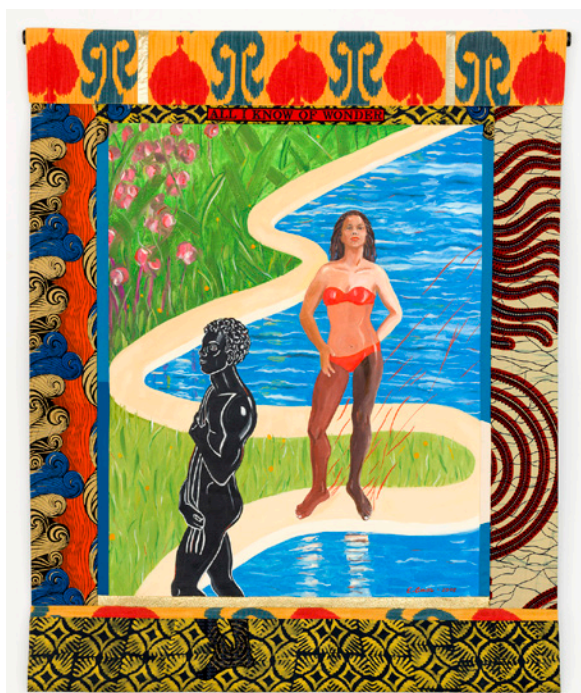


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ARTFORUM



Emma Amos, *All I Know of Wonder*, 2008, oil on linen, African fabric, 70 1/2 x 55 1/2". © Emma Amos/VAGA, New York.

JANUARY 2018

Emma Amos RYAN LEE

In *Tightrope*, 1994, Emma Amos paints herself as a circus performer. In star-spangled underwear and a black duster, she tiptoes on a high wire over a woozy crowd of blurred faces and headless eyeballs. In her left hand are two paintbrushes; in her right, she holds a T-shirt emblazoned with a pair of pendant breasts over a platter of red mango blossoms. This fragment of a body belongs to one of the subjects of Paul Gauguin's *Two Tahitian Women*, painted during the disaffected Frenchman's Pacific sojourn in 1899. Amos's vicious brushstrokes and high-key colors burlesque Gauguin's colonial primitivism with humor and ferocity, and she disciplines these energies with a border of printed African cloth, studded at each corner with a photo transfer of Gauguin's painting.

The tightrope walk allegorizes the artist's precarious and unstable relation to the modernist canon she appropriates. Born in 1938, Amos was the youngest and only female artist in Spiral, a collective of African American artists founded in 1963 for "the purpose of discussing the commitment of the Negro artist in the present struggle for civil liberties, and as a discussion group to consider common aesthetic problems." About these shared commitments and aesthetics, the group's fourteen members—among them Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, and Norman Lewis—never reached consensus. In a 1966 roundtable, Amos stated, "I don't believe there is such a thing as a Negro artist." Even before the formation of Spiral, she had found work as a textile designer and had begun integrating handwoven and, later, store-bought kente cloth and batik fabrics into dense, multitextured figure paintings. Eight of these works, spanning the past four decades, were on view in "Black Bodies." *Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray's Photograph - 1926)*, 1995, pays tribute to the African American entertainer, athlete, and civil rights activist blacklisted for his Communist affiliations and opposition to US

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imperialism. Amos's painting after Murray's nude photograph rhythmically retraces Robeson's muscular back and buttocks across a field of gestural brushstrokes. Robeson's body is contained within several frames: bracketed on one side by stacked reproductions of Murray's photograph, and on the other by photo transfers of a Roman frieze. The three images—sculptural, painterly, and photographic—are insulated by a thick border of black-and-white geometric fabric.

"Every time I think about color, it's a political statement," Amos told Lucy Lippard in a 1991 interview. "It would be a luxury to be white and never have to think about it." In *All I Know of Wonder*, 2008, a woman in a red bikini stands near a winding shoreline, casting her gaze out to the viewer. Her body is partitioned into segments painted in different skin tones. A nude male figure stands in the foreground. Painted onyx black with gleaming white highlights, he appears polished and sculptural. While the two oddly coupled bodies—one reified, the other radically unresolved—make a sibylline statement about the racialization of color and the patchwork character of identity, the title evokes a short poem by an aging Marsden Hartley: "The earth is all I know of wonder. / I lived and was nurtured in the magic of dreams / bright flames of spirit laughter / around all my seething frame." Whether she was thinking about Hartley's poem, "the seething frame"—be it a physical body or a limit circumscribing an artwork—seems spookily apposite, capturing something of the layered densities of Amos's textiles and the sensuous, embodied figures within.

—Chloe Wyma

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The New York Times

What to See in New York Art Galleries This Week

By MARTHA SCHWENDENER, WILL HEINRICH and JASON FARAGO

NOV. 21, 2017

Emma Amos

Through Dec. 16. Ryan Lee, 515 West 26th Street, Manhattan; 212-397-0742, ryanleegallery.com.



Emma Amos's "Tightrope," a self-portrait from 1994, at Ryan Lee Gallery. All rights reserved Emma Amos/Licensed by VAGA, New York, via RYAN LEE Gallery, New York.

The Obamas' recent selection of artists to paint their official portraits drew attention to the rich tradition of African-American figurative painting. One artist in this lineage is Emma Amos, the only female member of Spiral, a collective founded by African-American artists in 1963. (Ms. Amos's work is also included in the recent benchmark exhibitions "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" at the Tate Modern in London and "We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85" at the Brooklyn Museum.) "Black Bodies," her current show at Ryan Lee, offers a sampling of four decades of her work.

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Black bodies are central to this show, as the title suggests, but Ms. Amos often takes a stealthy approach to the subject. “Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray’s Photograph — 1926),” from 1995, is a portrait that celebrates the great African-American actor and activist Paul Robeson — but also the photographer who captured his image in an era when heroic black figures were less visible in art — while “Maybe If I Stand on My Head” (1999) depicts a man doing a headstand, alluding to the physical and psychic contortions people with dark skin must endure in a racialized society.

Near the entrance is “Tightrope” (1994), a self-portrait that includes tiny reproductions of Gauguin paintings in its corners. Here Ms. Amos points to the difficulties of being a brown-skinned (female) artist working in a tradition that generally objectified black and brown bodies. Under a dark, somber robe in the self-portrait, however, Ms. Amos is wearing a Wonder Woman costume. It is an empowering and feminist gesture but also a reminder of what it feels like for anyone to scale obstacles in the pursuit of becoming a successful, or even practicing artist.

