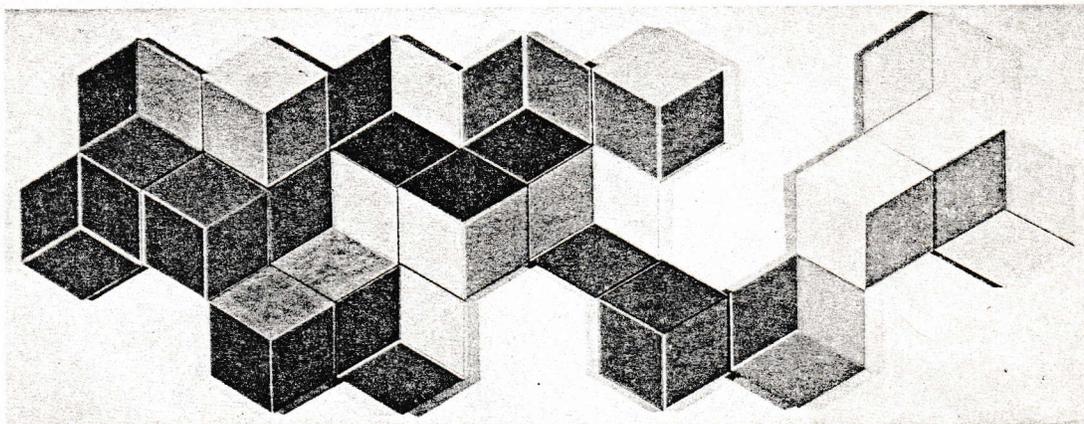


By Frank Bowling

It's Not Enough to Say 'Black Is Beautiful'



Alvin Loving: *Diana: Time Trip, 2*,
1971. 20 feet, 8 inches wide; Zierler gallery.

The problems of how to judge black art by black artists are not made easier by simply installing it; here a painter examines the works of Williams, Loving, Edwards, Johnson and Whitten as both esthetic objects and as symbols expressing a unique heritage and state of mind

Recent New York art has brought about curious and often bewildering confrontations which tend to stress the political over the esthetic. A considerable amount of writing, geared away from history, taste and questions of quality in traditional esthetic terms, drifts towards "relevance," arbitrating social balance and even quotas. For such writing to be serious, it must consider the artists' intent. Intentions, however, cannot be kept within formalist or literalist confines, even when the works display strong formalist or minimalist aspects. That the answers to questions of intent seem to match demonstrations of formalist or literal content, thus freezing the whole dialogue, leaves a highly complex, often fugitive and hence largely ignored area still to be investigated.

Much of the discussion surrounding painting and sculpture by blacks seems completely concerned with notions about Black Art,

Author: Frank Bowling teaches art history at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston; he will be included among the Whitney Museum's forthcoming "Black Artists in America" exhibition.

not with the works themselves or their delivery. Not with a positively articulated object or set of objects. It is as though what is being said is that whatever black people do in the various areas labeled art is Art—hence Black Art. And various spokesmen make rules to govern this supposed new form of expression. Unless we accept the absurdity of such stereotypes as "they've all got rhythm...." and even if we do, can we stretch a little further to say they've all got painting? Whichever way this question is answered there are others of more immediate importance, such as: What precisely is the nature of black art? If we reply, however, tongue-in-cheek, that the precise nature of black art is that which forces itself upon our attention as a distinguishing mark of the black experience (a sort of thing, perhaps, only recognizable by black people) we are still left in the bind of trying to explain its vagaries and to make generalizations. For indeed we have not been able to detect in any kind of universal sense The Black Experience wedged-up in the flat bed between red and green: between say a red stripe and a green stripe.

If formalism drove painting out of the arena of Action, and painting got to be more about itself as "process" and "thing" (we are not likely to forget the late Ad Reinhardt), painting didn't just isolate itself from questioning; it drove itself and the artists to declaring not just simply the works, but themselves, in a talismanic role. The art may be a simple box, but the artist remains a magician.

