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A Tate Modern Show Examines Race in the U.S.

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"We Shall Survive Without a Doubt" (1971), by Emory Douglas, featured in the exhibition "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" at Tate Modern in London. Credit Emory Douglas, Art Resource, NY/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

LONDON — At first glance, the painting seems abstract: white shapes and streaks hovering irregularly across a night-dark background. But after a moment, the forms become clearer in this Norman Lewis painting, “America the Beautiful,” which immediately hits the eye as you enter “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” at Tate Modern. They are the peaked white hoods and flaming crosses of the Ku Klux Klan.

“Soul of a Nation” opened on July 12, exactly a month before violence erupted in Charlottesville, Va., leaving a woman dead and many injured after clashes between white nationalists — including Klan members and neo-Nazis — and counter-protesters. But “Soul of a Nation” highlights art made by African-American artists between 1963 and 1983, 20 years that saw the emergence of the civil rights movement and the more militant call for black power.

“We didn’t anticipate that there would be such clear links between our show and contemporary events,” said Mark Godfrey, who curated the exhibition with Zoe Whitley. “A number of our visitors have remarked on it; it makes it even more shocking that some of the dreams of the civil rights leaders haven’t been realized.”

The exhibition offers a sweeping look at how artists of the time responded to ideas about black identity, political activism and social responsibility. It begins with the Spiral group, formed in Washington after the 1963 March on Washington and Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech, and continues through a huge range of artistic styles and debates centered on what it meant to be a black artist.

“I think the show provides a whole array of American artists who should be part of the art curriculum,” said Ms. Whitley. “It shows that black artistic culture at that time was as varied as any other culture. It’s not ‘black’ art, it’s a range of practices.”

But “Soul of a Nation” shows many of its artists struggling with questions about the politics of art: Should there be an overt political intent? Can abstraction be political? Who is the art made for, and who is showing it and seeing it? William T. Williams, 75, who lives in New York, and Betye Saar, 91, in Los Angeles, are two artists whose work figures prominently in the exhibition. They spoke in phone interviews about these issues, how they relate to them today and whether ideas of black power are still alive.

Here is an edited version of their comments.

WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS

I think an artist makes works about what he or she has internalized. I’m not interested in illustrating problems; I’m interested in making art that speaks to being alive and experiencing things in time.

Did I feel part of a movement? I felt both part of a group and also very individual. The dialogues and conversations I was having were with a very diverse group of artists who weren’t necessarily all black. I felt I was surrounded by other artists, all trying to express themselves in relation to what they were experiencing, and it came out in different ways. The process of making art is a very complex one. You never know where an idea is coming from, or is going to go. You have to believe that art has the power to change lives and influence thought, and that there is a moral aspect to it.

It's not my temperament to make overtly political pieces. It's a tricky question: We all have political thoughts, and how we express them is as diverse as the 64 artists in the exhibition. It speaks to the diversity of thought and production that came out of that period. The Tate exhibition speaks to inclusiveness rather than an exclusive way of addressing the civil rights movement. You see a fuller picture of the American experience.



"Eva the Babysitter" (1973), by Emma Amos. Credit All rights reserved Emma Amos, via Ryan Lee Gallery, New York/VAGA, New York

I think whether you are talking about black power or Black Lives Matter, you are talking about the same thing: people searching for freedom of thought and expression in their own lifetime. There are artists just as passionate now about making political art, and we have to allow them to have a range of expression.

The interesting thing for me was to see the work in England and to get feedback from an audience looking at it with distance. Hopefully they find a connection in 64 artists who are committed to the idea that art is important in our lives.



“Couple Walking” (1979), by Roy DeCarava. Credit Sherry DeCarava, via the DeCarava Archives

BETYE SAAR

I was really motivated by the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968. Before that I hadn't felt any pressure to make political art. My field in education had been design, and I'd first become involved in printmaking, then started doing other things — portraits, landscapes. But the death of Martin Luther King really did it. The images on television were pretty brutal. You saw the police at war with protesters who just wanted to eat where they wanted or sit on a bus where they wanted. I was a mom with three kids at home; I couldn't go on marches, but I used my art to release emotional feelings of anger and resentment.

My piece “[The Liberation of Aunt Jemima](#)” (1972) came out of that. The black-power movement and the women's movement were happening at the same time, and a friend who was a curator was putting together a show of black heroes. I thought of Aunt Jemima, not a living person, but the essence of something, the black smiling face on a pancake box.

In the 1960s, I'd begun to collect derogatory images of black people. Little salt and pepper shakers, cookie jars and so on. I found a little plaque that was a pencil and notepad held by Aunt Jemima, so I gave her guns instead of pencils. I sometimes had to explain that I was liberating her and making her a warrior. I felt that was my first politically conscious piece. Then I made “[I've Got Rhythm](#)” (1972), a metronome with a black man on the stick and pictures of people dancing and

the K.K.K. It's a kind of coffin for the memory of what slaves had to do. And even today, entertainment is a way for black people to move out of the realm of slavery; there is still a political background to these roles.

I didn't feel pressure to keep making a particular kind of work. I'm a mixed media artist, and my work is always inspired by my materials. In 2000, I started a series using washboards, so I suppose the feminism element is there. Unfortunately there are still derogatory images around, and there is still a lot of racism and hatred that unfortunately seems to have been on the uprise.

I think the Tate exhibition definitely tells us something still relevant about race in America today. The thing in our country is that people haven't accepted that racism affects all lives.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/06/arts/design/tate-modern-soul-of-a-nation-black-power.html>