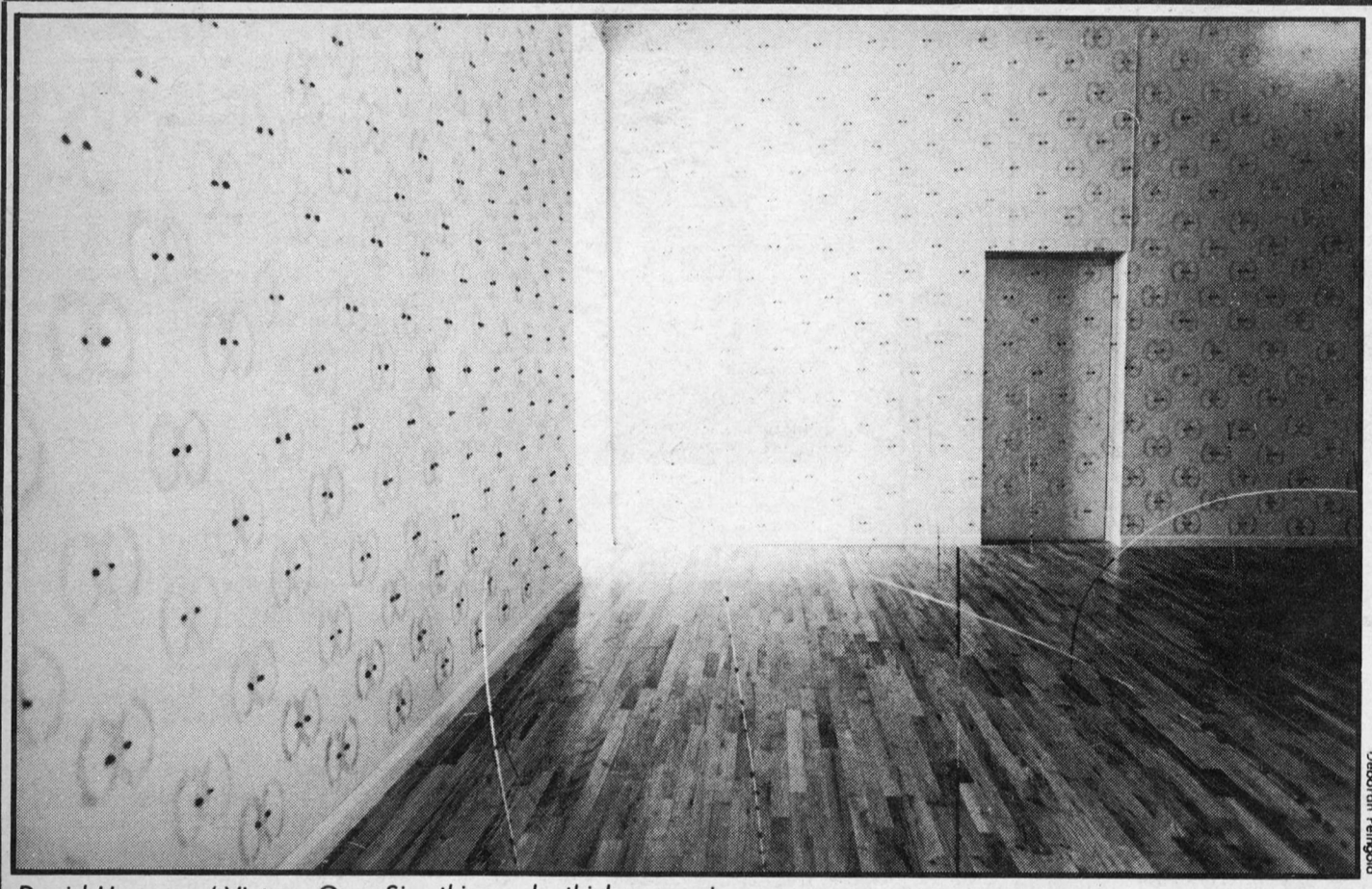

Deborah Feingold

David Hammons' Victory Over Sin: *thin reeds, thicker meaning*

POSITIVELY BLACK

John Perreault

Why is the art world so white? One would think that after the protests and demands of the '60s something somewhere would have changed. But once the demonstrations stopped — demonstrations *are* embarrassing and exhausting — even token exhibitions of Afro-American artists petered out. There were almost no non-whites at the Whitney's 50th-anniversary artists celebration last month. Winter vacation suntans provide the only facial color in Soho galleries.