The painters I am about to discuss all work in New York. Although they all are black, they have been grouped together almost entirely in

Black Art

relation to their role as artists. They first came together with the curatorial assistance of Lawrence Alloway and Sam Hunter in an exhibition called "5-plus-1" at Stony Brook University in 1969. Of the artists, Mel Edwards and Dan Johnson are sculptors, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, William Williams and myself are painters. It must however be understood that there are many other comparable artists, not necessarily connected with my main thesis but who must be included for reasons which will become clear both in this essay and in the future. These artists are the natural inheritors of modernism through the contributions of their ancestors in traditional African and modern art.

The arguments for an African legacy are often over-stressed and at times aggressively asserted. However there's no denying its emotional and political significance. It is clear that modernism came into being with the contribution provided by European artists' discovery of and involvement with African works, and their development of an aesthetic and a mythic subject from it. But the point I am trying to make concerns the total "inheritance" which constitutes the American experience and that aspect of it with which black people can now (perhaps they always have) fully identify, due to the politicization of blackness. It would be foolish to assume, as some do, that the development of modern art through the contributions of African ancestors is solely the property of blacks, for it is evident that the filtering process must include white consciousness.

I readily admit that this is partly a question of historical placement and time; it nevertheless remains a complex and pressing issue; to wit, a situation which does not shift objective facts, the works or the artists, into areas more readily meaningful. For there is a body of work and there are figures on the scene we simply have to deal with, no matter what the political climate is. At the same time parallel to the question of "intent" there is still the question of standards. How do we judge and salute works by black artists?

I believe that standards exist and complexity of "intent" can be judged by the ability of the individual artist: his ability to fulfill a meaningful talismanic role. But the meaningfulness of the artist's role in many areas of black life is similar to that of such popular figures as Imamu Amiri Baraka, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver and the late Malcolm X. It is interesting to note how the magic of the talismanic figure has been usurped by establishment art for its heroes at large, where we are led to believe that the most "relevant" artists are those who display the greatest "curatorial sensitivity." The trouble is that in an open-ended situation like ours, the establishment-hero functions more like an earnest modern Sunday school teacher—that is, hip.

Consequently, the artist-hero becomes a power behind the throne (a Western tradition which goes back to the Renaissance), or, worse, a priest saying the last rites. He is not at all the same thing as a caster-out of spirits, who, it was held traditionally, combined his panache as a showman with the ability to receive, set up and articu-



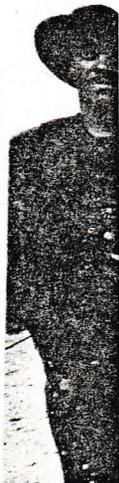
Jack Whitten: *First Frame*, 1971. 60 inches square.

late universal vibrations within the confines of a particular community and discipline. My point here is that black anything—energy, life-style, myth, traditions, even music—is now public property to be used by anyone who cares to, but often this use or rerouting is heavily laced with misinterpretation and bad vibes, producing a kind of hysteria only explainable in terms of politics and suppression.

The problems containing if not yet strangling an assertion that "experience" forges the *content* of art are such that a general statement in today's open-ended situation is available to any interpretation. The central principle that everything which exists can be analyzed into substance and essence, forces one to shift ground over whether works touted under the black label are consistent and positive examples of Black Art.

This is a complicated business, but if we examine some of the works themselves, certain distinctions emerge. There are the political-realist works of certain New York, Boston and Chicago artists, still committed to a mode with a long tradition in American genre and also in 1930s painting. Such Social Realism, used to create an irrational hyper-reality, permits the play of feelings without necessarily either including or considering the limitations of reality itself. None of it measures up to the impact or immediacy of a television newscast.

Unlike, say, the Surrealist painters, who chose an illusionist style to articulate a heightened sense of the reality of their erotic and dream world, they direct their attempts at captivating a local audience and finding a way out of a cultural dilemma. An example of this is the much reproduced and talked about *Champion* by Benny Andrews. Both the work, which is an ungainly papier-maché, collage and rope job, and the sermon the artist apparently preached (parts of which were duly published in *The New York Sunday Times*) at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (where the work was shown) for the benefit of a gathering of the brothers and sisters, stress the emptiness of a "magic event" at an exhibition of painting and sculpture which was not successfully turned into theater. (The establishment press and the exhibition itself jeopardized any possible future effort in this area by the inclusion of works which could not be considered even theatrical



Willi

props, much less art. Press emphasis on this aspect simply turned Andrews' lecture/happening into the empty gesture of tokenism the Museum intended the show to be.)