MARTHA SCHWENDENER

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THE NEW YORKER



The political is poetic for this New York artist, who, at seventy-nine years old, is absurdly under-known. Eight large paintings, made across four decades, ring buoyant variations on a theme: “Black Bodies,” as Amos has titled her show. Hung like banners, and often incorporating African fabrics and Amos’s own weavings, they picture athletic, dancing, heroic, and comic figures, with twisty references to art history and racial imbroglios. One adapts a nude photograph of Paul Robeson, taken by Nickolas Muray, in 1926; in another, Amos appears as Wonder Woman, holding up a T-shirt that bears an erotic image by Gauguin. Coming to comprehend the artist’s slow-burn meanings is like learning to dance.

Through Dec. 16.

Ryan Lee
515 W. 26th St.
Chelsea

212-397-0742

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ARTNEWS

9 Art Events to Attend in New York City This Week

BY The Editors of ARTnews POSTED 10/16/17 11:23 AM



SATURDAY, OCTOBER 21

Opening: Emma Amos at Ryan Lee

Ryan Lee in this show surveys the art of Emma Amos, an artist and educator known for her vivid figurative works that explore issues of African American identity and narrative, often through the lens of both art history and popular culture. There's recently been a renewed interest in Amos's work, which appeared in the Brooklyn Museum's "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965–85" show; this is her first solo exhibition since that show opened. Classic paintings by the former Spiral group artist, including 1994's *Tightrope*, which shows Amos clad in a Wonder Women suit and a black robe, will be shown alongside newer pieces. *Ryan Lee, 515 West 26th Street, 2-4 p.m.*

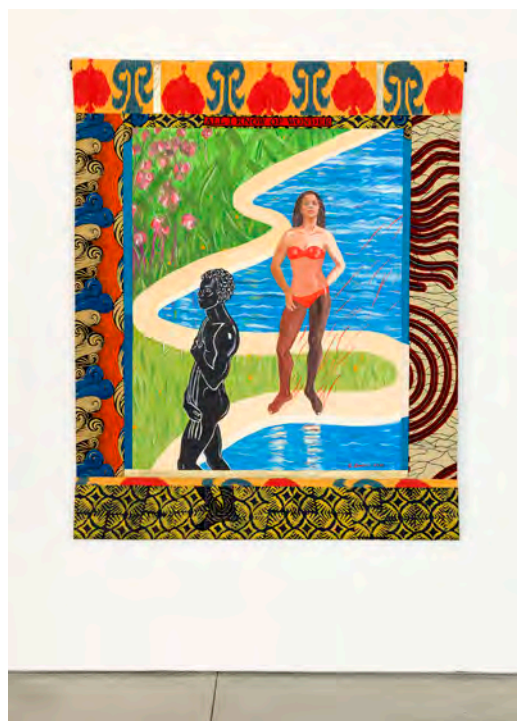
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artnet® news

Editors' Picks: 20 Things to See in New York This Week

Thursday, October 19–Monday, December 16



11. "Emma Amos: Black Bodies" at RYAN LEE

Ryan Lee presents a selection of historic as well as never-exhibited recent works by colorful figurative painter Emma Amos, the youngest and sole female member of the African-American artist group Spiral, active in the 1960s.

Location: RYAN LEE, 515 West 26th Street

Price: Free

Time: Opening reception, Saturday, October 21, 2 p.m.–4 p.m.; Tuesday–Saturday, 10 a.m.–6 p.m.

—Sarah Cascone

RYAN LEE

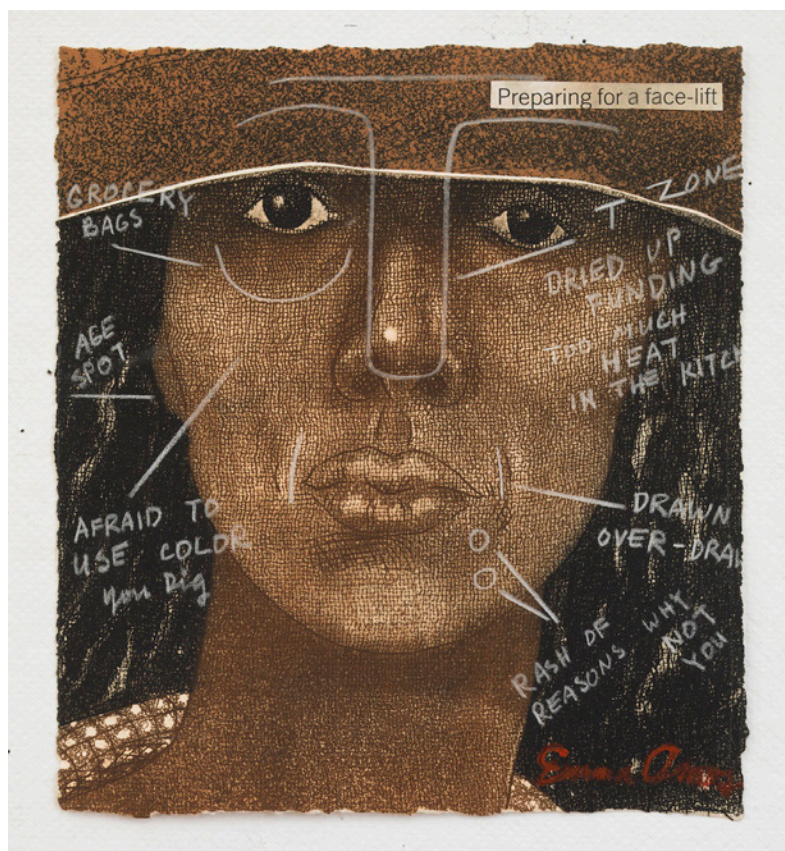
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The New York Times

To Be Black, Female and Fed Up With the Mainstream

By HOLLAND COTTER

APRIL 20, 2017



Emma Amos's "Preparing for a Face Lift" (1981) in the show "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-1985" at the Brooklyn Museum. Credit All Rights Reserved, Emma Amos/Licensed by VAGA, New York, NY, and Ryan Lee, New York

One reason for the hullabaloo around Dana Schutz's painting of the murdered Emmett Till in the current Whitney Biennial is the weakness of the work. It looks half-baked, unresolved. Like a lot of recent "political" art, it doesn't try for a weight suitable to, and therefore respectful of, its racially charged, morally shattering subject. The result, to use one writer's words, is "a tasty abstraction designed purposefully or inadvertently" to evoke an image of "common oppression."

Actually, those dismissive words weren't written about the Schutz painting. They were written in 1970 by the African-American critic Linda La Rue about the vaunted cross-cultural embrace of the second-wave feminist movement. The writer eyed with deep distrust the movement's assumption that it could speak with authority for all women, including black women.