Black artists tend to be poor: no rich parents to foot the bill; no coop lofts for them; no dinner party money to court the dealers, critics, curators; and, above all, no connections. The art world is upper middle class; poverty is a handicap. Most black artists cannot support their art with teaching jobs. This may soon be equally true for white artists, but in the meantime finding any work at all is immensely difficult for black Americans, no matter what their training. Making art takes money, space and time.

I have also heard the theory that some black artists were too easily satisfied with empty concessions in the late '60s and were, in effect, bought off by one-shot shows or commissions out of town. Hastily curated or "open" exhibitions seemed to confirm the prejudice against Afro-American art as special-interest illustration. Ethnic art, political art and art with overt content has never been favored by the establishment. "They" — black artists, and Hispanics too — had their chance and they muffed it. "They" were irrational in their demands, too difficult to work with. Or so the story goes. In other words, blame the artists — a clear case of punishing the victims.

But the real reason for the not-so-benign neglect of Afro-American artists is art-world racism, a racism that sadly reflects the society at large. One would hope that a love of art, a commitment to art, would force people out of bigotry and ethnocentricity. But it hasn't.

The non-Western heritage of Afro-Americans has never been completely suppressed, a testament to the strength of that rich legacy. College professors wax poetic about the glories of the museumized art of black Africa. It is even necessary to admit the powerful influence of African sculpture upon the intellectual sleight of hand played out with such refinement by Picasso and Braque early in this century, when they were inventing cubism. But textbooks have sanitized the African influence. To face this living, non-Western tradition closer to home must be disconcerting, particularly for those who insist that art be "pure," removed from magic, removed from cultural reference.

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I am happy to report that "Afro-American Abstraction," curated by critic April Kingsley, (P.S. 1, 46-01 21 St., Long Island City, through April 6) is a fine and serious examination of recent art by 19 black Americans. It is the kind of exhibition that should have been done long ago, in a major museum. Kingsley has limited her selection to abstract art that reflects an African influence. In fact, most of the artists have been to Africa and/or intend to express their Afro-American heritage in their art. In 1978 and 1979 Kingsley wrote ground-breaking articles for the *Village Voice* about Afro-American art. The exhibition is the direct result of her investigations, undertaken with a sympathetic eye and keen intelligence.

Not all of the work is to my taste. Not all of the work is strikingly original. But most of it is so accomplished that, taken as a whole, this exhibit destroys the racist notion that Afro-American art just isn't up to par. Very few all-white shows — and most art exhibitions are such — are as good.

The art includes paintings, sculpture and installations in styles that range from patterning to funky-fetish to austere. Afro-American elders Richard Hunt and Sam Gilliam are represented by recent works, but the younger artists, who are the majority, steal the show.

Black Africans were making metal sculpture in medieval times. This tradition of sculpture was passed to us through Picasso and Julio Gonzales, down to David Smith and Anthony Caro. Melvin Edwards' *Homage to the Poet Leon Gontran Damas* is, however, much more than an exercise in how to get flat plates of steel to stand up or hug the floor and yet activate space. It's a powerful work, with references to African vernacular architecture. The chain that cuts across the floor needs no exegesis. Edwards' *Nine Lynch Fragments* — masklike wall pieces made of spikes and auto shop debris — are also strong works utilizing condensed energy rather than the energy of activated sprawl.

In the same room — the central area of the P.S. 1 Exhibition Center — Ellsworth Ausby's striped and brightly hued *Space Odyssey*, composed of painted geometrical bits of canvas stapled to the wall, evokes painted shields and African patterning in a not-so-symmetrical arrangement that is convincingly heraldic.

