints on plush fabrics. Indeed, Amos spent more than a decade, beginning in 1961, working in the studio of Dorothy Liebes (1897-1972), a renowned textile designer from the 1930s to the 1950s; and many of Amos’s designs were translated into unique carpets, produced by the prominent Bigelow Sanford Carpet Company. Although she redeployed her efforts after Liebes’s death, Amos’s *Harmony Rug* (2002; Pl. 1) is a noteworthy example of the artist’s ongoing affinity with this medium.

An intrepid retro design, *Harmony Rug* is shaped to resemble both the letter R (as in “rug”) and a grand piano, complete with keyboard. The rug brandishes Amos’s signature De Stijl palette of primary colors plus yellow, black, and white. It also displays a forthright chevron pattern that circumscribes an oval with a hand and outstretched fingers that suggest piano playing. The carpet’s wool threads are thick and plush, approaching a shag texture, though shorter in pile length. Finally, its title refers to musical harmony as well as the visual harmony of forms and colors that the design entails. Playful, inventive, and skillfully executed, *Harmony Rug* embodies those qualities of jazz which the artist has favored since her Spiral years. Amos’s technical and design expertise extends not only to carpets, but also to the conception of patterns for

upholstery, window treatments, and clothing fabrication—virtuosity that is evident in her meticulous selections of textiles with which to frame her paintings—textiles that are at once sumptuous, harmonizing, and vigorously graphic. She prefers Kente cloth (strip textiles woven by Asante men in West Africa) and Kanga cloth (brightly colored pieced fabric first made by Swahili women in the 1870s). She also utilizes *Bogolanfini* textiles (dye-impressed with protective symbols by the Bamana women of Mali), as well as wax-dyed batiks made in Holland and exported to Africa. Amos deftly manipulates these exotic fabrics to flank and complement her unstretched canvases and to enliven the surfaces of her prints.

The decade of the 1980s brought new changes and challenges for Amos. She became a professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and she began to work in painting and print series. Following cycles focused on sports (football, basketball, and swimming), she began her as yet ongoing *Falling Series* in 1988. Featuring her now characteristic and self-assured figurative style, these works are predicated on the artist’s need to infuse her work with visual dynamism. In Amos’s words, “The metaphor of falling helped me to discover that I wanted to invent people in the air, because that was a way of having absolute movement. They are not standing on the ground, in doorways, or looking out of windows. There’s nothing that is stationary. [They are in] flux.”<sup>21</sup>

Amos finds inertia corrosive to her work and goes to great lengths to eliminate all that is static. She even employs energized brushstrokes to render concrete the very atmosphere that envelops her figures. Works from the *Falling Series* such as *Will You Forget Me?* (1991; Pl. 2) illustrate the extent to which Amos is able to effect impulsion by way of an assiduous attention to figural poses and to the deployment of paint and linear thrusts. Here the downward propulsion of the plummeting woman is realized by way of her posture—slightly oblique with hands above her head and legs apart—and by the buffeting of the figure’s skirt and hair, and the surging brushwork of the background, which reprises the figure’s directional momentum.

The rush of movement achieved in this work functions emblematically to express the hurtling passage of time within the artist’s own life. An autobiographical piece, *Will You Forget Me?* portrays Amos tumbling, and it pictures her mother, India, in the oversized photograph that the artist holds above her head. India, who died in Atlanta in 1979, was a twenty-year-old university student when the original photo was taken, and she stares out at the viewer as if into her own future, which in the artist’s present has become the past. In this deft assimilation of photography into painting (a distinguishing characteristic of Amos’s work), the artist disputes the anachronistic notion that “the camera never lies.” Instead she ascribes to the literary theorist Roland Barthe’s contention that a photograph, by virtue of its promise of veracity, is, in fact, more deceptive than a painting, which one naturally assumes to be artifice.

Amos recognizes implicitly that a photograph has the ability to alter time perceptions far more persuasively than a painted image. “I love the irony of photography,” Amos once



Fig. 1: Emma Amos, *Odyssey: Mules and Men* (1988), oil and acrylic with laser transfer photography on Sekishu rice paper, 72" x 40". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

remarked. "The two together [painting and photography] provide a way of manipulating memory."<sup>22</sup> While Amos (who both shoots her own and collects antique family photos<sup>23</sup>) acknowledges that a photograph can document a particular moment that might otherwise be forgotten, she also embraces the fact that one can rework a photo (either in orchestrating the scene or in the developing process) to act like a Freudian "screen memory"—one that is altered by subsequent experiences and permanently fixed in reification. The result is an artifact which, ironically, contradicts Barthe's theory even as it confirms it. Amos's transformative use of photography gives rise not so much to deception as to a deeper truth by transforming what is essentially a visual medium into one that is intensely conceptual.

In *Will You Forget Me?*, the unease reflected on the face of the falling artist as she clings to her "precious" photograph signifies Amos's battle to maintain a connection across the divide that separates her corporeal world from the afterlife that has enveloped her mother, and from a past in which her mother lived and breathed.<sup>24</sup> Amos physically and psychologically struggles to maintain her grip on her mother, who threatens to become an ebbing memory rendered here by the artist, significantly, in sepia tones. The historian Robert Henkes has perceived Amos's facial expression in the painting as fearful. Indeed, Henkes sees fear as the sentiment most salient in this series, indicative of "a lack of security, having nothing to which to anchor oneself .... there is only limbo."<sup>25</sup>

Henkes's choice of the word "limbo" is interesting and begs the question, with regard to *Will You Forget Me?*—who resides in this limbo? The artist? Her mother? Or do both linger there, as is implied by the nebulous blue and grey environment surrounding them? Henkes further argues that the fear expressed by Amos in this cycle embodies, "the loss of the past that no longer can serve the present or the future."<sup>26</sup> Anyone who has ever lost a parent will confirm that the emotions associated with such an event can be overwhelming; and although the pain of loss may diminish over time, as Henkes suggests, a reformed sense of vulnerability and irretrievable security often supplants mourning. Venerable parents such as Amos's mother act as anchors for their children. They are the roots that hold the family tree firm; they bond their children with the past and simultaneously propel them into the future. *Will You Forget Me?* actualizes the universal phenomenon of parental loss and all the thorny sentiments associated with it.

The vagaries of the human condition, so palpable in Amos's kinetic "falling" pictures, is a theme that presents itself with equal cogency in her more literary works centered on motifs of family and heritage. This substantive body of paintings and prints incorporates, as its cornerstone (rather than kinesis) a beguiling dynamic which, as mentioned earlier, Freudians term "The Family Romance." In essence, this idiom describes an Oedipal, and as such genealogical, phenomenon that occurs when children unconsciously elevate their parents to divine or royal status and, in doing so, make themselves heirs to a noble legacy. According to the distinguished art historian and psychoanalyst Laurie Adams, artists and their creative predecessors (who may or may not be their actual parents) relate in a similar Oedipal manner. Evidence of the particular forces at work within the context of the artistic Family Romance appears "not only in ideas and myths about art, but also in the behavior of artists and in the images they create."<sup>27</sup>

Expanding upon the theories of eminent psychoanalysts Ernst Kris, Otto Kurz, and Phyllis Greenacre; and citing classic Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance texts, Adams has argued convincingly that human history is inundated with instances wherein the dual attributes of paternal divinity (which is transposable with concepts of royalty) and creative genius are assigned to a long list of real and imagined personae (including Daedalus, Narcissus, Imhotep, the Christian God, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Raphael, and others). Adams has also analyzed

the psycho-subliminal relationships that exist between artists and their parents, mentors, muses, and creative forerunners, and she has situated the role of divinity (conceptually embodied in such terms as “divine inspiration” and “God the Father”) within this genealogical dynamic.<sup>28</sup>

God (who ideologically represents every father and, by implication, every parent) is perceived in all manner of Biblical, mythological, historical, hieroglyphic, literary, and graphic works as the original divine “artist.” That is to say, he is the first “creator”—the first “architect” of the world; the first “sculptor” of man; and the first “parent” who created children—the consummate act of creativity. However, while genealogically, “gods precede artists as original creators,” the reverse can also occur when artists are elevated to divine status and become, in essence, gods themselves. Adams gives the example of Imhotep, the builder of the Zoser step pyramid in the third millennium B.C., who was elevated to the status of a god for his creative genius and worshipped at Heliopolis. Other instances occur with Rembrandt, whom Chaim Soutine called a “god”; Raphael, who was crowned the “god of painting” by Ingres; and of course, Michelangelo, who was known during his lifetime as *il divino* and whose lasting exaltation “reveals the fine line between human and godly creators in our minds.”<sup>29</sup>