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Ms. La Rue's words are in the catalog for the exhibition "We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85" at the Brooklyn Museum. And her critical perspective is one that to a large degree shapes this spare-looking show, which takes a textured view of the political past — a past that is acquiring renewed weight in the immediate present when the civil rights gains, including feminist gains, of the past half-century appear to be up for grabs.

Whether those gains have ever not been up for grabs is a question to consider, though the show asks more specific historical ones. Such as: What did women's liberation, primarily a white, middle-class movement, have to offer African-American women in a country where, as late as the 1960s, de facto slavery still existed; a country where racism, which the movement itself shared, was soaked into the cultural fabric? Under the circumstances, to be black, female and pursuing a career in art was a radical move.

The show starts in the early 1960s, with the formation in New York City of the black artists' group Spiral, composed mostly of established professionals — Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff — who debated the pros and cons, ethical and aesthetic, of putting art in the service of the civil rights movement. In all the talk, at least one political issue seems to have been passed over: the group's gender bias. Among its 15 regular members, there was only one woman, the painter Emma Amos — then in her early 20s and one of Woodruff's students — who would go on to make important political art.

By the time Spiral dispersed in 1965, the social mood of the country was tense. Black Power consciousness was on the rise — you'll find a detailed account of its growth in the exhibition "Black Power!" at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture — and art was increasingly a vehicle for racial assertion. The multidisciplinary Black Arts Movement took form in Harlem and spread to Chicago. There it spawned a subsidiary group called AfriCobra (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) which, with its interweave of black nationalism, spirituality, free jazz and brilliantly colored patterning, had a wide, sparks-shooting embrace. Yet it attracted relatively few female participants. Two — the prolific printmaker Barbara Jones-Hogu, and the fashion designer Jae Jarrell, who painted directly on her clothes — are in the show.

By the 1970s, feeling the pressures of racism from outside the African-American world, and the pressures of Black Power sexism within it, female artists formed their own collectives, without necessarily identifying them as feminist. One of the earliest, called Where We At, was initiated in Brooklyn in 1971 by Vivian E. Browne, Dindga McCannon and the redoubtable Faith Ringgold. After organizing what it advertised as "the first Black Women's art exhibition in known history," the group turned its second show into a benefit for black unwed mothers and their children.

The practical generosity of that gesture said a lot about how a distinctive African-American feminism would develop. Black collectives were embedding themselves, at street level, in communities, running educational workshops, scrounging up funds for day-care centers, and making inexpensive art — graphically striking posters, for example. "Our struggle was primarily against racial discrimination — not singularly against sexism," said the painter Kay Brown, a Where We At member.

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Her measured words barely hint at the hostility felt by some black artists toward a mainstream feminist movement that in their view ignored the black working-class poor and sometimes its own racism. And anger sometimes comes through in the work. It does in the fierce hilarity of a short 1971 film called “Colored Spade” by Betye Saar that flashes racial stereotypes at us like rapid-fire bullets, and in a funky 1973 assemblage called “The Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail,” by the same artist, which turns a California wine jug with a “mammy” image on one side and a Black Power fist on another, into a homemade bomb.

As the 1970s went on, black women began to participate, with their guard always up, in feminist projects like the all-woman A.I.R. Gallery and the Heresies Collective, at least until they were reminded of their outsider status. At the same time, they found a warm welcome at Just Above Midtown, a Manhattan gallery opened by Linda Goode Bryant in 1974 to show black contemporary art. Archival material related to this remarkable space, which closed in 1986, fills one of the exhibition’s several display cases and makes fascinating reading, as does a vivacious interview with Ms. Bryant by the critic Tony Whitfield reprinted in a “Sourcebook” that serves as an exhibition catalog.

Major pieces by artists whose careers Ms. Bryant helped start and sustained — Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, Lorraine O’Grady, Howardena Pindell — appear in galleries devoted to the late 1970s and ’80s, when an unprecedented amount of mixing was in progress. A multiculturalist vogue brought women and African-American artists into the spotlight. In a kind of parody of tolerance, the Reagan-era culture wars attacked artists across gender and racial lines. So did the H.I.V./AIDS epidemic.

The show ends with heirs to the Just Above Midtown generation. Some of them — Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems — we know well. Others, like the great dancer Blondell Cummings and the Rodeo Caldonia High-Fidelity Performance Theater, we need to know more about. And the exhibition, organized by Catherine Morris of the museum’s Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art and Rujeko Hockley, a former curator at the Brooklyn Museum now at the Whitney Museum of American Art, at least encourages us to learn.

And it leads us to at least one broad conclusion: that the African-American contribution to feminism was, and is, profound. Simply to say so — to make an abstract, triumphalist claim — is easy, but inadequate. It fails to take the measure of lived history. The curators of “We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85” do better than that just by doing their homework. They let counternarrative contradictions and confused emotions stand. The only change I would make, apart from adding more artists, would be to tweak its title: I’d edit it down to its opening phrase and put that in the present tense.

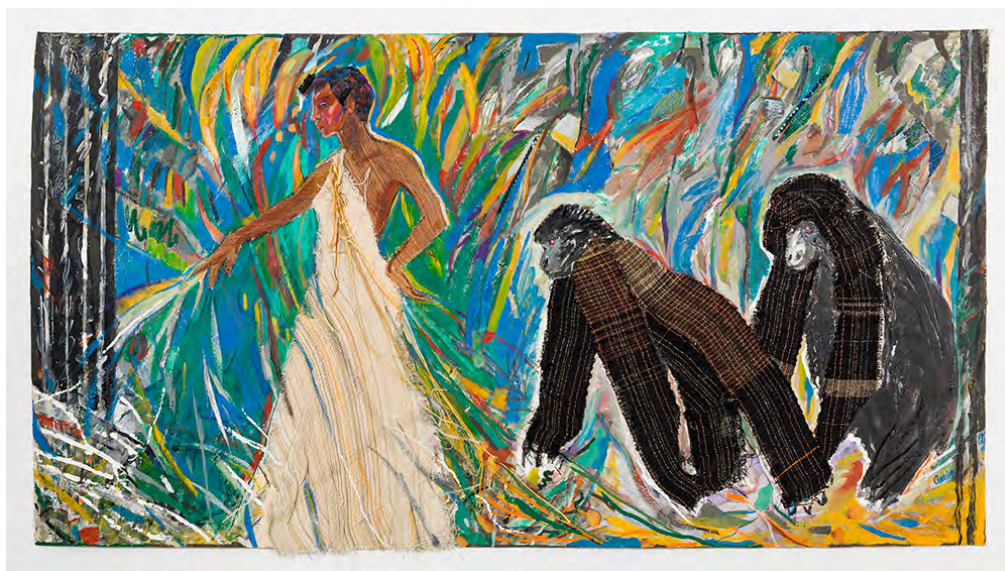
We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85
Through Sept. 17 at the Brooklyn Museum; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org.

