

Visual Arts

Tate Modern's politically charged 'Soul of a Nation'

The new survey of work made in two tumultuous decades of black activism reveals a prodigious range of artistic expression



Benny Andrews' 'Did the Bear Sit Under the Tree' (1969) © Estate of Benny Andrews/DACS

JULY 14, 2017 by: Maya Jaggi

In place of bullets in Jae Jarrell's wearable sculpture "Revolutionary Suit", the bandolier slung across the grey tweed dress holds artists' crayons. The work was created in 1968, at a time when African-American artists were debating the role of art amid violent resistance to political change, as the civil rights movement had given way to Black Power. The suit, later pictured on Angela Davis in Wadsworth Jarrell's 1972 portrait of the jailed activist, suggests faith in art's power to liberate.

Yet while artists were moved to respond to the times, for some the role of revolutionary could be a straitjacket. Along with debates about "black art" and a "black aesthetic" — as though there could be only one — came a quest for artistic as well as political freedom.

Tate Modern's *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power*, co-curated by Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, brings together some 150 works by more than 60 mainly African-American artists working in the United States from 1963 to 1983. The exhibition reveals a prodigious range of artistic expression, from Faith Ringgold's figurative Super Realism and Dana C Chandler's Black Expressionism to Roy DeCarava's new aesthetic in photography and the "Kool-Aid" palette of AfriCOBRA, the Chicago group to which the Jarrells belonged — whose political messages were lettered in glowing acrylic of cherry, lime-green and mauve.

Each of 12 rooms focuses on an urban artists' group or kind of art, beginning with the Spiral group in New York, whose 1965 show responded to crisis with "works in black and white". Romare Bearden's photomontages, such as "The Dove", infuse urban street life with the African-inflected culture brought by the Great Migration from the South. In a show that traces a central argument between defenders of abstraction and proponents of more politically legible or activist art, oil paintings by Norman Lewis — an under-recognised luminary of abstract expressionism — dissolve that line.

"Processional" evokes Martin Luther King's Selma marches to register black voters through a band of animated white brush strokes that grow in size and intensity like a light beam. In "America the Beautiful", abstract white shapes on a night-dark background ambush the viewer as the hoods and crosses of the Ku Klux Klan.

Lynching is an inescapable motif, as is ironic counterpointing with the Stars and Stripes. Charles White responded to the criminalising of Black Power activists with his oil-painted Wanted posters alluding to runaway slaves. David Hammons's "Injustice Case", a shocking image of the Black Panther Bobby Seale bound and gagged in a US courtroom, is made from a body print, the frame wrapped in a cut-up US flag. In Fred Hampton's "Door 2", Chandler used a bullet-ridden door, painted red and green, to allude to the police shooting of another Black Panther.

Los Angeles artists worked with found objects, ranging from Noah Purifoy's "Watts Riot", an abstract relief made from charred debris from the rebellion, to Betye Saar's subversive repurposing of derogatory curios. In "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima" and "Sambo's Banjo", the subservient caricatures are given tiny tools of liberation: Jemima in kente cloth holds a broom in one hand and a gun in the other.



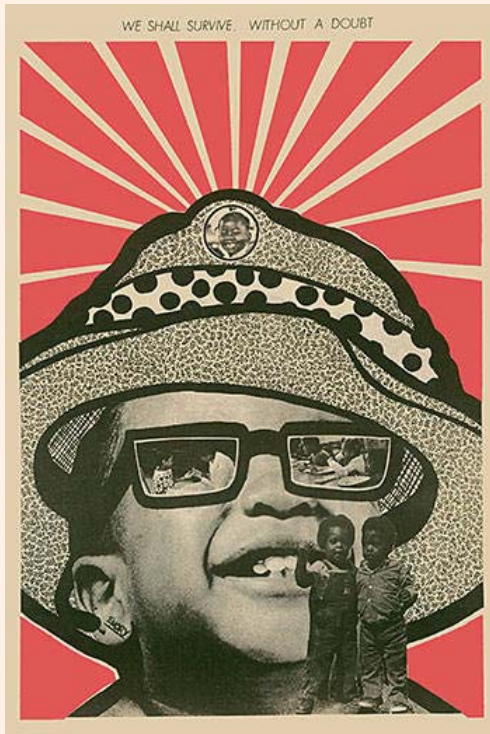
Roy DeCarava's 'Couple Walking' (1979) © Sherry DeCarava/DeCarava Archives

A key question was where to show and how to reach black audiences, when barriers to racial equality were mirrored in art institutions. The Kool-Aid painters made posters. Bearden enlarged photostats. For Emory Douglas, whose lithographs lent visual identity to the Black Panther newspaper, “the ghetto itself is the gallery”. Along with photographs of “The Wall of Respect” in South Side Chicago is a surviving fragment of one of its black heroes: the poet Amiri Baraka.