The profound and perplexing psychological correlations between divinity, royalty, paternity, and artistic creativity can be traced to one of the most universal and enduring childhood questions, “Where do I (babies) come from?”—a query that, as Adams notes, “has a parallel in the history of art.”<sup>30</sup> Artists and their chroniclers, from Pliny to Alberti to present-day theorists and critics, have endeavored relentlessly to answer their own version of this primal question: Where do artists come from? In the answers, artists are constantly being identified—and identify themselves—with the creative masters (i.e., parents and teachers) who preceded them. Indeed, the history of art itself has been written as a genealogy, with each school or period seeming to grow naturally (or with conscious antagonism—much like offspring) out of the preceding one. A passing look at any art history survey (even the revisionist texts) bears this out, with the tables of contents reading virtually the same from one to the next. Clearly, Family Romances within the context of art are constructed, either mindfully or subliminally, to parallel the biological human family. But that is precisely what makes the Family Romance so appealing as a stratagem for codifying art history or an



Fig. 2. Emma Amos, *Odyssey: Hunting* (1988), oil and acrylic with laser transfer photography on Sekishu rice paper, 72" x 40". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

individual artist's life and work, and so attractive to artists as a rubric from which to create their art and identity.

Such existentialist themes have a direct bearing upon Amos's oeuvre, particularly on those works that explore both the tangible and abstract genealogical ties between Amos and her own predecessors. Themes of this genre first became integral to the artist's iconography in the 1980s, when her art began to reveal a particular brand of the Family Romance that was at once multilateral and inspired. Included in Amos's *soi-disant* lineage are, above all, her biological parents, especially her mother, India, who is the subject of a number of works including *Will You Forget Me?* Other Amos forebears include artist elders, mentors and teachers, a variety of African-American literati and public figures, and master painters of the past whose works Amos willfully and cleverly has mined for form and content.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Amos created a number of images that disclosed the palimpsest framework of her conceptual family tree. *Will You Forget Me?*, for instance, directly addresses parental lineage by picturing Amos holding a photo of her mother above her head. With this gesture, Amos quite literally “elevates” India to an

exalted (if not overtly “royal” or “divine”) position. In another painting, *Katherine Dunham* (1988; Pl. 3) Amos invents a somewhat loftier Family Romance and links it first to India and then to herself. This piece, dedicated to one of the most celebrated dancers and choreographers of the twentieth century, features a portrait of the famed artiste in a yellow turban and white jacket. Amos chose to honor Dunham (1909–2006) in this work in response to the latter's unparalleled life.

More than a dancer, Dunham was an intellectual. She studied anthropology (as did India) and earned bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in the subject from the University of Chicago, as one of the first African-Americans to attend that institution. Dunham specialized in the evolution of African dance in the diaspora, particularly in Haiti and Brazil. Beginning in the 1930s, she founded and directed dance schools in New York and St. Louis; and she enjoyed a lifelong career as an international performer and as a professor of dance at Southern Illinois University. Dunham's devotion to black cultural studies and causes earned her numerous honors including the Presidential Medal of Arts and the French Legion of Honor.

Amos emblazons Dunham's name in a yellow cartouche (not unlike those seen on Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints), the colors of which are echoed by the vertical yellow striping that flanks the

storyline (written by the artist) recount the births, lives, genealogy, and personal achievements of various Amos family forerunners. Amos writes that grandfather Moses “became the first black pharmacist registered in the state.” Grandmother Emma was “elegant and cultured.” “My father ... was elected to the Atlanta City Executive Committee in 1953, making him one of the first black men to be elected to public office since Reconstruction.” “My brother Larry ... went on to receive MBA and Law Degrees from Indiana University.”<sup>32</sup>

The *Odyssey* narrative also muses about the Native American blood that runs through the veins of the Amos family and of so many African-Americans, and the white blood that marks the violent history of miscegenation. “My father’s grandfather was white. An Irishman named Donnelly from Hogansville. He raised red-haired, blue-eyed Minnie, my other grandmother, as a servant to ... her white half-sisters.”<sup>33</sup> The account continues with the artist’s experiences with segregation, discrimination, and an alarming family confrontation with members of the Ku Klux Klan. The text finally chronicles the Amos family’s friendships with, and appreciation for, black literati, artists, and jazz musicians. In sum, *Odyssey* is a testimonial to the long line of “skilled and literate people” from whom the artist hails.<sup>34</sup> As such, it reifies the Family Romance articulated in *A Reading at Bessie Smith’s Grave* and reaffirms Amos’s intellectual and creative birthrights.

Begun in 1990, *The Gift* (Fig. 3) appropriates the familial refrain of *Odyssey* and expands it to encompass a more contemporary dynasty—the artist’s own. Amos, who married educator Robert Levine in the mid-1960s, bore two children—a son Nicholas in 1967 and a daughter, also named India, in 1970. As its title suggests, *The Gift* is precisely that—a bequest from Amos to her daughter on her twentieth birthday. The work consists of portraits of women artists, friends, and colleagues who exerted significant and positive influences on Amos. Featuring more than forty acrylic paintings on paper, *The Gift* portrays African-American artists including among many Camille Billops, Helen Ramsaran, Faith Ringgold, Howardena Pindell, Elizabeth Catlett, Clarisa Sleigh, Lorna Simpson, Vivian Browne, Carol Byard, and Nanette Carter; Euro-American artists and critics such as Miriam Schapiro, Mira Schor, Joyce Kozloff, Lucy Lippard, and Moira Roth; and the Native American artist Kay WalkingStick.<sup>35</sup>

Representative of the eclectic network of supportive women Amos has known and been inspired by, this cycle “confers” a comparable legacy upon her daughter; and since Amos realized that her “gift” would at some point leave her studio and reside with India, she chose to recycle a number of these portraits, which appear in other works such as the 1991 acrylic painting *Giza and Faith*, and in several prints from the circa 1992 Women’s Series, including *Camille Remember Me*, *Have Faith*, and *Elizabeth Catlett*, *Emma and India*. Amos summed up the objective of *The Gift* when she stated, “There’s something powerful and strong about women artists, about womanhood.”<sup>36</sup> The maternal and sisterly legacy that Amos passes on to her daughter completes the artist’s Family Romance by enclosing a new generation within the embracing arms of its precursors.

Fig. 4. Emma Amos, *Great Grandpa Jefferson* (1997), acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders, 59 x 22". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.



Besides the monumental works Amos devoted to the concept of lineage, she also produced a cycle dedicated to “heroes.”<sup>37</sup> Indeed, her very use of the term “hero” to define the series connotes the elevated rank of the subjects. Intrepidly breaching the craft/high art divide, in *Great Grandpa Jefferson* (1997; Fig. 4) and *Muse Picasso* (1997; Fig. 5), Amos shaped her designs into clothing patterns for a woman’s skirt and top, and for a kitchen (or painter’s) apron, respectively. Both personae offer ideal subjects for commentary on the Family Romance—Jefferson for his attachment to Sally Hemings, who bore him a family of black children, and Picasso for his looming presence as one of the “fathers” of abstraction and for his fascination with African sculpture (which situates him tacitly within the same African heritage as Amos).

