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Culture Monster

ALL THE ARTS, ALL THE TIME

PST, A to Z: 'Now Dig This!' and 'Places of Validation'

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Pacific Standard Time will explore the origins of the Los Angeles art world through museum exhibitions throughout Southern California over the next six months. Times art reviewer Sharon Mizota has set the goal of seeing all of them. This is her latest report.



I was hesitant to compare “Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960-1980” at the Hammer Museum and “Places of Validation, Art & Progression” at the California African American Museum. Both shows feature many of the same artists and cover overlapping periods (“Places” stretches back to 1940), but in lumping them together, I’m reinforcing the separation of both from the mainstream. Still, there’s something to be said for acknowledging the histories of our varied relationships to this thing called art and the institutions that support and police it. “Now Dig This!” and “Places of Validation” are actually complementary shows that together provide a fuller picture of art by African Americans in Los Angeles.

“Now Dig This!” is the more easily digestible of the two. As [Christopher Knight noted in his review](#), its story is “not so much unknown as underknown.” Divided into four clear sections, the show provides a broad historical and political context for the work of artists like David Hammons, Betye Saar, Mel Edwards, Noah Purifoy, and John Outterbridge. And, perhaps in an attempt to unmoor the show from a strictly defined “black” identity, it also includes a section that mixes works by African American artists with those of their non-black peers and friends.

It’s this outward-turning gesture that got me looking, not for some essential “blackness,” but for instances in which artists integrated influences from other non-Western cultural traditions. In particular, Asian motifs seem to run through the show like a mini-theme.

The references are subtle to start: An undated watercolor abstraction by William Pajaud vaguely recalls Japanese landscape painting. The upturned ends of a horseshoe in Edwards’ 1964 wall piece “AfroPhoenix #2” suggest the horns of a samurai’s helmet. These observations could be written off as personal predilections. But the motifs are more overt in Purifoy’s “Unknown” from 1967, an assemblage that combines the spokes of a bamboo parasol and fragments of a traditional ink painting in the shape of a fan with the red, gold and green of African nationalism. Then there is Hammons’ “Afro Asian Eclipse (or Black China)” from 1979, a vertical fabric scroll with a pattern of woolly black hair woven into it. Multiculturalism is a complex thing.

This fascination with Asian themes appears in a more disturbing manner in “Places of Validation.” “Asian Dancer,” an undated mixed media wall sculpture by Charles Dickson, is one of the first pieces that viewers see upon entering the gallery. It is a portrait of a woman with an elaborate, spreading headdress and various other “Oriental” accessories (dragons and the like), but her body has been cut into three distinct pieces — staring face, bare breasts and exposed pubic region. As disturbing as this piece is, it points to the main difference between the two shows: Where “Now Dig This!” is rigorously curated with an eye to posterity, “Places” casts a wider net, including a far greater range of work — good, bad, inspiring, eccentric or bland — all by African American artists.

In this sense, by refusing to pick out stars or hew strictly to themes, it presents a fuller picture of the sheer diversity and energy within the Los Angeles black art scene. There are Richmond Barthé’s tasteful bronze busts of Josephine Baker and James Garner (!) from the 1950s, and Ernie Barnes’ majestic “My Miss

America," a 1970 painting of a muscular woman toting grocery bags. But there is also a bizarre, alien-like statue by Timothy Washington, also from 1970, and a Sun Ra-esque figure with glowing eyes in "Mystic," a very early (1977) painting by Mark Steven Greenfield.

The show also includes more intimate treats from well known artists: a 1972 double-sided Hammons body print in which he appears as a man on one side and as a woman on the other; a whimsical 1971 painting by Saar of breasts floating in a sea, topped by a rainbow and an impertinent tongue sticking out of a disembodied mouth.

The background for this flowering of activity is provided via video interviews, interspersed throughout the exhibition, with key figures — artists, gallerists, collectors — in what was a vibrant, if small, studio and gallery scene. It's a bit hard to identify the speakers unless you recognize them — names are only provided in a list at the beginning of each segment — but their stories are the glue that holds the exhibition together.

They discuss how the scene began out of a need for self-validation, to compensate for the exclusion of African American artists from museums and commercial galleries. Artists recall showing in libraries, department stores or anywhere they could find, until a number of black owned galleries sprang up in the 1960s. Alonzo and Dale Davis' Brockman Gallery brought the work of Elizabeth Catlett and Romare Bearden, as well as local artists like Hammons and Outterbridge, into the neighborhood around Leimert Park, inspiring a younger generation of artists. But it was still difficult to make a living: Saar recalls bartering artworks with her gynecologist to pay for the delivery of her last child.

This sense of community and cooperation, and the intense, diverse artistic production that came out of it, is really what the show is about. While "Now Dig This!" reaches out to larger sociopolitical events and the annals of art history, "Places" digs into how artists were sustained and communities fostered in the self-defined and self-constructed space called "black Los Angeles." To understand how these artists balanced global concerns with challenging conditions on the ground, both shows are required viewing.

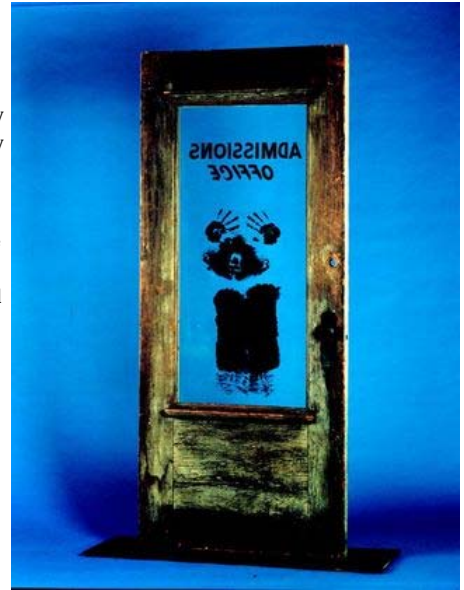
-- Sharon Mizota

Hammer Museum, 10899 Wilshire Blvd., Westwood, (310) 443-7000, through Jan. 8. Closed Mondays. www.hammer.ucla.edu

California African American Museum, 600 State Drive, Los Angeles, (213) 744-7432, through April 1. Closed Mondays. www.caamuseum.org

Photos, from top: "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980." Installation view at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles. Noah Purifoy's "Unknown" is on the right. Credit: Robert Wedemeyer.

"The Door (Admissions Office)," 1969, David Hammons. Collection of the California African American Foundation. From the California African American Museum.



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