The inherent problems are not resolved because, like so much bad Surrealist painting, this kind of art is a denial of both form, i.e. painting or sculpture, and that which truly exists in its own right, such as a tree, a table, a box, a man; as against a color or a relationship, in the disciplines of painting and sculpture which are a union of form with matter.

The true reality of particular entities is the embodiment in them of distinct form/matter as a species expressing itself in the spirit of the species, lending itself to being distinguished by such tried and proven (however arbitrary) substantives as, say, language-based systems (there is such a thing as black language in the U.S., as there is such a thing as *Neger Engel* in Surinam, a well-known source for the continuation of certain African forms in the New World). And people may agree to observe certain rules only, perhaps, because of man's inherent drive towards order. Then knowledge of that reality consists in the apprehension of the *specific* (unmistakable!) in an expression of the group mind of that species. It is in this sense that one cannot deny the claims made for such artists as Dana Chandler, Gary Rickson and Benny Andrews, who probably rightly deserve their reputations as having produced Black Art. But the divorce between art (painting) and life (politics) fractures or blocks the suggestive or evocative intention to call up the spirit of the situation or event; what remains are particularities, in a journalistic sense, of an event. What is missing is the feeling, the complicated response, not as history, even instant history, not now as television or radio, but as direct "inherited" experience.

A work of art with the power of making actual or implicit the nature of the species immediately apprehensible to sense perception and *more*, must also stand up to a rigorous analysis consistent with that which is "inside" the given discipline. The essence of the articulated experience may belong solely to the species; it constitutes its essence, and not what was contrived by politics, fashion or mannerisms. Thus it might be discovered that the species Black may have a *face* as part of its essence, whereas its *color* is merely an accident. Color does not in any way define *black*. It is not enough to say "black is beautiful."

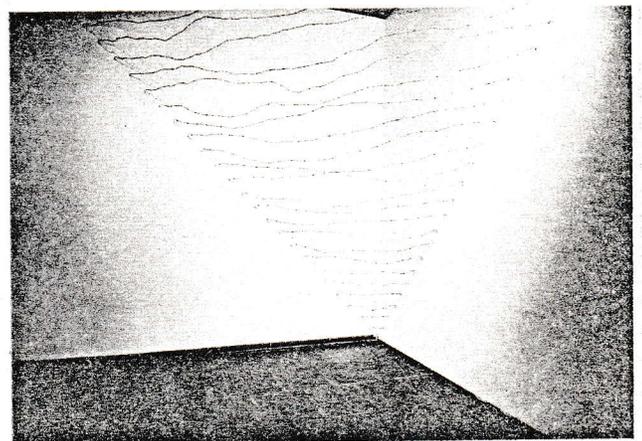
The traditional esthetic of black art, often considered pragmatic, uncluttered and direct, really hinges on secrecy and disguise. The understanding is there, but the overwhelming drive is to make it complicated, hidden, acute. Being *up front* is so often given a double edge, often turning such things as language inside out. What was overlooked in Mel Edwards' barbed wire and chains show at the Whitney was his wit, in the tradition of Duchamp, kept afloat by Robert Morris and Les Levine. The elegance and deliberately loose-hanging serial geometry were a sure cover for painful implications. The fact that so many critics missed the point is a lesson in the separation of white from black. Inherent in this delivery is the bondage neurosis in top hat and kid gloves. This particular museum exhibition was not a game, but controlled criticism gone beyond anything Minimal or anti-form art had achieved. In terms consistent with the convention of dropping hints, Edwards "drew" a linear pyramid directly in a material whose identification is with agony; it is not the same activity as Morris or Olitski invoking the state of Fallen-on-the-floor. And Edwards' unforced delivery is the opposite of political-realist art. He reroutes fashion and current art convention to "signify" something different to someone who grew up in Watts rather than to "signify" only in the meaning of Jack Burnham and his colleagues. Never mind the implication of the "free drawing" of a pyramid as opposed to *building* one. This work was like taking the Classical tradition and Humanism by the ear and making them face reality from the inside. The trouble is if your gaze is elsewhere, only an act of violence will redirect you, and, as I've pointed out elsewhere, *don't burn the museum down*: this will only bar you from the

art experience. Watching the museum burn is a *spectator sport*. Tangling with barbed wire hurts.

