



WEEKEND

TRAVEL, CULTURE AND OTHER GOOD THINGS

ART: SEE THIS SHOW

Painting With Clenched Fist

THE TATE MODERN'S 'SOUL OF A NATION' EXHIBITION LETS BLACK ARTISTS TELL THEIR STORY

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IN 1970, artist Faith Ringgold made a poster for the Committee to Defend the Black Panthers. A black face looked out from a red background. Some of the facial features were rendered in green, completing the triumvirate of the African liberation color palette. "Free all political prisoners," it read. "All power to the people."

Ringgold brought the poster to the committee's offices on East 18th Street in Manhattan. "They didn't like it," she recalls. "And you've got our address on there," they said. Defend the Panthers had just had its offices firebombed; announcing its location might invite another attack.

Ringgold made a second poster, sans address, this one showing an armed black family. Defend the Panthers hated that too.

The artist wasn't deterred; she was used to rejection, particularly as an African-American woman working in the largely white, male art world. Several years after Defend the Panthers rejected her, she offered her alma mater, the City College of New York, a painting. "I want my art in a public place," she remembered thinking. City College thought otherwise: "They said no. I said, 'Well, good. I won't waste my time on them.'"

Her next offer, in 1971, was to the New York Women's House of Detention, where black revolutionary Angela Davis was being held. The prison agreed to take an enormous painting called *For the Women's House*, which showed women in traditionally male occupations: police officers, doctors, basketball players. But in 1988, long after the jail had moved to Rikers Island, the complex changed over from female inmates to male ones. Ringgold's painting, out of place with the new population, was covered in white paint.

"Speak the truth and you get negative feedback," she jokes now.

Despite these disappointments, Ringgold persisted—and was rewarded for doing so. She eventually became famous for the children's book

Tar Beach, about growing up in Harlem, as well as others, most notably *We Came to America*. I've read both to my daughter without realizing Ringgold's history as an artist. But if the books are popular (and they are, immensely), her political art is essential in another way. "I'm the one who has to speak up for who I am and what my story is," she says. "I'm the one gotta say what I was doing in the '70s when other people were keeping quiet."

I've met with Ringgold at New York's Ace Gallery, a longtime champion of radical artists. In the room is her painting *American People Series #20: Die*, depicting blacks and whites, men and women, stabbing and shooting one another. In the center of the painting, two small children cower. Last year, the Museum of Modern Art acquired that painting, the surest sign yet that the art world is finally taking Ringgold seriously.

It is a gruesome work that Ringgold defends

PRINTS OF THE CITY: The artist Faith Ringgold (left) outside her studio in Englewood, New Jersey. The Tate Modern exhibit includes her work, as well as prints by Emory Douglas, including "We Shall Survive Without a Doubt."



because it is *her* vision of America. “During the ’60s and ’70s, American art was beautifully done, but there was no violence.”

This summer, Ringgold’s second poster for *Defend the Panthers* will be on display at the Tate Modern in London, where the new exhibition “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” opens on July 12. There are other artists in “Soul of a Nation” who might disagree with Ringgold’s vision of what art should be, but that’s one of the rewards of a catholic show like this. It allows for artistic disagreements without adjudicating them. Impressively comprehensive, the show contains more than 150 works by over 50 artists. Spanning two decades, from 1963 to 1983, and occupying 12 galley rooms, “Soul of a Nation” chronicles the hope, violence and despair of the years, roughly, between the age of Kennedy and the age of Reagan. And though planned nearly three years ago, it offers insights into the age of Trump, none of which are especially sunny.

Many works speak to the unfilled promises of the civil rights movement, to the anger that followed as the nation became more conservative under Nixon and Reagan: Ringgold’s *United States of Attica*, a map that chronicles racial and political violence throughout American history; Jeff Donaldson’s *Wives of Sango*, a lush, almost Fauvist portrait of several chic revolutionaries; and Elizabeth Catlett’s *Black Unity* sculpture, a mahogany fist, raised in the Black Power salute. The fist is a rebellion against white racism, as well as the white art establishment.

