The Overlooked, Radical History of Black Women in Art

ARTSY EDITORIAL
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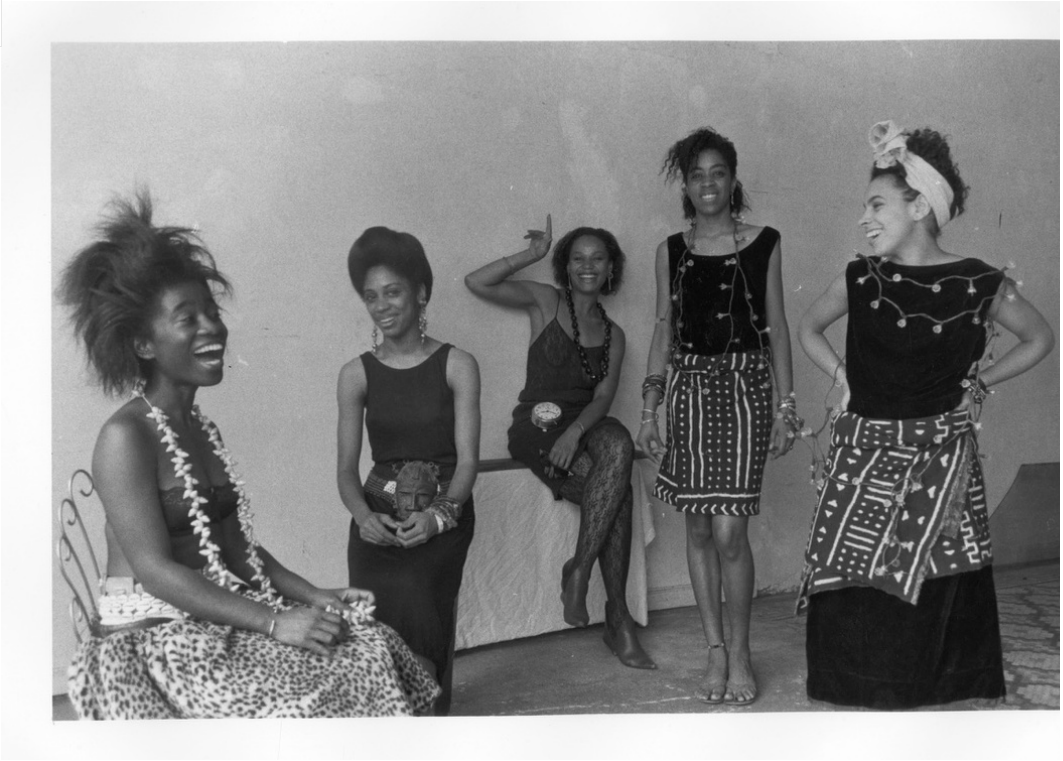
APR 28TH, 2017 10:41 PM



Lorna Simpson, *candid*. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

In 1977, the Combahee River Collective, a black feminist organization, gathered in New Jersey for their second retreat, where they worked together to formulate a collaborative letter.

The Heresies Collective, whose membership consisted predominately of white women, had just published its third feminist art journal, titled "Lesbian Art and Artists," but had neglected to feature a single woman of color. The Combahee River Collective, which was formed to raise consciousness about race and gender issues, had assembled to craft a response.

"We find it appalling," they wrote, "that a hundred years from now it will be possible for women to conclude that in 1977 there were no practicing Black and other Third World lesbian artists."

were so often excluded from it—a tension that continues today. The activities undertaken by black women to push back against their erasure, in the late ’60s through the early ’80s, effectively amounted to a desire for a revolution.

It is from this fervor that a current exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum gets its title: “We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85.”

The show, which is one part of the museum’s year-long initiative to reimagine feminist art, “A Year of Yes,” highlights the work of black women artists during the height of second-wave feminism and serves as a record of their stories—to be remembered for the next hundred years and beyond.

Emma Amos, *Sandy and her Husband*, 1973. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

At the exhibition’s core are the many artist-run organizations that were developed during this time.

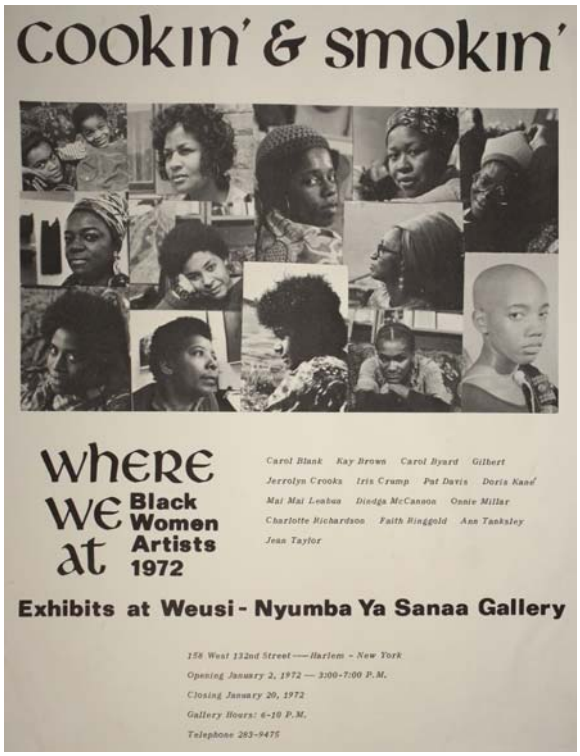
Among those represented is Emma Amos, the only woman and youngest member of the Spiral collective, one of the earlier groups included in the show. Spiral was conceived in 1963 against the backdrop of the Civil Rights movement. Its founding

political change.

The group would eventually invite Amos to join them after requesting to see examples of her work, a procedure that, she observed, other (male) members were not subjected to.