The title *Great Grandpa Jefferson* establishes Thomas Jefferson’s position not as a president but as a grandparent within the artist’s implied Family Romance, and within an African-American family to which he contributed numerous offspring. Amos’s portrait of Jefferson, set inside a circular pendant on the skirt of an African-inspired outfit, is encircled by a ribbon and rests upon a backdrop of heraldic banners. Insinuated by the placement of Jefferson’s face on a woman’s skirt is Sally Hemings, with whom he began a love affair after his wife Martha’s death. (Hemings was the daughter of Martha’s father, John Wayles, and his slave Elizabeth). Jefferson apparently remained faithful to Hemings for the remainder of his life, and together the couple had seven children, two of whom passed into white society after being freed by their father.<sup>38</sup>

In *Muse Picasso* (a pun on Musée Picasso), Amos centers Picasso’s portrait on an apron, within a green oval stamped with his name. The canvas areas are overlaid with chevron patterns, not unlike those seen in Bakuba textiles, and the



Fig. 5. Emma Amos, *Muse Picasso* (1997), acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders, 60 x 32". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

outer edges are trimmed with Kente-style cloth. In five medallions that surround Picasso's likeness, Amos has rendered an image of African herdsmen (at the top), two African sculptures whose eyes have been altered so that they seem to stare at the Spanish "master," a masked face from the lower right portion of Picasso's 1907 *Les Femmes d'Alger* (which he based on a Pende sickness mask from the Kongo), and Amos herself, looking up at her "muse" from the hem of the apron.

The expression on Amos's face appears to be one of consternation, as if she is not certain of the inspiration that her supposed muse and artistic predecessor provides. Indeed, the word "inspiration"—which, within the context of the Family Romance, can be read as "divine inspiration"—is inscribed in blue just beneath Amos's self-portrait, as if to explicate why she stares up at Picasso. He, like the artist's mother in *Will You Forget Me?*, is elevated above Amos, thus preceding her in lineage and suggesting his implied "higher" (i.e., divine or royal) position. The word "master," too, is painted along the red border to the left of Amos's medallion, invoking such idioms as "father," "master painter," and "slave master," not to mention "master of the universe." The reference alludes to the male-centered lexicon of art historical discourse, as well as to the thorny kinship between Africans and Europeans, both politically and artistically. Given Picasso's unabashed appropriation of African statuary in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, one might be compelled to ask, who indeed is the progeny and who the progenitor, or, will the real muse stand up?

There is a further meaning to the term "muse" as Amos applies it in the work's title, the implications of which are imbedded in other words inscribed along the painting's red border. Included are names of Picasso's own muses as well as his biological offspring. Other words inscribed, such as "passion" and "desire," describe his feelings for them as well as for his art. Within the mainspring of the Family Romance, art and family (especially children) are one in the same; both are products of the artist's creativity.

More genealogically charged even than these terms is the word "seminal," which appears within the yellow band below the African herdsmen and their oxen. Amos has inscribed the word below a suggestively virile image of bulls (not coincidentally a favorite motif of Picasso). As a biological term, the word is ponderous with the weight of associations with male virility and dominance, and its use in art criticism implies that original genius or divine inspiration must be male-centered; it is not surprising that many feminist historians have found the term objectionable. Amos inserts it here as both a statement and a question. She allows the word to hover above Picasso's portrait, and above the images of the African masks he tapped for inspiration. Amos has also written along the painting's border the names of the African peoples whose sculpture provided the sources for Picasso's Afro-cubist idiom: Ibibio, Ibo, and Dan.

The words "master," "domination," and "fear," which share canvas space with the designation "seminal," urge viewers to contemplate the overwhelming presence of the alleged godfathers of modernism (such as Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, Dali, Pollock, and any number of others one might

name) within the genealogical history of art, and the effect of this constructed hierarchy upon women artists. Amos's *Muse Picasso* and *Great Grandpa Jefferson* belie assumptions that the icons of white male artistic supremacy are either legitimately seminal or genius. By questioning these long-standing convictions, Amos creates a fissure into which she can place herself and tout her own seminal (or perhaps, more appropriately, "ovarian") nature. With the "heroes" cycle, Amos seems to move discreetly beyond the precincts of the Family Romance, which calls for the veneration of others, and to suggest that her worthiest ideal might lie not in others but in herself. Her major paintings of the latter 1990s and beyond—some of her strongest—decisively supplant ancestor worship with an upsurge of self-analysis and self-reverence, and the results, such as *Studio Air* (2003; Pl. 5), are assuredly formidable. But, that is another "romance." •

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#### NOTES

1. Emma Amos, quoted in Sharon Patton, "Emma Amos," in *Art by African Americans in the Collection of the New Jersey State Museum* (Trenton: New Jersey State Museum, 1998), 12.
2. Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Reclaiming Presence: The Art and Politics of Color in Emma Amos's Work," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints, 1982-1992* (Wooster, Ohio: College of Wooster Art Museum, 1993), 6.
3. Amos, quoted in an interview conducted by Al Murray for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, October 3, 1968, transcript, 4-5. (This interview is referred to hereafter as SI-AAA)
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. Sharon Patton, *African-American Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 185, 306; Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 186, 200, 316, 400-02.
7. According to the artist, the print was acquired by the Museum of African-American Art in Washington, D.C., but seems to be no longer extant. Interview conducted by author with artist at her studio, New York, January 8, 2006.
8. Amos, letter to the author, dated June 21, 2001.
9. Gouma-Peterson, et al., "Biography and Chronology," in *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints*, 80.
10. The Pan Africanist Movement was launched with international conferences in London in 1900 and Paris in 1919, and continued in Amos's era with FESTAC—the Festival of Arts and Culture—held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966, and again in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1977.
11. Amos, quoted in SI-AAA, transcript, 9, 11.
12. Amos, quoted in Betty Wilde, "Emma Amos," Leslie King-Hammond, et al., *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1995), 1.
13. Gouma-Peterson, "Reclaiming Presence," in Gouma Peterson et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 5.
14. Amos, quoted in SI-AAA, transcript, 9, 11.

15. Patton, *African-American Art*, 185, 306; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American*, 186, 200, 316, 400-02.
16. Amos, et al., "Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism—An Intergenerational Perspective," *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 9; Betty Wilde, "Emma Amos," 1, 24-26, 176-78; Robert Henkes, *The Art of Black American Women: Works of Twenty-Four Artists of the Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1993), 50-74.
17. Amos, electronic letter to the author, dated May 12, 2006.
18. Amos, quoted in an interview with bell hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right: Making History Visible," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 17-18, 21; Amos, et al., *A Contemporary Feminism*, "9.
19. Amos, quoted in interview with hooks, in "Straighten Up and Fly Right" and "Biography and Chronology," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 22, 80; Patricia Mainardi, "Quilt: The Great American Art," *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 1, 18-23.
20. Gouma-Peterson, et al., "Biography and Chronology," in *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints*, 80.
21. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 23.
22. Amos, quoted in "Measuring Content," in Jo Anna Isaak, *Looking Forward Looking Black* (Geneva, N.Y.: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 1999), 38; and in Patton, "Emma Amos: Art Matters," 42.
23. One of Amos's most prized photographic collections is one she inherited from her godmother's husband, George Shivery, who documented indigent blacks in Mississippi and Tennessee in the 1920s and 1930s. Valerie J. Mercer, "Emma Amos: A Skillful and Imaginative Printmaker," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 33-34.
24. Amos, electronic letter to the author, dated July 19, 2006.
25. Henkes, *The Art of Black American Women*, 127.
26. Ibid.
27. Laurie Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 73.
28. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurtz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 53; Phyllis Greenacre, "The Childhood of the Artist" and "The Family Romance of the Artist," *Emotional Growth* 2 vols. (Madison, Conn.: International University Press, 1960; reprinted 1971); Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 73-83; Sigmund Freud, "On the Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" and "Family Romances," *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London 1953-1973), S.E. IX 235-41 and S.E. XIX 173-79; Homer, *The Iliad and The Odyssey*, each 2 vols., trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge: Loeb Library Edition, 1978-86); Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. J. Wykwerf and N. Leach. (1485; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).
29. Ibid.; Avigdor W. Poseq, "Soutine's Paraphrases of Rembrandt's *Slaughtered Ox*," *Kunsthistorik Tidskrift* LX, vol.3-4 (1991): 210-22; Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 78.
30. Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 75.
31. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right" and "Biography and Chronology," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 17.
32. Amos, *Odyssey* ([New York]: Ratchethead Studios and Selco Graphics, 1993). Also printed in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 35-38, 44.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 35-38.
35. Portrayed in the detail reproduced of *The Gift* are, left to right (date painted is also indicated): Top row: India Amos, daughter, 6/1/90; Camille Billops, artist, archivist, 6/4/90; Martha Wilson, performance artist, director of Franklin Furnace, 6/9/90; Joyce Kozloff, painter, mosaic muralist, 6/14/90; Howardena Pindell, artist, 6/22/90; Row two: Sabra Moore, painter, 7/24/90; Renee Green, installation artist, 7/25/90; Faith Ringgold, painter, author, 8/1/90; Shirley King, photographer, chef, author, 8/6/90; Josely Carvalho, artist, 8/14/90; Row three: Judy Blum, painter, 9/20/90; Helen Ramsaran, sculptor, 9/25/90; Mira Schor, painter, writer, 9/26/90; Sharon Sutton, architect, printmaker, 10/7/90; Nancy St. Paul, photographer, 10/10/90; Row four: Marina Gutierrez, artist, 10/30/90; May Stevens, painter, 12/3/90; Miriam Schapiro, painter, 2/3/91; Lucy Lippard, author, critic, 1991; Kay WalkingStick, painter, 3/23/91. The 20 portraits not pictured include: Top row: Mary Anne Rose, painter, 6/24/90; Zarina, artist, 6/25/90; Brahma Yassky, painter, 7/3/90; Carol Sun, painter, 7/23/90; Petah Coyne, sculptor, 1990; Kathy Caraccio, printmaker, 8/14/90; Clarissa Sleigh, photographer, 8/16/90; Vivian Browne, painter, 9/12/90; Joan Semmel, painter, 9/13/90; Rose Viddiano, sculptor, 9/19/90; Row three: Toby McLennon, painter, performance artist, 10/12/90; Lorna Simpson, photographer, 10/19/90; Carol Byard, sculptor, painter, 10/20/90; Nanette Carter, painter, 10/29/90; Claire Khalil, painter, 10/29/90; Row four: Elizabeth Catlett, sculptor, 4/7/91; Susan Unterberg, photographer, 5/16/91; Moira Roth; art historian, author 6/17/91; Fern Logan, photographer, 1991; Linda Peer, sculptor, 1993.
36. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 27.
37. Amos, statement to author, New York, January 2006.
38. "Passing" was possible for them because their mother, Sally, was a so-called "quadroon" (someone with one-quarter African blood), and they themselves were "octoroons" (the French colonial term for persons with one-eighth African blood), and as such virtually indistinguishable in physical appearance from whites. For centuries the white descendants of Martha and Thomas Jefferson denied the legitimacy of their black relatives, until in 1999 DNA testing proved that members of both the black and white Jefferson clans were progeny of the same genealogical stock.