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Art in America

Emma Amos
at Ryan Lee
through Apr. 9
515 West 26th Street



This exhibition of Emma Amos's paintings from the 1980s, which explore the representation of black bodies and painting modes traditionally embraced by white male artists, strike a contemporary cord. In her "Athletes and Animals" series (1983-85), dynamic basketball players, swimmers, and runners compete alongside majestic large cats and primates. Dispelling any evocation of racial stereotypes, Amos's *Josephine and the Mountain Gorillas* (1985) pictures the artist's apparent avatar, the famed entertainer and activist Josephine Baker, as she breaks through an Ab-Ex ground with two loyal gorillas following in her wake. The show, titled "True Colors," mines many prescient sociopolitical issues, and Amos's engagement with textiles, often hand-woven, yields exuberant paintings that are political, personal and triumphantly out of the margins. —Julia Wolkoff

Pictured: Emma Amos: *Josephine and the Mountain Gorillas*, 1985, acrylic and hand woven fabric on linen, 48 by 90 inches. Courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery, New York.

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Interview

ART

TRUE COLORS

By Rachel Small



By the 1980s, Atlanta-born artist Emma Amos had lived in New York for two decades and had been the youngest and only female artist in Spiral, a Civil Rights era collective of African-American artists. It's then that Amos conceived her leitmotif "figure in flux"—men and women rendered in wispy brushstrokes and often framed with swatches of patterned fabric, their fragile appearance serving as a metaphor for their trace in a whitewashed history. She chose subjects who held a tenuous stake in cultural memory: her *Athletes* series (1983-85) draws parallels between black athletes and animals for both their agility and exploitation; and *The Falling Series* (1989) portrays black entertainers and other figures tumbling through fragmented backgrounds. This month, New

York's Ryan Lee gallery will display about a dozen works, revisiting Amos's innovative depiction of the black body at a timely moment. "I hope people will be able to see the works for what they are," says Amos, "and what they can reflect of the times in which they were made, and how they resonate in the present."

AMOS'S THE RAFT, 1986. ACRYLIC ON WOVEN LINEN, 56 X 36".

"EMMA AMOS: TRUE COLORS" IS ON VIEW AT RYAN LEE GALLERY THROUGH APRIL 9.

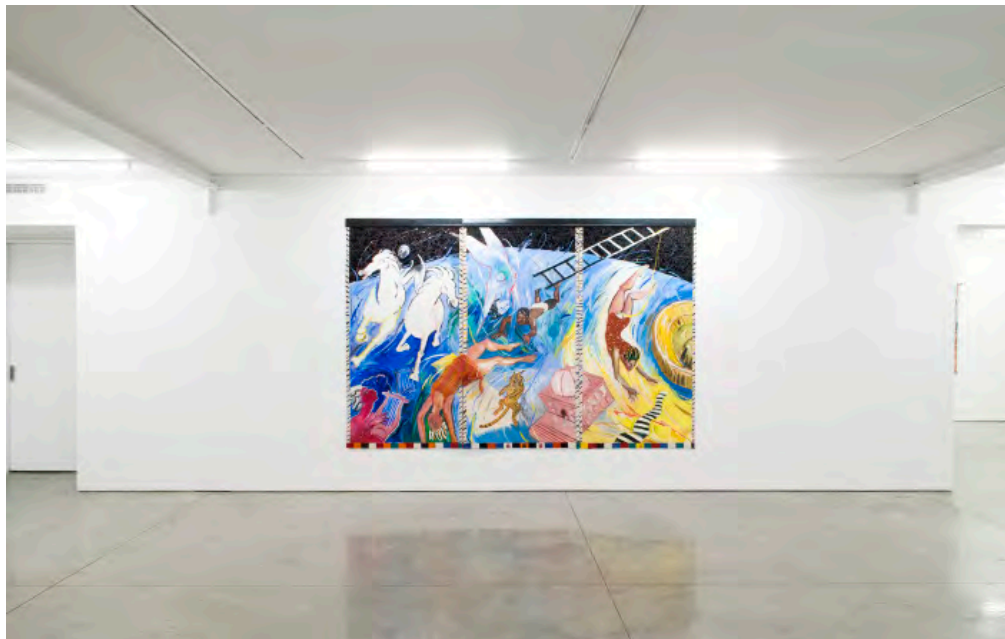
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Culture Talk: Courtney Willis Blair on Ryan Lee Gallery's Representation of Emma Amos

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Apr 6, 2016 • 5:37 pm



AT THE REAR OF RYAN LEE GALLERY, a 1966 painting by **Emma Amos** casually sits on the floor leaning against the wall between works by other gallery artists. Blending figuration and Abstract Expressionism, the canvas references Color Field painting and conjures Bob Thompson. The work bears little resemblance to the collage paintings on fabric featured in the front of the gallery. These textile works were produced by Amos in the 1980s and are the focus of “Emma Amos: True Colors,” the artist’s solo exhibition on view at the gallery through April 9.

“What we found so intriguing about the 80s work is it really is a pivotal period for Emma. It’s a commencement of a really important time in her practice where she is moving away, more and more, from the structured canvas, more and more, from working with oil as a paint medium. She is dealing with linen, dealing with fabric, dealing with acrylic and beginning to push these ideas she had in the 60s and 70s to a new place,” says Courtney Willis Blair, assistant director at Ryan Lee.

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Born in Atlanta, Amos is one of the last surviving members of Spiral, the short-lived, historically important African American artist collective founded by Romare Bearden in 1963. She was the group's youngest and only female member.

Throughout her practice, from the 1960s to the present, Amos has pushed herself and her work in new directions. Now in her late 70s, she maintains her longtime studio in New York City and, in January, joined Ryan Lee. In February, the Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia at Athens honored Amos for her contributions to visual art and culture, presenting her with the 2016 Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson Award. Her work will also be presented in "The Color Line," a survey of African American art at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris later this year.

Shortly after the gallery announced its representation of Amos, I spoke to Blair about the relationship, the exhibition and the arc of Amos's practice.

CULTURE TYPE: How did Ryan Lee Gallery come to represent Emma Amos?

COURTNEY WILLIS BLAIR: Mary Ryan (partner at Ryan Lee) worked with Emma in the late 90s and knew Emma during that time when she was working with another dealer, having included some of Emma's works in a few group shows. And then a little over a year ago, in the fall of 2014, I was organizing a show. I wanted to show artists who were dealing with how to confront individual and collective histories. I wanted the show to be inclusive in terms of cross-generational artists who were at different stages in their careers. We started putting the list together of artists we were going to invite and Emma's name kept coming up.

