

## arts

# Fighting the power — the art of a revolution

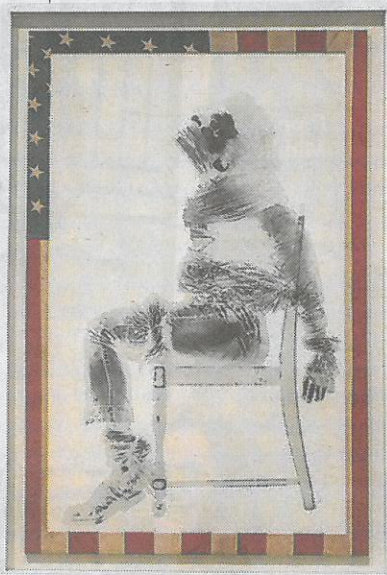
Tate Modern's big summer show reveals how black artists in America portrayed the struggle for civil rights. **Rachel Campbell-Johnston** gets a preview

What is black art? The African-American artist Romare Bearden had a defiantly simplistic answer. "Black art is the art that black artists do." His words could be the tagline of Tate Modern's new show.

Taking 1963 and the landmark civil rights march on Washington as its starting point, *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* examines how, over the next two decades, black artists in America addressed the political, social and cultural challenges that black people were facing. Sometimes they came together in a harmonious chorus, but just as often they diverged into dissonant chords.

This was a particularly vivid moment in the history of black art. It was a time of riots and revolutions, protests and uprisings. It was the era of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King. The Black Panthers were rising and arming their followers. Black leaders — and bystanders — were being murdered by the

Right: *Revolutionary*, 1972, by Wadsworth Jarrell. Below: *Injustice Case*, 1970, by David Hammons

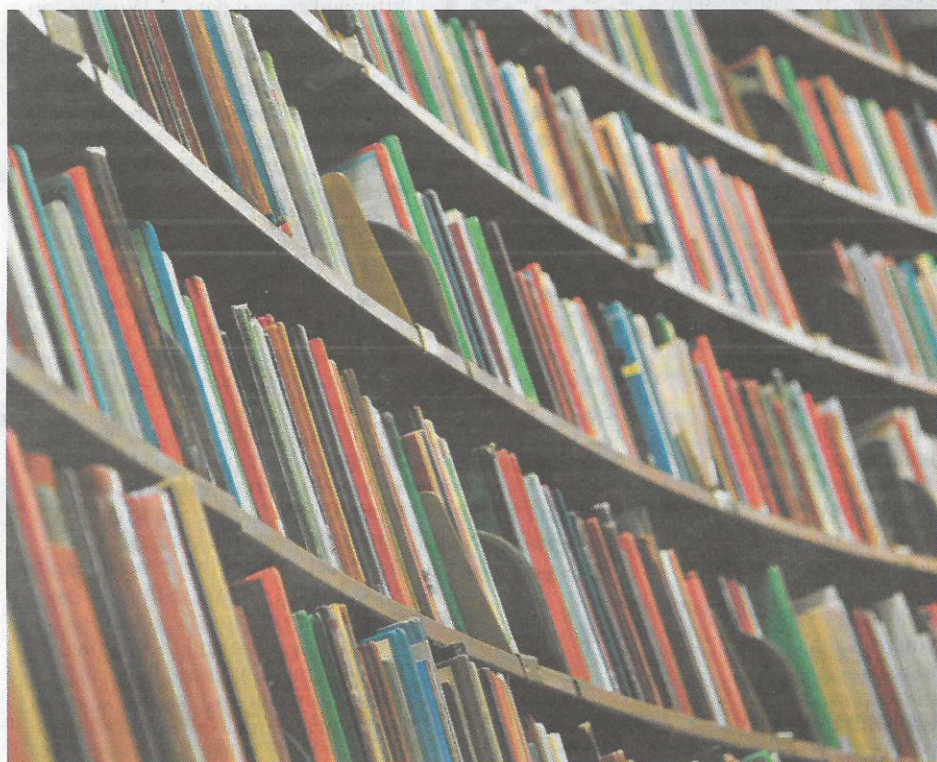


state. And artists were responding by seeking a language that, while documenting the period, could also convey their convictions and emotions.

*Soul of a Nation* is a fascinating and heartfelt exhibition that, by bringing together significant artworks and archival material and mixing the famous with the unfamiliar, captures the radical spirit of its times.

It begins with the formation of Spiral, a "group of Negro artists" (as they called themselves) who, in 1963, joined forces to try to work out what it meant to be a black artist. They couldn't agree. However, two works from their only exhibition make for a cliché-busting opening at the Tate Modern show. You might have been expecting the bright colours of Afro-Caribbean tradition, but the Spiral artists presented works in stark monochrome.