## Women's Review of Books

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# Art: 'Committed to Print,' on Political Themes

By ROBERTA SMITH

**W**ITH its new exhibition, "Committed to Print," the Museum of Modern Art, defender of a relatively pure modernist faith, reads cautiously but deliberately where it doesn't often go: into the terrain where art and overt political sentiment mingle and sometimes fuse. The title invites two readings, and Deborah Wye, the organizer of the exhibition, makes good on both of them. She has sought out art that reflects a willingness to go on record, to communicate a strong position or searing fact, and that is also committed to some form of printmaking as the best medium for these messages.

Focusing on prints, limited-edition posters and artists' books made in America during the last 20 to 25 years, this exhibition has a certain physical modesty about it, and a not altogether unwelcome absence of certified masterpieces. But its scope and variety are prodigious. Its nearly 200 items represent 108 artists and collaborative groups. These artists are diverse, including many more women

and minorities than is usual for an exhibition at this museum. They work in a number of differing styles, in all sizes, in all the orthodox print media and in a few less orthodox ones (stencil, offset, work designed specifically for subway cars or stations, for example).

Most importantly, this exhibition is both a survey of art and a walk through the present and recent past of this country and some of its neighbors. It documents artists' responses to a number of the most significant issues and traumatic events of the past quarter century, from the civil rights movement to the anti-nuclear movement, from the political assassinations of the 1960's to the growing homeless population of the late 1980's. Flanked at the museum by smaller exhibitions of Josef Albers photographs and works on paper by Robert Motherwell, "Committed to Print" has an aberrant, incendiary intensity. It's a welcome change of pace for the Modern and an important part of its current "Contemporary Art in Context" program.

However, this is still very much a Museum of Modern Art exhibition. Divided into sections that include

"Governments and Leaders," "Race and Culture," "Nuclear Power and Ecology" and "War and Revolution," it is carefully selected and although overcrowded, well installed. Despite the range of issues encompassed, the show also seems to sidestep some. The section titled "Gender" contains no reference to abortion, nor is there any art dealing with homosexual rights. More locally, one would have enjoyed seeing some of the Guerrilla Girls' recent posters, with their scathing statistical art world analyses, among the ferment. But the exhibition is limited mainly to art that is portable and therefore still collectible. It excludes examples of the mass-produced posters that often appear, usually overnight, on the city's sundry vertical surfaces, although certain works — Eva Cockcroft's anti-nuclear stencil — can be used outdoors. David Hammons's image of Nelson Mandela, also a stencil, has actually been cut from an outdoor site.

Still, this exhibition cuts through boundaries that are often carefully maintained. It brings together artists whose names are household words, such as Andy Warhol, with those who are much less known, such as Emma Amos, Elizabeth Catlett and Vincent Smith, three printmakers who deal vividly with civil rights themes. It shows artists for whom a political poster may have been a one-time thing (Jasper Johns's Vietnam War moratorium poster) and artists like Hans Haacke, Nancy Spero and Antonio Frasconi, for whom political struggle of some sort is the heart and soul of their work. It includes works by Ben Shahn and Jack Levine, two very different artists themselves, whose art has its roots in 1930's Social Realism, as well as works by Bruce Nauman, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, whose political concerns have developed out of Conceptual art's emphasis on language. Yet among the younger generation is also Paul Marcus, whose oversized woodcut "The Auction" employs a 1930's vernacular. Also here are woodcuts by Richard Mock that have appeared on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times, and the stencils of John Fekner that oppose the transportation of nuclear wastes through New York City and that have appeared on the pilings and overpasses of the Long Island Expressway.

The achievement of this exhibition is more documentary and historical than esthetic. It is not so much that art loses out in this equation or is overlooked. On the contrary, art is repeatedly used well, respectfully and originally. It is simply that the various events and issues delineated here are in themselves overwhelming. It is difficult to walk through parts of this exhibition and think that much is right with the world. This is particularly the case in the gallery titled "War and Revolution," where a wall of work expressing opposition to the Vietnam War faces a wall devoted to artists' responses to the United States involvement in Latin America.

But there's something invigorating and compelling about this exhibition, and not just because so much history is encapsulated within so little space. First, it documents the way that, since Abstract Expressionism, certain strains of art have become increasingly engaged with the outside world. Second, it is simply a remarkable display of moral fiber. Time after time, this exhibition shows artists placing themselves squarely in the path of human events and bearing witness through their work.

nett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, during the last 20 years of her life, and the crystalline, off-kilter arrangements of Kandinsky's late work may also have been important to such works as "Fire Festival" of 1951. But the results are not generally derivative. For one thing, Mrs. Mason's best paintings are dramatically small, usually under 20 inches on a side. Their lovely surfaces and subtle compositional adjustments are viewed up close where every centimeter counts, yet their scale is expansive and almost grand.

A poet as well as a painter, Mrs. Mason also had good titles, one being "The Importance of the Neutral Color Red," attached to a painting from 1959 in which four vertical bars of color match size and weight on a neutral ground. At a point when abstraction is being reconsidered from all sides, this is a timely show.

## 'German Realist Drawings From the 1920's'

David Nolan Gallery

560 Broadway (at Prince Street)  
Through Feb. 13

This exhibition brings together the drawings of 18 artists from pre-World War II Germany whose names will be new to most denizens of SoHo galleries, where contemporary art prevails. Works by Otto Dix, Georg Grosz and Christian Schad are on view, but the show is carried by much less familiar names: Wilhelm Lachnit, Rudolf Schlichter, Erich Wegner and Karl Hubbuch.

To some extent these drawings, mostly in pencil, delineate a retrenching of realism that is quite at odds with the descriptive and painterly liberties taken by the German Expressionists, who were these artists' contemporaries. (Both groups, by the way, were viewed as degenerate by the Nazis.) A subtle subversiveness pervades this show, but it is usually arrived at by attempting to show people and things as they really are, although minor distortions abound.