I did a studio visit with her and Mary, it must have been some time later that fall—maybe October, November—to see the work again in person and to visit Emma at her studio. The work just feels so fresh, from as early as the 60s when she was still in Spiral, up until the work that she is creating and making today. We included some of the historic work from the mid-60s in the show, work that she did with Spiral, as well as works on paper and prints that she had done in the 90s. That was the beginning of reconnecting her practice and her work with Ryan Lee.

We really hit it off and we had conversations at the studio and decided that we wanted to represent her. It's important that you build a relationship. This has been about a year in the making. We were able to finalize the representation fairly recently and put together a show of hers. We've been longtime admirers of her work, so we are thrilled that we are able to present it in this way and be an advocate for her work.

Did Amos have representation before Ryan Lee came on board?

She was working with another gallery, but it wasn't a full representation. I think she was looking to work with a gallery in a more direct way. The way we will be working with her is different than the gallery she was working with before. Emma's been around for quite a while. She's been in that studio on Bond street for quite some time. Maybe 20 years now. It might be even longer than that. She's worked with galleries before, but as with every artist, the situation changes over time. When we met with her, she did not have official representation. It was great timing and being able to work with her is fantastic.

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Speaking of timing, news of Ryan Lee's representation came at the same time that Amos was announced as a recipient of the Georgia Museum of Art award and that she is expected to have a forthcoming solo exhibition at the museum. How did these honors come about? Was the confluence organic or strategic?

Emma's had attention from museums and curators for some time. She's in some really fantastic collections and she's been in some fantastic shows that are thematic shows or shows about a specific period and she's always had attention in that regard. She's an important post-modernist artist. She was in Spiral and she had a tenured professorship at Rutgers. She was a faculty member at Skowhegan [School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine] and a visiting lecturer at Pratt. She's been very much a part of the New York art scene and a part of the feminist collective The Heresies, which had Joan Semel and Lucy Lippard. She's always been on the radar as a part of those circles.

The Georgia Museum award was recently announced. It's a named award for [collectors] Brenda and Larry Thompson and the artists nominated have some sort of connection to Georgia, whether it's that they are from Georgia or they work there. Emma's originally from Atlanta and so we were thrilled to hear that she not only was nominated, but that she won the award, that her home state was recognizing her in this way and the museum will be organizing a retrospective of her work. For Emma, who was born in Atlanta in the late 30s, being recognized in this way at a prominent museum in Georgia is really special for her. This is a nice homecoming for her. She has some other museum exhibitions that will be happening that haven't been announced yet and she'll be included in the exhibition "Color Line" which opens in Paris later this year. Also, since we started working with her, we have been instrumental in putting her work in some collections. We worked with the Whitney Museum and the British Museum, putting some works in their collections and we'll continue to do so. We're really a conduit to other opportunities.

In terms of timing and the Georgia Museum award, the Georgia Museum had been interested in doing a show with her with the curator there. [In September 2015, the museum announced the appointment of Shawnya L. Harris, its first Larry D. And Brenda A. Thompson Curator of African-American and African diasporic art.] Everything is coming together at a really great time, and it is really a significant moment for her.

When is the exhibition at the Georgia Museum? Is it expected in 2016?

No. It will not be this year. It likely will not be for a couple of years.

At the beginning, when you talked about your first visit to Amos's studio, you said you were arranging an exhibition of collective histories. What was the name of that exhibition?

It's called "I lost an arm on my last trip home." It was an exhibition with four artists: Derrick Adams, Emma Amos, Sarah Rahbar, and Bethany Collins. It borrowed its title from the opening line of Octavia Butler's "Kindred," the science fiction novel that deals with this very messy plot about lineage and violent history that has been passed down. The main character is called back into time by one of her ancestors who is in the antebellum South and eventually rapes and has children with one of his slaves and that's the line that she exists on. The exhibition itself took this

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idea of what does this history mean to an individual, the violence of this history, the beauty of this history, and the vulnerability and aggression of this history—how do artists confront these things.

I would like to talk about Amos's evolving practice—the work she did in the 60s, her work in the 80s, and then what she is doing currently.

Emma has made a long-term commitment to dealing with social code, conceptually and also being very, very interested in formalism, and color as a formal technique as well as a way to talk about things people don't want to talk about.

In the 60s, when she was a part of Spiral, she was fairly young, in her 20s, and she had been invited to join the group by Hale Woodruff. At the time, he had known her family in Atlanta and had been asked to work with her when she was very young and it didn't work out. Hale was very busy. Emma was just a child. But he had kept a finger on the pulse of what she was doing. When she returned from London— she had studied there for a few years— she had already graduated from Antioch College in Ohio. She was living in New York and studying at NYU as well, and she was invited by Hale to join Spiral and it turned out that she was the only woman in that group of 14 other members and the youngest member, as well.

Emma, during the early to mid 60s, was working mainly on canvas with oils, very figurative work with references from abstract expressionism and from color field painting, in a way challenging this notion that these movements or techniques were only perpetuated by her white male counterparts.

After this initial period, where did she take her work?

Then in the 70s, she was still working in that vein. In a lot of paintings from the 70s, you started seeing figures who are named figures in her work, friends. Again, Emma was a part of communities of artists and so you started seeing her painting people who are around her.

Then in the 80s, she diverts away from the traditional canvas and starts working with acrylic and linen. She also starts using fabrics a lot more. We are showing work between '83 and '89. A lot of those works are—this is when not many people were doing this at the time—incorporating African-sourced fabrics. She was getting fabrics from places like Burkino Faso and Ghana and incorporating them into her work.

She also studied and worked with Dorothy Liebes, who is a very important weaver and so she had honed her skills. Then you see her incorporating these ideas of craft and domesticity, but in a way that is very much about challenging these notions around them. She is breaking down these fabrics. She's tearing them. She's ripping them. She's collaging them on. She's weaving them into the canvases and again the figures in her work are often times on these abstract backgrounds.

Are some of these methods presented in the exhibition?

There is a piece that we are showing in the exhibition called "Josephine and the Mountain Gorillas." You have this image of Josephine Baker in a very lush jungle space but at the heart of it, it's really abstract painting. It's energetic. A lot of movement. A lot of different bright, bold

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colors in the background and then Josephine is laying in this beautiful white gown that's made of cloth that Emma has cut out and collaged on. The gorillas themselves [are collaged on] as well. These chunks of legs that they have, they almost look like tree trunks in a way from that texture you are getting from the cloth that she is collaging onto the work.

