

They're women, they're black and they don't make art about that

By Philip Kennicott November 1 at 1:54 PM

A new exhibition at the National Museum of Women in the Arts confronts two false assumptions embedded in the art world. First, that women should make feminine art, and second, that African American artists should make figurative and “activist” art, works that confront issues of race, inequality, injustice and the long history of violence against black people.

“Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today” focuses on black female artists who work beyond or outside those dictates. The work includes fiery abstractions made with clotted oceans of paint and delicate prints with hues of pink and refined tracery. Some paintings burst off the walls and dominate the space; others intimate silence and draw the viewer ever closer to their enigmatic reticence. But all defy aesthetic expectations rooted in the arbitrary categories of race and gender.

As an introductory essay to the show's catalogue explains, these artists are “working on a periphery of a periphery of a periphery.” Where are these multiple peripheries? In no particular order of precedence, consider first gender and abstraction. Through the middle of the last century, the field was dominated by men who repurposed 19th-century ideas about the heroic artist and the demonic powers of emotional expression. Women who worked in nonobjective styles were overlooked, marginalized or misinterpreted. When they did manage to succeed on their own terms, often it was because the visual language they employed reflected expectations about their bodies and deportment, small, delicate gestures, muted colors or repetitive forms that soothed the eye. There were exceptions, of course, but the exceptions reinforced traditional expectations in the usual way that power defends itself: Do you accuse us of excluding or marginalizing you? Well, this solitary example to the contrary undermines your accusation.

Next, consider race. The time frame encompassed by this exhibition tracks the history of art from the high-water mark of the civil rights movement in the 1960s to the Black Lives Matter movement of our own time. Many of the women included here resisted the tug of making art that was explicitly political or directly about the black experience. Abstract art was often seen in racial terms, as an elite form practiced by white artists. Black artists were expected to meditate on black ideas, using a visual language derived from ideas about the African roots of the African American or diaspora experience.

Mildred Thompson, one of the finest artists in this exhibition, would have none of that. “To copy symbols that one does not understand, to deliberately make use of a form that one does not know how to analyze or appreciate was for me the height of prostitution,” she said. And she wasn't willing to cede abstraction to “elite” artists: “It was perhaps because I had lived and studied with ‘whitey’ that I had learned to appreciate my Blackness.”

It's a powerful statement of independence, and one that is consistently challenged by the ingrained habits of critics, curators, scholars, collectors and audiences.

So the art included feels assertive, demonstrative, forthright, and unapologetic. But beyond that shared sensibility, are there links between these works? Are there affinities of style or detail that tie any single work to the 40 some others on view? Is there a takeaway that transcends the individual artist?

This is perilous territory. Once you start looking for those links, you risk limiting the very thing the artists have sought to preserve: The individuality

and sui generis expressive content of each work.

And yet, there do seem to be traces of commonality or kinship, especially in how several works express a sense of cleavage or division. Perhaps this captures how power works on us, the way it creates division not just between social groups but in our sense of self. Power tell us what we should be, regardless of who we really are. It separates us from our innate dignity and stamps its own price on our ideas, our gifts, our contributions.

In a large and dynamic composition by Shinique Smith, “Whirlwind Dancer,” the cleavage is physical. The painting seems at first to represent a single, unified object, some kind of vortex or whirlwind that has sucked up the material and detritus of a half-century of painting into a looping, billowing expression of pure energy. But this is actually two canvases joined and as you study that seam you realize that lines or shapes cross the division only in a few places. This metaphor of an energy that is whole despite being spread across a gap or fissure is the essence of the work’s power.

A sculpture by Barbara Chase-Riboud, whose bronze and fabric steles are on view at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery in New York this fall, is divided horizontally, with a fabric skirt seeming to bear the enormous weight of a bronze torso. The statue enacts a dialogue that many people feel internally, between a primal fear that everything could come crashing down, and an exhilarating sense that we are, somehow, managing to keep it suspended in the ether of nothingness.

Jennie C. Jones is represented by work that uses acoustic panels to create classic, minimalist abstractions. But the acoustic panels bring with them intimations of silence, and a dichotomy not unlike that suggested by the work of Chase-Riboud: Are these about silence, which is the canvas on which music is written and a liberating spiritual force, or the act of being silenced, which is the first and fundamental strategy of power?

These dichotomies sprawl throughout the exhibition. In one particularly breathtaking work, an untitled 1972-73 painting by Howardena Pindell, the canvas is covered with small dots the same size as the little round scraps of paper left over when using a paper punch press. In another work she uses the actual circular paper scraps mixed into paint to create a strangely shaped autobiographical work referencing time she spent in Japan. But in the untitled acrylic painting, she has meticulously painted their two-dimensional trace, on a canvas that includes an illusionistic pattern of creases, as if the whole thing had been stuffed into a cupboard or left lying on the floor, untended, until imperfections took form. It is a complex work that starts the mind on a chain of questions — who made these dots, who punched the paper and for what purpose, and what was written on the pages of the paper that was punched? — that ultimately point to the idea of text or document that is being withheld from us.

This is the question with which power must be rigorously confronted: What is being withheld from us? This exhibition is one, practical, pragmatic answer to the question. But of course the question raises another: What do we withhold from ourselves?

Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today is on view at the National Museum of Women in the Arts through Jan. 21. For more information visit www.nmwa.org.

 10 Comments

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