This show will make you think a lot about photography, especially the work of August Sander, who documented the ravages of time upon the human face, and Lewis Hine, who depicted children trapped by forces beyond their comprehension. Like some of Mr. Hine's work, Mr. Lachnit's "Child Laborer" presents a bone-thin creature with a poet's face. His "Blind Man" is equally strong, as is the handsome, slumped gentleman in a three-piece suit in Mr. Schlichter's "Unemployed."

Ultimately, photography may have won out over drawing as a reportorial tool. But the efforts to respond to life's realities with a drawing style initiated by Ingres and shaped by Cézanne, Beckmann and Picasso often yield powerful results. This is an exhibition for both the connoisseur and the social historian.

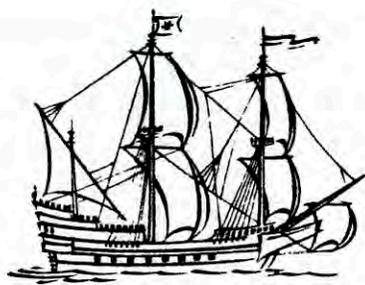
## Alan Uglow

Lorence-Monk Gallery

568 Broadway (at Prince Street)  
Through tomorrow

Alan Uglow's latest exhibition is a single installation piece titled "Signals." It presents a form of abstract painting that is both pure and impure in ways that are unusual today. The emphasis here is on perception and the way the eyes and ears can work together and against each other, corrupting and expanding their very different capacities. Four large monochrome panels, one high on each wall, provide floating squares of undiluted red, blue, yellow and black. Four speakers, one to each corner of the gallery, emit pulsations of an entirely

## SHOWCASE Auctions Exhibitions



## Sir Francis Drake and the Age of Discovery

THROUGH MAY 1

FOR TEN YEARS, SIR FRANCIS DRAKE COMBED THE NEW WORLD TO CAPTURE GOLD AND LAND FOR HIS QUEEN, ELIZABETH I

The "Drake Manuscript" is a 400-year-old illustrated guide to the Caribbean sailed by England's greatest privateer. Its 200 watercolors of the flora, fauna and Indian life which greeted Drake and his men have been hailed as "a new window on the New World." They will be presented to the public in their entirety for the first time in the exhibition "Sir Francis Drake and the Age of Discovery."

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## No Regrets

*An art critic looks back on the hard-won achievements of feminist art and the current state of its legacy.*

BY LUCY LIPPARD

*The following is the text of the keynote talk that opened the Museum of Modern Art's symposium "The Feminist Future" [Jan. 26-27], revised for a lecture during the "WACK!" show at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in April, and slightly revised again for publication. I'd like to dedicate this talk to the memory of Arlene Raven, Marcia Tucker and Molly Ivins.*



Jackie Winsor: *Solid Lattice*, 1970, wood and nails, 27 by 24 by 22 inches.



Joanne Leonard: *Journal (Miscarriage)*, 1973, mixed mediums on paper.

From time to time over the last 30 years, feminism has been relegated to the past and replaced by a grave marker or post (as in post-feminism). I'm going to try to provide some kind of perspective on where we've been and a bit about where we are—not an easy task, as there's no cohesive feminist art movement today, and the wildly varied manifestations of the uncohesive feminist art movement are often under the radar, especially if you live, as I do now, in a New Mexico village. And of course we were *never* all that cohesive. Definitions of feminist art were always passionately contested. It was one of our strengths that there was never a single unified feminism or a single feminist community, despite attempts by the dominant culture to conflate us into a short-lived movement and to blame each branch for the supposed sins of the others.

But I believe there was and still is something that might be called a feminist culture, *not* to be confused with cultural feminism. Feminist culture entails a basic set of values common to socialist, radical, lesbian and various other brands of feminisms. I'm not fool enough to try defining it. But 30-odd years ago a group from the L.A. Woman's Building arrived at these functions for a feminist culture: "raising consciousness, inviting dialogue, and transforming culture." Still sounds good to me. My own version around that time was that feminist culture is "a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life." When I first became a feminist, 37 years ago, I compared it to jumping off a bridge and wondering halfway



Two panels from Ida Applebroog's *"Dyspepsia Works,"* 1978-81, ink and Rhoplex on vellum, approx. 11 by 9 inches each.

down if this was such a good idea. But there aren't a lot of recovering, post-feminist artworkers from that period, if there are any. Feminism changed lives and they usually stayed that way.

Today the notion of feminist community is splintered—in part because of right-wing ascendancies, in part because of post-multiculturalism, and in part because the women's movement *did* succeed in integrating women artists into the mainstream, where they often forgot how they got there. To paraphrase Anthony Appiah, we are in danger of being understood only for our opposition to patriarchal culture, which amounts to "intellectual indenture."

From the beginning of second-wave feminism, which began around 1966 and hit the art world belatedly in 1969-70, representation of and by women in words and images has been the core issue of feminist art. *Unconscious* feminism began for me with the show I curated in New York City in 1966 called "Eccentric Abstraction." I hadn't a clue that the Women's Liberation movement was starting up and I was neck deep in Minimalism (which Clement Greenberg once accused of having "rather feminine sensibilities"; it wasn't a compliment). The work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Alice Adams (as well as that of the other participants in "Eccentric Abstraction"—Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier, Frank Lincoln Viner and Don Potts) existed in a curious location between biological and Minimalist abstraction that was later claimed mostly by women. For all their quasi-ugliness there was something immensely attractive about Bourgeois's small turdlike latex sculptures and Hesse's obsessive syntheses of strength and fragility through materials. They opened up a volcanic layer of suppressed erotic imagery and "body ego" that

somehow I'd been waiting for. It didn't sink in that this imagery was *female* until I became a feminist four years later, on the wings of Conceptual art and the politics of the Artworkers Coalition, the latter also the birthplace of New York's first feminist art group: WAR—Women Artists in Revolution.

At first, in New York, it was all about art. For better or worse, feminist art there was often preoccupied with fending off or competing with the male-dominated mainstream. We spent a lot of that decade remodeling our lives and our textual and formal languages to make room for women's experience. The Slide Registry of Women's Art—which we used to prove that women were doing everything that men were—was kept in my house for a couple of years. The Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee (founded by Brenda Miller, Poppy Johnson and Faith Ringgold) used it to force the Establishment to look at art by women, beginning with the 1970 Whitney Annual. Our tactics at the Whitney were multiple: we issued a fake press release saying the Annual would finally be 50 percent women and 50



Lee Lozano: *Untitled*, ca. 1964, oil on canvas, 66 by 96 inches.

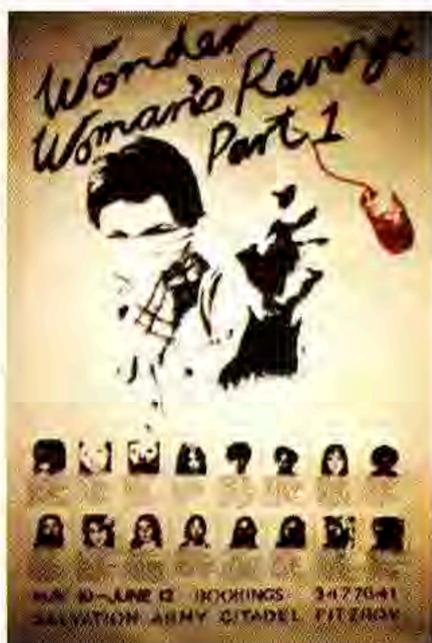
percent "non-white." We projected slides of women's art on the outside of the building. We faked invitations so a lot of us could get inside to do a sit-in at the opening. The museum got wind of that and set up a machine to distinguish the fakes from the authentic invitations, so we traded our fakes to famous people the museum didn't want to evict. We protested weekly on the Whitney's defensive bridge over the moat; we faked a docent's tour; we blew whistles in the stairwells, lipsticked the women's room mirrors, left eggs and unused tampons marked "50 percent women" around the galleries . . . and we got a lot of attention, even from the FBI. Joining us was WSABAL (Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation), consisting mainly of Faith Ringgold and her daughters Barbara and Michele Wallace, who made a big splash for

Faith Ringgold: *Dancing on the George Washington Bridge*, 1988, mixed mediums, 68 inches square.



one female family. WEB, or West East Bag, a national network and newsletter of women's groups with slide registries, was founded in April 1971 when a few of us visited the show "26 Women Artists" I'd curated at the Aldrich Museum. Pretty soon came Women in Art, and The Women's Interarts Center. A.I.R. Gallery inspired SoHo 20, WARM in Minneapolis, Artemisia in Chicago, and a bunch of other so-called separatist groups. The Women's Caucus for Art within the CAA networked with those in academia, and it's still going strong.