She is really dealing with those in the 80s again, incorporating figures. Josephine at the time is arguably one of the most visible... well entertainers really. She's also a woman of color and an activist in her own right. It was, for Emma, a way to explore this idea of blackness within this entertainment culture. There's another work where she is referencing Thurgood Marshall, Miles Davis, and so again, politics, music, entertainment, dance, all of these notions are important and not just to the black experience. It's the American experience and reframing these images of the black experience.

Can you talk about the series of works she produced during this time in the 80s?

She is also working on a series called *Athletes and Animals*, where she is comparing the way we consider athletes, black athletes, in particular, both men and women, and the way we consider animals, particularly wild animals. The grace that these animals have, the strength, the aggression that they have, but also to the way we exoticize them. Again, she is using fabrics in these works and showing a lot of movement. A lot of her work has this idea of energy and movement.

All of that switches over when she starts doing *The Falling Series*. You have these figures who are falling against these beautiful abstract backgrounds and she pulls in references to Surrealism at times. Again, very highly trained as an artist. Very, very knowledgeable of art history. Very knowledgeable of what's happening at the time, not just in art, but also culturally.

The *Water* series happens during the 80s, too, where she is intrigued by this idea of water at the beach, while she is watching the Summer Olympics in L.A. in 1984. It's very obvious that with the water sports, there is an absence of black athletes and so she starts to explore this idea of water. Emma, not knowing how to swim, at the time was fascinated with water, not only the fear and anxiety it induced in her, but this idea of liberation and freedom. Those two things are coming together and that continues throughout the work on these non-stretched canvases, incorporating the African fabrics.

After the 80s, how did her practice evolve?

Working on in the 90s she starts looking at university athletes like Paul Robeson, the track team at Fisk [University]. She again is dealing with memories of the South and you start seeing images of Klan members. She's dealing with images in art history. She has a lot of images where she paints a self portrait and she is wearing Lucian Freud's skin. Again, we are talking about these canonical figures in art history. All of this is a long-term continued commitment. She's very prolific.

Now, as she's getting older she has the urge to work and to make, which continues throughout your life. She has done some beautiful silhouette pieces and recently she's been doing more intimate drawings and watercolors. It's really, I think, a storied career that is still continuing. As

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you look at the work and understand the periods throughout her career, I think it's important to note this interest in what's happening with women, what's happening with people of color. How all of these things are related, these moments of beauty and joy that are interlaced with vulnerability, and violence even at times, I think has always been important to her.

She is currently doing drawings and watercolors?

Yeah. She works on a more intimate scale now in terms of size.

What kinds of subjects is she exploring?

She's always exploring the figure. That's something she's done throughout her career and that's something she continues to push on, but she also has a knack for the abstract composition. Again, this relationship between figuration and abstraction has stayed with her.

Going back to her fabrics works, before her *Athletes and Animals* series, when she first started working with animals, tell me why the animals? What do they symbolize? How did they come into play?

Emma, the way she introduces work, the logistics of her practice, she always painted what surrounds her. There are animals that appear outside the *Athletes and Animals* series. There's a piece that she did when she was a faculty member at Skowhegan where she paints the cows that are in the field and places herself in that context.

There's a large piece that she did. It's a triptych that we'll be showing in the exhibition, called "Flying Circus." There is a horse figure in there that represents mythology. She has done animals outside of the athletes series and it is for a number of different reasons. Sometimes, it's as a reference to something else, as a symbol.

She paints what's around her. She paints what she is thinking of and so there are a number of different reasons why animals come into some of the compositions in her work. I was trying to see if there was an image of an animal from the 70s, and from what I remember, most of them are domestic animals. She's done cats, for example.

There is a piece in the 70s, it's called "Shirley and the Snapper." It's from 1977 and it's a smaller piece. Shirley is holding this basket of fish. But, again, this is Emma looking at things around her, exploring figuration and realism.

Why does the exhibition concentrate on her works from the 1980s?

What we found so intriguing about the 80s work is it really is a pivotal period for Emma. It's a commencement of a really important time in her practice where she is moving away, more and more, from the structured canvas, more and more from working with oil as a paint medium. She is dealing with linen, dealing with fabric, dealing with acrylic and beginning to push these ideas she had in the 60s and 70s to a new place.

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The 80s are significant in a way that you see that shift happen and I really think that the work that finds itself happening later in her oeuvre is tied to this period of the 80s. It was also very prolific period. She is doing a number of different series during these 10 years. At the time, she is also working with Robert Blackburn, so printmaking has become an important part of her practice. When I think of the 80s work, I think of it as this signifier for what's to come. It's this anticipation for the work later in life.

In the 80s, that is when she's working largely with The Heresies and some other collectives. She's very active, being a part of these communities that are political and artistic and creative—all these things. She's awarded tenure at Rutgers in the mid 80s, so it's not just within her practice, but what she is doing outside of that. How she's teaching younger artists from a younger generation and building these communities that are cross generational, building these communities that are for the marginalized, these feminist collectives. All of those things are intrinsically tied and really they sort of explode in the 80s. CT

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Studio

Summer/Fall 2011

Emma Amos: Spiral Icon

By Lauren Haynes, Assistant Curator



Emma Amos; *Flower Sniffer*, 1966. Photo: Becket Logan Courtesy for the artist (c) Emma Amos/ Licensed by VAGA, New York, and RYAN LEE, New York.

“I like that people can read their own meanings into my paintings and that those readings may be quite different from mine.” – Emma Amos¹

In late April, I had the amazing opportunity to visit the studio of visual artist Emma Amos (b. 1938). Amos is a painter, printmaker and weaver who has exhibited in museums and galleries worldwide for almost fifty years. Amos was born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia. She lived there until she went off to school—first to Antioch College in Ohio and then to graduate school in London and later at New York University. Since then, Amos has lived in New York. In addition to her career as a visual artist, Amos is also a teacher; she taught at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University for twenty-eight years and served as Chair of Visual Arts for two years. Although Amos has retired from teaching, she has not retired from making art. Not only

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is her studio filled with work she has created over the years, it is also filled with materials she is currently using on new works. She has been in the same incredibly organized studio in NoHo for twenty years. The walls of the space are filled with artwork—her own and by other artists she has known and whose work she appreciates, including Norman Lewis (1909–1979) and Nellie Mae Rowe (1900–1982). While in Amos’s studio I was able to see artwork she’s created from the mid-1960s to the present, including works in progress. Most of Amos’s paintings since the late 1980s have been acrylic paintings on linen, surrounded by a border of African fabric. Amos and her studio assistants were in the process of picking the border for a recently completed painting during our visit.

