

Tate Modern celebrates work of black artists from civil rights movement

Soul of a Nation says there is no single vision of what constitutes a 'black aesthetic' as many works arrive in the UK for the first time



A woman looks at the sculpture *Black Unity* 1968, by Elizabeth Catlett, in the *Soul of a Nation* exhibition. Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

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You hear the exhibition before you see it - the booming voice of Dr Martin Luther King resonating through the Tate Modern galleries.

King's rousing words in Washington in 1963 inspired the black communities of America to protest, march and sing for their rights. Now for the first time, the show at the Tate Modern shows how they also drove an entire generation of artists - long ignored by history - to paint, sculpt, print and take photographs.

Curator Mark Godfrey said the show - *Soul of a Nation* - had been born from the Tate's drive to

collect more African-American art from the period. Godfrey added that they realised during the research that the artists took a very multifaceted approach to what it meant to be a black artist, who they should make their work for and how the omnipresence of the political struggle of the black community should be represented.

“The question ‘is there a black art’ runs through every room in this show and the answer is different every time, from one group of artists to another,” said Godfrey. “Even if you’re talking about overtly political work, you’ll get one type of work that was made in Chicago and another type of work that was made by Emory Douglas, who designed the Black Panther newspaper.

“They both may have been making images of the Black Panther leaders but Wadsworth Jarrell in Chicago wanted to make those extremely colourful and Douglas would use just two colours and a very different graphic style.”

Soul of a Nation examines what it meant to be black and an artist during the civil rights movement, from 1963 - when the idea of black power was emerging in America - through to 1983. With each room of the exhibition orientated around the different artistic movements and cities where they originated, from LA to Chicago to New York, the core principle tying the show together is that there was, and still is, no single vision of what constituted “black art” or a “black aesthetic”.

The majority of the work has not been displayed in the UK before and it is also the first time a painting dedicated to civil rights leader Malcom X, by Jack Whitten, has ever been exhibited after it was uncovered in the basement of his studio in Queens, New York, when the curators were researching the show.

A fragment of the Wall of Respect, a revolutionary civil rights mural in South Side, Chicago painted in 1967 and mostly destroyed by a fire in 1971, is also on display - its first time being shown in the UK.



Jae Jarrell with her Revolutionary Suit, remade in 2010.
Photograph: Guy Bell/Rex/Shutterstock

Godfrey said that even though many of the works had since entered major American museum collections, there was a notable disparity between how black and white artists were treated.

“At the time, the museums were more likely to collect the abstract art than they were to collect the political and figurative art,” he said. “Or major American museums would buy one work by an artist and that would be it, they wouldn’t follow their career in the same way they would follow the career of a number of white artists. Or they would buy a work but

not display it, and it would go into their storage.”

Two of the founding members of the AfriCOBRA collective formed in Chicago in the late 1960s, married couple Wadsworth Jurrell, 87, and Jae Jurrell, 81, said it was extremely moving to walk through the Tate show.

“It’s still so powerful,” said Jae. “Wadsworth and I always believed that the artists were the visionaries that gave beauty and guidance to communities at that time. All I can advise the world is ‘don’t sleep’ because we are still around and we have left a visual imprint. We outsmarted those who ignored us because we may be old but we are here.”

Her husband said that the show also highlighted how many of the battles that had driven the art during the civil rights movement were still being fought in today’s racially divided America.

“We’ve only had cosmetic changes, significant change hasn’t happened even with a black president,” Wadsworth said. “Those ethical racial issues we were talking forty, fifty years ago are still issues today, and they are still at the forefront. Institutional racism has not changed.”

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