Art relating to the Black Panthers has been the subject of many stand-alone exhibitions, including the Oakland Museum of Art’s “All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50” last fall and an excellent 2009 show of Emory Douglas prints at New York’s New Museum. “Soul of a Nation” does a fine job of chronicling African-American militancy and pride. But there is also, crucially, art that has nothing to do with those topics. Despite

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the show’s seemingly inescapable political overtones, it provocatively argues that there is more to African-American postwar art than explicit expressions of anger over social injustice.

“Is the job of the black artist different than the job of a white artist? What’s the role of the black woman artist?” asks Mark Godfrey, one of the show’s two curators. (The other, Zoe Whitley, is a native of Los Angeles who has long worked as a curator in London.) “Those questions form the basis of a very compelling story.” Godfrey knows the Tate Modern can’t answer those questions, but the greater risk would be in not asking them.

Without belaboring the point, “Soul of a Nation” makes the case that just as the Italian Renaissance meant one thing to the artists of Siena and another to those of Pisa, the black





ART HISTORY: William T. Williams in his New York studio, with his 1971 painting "Mercer's Stop." Opposite: Faith Ringgold's 1967 painting "American People Series #20: Die," recently acquired by the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

art of the 1960s had its own competing centers of creativity and influence. The art coming out of Oakland, the California city that gave birth to the Panthers, was, unsurprisingly, the most political. New York's Spiral Group was friendlier to abstract works, while Los Angeles was home to what Godfrey calls "assemblage aesthetic," exemplified by the work of Noah Purifoy. In 1971, he created an *Environmental Experience*, a reconstruction of inner-city life. The explanation attached to the piece played on deep-seated white prejudices: "Niggers ain't gonna never be nothing. All they want to do is drink and fuck."

William T. Williams, one of the New York artists featured in the Tate Modern show, lived out many of the tensions inherent in "Soul of a Nation," his own career an argument with itself about what black art can (and should) be. And while others flocked to the political debates of the day, he retreated from them, eventually to a studio in Connecticut. Williams recently showed his work at a commercial art gallery for the first time in more than 40 years, at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. We met there on a

recent afternoon, amidst the paintings that constitute his series "Things Unknown."

A native of North Carolina, Williams went north to study art at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, and later at Yale, where he got a master's degree. In the late '60s, he was part of the Smokehouse Painters, a collective that created murals around Harlem, on tenement walls and neglected public spaces—a "radical" notion at the time, he remembers.

Printmaker Emory Douglas is on one end of the spectrum, his art summoning revolutionaries to the barricades. Williams is on the other. "I don't wake up and be preoccupied by being a black person," Williams says. "It's a nonissue."

Yet he admits that race is inescapable: "How do you experience this society without thinking about race?" Some of the most charged works in the Tate Modern show express that heartbreaking impossibility. Dana Chandler's *Fred Hampton's Door 2*, a reference to the Black Panther killed in an FBI raid, is deceptive—the teal and rhubarb colors suggestive of a summer cottage out of childhood dreams. But the door is riddled with bullet holes.

After four months at the Tate, "Soul of a Nation" will travel to the United States: first to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, followed by the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Until then, the Brooklyn Museum is offering a kind of sister exhibition, "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85." These women—marginalized by whites for their race and by male black peers for their gender—poured their outrage into art, as some today pour it into Twitter. Their works exemplify the old truth about privation, personal or collective, being a catalyst for creativity. (Included is Ringgold's *For the Women's House*, restored after being painted over.)

At the Brooklyn exhibition, which was crowded on a recent Saturday afternoon, I lingered in front of a work by Emma Amos, *Sandy and Her Husband*, painted in 1973. It shows a couple dancing in a living room, hands clasped, eyes closed. He has a hand at the small of Sandy's back, which suggests he is familiar with her body. She leans into him, head resting on his shoulder.

Sandy's race is plainly African-American, while her husband's is difficult to determine. It made me conscious of my desire to know his race, because it is a thing we always want to know in America. But Amos is more concerned with the basic humanity of the scene, two people quietly dancing, two people in love. **N**

"Soul of a Nation," at the Tate Modern, July 12 through October 22; "We Wanted a Revolution," at the Brooklyn Museum through September 17.