Much of Amos’s work is figurative. Amos has a series of works featuring bodies moving through water (“The Water Series”), a series of bodies falling through the air (“The Falling Series”) and a series that juxtaposes images of athletes with those of animals. She began working on these series in the mid-1980s and continues to add to them today. While in her studio, I was able to see images of an artwork called *The Gift*. In the early 1990s, Amos painted fifty-five watercolor portraits of her female artist friends. Together, these paintings make up *The Gift*, which includes no male artists because, as Amos told me at the time, “There were enough images of them.”

During our studio visit, we also discussed Amos’s involvement in the legendary Spiral group and the Museum’s exhibition *Spiral: Perspectives on an African-American Art Collective*, which will be on view from July 14 to October 23, 2011. The Spiral group was a collective of African-American artists that met once a week from the summer of 1963 to 1965 to discuss the role of black artists in the civil rights movement. Founded by Charles Alston (1907–1977), Romare Bearden (1911–1988), Hale Woodruff (1900–1980) and Lewis, Spiral’s membership eventually expanded to fifteen. Amos was one of the youngest and the only woman. Woodruff, who was also from Atlanta and a professor at New York University while Amos was in graduate school, invited her to join. “I was the only woman and I was the youngest member, when they did invite me,” Amos says. “I’m not sure they invited other people by looking at their work, but they were very nervous about having a woman in their group, and they wanted to make sure I was a real artist and not a dilettante or something. I think they asked me to join the club (which met once a week for discussion) instead of the women they knew, because those women represented some sort of threat, and I was only ‘a little girl.’”²² During our visit, Amos talked about how much she enjoyed being in Spiral and how she spent the meetings yelling, laughing and arguing just like everyone else. Other members of Spiral were Calvin Douglass (b. 1931), Perry Ferguson (active New York, New York, mid-60s), Reginald Gammon (1921–2005), Felrath Hines (1913–1993), Alvin Hollingsworth (1928–2000), William Majors (1930–1982), Richard Mayhew (b. 1934), Earl Miller (b. 1930), Merton D. Simpson (b. 1928) and James Yeargans (1908–1972). Although the Spiral group only showed together a limited number of times, their legacy has made a mark on art history and influenced generations of artists. The Studio Museum’s 2011 exhibition *Spiral: Perspectives on an African-American Art Collective* takes an exhibition of the same name organized by the Birmingham Museum of Art as its starting point, and then brings selections from the Studio Museum’s permanent collection and significant works from New York-area collections, including rarely seen paintings from the mid-1960s by Amos and the Studio Museum’s iconic Bearden photo projection, *Conjur Woman* (1964).

Spiral: Perspectives on an African-American Art Collective was organized by Emily G. Hanna and Amalia Amaki for the Birmingham Museum of Art (December 5, 2010–April 17, 2011). Organized

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by Studio Museum Assistant Curator Lauren Haynes in collaboration with Hanna, the Studio Museum presentation of Spiral will be on view July 14 to October 23, 2011.

1. Emma Amos, Artist Statement, <http://emmaamos.com/about/statement> (accessed May 5, 2011).
2. bell hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right: Making History Visible," in Emma Amos Paintings and Prints 1982–1992, (exhibition catalogue) (Wooster, OH: The College of Wooster Art Museum, 1993), 19.

By Jeanne Siegel

Why Spiral?

Negro artists, well known and neophyte, meet as a group in New York to discuss the contradictions facing them in modern America

When I asked each of the 13 men and one woman that make up the present membership of the Spiral group what Spiral stands for, I got 14 conflicting answers. One of the reasons for the disparity is that unlike most artists' circles, its *raison-d'être* was not primarily an esthetic one, nor was it formed for the traditional purpose of exhibiting together and making public statements. As if the problems that confront all modern artists are not enough, Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Felrath Hines, Norman Lewis, Alvin Hollingsworth, Merton Simpson, Earl Miller, William Majors, Reggie Gammon, Hale Woodruff, Perry Ferguson, Calvin Douglass, James Yeargans and Emma Amos—a dynamic and totally divergent group ranging in age from 28 to 65, that includes a court clerk, art dealer, floorwaxer, Ph.D. candidate and restorer of old masters—first began meeting three years ago to discuss what they considered a far more vital issue: what should be their attitudes and commitments as Negro artists in the present struggle for Civil Rights.

At a glance the issue seemed clear enough, but it provoked many searching questions. Should you participate directly in the activities of the Movement? Do you have special qualities to express as a Negro artist? What is your value as an artist who is both an American and a Negro? What do you have in common with other Negro painters? What should your role be in the mainstream of art?

In other words, they felt an urge to say something, but they didn't know what, how or where to say it. They also knew that something set them apart from other painters, but they weren't sure if that "something" had a tangible form that could be transmitted through art. They referred to this possibility as "the Negro Image," and they suspected that, although unquestionably intertwined with other issues, it had to be clarified before other problems could fall into place.

Norman Lewis: I am not interested in an illustrative statement that merely mirrors some of the social conditions, but

Author: Columbia-trained art-historian Jeanne Siegel is completing a thesis on Negro artists in America.



Emma Amos [left], Perry Ferguson, Alvin Hollingsworth [right].

in my work I am for something of deeper artistic and philosophic content.

Hale Woodruff: I agree with Norman Lewis. I am not interested in some "gimmick" that will pander to an interest in things Negroid.

James Yeargans: We should look to our past for a distinct identity. The Negro artist should take something out of the present upheaval as part of his expression. The Negro has a deep cultural heritage to be explored.

Charles Alston: I have come to the point where I wonder whether most of the expression I observe in Negro



Romare Bearden: *Mysteries*, detail, 1965, collage. Cordier & Ekstrom, New York

ARTnews Sept. 1966



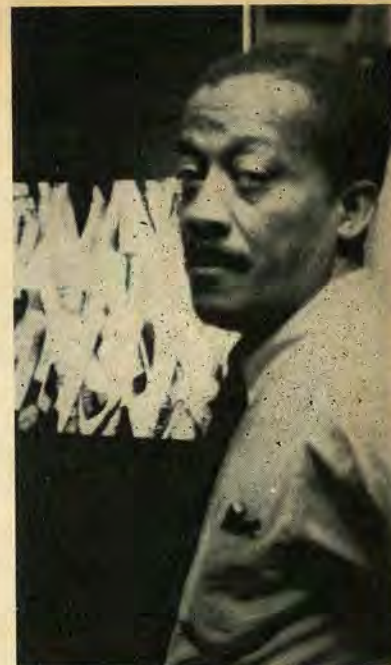
Romare Bearden [right] and Reggie Gammon.

painting might not be only reflections of a dominant culture and not truly indigenous. The Negro artist might have a more personal "thumbprint."