William Williams' work is like Frank Stella's in not being about memory. It's about discovery. There is almost no apparent residue, only amazed recognition as these bright abstractions register their charge to the eye and brain. The flow of energy is astonishing. But before I discuss Williams' work specifically, I want to establish a clear and to me obvious distinction between what Williams does and what Stella has done. Criticism, none the less influential for being word-of-mouth, seems to want to penalize the former. But I contend that this is what we are about: Self-evident change!

Stella and Williams don't share an educational background. One went to Abstract-Expressionist Princeton, the other to Bauhaus Yale. This simple fact is not only important, it's explicit. The influence on Williams' work, for very special reasons (social reasons, if you like, but it is self-evident from the nature of the background of white American art, that he, like so many others before him who also happened to be black, couldn't identify with it) was *not* Abstract-Expressionism. Instead it appears to have been European abstraction of the hard-won sort, represented by people like Albers, or even Johannes Itten. There is something (an attitude, a drive in so much of this energy) recalling the force of the Bauhaus, the inconsistencies of proletarian ambition; the implied, if not actual *kitsch*, of knowing too much and understanding too little, except in the larger societal sense. It is a kind of style and energy which glitters like a newly manufactured brass button.

Much of Williams' earlier work was close in spirit and execution to Lissitzky. The posture and the placing of forms recalled Russian Suprematism and re-enacted in an uptown situation things one had read about that kind of revolutionary drive. More important however, compare Williams' jazzy, jagged 1968-69 works (when they settle into the format of the dominant rectangle, after the confused burst of first encounter) with Lissitzky or Malevich and one gets a near equivalent of that circle-and-square tyranny dominating the intentful works of the Russians. One begins to appreciate that the content of this work is not about abstract decorative high art, but aggressive hammer blows in the uptight geometry of color and line. Everything in those paintings—colors as line, lines in between the colors—clashes wherever the elements meet in a confused surge of
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Mel Edwards: *Pyramid Up and Down Pyramid*, section, installation at the Whitney Museum, March, 1970.

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means to assimilate their paradoxical choices in a new equilibrium. Homeostasis is defined by the dictionary as "the tendency of a system...to maintain internal stability owing to the coordinated response of its parts to any situation or stimulus tending to disturb its normal condition or function." Cubism, not finally in any one of its stages or its productions, but in its over-all outlook, was homeostatic in this regard. It is the tension between the way it threatened itself, and the search to find resources to assuage threat, that most fruitfully defines the role it played in the sensibility to follow.

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Buddha dating from the reign of the great 8th-century Kashmir king Lalitaditya: in its unusual pedestal is introduced the supporting figure of Atlas, incongruously flanked by two deer and two lions. Conversely, one is tempted to equate Romanesque sculpture with a stone pillar from the 2nd century A.D. Kushan dynasty showing the mythical tree goddess or dryad Yakshi in high relief standing on a crouching dwarf—as a stupa element illustrating events in the life of Buddha it serves the same devotional purpose as in a medieval Christian church. At the opposite pole from Indian animation is the classic calm of a Khmer stone female figure of *Uma*, from the Baphuon period, 11th century A.D.

Notable among the African pieces in the exhibition are two Benin bronzes, one a Portuguese warrior in 16th-century armor pointing a flint-lock gun, on a pedestal littered with arms and parts of human bodies; the other an African figure in a beaded costume and wearing a Maltese cross on his chest—both date from the 17th century and were formerly in the famous Pitt-Rivers collection. Perhaps unique is a stone mask from the Dan tribe of Nigeria (19th century).