While the Chicago wall spurred a muralist movement across the US (captured here in slides), the theme of heroes is echoed in a room that includes Warhol’s screen print of Muhammad Ali, and consummate paintings by Barkley L Hendricks, who died this year. Hendricks used aluminium leaf to create “Icon For My Man Superman”, a portrait with afro and Superman T-shirt. “Brilliantly Endowed”, a nude self-portrait, accessorised with silver jewellery and trainers, combines painterly virtuosity with attitude.

White and Hammons appeared in *Three Graphic Artists*, a show that resulted from lobbying by two African-American art handlers in a Los Angeles County museum. Museums were themselves sites of protest, as at the Metropolitan Museum’s *Harlem on My Mind*, a socio-documentary exhibition in 1969 that bizarrely contained no art — ground explored in Susan E Cahan’s book *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (2016).

Here the art is allowed to tell its own stories. The US is a haunted and divided house in Archibald Motley’s oil painting “The First One Hundred Years”, a surreal nightmare in blue, with separate signs for “Whites” and “Colored”. The ghostly faces of Lincoln, King and JFK are suspended above a dangling body, while a broken stained-glass window alludes to the Alabama church firebombing that killed four girls.

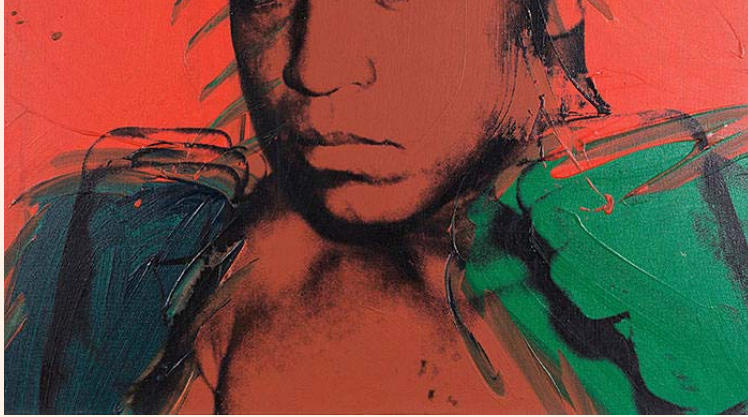


Emory Douglas's 'We Shall Survive Without a Doubt' (1971) © Emory Douglas/Art Resource



Andy Warhol's 'Muhammad Ali' (1978) © Andy Warhol Foundation

Ringgold, whose “Die” is a stark figuration of the bloody human effects of riot, has recalled that much art of the era “was beautiful — abstractions — but it was ignoring the hell that was raging for the African-American people.” Others compared abstraction to improvisatory jazz, a link implicit in William T Williams’ acrylic painting “Trane”, a dazzling tribute to John Coltrane. In “Homage to Malcolm” by Jack Whitten, who was awarded the National



Medal of Arts by Barack Obama in 2015, thick black paint on a triangular canvas (alluding to pyramids) is scored through with an Afro-comb.

Frank Bowling was pivotal in this debate, a Briton from Guyana who moved to London but built a transatlantic career, making huge acrylic map paintings in his Brooklyn studio. In brilliant reds and greens, “Middle Passage” places family photos and mementos over a stencilled image of the Americas. The New World is only faintly discernible in “Texas Louise”, a seeming landscape with a horizon in pinks and oranges that ventures deeper into abstraction imbued with history and memory.



'Pittsburgh Memory' by Romare Bearden (1964) © Romare Bearden Foundation

As Bowling told me in 2007, the hostility he encountered to his abstract art “sent me to the psychiatrist’s couch”. Yet there is a palpable sense of freedom among artists who used it not as escape but to reimagine the world. In Joe Overstreet’s installation “We Came from There to Get Here”, a suspended tent might recall lynching but for the vibrant optimism of its pastel colours.

Only a couple of these immensely powerful works are in Tate's own collection. Seminal works not seen for decades have been unearthed. Others — signalled in the exhibition — have been lost entirely in the intervening years. As co-curator Whitley, who is from Los Angeles, says, the show is “timely — but it's been a long time coming”.



Elizabeth Catlett's 'Black Unity' (1968) © Catlett Mora Family Trust

To October 22, tate.org.uk

Artworks: Estate of Benny Andrews/DACS, London/VAGA, NY; Romare Bearden Foundation; Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts/Artists Rights Society (ARS); Sherry DeCarava/DeCarava Archives; Emory Douglas/Art Resource, NY; Catlett Mora Family Trust

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