

# Beyond the Spectrum

Abstraction in African American Art, 1950-1975

January 11 – March 8, 2014

RECEPTION

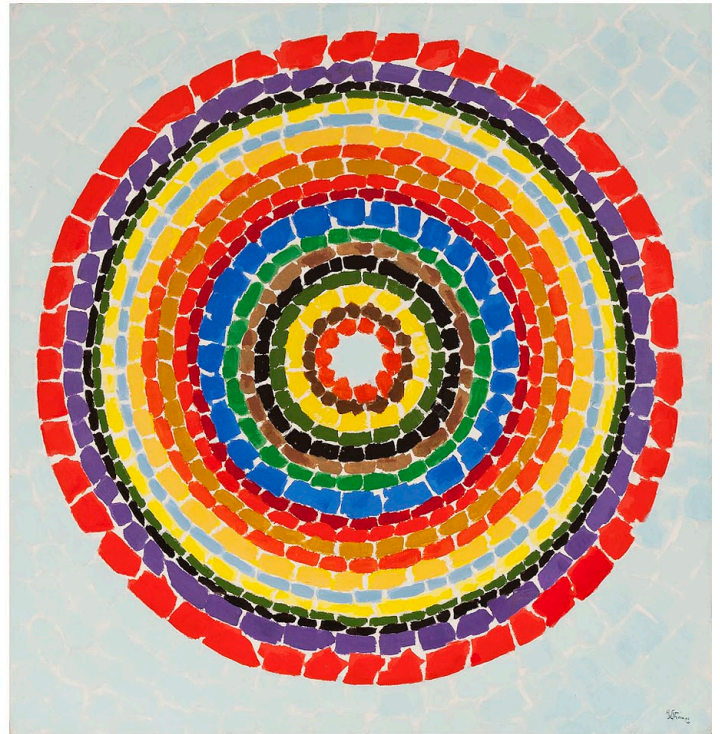
Saturday, January 18, 2014 / 5:00-7:00pm

*I think all art is abstract . . . the earliest art of human beings was figurative and abstract. Period. So there was never a time that human beings didn't deal with both modes. To conceive of something from the world you experience, and then create or recreate based on it, is an abstract process anyway.*

– Melvin Edwards

*Representation versus abstraction,  
black versus abstraction:  
two analogous constructions, each artificial to the core.*

– Jonathan Binstock



Alma Thomas (1891-1978), *Lunar Rendezvous-Circle of Flowers*, 1969, oil on canvas, 50" x 48", signed and dated

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

(New York – January 8, 2014) **Michael Rosenfeld Gallery** is pleased to present **Beyond the Spectrum: Abstraction in African American Art, 1950-1975**, an exhibition of over thirty paintings and sculptures by leading abstractionists including major works by **Charles Alston, Frank Bowling, Ed Clark, Harold Cousins, Beauford Delaney, Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Norman Lewis, Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, Alma Thomas, Jack Whitten, William T. Williams, and Hale Woodruff**. Since its inception, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery has consistently exhibited work by African American abstractionists, in solo exhibitions (**Thomas, Delaney, Cousins, Lewis**) and group shows – on mid-century American abstraction, abstract expressionism, and within its celebrated *African American Art: 20th Century Masterworks* series. While many of these artists have been a constant presence in the gallery's exhibition history, **Beyond the Spectrum** marks the first time that work by **Bowling, Clark, Loving, Pindell, Whitten, and Williams** will be on view at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

**Beyond the Spectrum** follows in the curatorial footsteps of Kenkeleba Gallery's (New York City) groundbreaking 1991 show **The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting, 1945-1975** and the more recent **Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964-1980** (2006) at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Like these predecessors, **Beyond the Spectrum** is not intended to be a comprehensive survey of twentieth century African American abstractionists. Instead, the show presents abstract painting and sculpture by a group of American artists work-

ing in the years just before, during, and after the Civil Rights Movement. While their identity as black Americans is not the motivation for their inclusion in the show, this identity is nonetheless significant in that many found themselves marginalized in a white-dominated art world that granted limited admission to black artists and again within the Black Arts movement, which rested on a revolutionary ethos that saw abstraction as a site of established privilege, limited in its ability to express political dissent and contribute to the struggle for racial equality.

As the title suggests, **Beyond the Spectrum** plays on notions of spectra – of ranges and degrees between fixed polarities. Just as refraction reveals light to be far more complex than our immediate perception allows, the artists in this show reveal a plethora of positions and possibilities within the seemingly unified categories of "painting," "sculpture," "abstraction," and "political/apolitical art". In paintings by **Alma Thomas** and **William T. Williams**, the color spectrum is mined for its aesthetic and expressive potential as vivid hues are juxtaposed in dynamic compositions that pulse with energy. Working with a more limited palette, **Howardena Pindell** and **Beauford Delaney** explored the wide range of shades and intensities within a given color in their luminous paintings. Moving between media, the draped canvases of **Sam Gilliam** and the torn paintings of **Al Loving** exist on the spectrum between painting and sculpture. Finally, within the varied strands that make up abstraction, **Richard Hunt, Harold Cousins** and **Melvin Edwards** embraced welded metal to explore abstraction in the third dimension.





Sam Gilliam (b.1933), *After Glow*, 1972, acrylic and dye pigments on canvas, 75" x 100 1/2" x 2 1/2", signed and dated

The works in **Beyond the Spectrum** attest to the array of approaches and styles within American abstraction, and they challenge two persistent tendencies: to conceive of abstraction as the purview of white artists and to limit notions of authenticity to figural representations of African American culture where black artists are concerned. The first hides the monumental contributions African and African American culture have made to modernism. As American art historian Thomas McEvilley has written, it was not by accident that abstract expressionism emerged in tandem with bebop. Furthermore, to routinely omit artists such as **Norman Lewis**, who participated in the famous closed-door Studio 35 sessions defining abstract expressionism, is to disregard abstraction's debt not only to black culture, but to the artists who shaped its contours and analyzed its place in art history and theory.

The second issue, concerning "authenticity" and "the black experience" is generally discussed in relation to the Black Arts movement and its preference for images that contested the pervasive vilification, ridicule, and disparagement of African Americans in US popular culture. But the split that imagined "African American artist" as incompatible with "abstract artist" predates the Black Arts movement by decades. As abstraction gained momentum after the war, black American artists were at the forefront of aesthetic debates, but unlike their white counterparts, they also had to contend with an art world that saw them first as black and second as artists. In his

1946 essay "The Negro Artist's Dilemma," Romare Bearden criticized the tendency to evaluate work by black artists based on "sociological rather than aesthetic" criteria. Although Bearden himself worked in a more representational vein, he was acutely aware that as long as the sociological dominated the conversation, the formal innovations of both figural and abstract artists of color would continue to be dismissed.

**Beyond the Spectrum** highlights precisely these formal innovations. Emphasizing the stylistic accomplishments of artists whose careers were diminished or who were marginalized or excluded solely on the basis of racial categorization, the exhibition argues that not only did black artists shape American modernism in a vital way, but also that, like the division between figuration and abstraction, the notion that abstract art cannot be either "black" or political is entirely false.

**Visuals available upon request.**

**Michael Rosenfeld Gallery** is located at 100 11th Avenue (at 19th Street), New York, NY, 10011. Gallery hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 10AM-6PM.

For additional information, please contact Marjorie Van Cura at 212.247.0082 or [mv@michaelrosenfeldart.com](mailto:mv@michaelrosenfeldart.com).



100 ELEVENTH AVENUE @ 19TH • NEW YORK, NY 10011 • 212.247.0082  
MICHAELROSENFELDART.COM