The most unusual of the Pre-Columbian pieces, exquisite in its abstraction of natural forms, is a small stone bird from the Michigan Mound Builders culture, ca. 1100 A.D. Other Pre-Columbian pieces include an impressive Late Classic Mayan head from Chiapas, stucco with remnants of color, ca. 600-800 A.D.; and a Mid-Classic period Colima mask, ca. 300-500 A.D., painted clay, smaller than life-size, probably intended to be worn on the chest.

The wide range of this collection reflects a restless, adventurous curiosity in search for new experiences. "The ability to buy top quality is very important to me," says Heller. "All I care about is if it makes me sing in the stomach."

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passion. The work is virtually irresistible, hallucinatingly original, when it should be pathetic and disastrous.

In the end there is a reason for this attraction toward European abstract revolutionary art, not unlike the late Bob Thompson's absorption in European old masters. Over and above Williams' Yale schooling—in the sense of a talisman—this brother is standing on the corner winning a round of "the dozens," hands down, against all odds.

The mood has begun to change in his recent work. In a four-part picture like *Overkill*, 28 feet long, what seem like leftovers of Cubist faceting have crept in, creating concave and convex drives, flattening and asserting equivalents or challenges to the surface geometry; but they seem on closer scrutiny more a flirtation with what has come down to us from the flattening of certain spherical forms in the sculptures of Baluba art (with its distinctly spaced out and incised hemispheric curves) than with any of Cézanne's discoveries. The picture switches from positive to negative, which intellectually implies cancellation. This is not such a new idea, in fact it is common currency. The astonishing thing is that just the opposite of the expected response is received. Looking at the painting top to bottom,

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of his canvases from the rectangular to other "viable structures." It was as though such perspectives could clear the confused or confusing Surreal imagery of the work of such an artist as M.C. Escher (whom Loving admires) and declare painting's distinct expressive content through structuring.

This observing through discovery of rules and insistent drive towards order, evident in Loving, is consistent with his background; it cannot fully be explained without a long dissertation on this gifted artist's development. His "activated banding," "small fine lines," which seemed so imperative in the segments, the individual hexagonal pieces recently dominant in Loving's work (like being boxed-in, incarcerated) have now given way to color mixing. In this sense one can say that Loving's earlier Expressionist color is changing: "I'm thinking about color as viable structure." Instead of "not being conscious [of color] except whether I like it or not." The interesting thing here is, much as Loving is convinced by his "natural" colorist sensibility, as one follows the progress of his work, the lines keep creeping back. That I could be fooled by an apparent elimination of lines in these big pieces is heartening. But the lines are still there as function in the pure sense. Loving says: "If I could get color that's strong enough, the lines would go...but anyway I like what the lines do."

For lots of rarely mentioned reasons, Loving's work denies sedate enjoyment, if less so than Williams'. It is discomfiting like any new kind of art, however much it may operate within the context of the already accepted, and hence be flippily *understood*. And it demands maximum attention if the black shared experience and heritage are not to go wasted.

Loving's *Timetrip One*, 25 by 12 1/4 feet, consists of 11 hexagonal pieces, painted on primed or in some instances unprimed cotton duck, in totally artificial colors, held together by cunning as well as by experiments with chemical formulas. It is an important work. Even the dense brushing and priming do not let the colors operate as anything more than tints. The opacity pushes the artificial light (under which most of this work is seen) back into one's eyes, to the extent that one can't see the color. It's ever too bright and dazzling, like bad, bad neon glitter.

A weakness in Loving's work, and it is reflected in his attitude, is rather like what went wrong with Neo-Impressionist painting. He seems to neglect the fact that color activants are not color expressions. His response, both intellectual and physical, is not essentially expressive (as was so much of what was done by the Pollock, Kline, de Kooning generation), but an ego trip into ways of excess or extravagance. Enormous paintings are more literal signifiers to a better way of life than those which illustrate freedom in realist or Expressionist styles.