Amos's work reflects the isolation she experienced in Spiral, as well as in the art world at large. In *Sandy and Her Husband* (1973), for instance, Amos painted her self-portrait, *Flower Sniffer* (1966), so that it appeared to hang on a living-room wall—her body is hunched over and her eyes pivoted in a fixed gaze at a couple embracing in the middle of the room. Amos is inside the painting, within the scene, and yet she is still found on the periphery.

Another figure featured prominently in the exhibition, Dindga McCannon, had invited a group of black women artists to her home in Brooklyn in 1971. Kay Brown and Faith Ringgold were among those who attended. The meeting, and the many that followed, would eventually lead to the formation of the Where We At (WWA) collective and one of the first professional exhibitions of black women artists. That June, the self-titled group show opened at Acts of Art Gallery in New York's West Village.



Where we at, *Cookin & Smokin Poster*, 1972. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktai* 1973. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

"We Wanted A Revolution" features a rich collection of works and texts by the artists of WWA. McCannon's three-dimensional collaged painting of a female

Elsewhere in the show, Betye Saar offers an emblem of the Black Power Movement with *Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail* (1973)—a rendition of a molotov cocktail that highlights the violent clashes between activists and law enforcement, as well as the aggressive, commercialized stereotyping of black femininity.

Crucially, many of the artists and activists featured in this exhibition had their hands in both the black feminist and black power movements of the ’60s through the ’80s. But their contributions were often overlooked.

One such figure is Ringgold, whose voice in this show displays just how intertwined the issues of gender and race were and still are. Ringgold, who was a key early member of WWA, appears in many forms throughout this history.

Moved by her concerns about the activist and former Black Panther party member Angela Davis’s imprisonment in late 1970, for instance, Ringgold set out to create a mural for the inmates at the Women’s House of Detention on Rikers Island. She conducted a series of interviews with the female inmates, in which many explained that they wanted to see narratives of women outside of typical domestic roles.

Faith Ringgold, *For the Women's House*, 1971. Courtesy of Rose M. Singer Center, Rikers Island Correctional Center. 2017 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

Ringgold would ultimately create the large-scale painting *For the Women's House* (1971) to be hung in the lobby of the facility. The mural, which is featured in the exhibition—only the second time it's been shown since its removal from the island in 1999—is sliced into eight triangular scenes, with each one imagining different futures for these women, from shooting hoops on a basketball court to addressing the nation as the president of the United States.

The work represents a hopeful, revisionist view of the world—one in which women share the same mobility as their male counterparts.

The show spotlights not only groups and collectives, but also the protests and activities of community-run spaces that became the nexus for black art at the time.

Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown (JAM), founded in 1974 and dedicated to showcasing artists of color, is one such example. Bryant and many other artists connected to JAM wrote critical letters in response to the outrage of an exhibition titled "The Nigger Drawings," at Artists Space in 1979, which appear in this show.

performance. Senga Nengudi created anthropomorphous renderings of flesh-toned panty hose that were evocative of the female form, such as *Inside/Outside* (1977). Her works were often used as props in public performances.

Later works by Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson display a careful examination of the narratives around black identity. Weems's *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978–84), for instance, aimed to challenge common perceptions of the black family as being broken and destructive, while Lorna Simpson's iconic captioned images—the first of which, *Gestures/Reenactments* (1985), is displayed here—offer a complex reading of a black man's experience as both victimizing and empowering.

Installation view of Elizabeth Catlett, *Target*, 1970, and Barbara Chase-Riboud's, *Confessions for Myself,* 1972 in "We Wanted A Revolution." © Jonathan Dorado. Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

By capturing this history, the exhibition hopes not only to revise the feminist canon, but also to fill in the backstory behind feminist and civil rights movements today. And it does not shy away from institutional critique—an article on display recounts an open hearing of women artists held at the Brooklyn Museum in 1971 and titled, "Are Museums Relevant to Women?" Nor does it try to overshadow the individual stories and perspectives of the artists it includes.

"One of the most important things that feminist art history has brought to the world is significant contributions to this idea of revisionism, of revising history, rewriting history, and writing people back into history," says the exhibition's

Including a show about black women within "A Year of Yes" emphasizes the dangers of a single narrative and the importance of engaging in more nuanced discussions about racial and gender inequality. "In order to effectively envision our future, we need to be able to talk honestly about our past," Anne Pasternak, the museum's first woman director, notes in the catalogue.

This transparent and self-critical approach shaped the way that the institution brought the exhibition together. A year and a half ago, in the early stages of its preparation, the museum invited a group of artists—who would eventually be featured in the show—to have a discussion with curators about the exhibition.

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

Courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

"It became clear that these artists wanted to tell this story themselves," says Morris, who curated the exhibition alongside Rujeko Hockley, now an assistant curator at the Whitney. The two "became concerned about not wanting [the exhibition] to be written like it was a history that [they] were discovering," and so made it a priority to privilege the voices and opinions of the artists over their own.

It's accompanied by a robust catalogue featuring a carefully curated selection of historical texts that provide an additional opportunity to engage with these women's voices. Together, the exhibition and catalogue form a kind of pseudo-curriculum, a comprehensive (and long-overdue) excavation of these women's histories over 20 years.

Indeed this show is a grand achievement for the artists, curators, and historians involved, and is a welcome resource for the many young women who have long been

While the show raises timely questions about intersectional feminism, female representation, and gender inequalities—all urgent themes in Trump's America—perhaps most pertinent is the show's insistence on reminding us that black women have long faced the perils of a world in which their voices are silenced.

In this sense, "We Wanted A Revolution" is the realization of a dream—for us all to finally sit back and listen.

—Yelena Keller