At the same time, theories about women's art being different from men's art were blowing in from the



Mary Gallagher and Angelica Gee: Wonder Woman's Revenge, Part 1, 1973, poster.

West Coast, from Judy Chicago's feminist art program at Fresno, and then from Chicago's and Miriam Schapiro's program at Cal Arts—famous for Womanhouse. Then came the dazzling Woman's Building, built with pink tools and bathed in pink spotlights on special occasions. Many of us New York women mightily resisted these ideas at first. But after looking at the slides pouring into the registry, it didn't take long for me to concede that certain forms, images and patterns recurred so often they couldn't

be denied. Whether their source was nature or nurture was subject to debate, a debate that got more interesting when lesbian art was thrown into the mix, a debate that still hasn't entirely subsided.

Eventually it became clear that mere resistance was confining, that we could survive outside the art world and create our own formal and intellectual spaces. "Feminism's greatest contribution to the future of art has probably been precisely its lack of contribution to modernism," I pontificated in 1980. Modernism was about truths, and feminism produced a rupture—a real paradigm shift (to use an overworked phrase) in the 1970s. Truth with a capital T hasn't been the same since. But precisely because feminism escaped or ignored the modernist canon, it has had a huge impact on contemporary art of the last 30 years, and has simultaneously been neglected by historians.

In the early to mid-'70s all the now well-worn feminist issues—formal and ideological—were new to us. The art—incredibly honest and often raw—seemed fresh and outrageous. Even the simplest things about women's experience hadn't been said aloud before, displayed in public before. "Feminine" materials and the color pink, orgasm, menstruation, childbirth, menopause, domestic labor, all took on a new and rebel-

lous significance, as did central imagery and explicitly sexual imagery from a female viewpoint. With this reclamation of our visceral identities, there was—and still is—a lot of emphasis on the gendered body: Carolee Schneemann pulling a scroll out of her vagina; Lynda Benglis flaunting a double dildo; Suzanne Lacy playing with animal guts; Judy Chicago's *Red Flag*—a tampon extraction; an Australian poster by Mary Gallagher and Angelica Gee of a woman hurling a bloody tampon at the viewer like a Molotov cocktail.

These don't have a lot in common with Joana Vasconcelos's chandelier of tampons at the 2005 Venice Biennale, which was beautiful, but doesn't pack the same wallop these days. A lot of the early claims made for essentialism have fallen to the sharp knives of critical theory, but the obsessively repetitive aspect of women's art and the focus on sexuality were voluntarily constructed from social experience and have remained in the feminist canon.

As Elizabeth Hess has pointed out, when conservative art writers argue that nothing happened during the pluralist '70s, they mean nothing happened except feminist art. One reason it hasn't received its art-historical due is that, like Conceptual art, feminist art was not based on style but on content. It was hard to pin down, a moving target. It was never an art movement per se, with all the implied similarities in style and esthetic breakthroughs, critical triumphs and post-coital exhaustion. It was art made as part of a larger social movement, based on the struggle for across-the-board equality we have yet to see.

At the same time, for all the feel-good and sometimes self-congratulatory rhetoric of the '70s, the integration of women of color into largely white organizations did not go well on either coast. ("Add a woman of color and stir," acidly commented one California critic of tokenism.) The mere idea of integration instead of co-founding and equal beginnings indicates how this became the great failure of second-wave feminism. Good intentions were rampant, but so was ignorance, and sometimes arrogance. We're all struggling for the right to be perceived as subjects of history, acting in it, rather than as objects acted upon. Today the distinction between international (which means mostly European-derived) and global (which means everyone who is still usually left out despite a body of often brilliant post-colonial criticism) is another barrier that has to be breached. What Edward Said called "the violence of the act of representation" was no less important then than now. We are too slowly learning to see the flesh and blood beneath the makeup and the make-believe.

At one point in the '80s, a woman told me I wasn't considered a feminist any more because I was "too interested in the Third World." I was surprised to hear that women were unrepresented in most of the world. But I was also seriously alarmed at such a narrow definition of feminism. It highlighted a problem for feminist art activism, which was the lack of solid ongoing exchange and support for lower-income women and women of color (as though they were offshoots of the generic white middle-class women's movement)—what has now been conflated into a vague

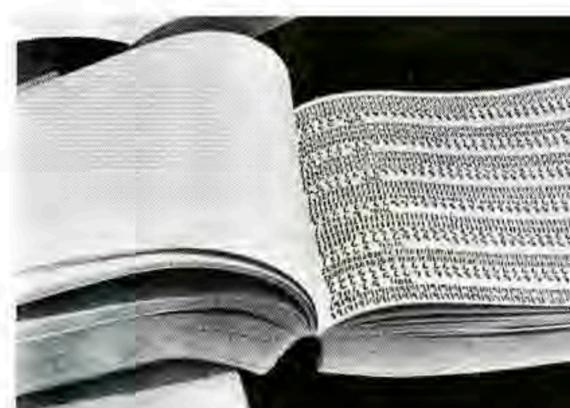
Painting (with floor element) from Emma Amos's "Falling" series, 1988-92.



May Stevens: Mysteries and Politics, 1978, oil on canvas, 78 by 144 inches.



Eunice Golden: Crucifixion, 1969, oil on canvas, 48 by 72 inches.



Hanne Darboven: One page of Jan. 23, 1968, from one of six volumes of the year 1968.

and boundless "diversity." As Audre Lorde wrote, not those differences between us that are separate. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences and to examine the distortions which result from misnaming them and their effects upon human beings and expectation." But I don't think feminist artists given up yet on the polyphonic voice.

I wrote in the '70s and still earnestly believe "women are in a privileged position to satisfy the needs of an art that could communicate the needs of all classes and genders to each other, and get rid of the we/they dichotomy to as great an extent as is possible in a capitalist framework." Only when politics is truly internalized can they be effectively communicated through form. Those of us who identified with socialist feminism in the '70s and '80s were struggling with the contradictions between Marxism and feminist horizontal and vertical class structures. As Barbara Ehrenreich observed, "For all the ardent egalitarianism of the early movement, feminism did, in fact, have the unforeseen consequence of heightening class differences between women, ideologically and professionally." And as Navajo/Creek/Seminole photographer Hulleah Tsinhahjinnie has said, "While my mother and aunt were cleaning the house of white women, those women were developing theories of feminism."

Nevertheless, for all the internal and external assumptions that the women's movement was white and middle class, the fact remains that in a 1986 poll, only 26 percent of lower income women refused to identify as feminists, compared to 41 percent of upper income women. A 2005 poll showed 69 percent of women believe the women's movement has improved their lives, but only 24 percent will call themselves feminists. And feminist art's focus on sexuality over the last three decades may have to be reconsidered. A 1990 poll by Virginia Slims showed that poor women were not galvanized by reproductive rights and other so-called sexual issues but by poverty and lack of support from their male partners in child care and domestic work. Domestic violence is a trans-class issue that surely comes in there somewhere. I wonder how much of that has changed, or if it has. This year, Democrats are reintroducing the Equal Rights Amendment. The issues are there; the allies are there; the coalitions remain too few.

I know many of my own epiphanies around race and class came while working with the Heresies Collective, founded in 1976 by about 20 women—artists, writers, a filmmaker, an anthropologist—all



**Jenny Holzer and Lady Pink (with Ilona Granet):** Tear ducts seem to be a grief provision, 1983, spray paint on canvas, approx. 90 by 115 inches.