Loving's painting intelligence is beyond question. After his early pictures, he decided that "just to go to other imagery made little sense...I could repeat any imagery and still come up with the same...I chose the cube or the box simply because it was a foundation to intellectualism...a sort of mundane form that could be very very dull unless a great deal was done with it." He was impressed by "Frank Stella's first pieces where he had dropped the Expressionist vocabulary about composition."

Even though painting is still dealing with the wall and the floor, its expressive content relates to how one responds to the object as a specific. Painting is so complicated that it really doesn't bear explaining except as to what it decidedly is not—i.e., not architecture or sculpture. In this sense, Jack Whitten's work gives off a sunny, glowing, natural response from somewhere in the spots of paint, pushed up from orange to that kind of rich grey one only gets from an instinctive and natural response to color. The color is not greyed-out. On first confrontation one may be confused until one realizes that this grey has a richness which must have something to do with weathered Southern sensibility exactly in tune with itself. Whitten makes "fine" paintings which his new technique of pushing the

randomly selected color through a fabric screen of various dots on already wet and receptive *other* fabric (in this case cotton duck) makes for a kind of tough choosing that only such a sensibility can pull off. The pictures are so new and mysterious that only intuition tells me this *down home brother* has it in his hands, his mind, his psyche. His mind reading back to me is laughter. His very body action makes every mark without a mistake, even though painting is full of mistakes.

Dan Johnson's work is, he says, in transition. He is under no illusion as to what it is he is doing. His sculpture may be a spectator sport, but his commitment is without question. His position in the community is easily consistent with his status as a kind of *Ebony* magazine STAR, emerging into a larger society. It's more than Bill Bojangles Robinson tapping out and shuffling the *Star Spangled Banner* at a party for President Nixon...or Larry Rivers' arrogant remark about "a better life for black people with the emergence of people like William Williams..." If River's remark has any truth or meaning, it is only true in my opinion for Dan Johnson, who is a magic man and should be Mayor of Soho, at least.

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me that George Washington Carver was the greater concept artist and the peanut his concept, and what better than Carver's landscape architecture? Williams' early works were prodigiously eclectic, with roiled stainings and abrupt rectangularities. He was not to remain interested in the velocity of the brushstroke, but has been impelled to a more Léger-like muralism, an unmediated, populist vulgar, jazz as in Miles not Stuart Davis, with a strong center if less energy about the edges. The name of Williams' Great Dane is Indigo, living with the painter and never discussing his works, that might be accused of being too taut, too aggressive, too maximal, but they are fugues with flash, deriving in an interesting way from the depth of Moholy-Nagy and Albers at Yale (where Williams studied) into the horrible green light of the street. The painting does not fall apart like a feather, nor does it strain after the political in listless stories, though the loops, pyramids and seeming question marks look hemmed-in and anxious: circumstances of the composition seem to force the elements to restrain their desires. It is a painting of visible, marked conflict. The relations in the works are demanding relations, offending relations. There is not a smooth run on the canvas but interruptions by textures that glitter and bristle, sequin textures, for instance. These unmitigated compositions are only slightly suppressed by an unaccelerated perspectivelessness. Even the simple and almost Caro-like sculpture of a pig trough, executed for the John de Menils, registers as a vehement weight, as if it says, "If Ellison was a prophet, Baldwin a Parisian priest and Leroi Jones manipulated by media, then am I a little dot?" Here is an infuriated if austere self-laceration, as in his use of glittery clouds of sequins upon cheap rose-patterned linoleum: it does not allude to O'Keeffe but keeps its own cloudy sublime of the wretched.

His series, with their sunrays and combinations of Seals of Solomon and Pyramids with blue Niles pouring through them, stand as the painter would have them stand, like a chorus of airless Bojangles. The Star of David and the Egyptian tombs interlock and warp once more. There is motion in Williams' painting as much as Muybridge and the closed fist of an abstract symbolism. The motifs may be unraveled, as a pentacle may be a spinning-top, but the intimate rage is always veiled. As in the American Indian and African art, whose magical marks and spiritual politics he loves, his narrative and formal arts interact "in a knowable manner," but the sum total, he feels, "is not knowable." It is not modules, but an unpredictable art like the art "who could pee anywhere at any time." The paintings are rampant, filled with almost hormonal...

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