Further on, David Hammons has taken over the smallish back room to invent an effective installation called *Victory Over Sin*. Dimly lit by a hanging ceiling fixture that evokes the oppressiveness of poverty, thin reeds wrapped with brightly colored cord and decorated with tufts of Afro-American hair jut up from the floor, suggesting African grasslands. The gray walls are "wallpapered" with a penciled motif — two diagrammed stomachs? — each dotted with tufts of black hair like eyes or nipples or seeds. A complex mood of wonder and poignancy prevails.

Senga Nengudi provides another outstanding work. Made of soaring fabric, sand in panty hose and a cluster of slats from a wooden blind, her ritualistic piece, humourously called *Maybe a Hamburger Will Soak Up the Tears*, communicates feminist as well as Afro-American content. Barbara Chase-Riboud's *All that Rises Must Converge* also operates within the wall-to-floor mode but emphasizes the contrast between hard and soft, the metallic and the organic: polished bronze seems to vomit forth shiny braids and tassels upon the floor below, but with elegance rather than funk.

I was also impressed by Maren Hassinger's *Leaning*. This floor piece, composed of 21 units of 16 bound-wire clusters, is splendid. It is a serial work that suggests bound hair or clumps of wind-swept trees with their roots exposed, while maintaining a firm grasp on form and sense.

William T. Williams' four-panel painting — *The Taxi Dancers (Untitled, Tale for Shango, Ashanti Walk and E-Flat Green)* — is also worthy of special praise. Williams received some attention in the late '60s and then disappeared. Were his early exhibits premature? (The same question, by the way, can be asked of many white artists.) At any rate, this new work seems to fulfill his early promise. Gone are the clean edges and the hard colors, the complicated geometry that I still remember. Here, the seven color divisions, spread across four panels, are scrawled with chalky calligraphic marks on stavelike, fencelike lines. Are we witnessing the beginnings of a new language? The panels have a very African, roughly printed fabric look. The high-speed markings move horizontally: pink on black, yellow on black, black on gray, green on plum, flamingo on dark gray, flamingo on green, dark gray on green.

Howardena Pindell's *December 31, 1980: Brazil: Feast Day of Iemanja* is wonderful too. This hanging is made up of sewn-together strips of canvas covered with punched-out dots of paper, sequins, glitter and *fragrance*. (I couldn't smell anything.) Pindell has been to Brazil, where she became interested in Macumba, a mixture of African religion and Catholicism. Iemanja, a Macumba goddess, has a penchant for the glittery and the shiny.

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Who says abstract art cannot have content? One work after another in this eye-opening show reveals new possibilities for content in abstract art. Reference and allusion roots the work in real life, in history and in Afro-American culture. Traditional African art utilized many abstract elements in sculpture, in fabrics, in body decorations and even in hair. Artists as diverse as Ellsworth Ausby, Melvin Edwards, David Hammons, Jamillah Jennings, Charles Searles, Martin Puryear, James Little, Alvin Loving, Tyrone Mitchell and William T. Williams draw upon these resources. Senga Nengudi's mixed-media piece has the grace and form of an African sculpted gazelle. Materials and methods have meaning too. Metalsmithing is an African skill brought to America during the slave trade period; Richard Hunt and Mel Edwards underline this in their work. The ad hoc method of *bricoleur* — using what is at hand — is an ingredient in traditional African art reflected in the methods of Nengudi (panty hose) and Hammons (barbershop sweepings).

Reference and allusion roots this work in Afro-American culture . . .

Content is one of those weird art-world words, so vague in meaning that it is rarely more than a noise of approval. Divorced from its fuzzy evaluative use — "it's got content" means "I like it but I can't quite say why" — content to me is the result of signification. In other words, the art work has content if it refers to something outside of itself. The question then becomes: can abstract shapes and color combinations or even textures *refer*? (I'm not speaking here of some hypothetical universal symbolism, but of cultural and historical cues.)

The excellent works in "Afro-American Abstraction" clearly refer to African and Afro-American culture, and may open the way to a new semantics of abstraction. This is sorely needed at a time when abstract art suffers from self-reference and dependence upon the academic modernist tradition. •