

Art Of The Civil Rights Era Revisited In The Hood Museum's 'Witness'

Jacob Lawrence, Soldiers and Students, 1962, opaque watercolor over graphite on wove paper. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College: Bequest of Jay R. Wolf, Class of 1951; W.976.187. ©2014 The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), N.Y.

HANOVER, N.H. — Fifty years ago, the Congress of the United States passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. The bill came before the US Senate in February 1964, survived a 54-day filibuster, and was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 2. The struggle for racial equality had been waged for decades, and it continued to be fought throughout the 1960s.

Visual artists mounted their own insurgency, acting on their commitment to the belief that progress could be won by changing the way people see things. In observance of the 50th anniversary of this momentous legislation, "Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties" presents more than 100 works by 66 artists who merged their art and their political activism on behalf of civil rights. The exhibition, organized by the Brooklyn Museum, is among the few to explore how painting, sculpture, graphic art and photography not only

responded to the political and social turmoil of the era but also helped to influence its direction.

"Witness" will be on view from August 30 through December 14, and will be accompanied by lectures and other museum programming, a fully illustrated catalog, and a smartphone-based audio tour.

"This ambitious exhibition is an opportunity for everyone to encounter moving works of art and a spectacular array of innovative programs," said Michael Taylor, director of the Hood Museum of Art. "Visitors will be able to explore, through the power of the extraordinary works of art on display, the many ways that people make a difference to themselves, their communities, and the world by taking action."

No clear and contemporary road map existed for political activism in the arts at the outset of the 1960s. The established artists of the Cold War generation — primarily abstractionists who saw their work as profoundly subjective and self-contained



— rejected the validity of art that was socially or politically activist.

A significant number of artists, driven by their inseparable convictions and commitment to their work, nevertheless tapped a wide array of aesthetic approaches to produce art in support of the cause of racial equality. The works on view in "Witness" encompass gestural abstraction, pop aesthetics, collage, assemblage, photography,

minimalism and collaborative printmaking. The artists who created them sought to envision, or move American culture closer to a civil society. They generated a multiplicity of dialogues about systemic racism and the disenfranchisement of African Americans, and they visualized affirmations of full citizenship, black identity, empowerment and communal creativity.

"Witness: Art and Civil



Benny Andrews, "Witness," 1968, oil on canvas with painted fabric collage. ©Estate of Benny Andrews / Licensed by VAGA, New York City. Photo by Joshua Nefsky; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York City

Rights in the Sixties" is curated by Teresa A. Carbone, Andrew W. Mellon Curator of American Art, Brooklyn Museum, and Kellie Jones, associate professor in the department of art history and archaeology at Columbia University.

The Hood Museum at Dartmouth College is at 4 East Wheelock Street. For further information, 603-646-1110 or www.hoodmuseum.dartmouth.edu.

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