**Agnes Denes:** Wheatfield—A Confrontation, Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan, summer 1982, two acres of wheat planted and harvested.

white, at that point. We published a journal of feminism, art and politics that lasted 12 years, and established a shorter-lived school—the New York Feminist Art Institute. *Heresies* was the first time I had written about feminism and Left politics within a comfortable context. Each essay was constructed from dialogue with my peers, which included incendiary brainstorming, fierce disagreements, passionate rants, and the inevitable crit/self-crit (criticism/self-criticism for those of you who have never gone around the circle dissecting

virtually everything that was said and done). The magazine's various issues—on lesbian feminism, racism, the Goddess, sex, propaganda, ecology, media and class, women's traditional arts and so forth—were each edited by a separate collective and overseen by the "mother collective," a process by which *Heresies* created an ever-expanding community that survives 30 years later. It's this kind of experience that keeps a feminist in the fold.

**C**ertainly the foundation was laid in the '70s for the more refined theoretical work of the '80s, when "representation" became the dominant focus. Photography, performance and, later, new media, offered appropriate vehicles for women artists trying to compete with the mass media's misrepresentations. When French psychoanalytic theory invaded the academies and photo-text work became de rigueur for feminists confronting a male-led and often misogynist expressionism, these tendencies diluted some feminist issues while integrating feminism into the new canon—the discourse of "visual culture"—distancing it from fine art.

Also in the late '70s and early '80s, a range of young artists' collectives revamped public art, often with a feminist twist, as a new generation of major women artists—among them Jenny Holzer and Kiki Smith—arrived on the scene within new young mixed-gender collectives and a retro punk art scene. (Some of us older lefties had trouble with the retro part but it was a great shot in the arm not only for feminism but for activist art groups.) In 1985 the Guerrilla Girls burst onto the scene with the posters they called "cultural terrorism." They were followed up by PESTS which did the same for artists of color.

All this in the mid-'80s, when, *not* at all coincidentally, the art market was in lousy shape, and art about gender—feminist and queer art—was briefly touted as the hottest item around. Thanks to the culture wars of the late '80s, many of the original feminist issues were reframed (though Karen Finley and Holly Hughes never attracted the support that came to Serrano and Mapplethorpe). The queer renaissance, with ActUp, Lesbian Avengers, Dyke Action Machine and Gran Fury, brought a renewed energy to feminism, sadly embraced in part due to the AIDS crisis and reactionary politics.

In the '90s, young feminist artists, trying to toss off the blanket of deconstructivist jargon and to revivify the imagery of feminist art, looked back to earlier work by Hesse, Bourgeois, Nancy Spero, Harmony Hammond and many others. Paralleling ActUp's media savvy and art-aware successes, WAC—Women's Action Coalition (often misidentified as Women's Art Coalition)—was created in infuriated response to the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill debacle and the William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson rape trials. WAC was not an artists' group, though it came out swinging at its political targets with terrific graphics, but artists were among its founders and leaders. It was a national women's SWAT team, activated by daily injustices, swooping in like Wonder Woman to claim public space with the galvanizing beat of its drum corps. During WAC's too short but dynamic life, chapters sprang up around the country,

**In the early to mid-'70s the art seemed fresh and outrageous. Even the simplest things about women's experience hadn't been said aloud before, displayed in public before.**



**Ilona Granet:** Curb Your Animal Instinct, 1986, enamel on metal, 24 by 26 inches.

giving women artists a place to rekindle their anger, to inform their artmaking with communal experience again, to back up their art with action again.

All along there has been a certain tension between practice and theory, activism and academism. While the limitations of untheorized strategy were acknowledged, the often exciting theory being created on the ground has been mostly disregarded in the ivory towers, which led to a mutual distancing.

Actions left untheorized tended to disappear from history, if only for lack of serious consideration. On the other hand, the '80s proved that there are also limitations to overtheorized strategies. Theory does not invalidate activism nor vice versa. Activist art, creating its own political context, can also generate ideas just as ideas can generate activism.

Not being a theorist, I never saw any reason why all these vital and shape-shifting ideas couldn't co-exist. I wrote optimistically about "Both Sides Now" (the title of a show I did at Artemisia in Chicago in 1980). Clearly it's dangerous and it's dumb to confine people to imagined essences, to totalizing histories from which there is no escape. But it's equally dumb to throw the baby out with the bathwater, to reject all subjectivity, roots and origins as mere swamps of stereotype, limitation and prejudice. The stories that define us can be liberating as well as constricting. This remains a fertile area not just of opposition but of serious possibilities. A simple either/or won't work and it's not the point. For instance, recent biological research is coming up with some facts about the gendered brain that we are going to have to weave into our assumptions. It will only get more interesting.

Thinking back, I've regained my admiration for that ultimate in eye-opening truisms: "the personal is political." This modest phrase—now admittedly a cliché—was the baseline for cultural, radical and



**Detail from Martha Wilson's I make up the image of my perfection/I make up the image of my deformity (shown), 1972, two color photographs by Alan Comfort.**

socialist feminisms, with emphases differently placed in each branch. In the hands of feminists and other activists, it remains a living and dynamic proposition, a brilliant way to translate lived experience—positive and negative—into political action. The “political is personal” is not the opposite of this credo, but its other half. Martha Rosler for instance talks about inserting public narratives into private life and vice versa. The lesbian collective that publishes the journal *LITTR*—a worthy heiress to *Heresies*—suggests that we “build private insurrections that loosen public ground.” When we understand who we are in a historical sense we are far better able to understand what other cultural groups are experiencing within a time and place we all share.



**Yolanda Lopez:** Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe, from the “Guadalupe” triptych, 1978, oil and pastel on paper, 30 by 24 inches.

**F**eminist art brought with it the resurrection of content, of narrative forms, traditional arts, autobiography, performance, documentary photography, affinities with the politics and creativity of global cultures—all ways of bringing the details of daily life into the art context where they can be understood within a broader frame. I’ve always been obsessed with the collage esthetic that defines so much feminist art—a layered, cumulative mode. From Hannah Höch to the Guerrilla Girls to Barbara Kruger to Deborah

Bright, collage or montage has always been a particularly effective medium for a political art. Humorous and hard-hitting, it can bring separate realities together in endlessly different ways. Collage or montage, though it was first exploited by modernism, is also the core strategy of postmodernism. It represents a dialogic approach. Collage is about shifting relationships, juxtaposition and superimposition, gluing and ungluing. It’s an esthetic that willfully takes apart what is or is supposed to be and rearranges it in ways that suggest what could be. Collage *makes something* of contradictions. It contains the possibility of visual puns, accessible contrasts and irony. It’s also the medium of surprise, which can shake us out of our stupors.

Collaboration is the social extension of the collage esthetic, and it characterizes a lot of women’s art. Collaboration has long been a weapon against the powerful sense of alienation that characterizes late capitalism, which divides and separates through specialization at the same time that it homogenizes. Putting things together without divesting them of their own identities is a metaphor for cultural democracy, the diametric opposite of a global corporate culture; this has been the impetus for the proliferation of new young international collectives.

Feminists engage with the world. Not to do so is among the most unethical decisions



**Sabra Moore:** A Roomful of Mothers, 1985, mixed mediums on paper.

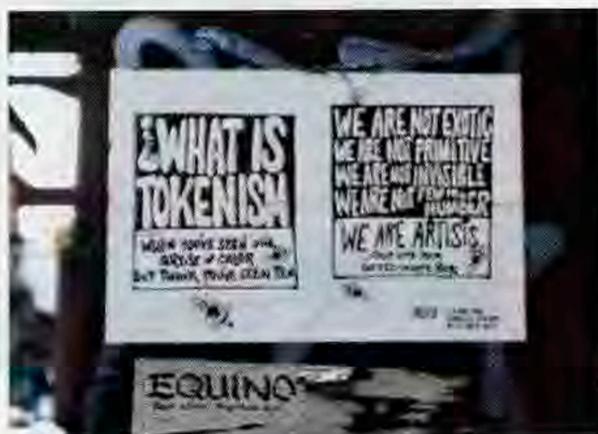


**Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Creek/Seminole/Navajo):** Damn!, 1998, digital image, unset dimensions.