In fact, nothing about this show is simply black and white. Is there a distinctive black aesthetic? Does it have to be figurative? How explicit must its political message be? What materials would be best? Where could the art be shown? Which audience should be its target? These are the sorts of questions



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established affiliate of the abstract expressionist movement. A few pieces have an almost totemic significance. A fragment of the Chicago Wall of Respect — a revolutionary mural that became a symbol of the civil rights movement — is on display in this country for the first time.

More often the names will be unfamiliar to most visitors. The curators go heavy on the explanatory labels. A few will probably find this an irritant. Many more, I suspect (me included), will be grateful, not least because preconceptions are frequently challenged. Even the most agile will likely be wrong-footed.

Certainly, the sheer multifaceted variety feels as bewildering as it is refreshing. Here, for instance, is a roomful of work by the artists of AfriCOBRA — the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. "Rhythm", "shine... the rich lustre of a just-washed 'fro", and "Color — color Color color that shines, color that is free of rules and regulations" were the rules of a group that set out to embody "the expressive awesomeness" of African art and life in the US. They confronted their viewers with the eye-popping dazzle of a palette that found its colours in the orange, strawberry, cherry, lime, lemon and grape varieties of Kraft's Kool-Aid drink.

It is definitely striking. However, that doesn't mean that more reticent images can't compete. Look at David Hammons's haunting *Injustice Case* (1970), a ghostly screenprint that reduces its subject, a man tied to a chair, to a silvery x-ray. Hammons is referring to the trial of Bobby Seale, a co-founder of the Black Panther Party who, charged with conspiracy to incite violence, was bound and gagged in



Top: *Die*, 1967, by Faith Ringgold. Above: Fred Hampton's *Door 2*, 1975, by Dana Chandler. Below: *Black Unity*, 1968, by Elizabeth Catlett. Right: *21 August 1971*, by Emory Douglas

court in response to his vocal protestations. Hammons frames the picture within a cut-out American flag — an illegal act in itself. This is one of the most radical and evocative images in the show.

The aims of *Soul of a Nation* are profoundly serious, but there is humour too. In a wilfully impudent 1977 self-portrait, *Brilliantly Endowed*, Barkley L Hendricks appears nude (bar his jewellery, cap and socks) as a riposte to the art critic Hilton Kramer, who had described him as a "brilliantly endowed painter" who erred "on the side of slickness". Hendricks paints one outstretched hand resting casually on his upper thigh, thereby offering his viewers a scale by which they can measure his not insubstantial endowment.

Some pieces are manifestly political. Who can miss the message of Dana Chandler's *Fred Hampton's Door 2* (1975), a replica of the bullet-riddled, blood-stained door of the Black Panther, who was killed by police in 1969? Or misread Faith Ringgold's dramatic mural-sized painting of a violent street riot?

Images of civil rights leaders, spokesmen and icons crop up everywhere — not least in a gallery entitled *Black Heroes*, where, notably, they become the subject matter of white artists too. Andy Warhol portrays Muhammad Ali and Alice Neel paints Ringgold. Anything from a tweedy twinset to a pair of tights can be politicised.



Selma Nengudi stretches nylon stockings into a constructivist-style sculpture. Tights, once a signifier of western femininity and professionalism, the label explains, were increasingly rejected by black American women, who were shunning the white parameters of beauty set by the tights' standard "flesh" tone.

Every style or material, it would seem, can be drawn into the argument. Many works find their roots in western tradition. Hendricks, after a trip to Europe, taught himself metalwork and made his own Byzantine icon. Archibald Motley paints a gruesome dreamscape in surrealistic style.

Several pieces put a striking contemporary slant on traditional African sculpture, but 20th-century abstraction is far from precluded. A 1970 piece by Jack Whitten goes on public display for the first time. Inspired by a trip to the Pyramids, Whitten creates a large triangular canvas, raking into its black surface with the teeth of an Afro comb to make swirling patterns and revealing glimmers of red and green beneath.

For Howardena Pindell, tactility matters and she achieves this by cutting up a canvas into hundreds of pieces, stitching it back together into a massive grid, dotting it with thousands of punched holes and adorning it with myriad sequins. "A very rich surface empowers," she declares.

This show is richly evocative, densely referential and quintessentially varied. Yet, brought together, these pieces recapture a sense of the energy surge that, sweeping away preconceptions, shifted the parameters of

the American art scene for ever.

*Soul of a Nation* is staged at an apposite time in Britain. Black art is rising to the top of our cultural agenda — you only have to look at the shortlist for the Turner prize to see that. The age limit of an award previously given only to artists under 50 has been abolished so that the long and unjustly overlooked talents of such artists as Lubaina Himid or Hurvin Anderson can at last be accounted for. On the platform erected by the pioneering black artists of the postwar era, an invigorating vision of our future is being built. ***Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* is at Tate Modern to October 22**

that artists were addressing. And the answers they came up with were as disparate as the works on show here.

Some of it is by well-established artists. Norman Lewis, for instance, whose 1960 monochrome painting *America the Beautiful* is among the most haunting here, was an

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