Dazzling again - the forgotten canon of America in the age of Malcolm X

Tate Modern's compelling show, Soul of a Nation, puts the battle for civil rights in a brutal, brilliant new light, writes Jonathan Jones

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Cam Gilliam's 1969 painting April 4 is an epic cascade of purple tares, a huge curtain of sorrow. Agony stains it. Melancholy seeps through its delicate clouds of colour. You don't know what its title means to be moved by it. When you know it was painted to mark the first anniversary of the murder of Martin Luther King on 4 April 1968, this abstract painting becomes a funeral elegy for assassinated hope. It is one of the most powerful things in an exhibition that uncovers an entire lost history of American art.

Tragedy, suffering and violence pervade this exhibition like the dark blots that soak into a discoloured handkerchief of a painting. It starts in 1963 with The March on Washington where King spoke immortal words to more than 200,000 people from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. A group of African American artists called Spiral started, at the height of the civil rights movement, to make art that reflected its ideals. This exhibition traces the twists and turns of that aspiration to represent black America in the following two decades as King's dream gave way to disillusion.

How could black consciousness be expressed in art? That question turns out to open dazzling new vistas on a brilliant epoch in art history.

Soul of a Nation transforms how we see American art in the age of Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol (who makes a cameo appearance with his portrait of Muhammed Ali). All those artists were white, and all are enshrined as American icons. By contrast, Cam Gilliam was until recently forgotten. He has only now, in his 80s, started getting the attention he deserves.

The achievement of this exhibition is the simple one of recapturing the talent of a legion of artists who have been kept out of the American canon of genius in a way that is utterly unjust.

It does more. The curators have looked far and wide in their search for the forgotten riches of art in the age of Malcolm X. They include everything from copies of The Black Panther magazine to witty, deadpan satirical portraits of 1970s icon Brian David Hendricks. When a critic described Hendricks as "a brilliantly endowed painter", he immediately responded with a nude self-portrait called Brilliantly Endowed. Sadly, he died this year, too soon to bask in this exhibition's stardom.

The open and imaginative way curators Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley have delved into the archives means they have looked far beyond what happens to be fashionable now. One reason Gilliam, for instance, is not well known is that he belongs to the colour field movement, often dismissed as a soggy aftermath of abstract expressionism. This exhibition rescues not just some great abstract painters but colour field painting itself.

Another mighty exponent is Frank Bowling. That's Frank Bowling RA, OBE, the Guyanese-born painter who is usually seen in a context of post-colonial British art. In the 1960s Bowling went to the US and met the critic Clement Greenberg, who had spotted the genius of Jackson Pollock and also admired him. Bowling's vast, addictive 1971 canvas Texas Louise is a romantically blazed desert light almost seven metres wide in which the American glows like a dying vision of an anguished history. It is an unforgettable painting.

In 1960s Los Angeles, Noah Purifoy and Royo Saar created mysterious totems of what seems their own private religion. They have something in common with Rauschenberg but more with the Watts Towers, the masterpiece of outsider art built by Simon Rodia that soar gigantically over LA. In fact Purifoy co-founded the Watts Towers Art Center. His work 'Totem is a Kind of miniature Watts tower with an African aesthetic, made from anything he could find. Saar meanwhile creates altars, icons and mobiles that mix world religions and recycle junk to create one of the most magical bodies of work in American art. Saar is still alive, aged 65, to receive the homage of an entire room dedicated to his exhibition. He talks with Joseph Cornell as a sculptress of everyday life who weaves found stuff into poetry. Like others here he has never had a fraction of the museum space allotted to the great white men of American art.

This exhibition does not destroy the canon. It enhances it, showing how the history of American modernism that started with Pollock released radical visions of uncommon beauty and eloquence.

A photograph of John Coltrane is a reminder that American modern art has its roots in African American music. Pollock listened to jazz while he worked, in this exhibition Coltrane's contemporary transcends his artistic intensity and courage into colours that start in rage and ascend to a love supreme.

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, Tate Modern, until 22 October

Card payments overtake cash as Britain taps into contactless spending

Rupert Jones

Is this the beginning of the end for cash? For the first time ever, notes and coins have been toppled from their position as Britain's number one payment method. Plastic cards now account for more than 40% of all transactions and were "increasingly displacing cash for lower value payments".

For years, cards have accounted for the majority of retail spending by value, but 2016 was the first year they accounted for more than 50% of transactions. It is also the first time that debit cards have recently the number of wave and tap out.

Contactless has reached almost every aspect of our lives: Music fans attending this month's British Summer Time concerts in London's Hyde Park were able to pay for a pint with a tap of their card. Police officers in the south-west of England are using the technology to record data on their own deployment.

There are more than 200 venues where contactless cards can be used in Britain, and the maximum limit for a single transaction is £30 - a figure that has not changed since autumn 2015.

So could Britain end up going cash-free? Perhaps, but Sweden is expected to become the world's first truly cashless country. "It's a creative testbed for the future of retail," said the Swedish retail industry to The Guardian.