**Performance by Carneval Knowledge, 1982.**

an artist can make. One positive development in the contemporary diffusion of feminist values is the fact that even the iconic artists of the 1970s have brought their feminism to a wide variety of issues. Suzanne Lacy’s powerful large-scale performances, which claim not only public space but public consideration, have most recently been devoted to youth, in Oakland, as well as in Medellín, Colombia. Mierle Laderman Ukeles has constantly expanded her originally domestic Maintenance Art into the urban infrastructure. Harmony Hammond now makes eloquent minimal abstractions in which the act of painting expresses the queer experience. Joyce Kozloff makes perversely decorative maps of wars, energy inequity and other urgent issues. I could go on and on. The point is that feminist artists are concerned with the global class struggle, with racism, with peace, with environmental justice and so on. The many women active in the current antiwar movement—Women in Black, Artists Against the War, Not in Our Name



**Street protest poster in SoHo, 1987, by PESTS, an action group for artists of color.**

and so forth—were acting *as feminists* when they insisted after 9/11, “Our grief is not a cry for war.”

One significant stronghold of once-removed feminist art is public/community-based art and the eco-art movement, where women’s “mythic” identification with nature has found new outlets. Environmental issues used to be considered soft politics. Now they are central, as we confront the abyss. Public interventions, community art, and eco-art are all about claiming space for alternative value systems. A lot of the most interesting eco-art is in a sense about gendered space; it often takes the form of projects that may take years or even decades to complete, expanding our current notions of art in time. Feminist art has always applied the principles of generosity and reciprocity to the social structures from which it emerges. I think that’s why much of the best public art is made by women with a feminist consciousness. (The distinction between working for the public and working for the market is an important one.) If some women are gifted synthesists and mediators (and I don’t see that as an insult), what better place to work than on that “fluid membrane between public and private spheres,” to quote Sheila de Bretteville, co-founder of the L.A. Woman’s Building, now head of Yale’s graphic design department. With Susana Torre, Dolores Hayden and others she pioneered notions of gendered space and public art. If it weren’t for these feminist models, I probably wouldn’t have spent the last 15 years working on community planning, writing neo-cultural geography, or curating a show on global warming in which there are 27 women, 10 men and seven mixed collaborations [it will appear at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Sept. 14-Dec. 21].

Ever since the beginning of the feminist art movement there’ve been monotonously repeated complaints from male and female nonfeminists—about how art has no gender and about “separatist” exhibitions. Given the increasing complexities of gender and identity politics in the last few decades, these two points may seem pretty simplistic. But they keep turning up in different guises. The effectiveness of various kinds of separatisms shifts with the times. (Just remember the omnipresence of all-white-male shows we older folks grew up with.) And maybe art has no gender, but artists do. I suspect there are not many thinking women, or men, who would deny, even today, that women’s lived experience—political, sexual, biological—is different from men’s lived experience.

The wishful or even utopian exaggerations of a mythic female power, widespread in early feminism, have fallen to a more skeptical age, which is fine with me. But I can’t help harboring a sneaking nostalgia for the days when it all made sense, when we were enveloped in an exhilarating cloud of ideas and images, when we were sure we could change the world for women



**Michelle Stuart:** #50, High Falls, NY, 1975-76, mixed mediums, approx. 131 by 60 inches.

within a decade, when we had our own spaces and our own communities, our own culture . . . when we used the word "revolution" and believed it was possible. It was a hell of a lot of fun.

I know cyber feminists are out there even if I can't hear them because I live off the grid and stubbornly don't do the Internet. For a while we had rooms of our own. Now we have chat rooms shared with virtually everybody. Maybe the Web (I think of the 1971 WEB) is the new way to negotiate feminist visual production/practice in a time that is not very hospitable to idealism.



Brenda Miller: *Tenstrike*, 1973, sisal, 80 inches square.

notion of sisterhood is "so outdated it almost seems cool." Ouch.

The last six years have been worse than we could have imagined. The breadth of malicious mistakes made by the Bush Administration have hit us with so many issues all at once that sometimes we feel powerless. A more cynical worldview characterizes the early 21st century and its arts, created in the midst of religious fundamentalism, nationalism and war. Our bodies are still battlegrounds, as the recent Supreme Court partial-birth abortion decision makes all too clear. Our anger is as fragmented as our communications, because there is too much to be angry about. A question that came up at MOMA was "is anger essentialist?" I'd say no, anger is essential.

Nevertheless, we are notoriously resilient. Our daughters, daughters-in-law and granddaughters will be, too. There's no question that feminism, with some help from feminist art, has filtered out into the dominant culture and changed the way the world sees and treats women. Despite cultural amnesia and the fear of erasure common to all progressive movements in less than progressive times, the exuberant optimism of vintage feminist art is attracting attention again. Some women's work has even trickled gradually into Janson's *History of Art*. Women have represented the U.S. (as well as France, Germany and many other countries) at the Venice Biennale. *The Dinner Party* has finally found a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum. The Feminist Art Project out of Rutgers is gathering the forces again. The long-awaited "WACK!" is attracting

crowds at L.A. MOCA. Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly's "Global Feminisms" is at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, and coming down the pike in November is Mary Garrard and Norma Broude's "Claiming Space," at American University in Washington, D.C. And an e-book titled *From Site to Vision: The Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture*, by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton, has just appeared. All of these demonstrate the length and breadth, the staying power, commitment and rejuvenation of contemporary feminist art. Can another feminist art revolution be far behind? Anne Wagner suggested at the MOMA symposium that "political

**One reason feminist art hasn't received its art-historical due is that, like Conceptual art, it was not based on style but on content. It was hard to pin down, a moving target.**

imagination is feminism's best shot, the key to the future." Griselda Pollock added, "Imagination is how politics operates at the level of esthetics." And this goes for transgendering the issues, as David Joselit put it, educating and incorporating men as well.

So where are we now? On the cusp of a Third Wave? (It has been almost 40 years.) In 2002 Spanish curator Rosa Martinez offered a manifesto for a "New Feminism" that would gather "a series of radical but flexible strategies to reinvent the emotional, sexual, economical and geopolitical distribution of power" and demand "a better distribution of the benefits" of capitalist development, rejecting the "nineties backlash that claims that equality between men and



Documentation of a performance by *The Waitresses*, ca. 1978, a group associated with the *Woman's Building* in Los Angeles.

women has already been achieved." And many young women are thinking outside the whitewalled room. Taiwanese Hsin-I Eva Lin went on a 45-day strike (no art making, empty studio and leafleting) during a 2004 residency in New York "to call attention to the insecurity of labor in the global economy."

Artist Carrie Moyer wrote recently (I'm paraphrasing) that the real question is whether feminism is recognized as a meaningful historical precedent, acknowledged and cited by artists, critics and historians. Is this Feminist Spring just another blip against the backlash? Time will tell. bell hooks has written about "feminist movement." By omitting "the," she endows our political noun with the forward momentum of a verb. So much for the past, let's get on with the future of feminism. What are we going to make of this window of opportunity? One thing at least is for sure, we'll be post-feminists when our goals have been met, and not before. □

Author: *Lucy R. Lippard* is currently working on *Scratching the Surface*, a critical history of her home turf, the *Galisteo Basin* in northern New Mexico.



Anne Noggle: *Stonehenge Decoded*, 1977, black-and-white photograph.

Significantly, many of the collaborations and collectives that have come back into style involve people working in different countries and communicating via the Internet. It's always a good sign when the exalted egos cultivated by the art world's rugged individualist system are willing and able to work together. And of course, as Mira Schor has pointed out, there have now been at least two generations of artists who can claim an "artistic matrilineage." This has definitely contributed to a certain hunger for feminist action. Today's young feminist artists are unashamedly working off '70s feminism just as artists did in the '90s.

Certainly we should hang onto the f-word and continue to give it new meanings. As one young woman pointed out at MOMA, if we invented another term, it would soon be demonized too. I've been chatting about feminism with younger women, across three semi-generations, and one quite common take is the rejection of any generalizations about women or men. "Feminism is part of who I am," said one undergraduate, "but to make a big deal of it would just be bad for the cause. It shouldn't be an issue anymore. Let's go forward instead of looking back. I may not call myself a feminist, but

Clarissa Sligh: *Reading Dick and Jane with Me*, 1989, offset printing, 22-page artist's book, 8½ by 7 inches.



Deborah Bright: Black-and-white photograph from the "Dream Girls" series, 1989-90.

