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BY
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Soul of a Nation: a revelatory exhibition telling the story of black art

Tate Modern offers a powerful glimpse into the civil rights struggle.

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The story of American art in the 1960s and 1970s has two main narratives. The first is that of the mainstream – pop art, Warhol, Lichtenstein, Rauschenberg and Johns – and is exclusively white. The second is an undercurrent – the artists of the civil rights movement and their successors – and is exclusively black. The two

strands have remained, ironically, stubbornly segregated. Even when they sporadically seem to converge, in Warhol's *Race Riot* paintings of 1964, for example, the connection is glancing. Warhol's paintings were not heartfelt social commentary: he said that the photographs of the Birmingham, Alabama protest merely "caught his eye". "Soul of a Nation" is Tate Modern's attempt to tie the two narratives together.



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This is a genuinely revelatory exhibition. It spans the period 1963 to 1983 and there are some 60 artists represented by 150 works; the vast majority of both will be largely unknown to British audiences. The familiar images of the civil rights movement and black power are photographs of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, of Tommie Smith's clenched-fist salute at the 1968 Olympics and the defiance of Muhammad Ali, of the music of Aretha Franklin and John Coltrane and the novels of Toni Morrison.

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense formed in 1966 with the call for the "power to determine the destiny of our black community". The Organisation of Black American Culture formed a year later with the same wish for black artists. Although their art did not gain as much purchase on the popular imagination as Warhol et al, black artists nationwide were far from silent, as "Soul of a Nation" shows.

It is not, however, an exhibition merely about racial politics – it examines, too, the notion of a “black aesthetic” and whether its practitioners saw themselves as black first and then as artists, or the other way round. Politics tends to make for uneven art and the work on show here veers between crude agitprop and highly accomplished.

One of the founding fathers of black art, Norman Lewis, got the balance right early. His *America the Beautiful* (1960) looks at first to be an abstract picture comprising white triangles spattering a black canvas. It is only at second glance that those triangles resolve themselves into Ku Klux Klansmen and their random spread becomes a nighttime procession. Lewis was a late abstract expressionist, a colleague of Rothko, and had previously stated that “political and social aspects should not be the primary concern; aesthetic ideas should have preference”. As the 1960s progressed, however, and Lewis himself joined the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, that position became untenable.

Just as potent, though more straightforward, are Faith Ringgold’s *American People Series #20: Die* (1967), and *United States of Attica* (1971–2). The first shows a chaotic scene of black and white Americans shooting and stabbing each other in the street, even as white and black children cower and comfort one another: it is a scene of slaughter in which everyone is the victim and is clearly influenced by Picasso’s *Guernica*. The second is a map of the United States in red and green, the colours of Pan-Africanism, commemorating the deaths of 42 men – the majority black inmates – during the Attica Prison Riot for better conditions and political rights. It also lists the deaths of innumerable other black citizens across the country and exhorts the viewer: “This map of American violence is incomplete, please write in whatever you find lacking.”

Not all Lewis and Ringgold’s successors had the same ability to mix the art and the message. Wadsworth Jarrell’s 1971 portrait of Malcolm X, *Black Prince*, for example, is comprised of brightly coloured letters

spelling out one of the activist's calls-to-arms. Like a Banksy, it is clever and packs a one-hit impact, but out of its own time it has the look of a hallucinogenic Jimi Hendrix album cover rather than a radical rallying-cry.

Malcolm X is also the subject of Jack Whitten's *Homage to Malcolm* (1970), a huge triangle (representing Malcolm X's visit to the pyramids) of blacks, inky blues and dark reds. Without the title and the knowledge that Whitten – awarded the National Medal of the Arts by Barack Obama in 2015 – had scored the thick paint surface with his afro-comb, the picture could be interpreted in various ways (depression, the occult, night moods...) that have nothing to do with racial politics. For Whitten, though, abstraction was as valid a way of treating the black experience as any other.

Whitten is one of several artists in this constantly surprising and thought-provoking display, which takes in everything from mural art to conceptual art, and shows how times have changed: Jean-Michel Basquiat, who could have figured at the end of the exhibition's timespan but isn't included, is currently the second-highest grossing artist of 2017 (behind Picasso), with sales of more than \$252m and counting. That is the real narrative of the exhibition: how art about the experience of being black became simply art by black painters and sculptors.

“Soul of a Nation” runs until 22 October

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