FOUR THINGS TO SEE AT

Soul of a Nation

Tate Modern’s new show explores a turbulent period of activist art making. Matt Brown picks the highlights.

THE 150 PIECES in ‘Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power’ were made in the US between 1963 and 1983, a time marked by Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, Black Power rallies and a constant struggle for change. It was a time when black artists sought to assert their own voices in an art world whose gatekeepers were white artists and curators. That still resonates, as movements like Black Lives Matter gain momentum and republican artists and filmmakers. But this show feels like a timely reminder of a particularly febrile chapter of American art. Here are some of the most striking works in it.

1. Elizabeth Catlett
   Black Unity, 1968
   Catlett’s organic forms have a lot in common with other modernist sculptors, but her work comes complete with a strong social message, as she portrays the African-American experience. One side of this mahogany piece is a raised fist—a symbol of defiance and solidarity that was adopted by the Black Power movement. The other side has two joined faces to represent the black community’s spirit of togetherness.

2. Barkley L. Hendricks
   Icon for My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People — Bobby Seale), 1969
   Hendricks belonged to the school of postmodern realism and painted sleek, life-size portraits of black friends, acquaintances and anyone else who happened to pique his interest. Though he never considered his work overtly political, this self-portrait’s title refers to a quote from one of the founders of the Black Panther Party.
THREE SHOWS
YOU HAVE TO SEE

Still on and still great

Grippy, elemental, brutal monochromes that take in things
like the stock market and maths. Oh, and they’re made
from super-shiny, glistening tar.

Hokusai: Beyond the Great Wave
The brushstrokes of Japanese master Katsushika Hokusai
lead you on a journey through mythological worlds, lush
landscapes, ghost stories and scenes of everyday life.
> British Museum, £8.50/£16.50. Until 16 Sept. £12.50
for those under 16.

The RA Summer Exhibition
Chaotic, eclectic, sprawling and a whole lot of fun!
The walls of Burlington House are given over to more than
1,200 artworks by big names and recent graduates alike.
> The Royal Academy of Arts, £7/£12. Until 11 Sept.

3 Emory Douglas, 21 August 1971, We Shall Survive
Without a Doubt, 1971
Douglas was the art director of the Black Panthers’ newspaper,
and the party’s Minister of Culture, and so had a misunderstanding of
the importance of strong images in the service of political causes.
Essentially creating an aesthetic for the movement, his bold, super-
hard-hitting graphic style has had far-reaching influence – think
that iconic 2008 Obama poster by Shepard Fairey.

4 Lorraine O’Grady
Art Is... (Girlfriends Times Two), 1983/2009
O’Grady’s image reflects the struggle for the control of black
representation in mainstream culture, which was all too
frequently as victims of oppression or fetishised sexual objects. O’Grady
recognised that it was important
for African-Americans to take their
portraiture into their own hands –
and this jubilant photograph of joyful
black girls framing themselves takes
that idea to a liberal conclusion.

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