Romare Bearden: I suggest that Western society, and particularly that of America, is gravely ill and a major symptom is the American treatment of the Negro. The artistic expression of this culture concentrates on themes of "absurdity" and "anti-art" which provide further evidence of its ill health. It is the right of everyone now to re-examine history to see if Western culture offers the only solutions to man's purpose on this earth.



Charles Alston



Norman Lewis

Norman Lewis: Our group should always point to a broader purpose and never be led down an alley of frustration. Political and social aspects should not be the primary concern; esthetic ideas should have preference. Is there a Negro Image?

Felrath Hines: There is no Negro Image in the twentieth century—in the 1960s. There are only prevailing ideas that influence everyone all over the world, to which the Negro has been, and is, contributing. Each person paints out of the life he lives.

James Yeargans: Is there a White Image?

Charles Alston: *Nobody Knows*, 1965, 40 inches high.

Norman Lewis: *Procession*, 1964, 57 inches high.
Willard Gallery, New York





Felrath Hines: untitled, 1964.

Spiral

Felrath Hines: There is not. There are just varying means of expression.

Norman Lewis: If we had been allowed to pursue our own image historically, it would have been a Negro Image.

Felrath Hines: There are Jewish painters who, like Chagall, paint Jewish subject matter, and some who don't.

James Yeargans: The word "image" is ambiguous. I would like some explanation of it . . . I have brought one of my paintings that I feel was inspired by certain rhythms that are peculiar to my experience as a Negro.

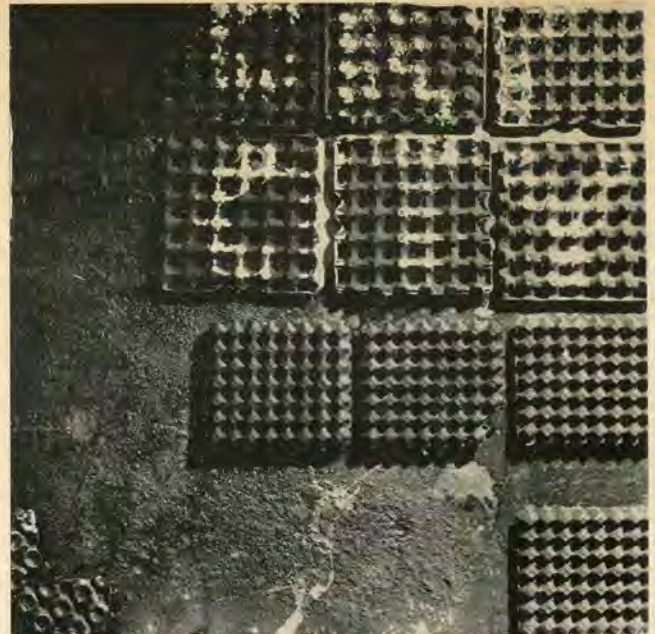
Norman Lewis: I feel that Franz Kline in his paintings with large contrasts of black against white and Ad Reinhardt in his all-black painting might represent something more Negroid than work done by Negro painters.

Perry Ferguson: I suggest that there is no such thing in America as a Negro Art.

James Yeargans: I prefer the word "Afro" to Negro. We can speak of an Afro-American Art.

Alvin Hollingsworth: I wonder why it should be necessary to seek one particular image. Even the exponents

Alvin Hollingsworth: *Cry City*, 1963, 48 inches high.
Dintenfass Gallery, New York



of Pop Art paint in divergent ways. When I was a child I used to think Bob Gwathmey was a Negro.

Romare Bearden: You can't speak as a Negro if you haven't had the experience.

In spite of their doubts and different opinions, they still hoped to evoke in their paintings the "signature," the personal "thumbprint" that they had talked so much about. This was not merely a concept of subject matter, but closer to the formal quality that is found in jazz. Jazz, they feel, grew out of the grassroots of Negro culture. In a concerted effort to bring out this "Negro-ness" they tried to eliminate traditional Western ideas from their minds. Romare Bearden suggested that certain new esthetic ideas of such African writers as Diop and Senghor should be discussed. Merton Simpson, a dealer in primitive art, lectured on African sculpture. They studied geometric tribal designs found on huts, textile patterns, Zulu shields.

In the spring of 1964, for their first group exhibition, they flirted with the idea of "Mississippi, 1964" as a theme



Emma Amos: *Without Feather Boa*, 1965, etching, 30 inches high.

Reggie Gammon: *Freedom Now*, 1964, 40 inches high.



Merton Simpson: *Victim*, 1965, 30 inches high.



Earl Miller: untitled, 1963, collage, 12 inches high.

William Majors: *Ecclesiastes VII*, 1965, etching, 14½ inches high.



and then rejected it as too pointedly "social protest." In its place, they chose an esthetic limitation—to restrict their palettes to black and white—which, they felt, carried symbolic overtones. Bearden created a group of collages that drew on his memories of the South, Harlem, ritual jazz. "I use subject matter," he said, "to bring something to it as a Negro—another sensibility—give it an identity." Giant faces were faceted into abstractions that left no doubt about the artist's desire to depict the nobility of the Negro in a fractured society.

Although Bearden returned after 20 years to the Negro image, themes of the human condition had never ceased to concern him. If we compare the recent collages to his paintings of the 1940s, the difference lies in a certain spirit of detachment that the artist has achieved since the era when "social protest" was current. A product of the W.P.A., he speaks nostalgically of the days when all the Negro artists lived in Harlem and he and Jake Lawrence had studios next door to each other on 125th Street. Today Bearden, a social case-worker when he isn't painting, worries

about the fact that the Negro artist has so little rapport with his own community.

Charles Alston, a cousin of Bearden, who also got his start with the W.P.A., says, "Bourgeois Negroes have always striven to participate in the mainstream, always tried to achieve the mainstream's values, a car, a fur coat . . ."

Although in the heat of the moment he has created paintings like *Starved People*, of Klansmen and poor whites—"those people," according to the artist, "who make the rules, the victims"—such canvases are not typical. "The themes that I am working on today," Alston says, "for example, *The Family*, a mural for the lobby of the Harlem Hospital, or *Nobody Knows*, a portrait of a blues singer, have concerned me throughout my career." He feels now, "Spiral was too weighted on the side of the Cause . . . too involved in self-conscious themes."

Perhaps most deeply affected was the sensitive and talented Norman Lewis. His subject, tiny forms in clusters that suggest migrations of people or birds in space, hasn't changed, but what was delicate and diffuse became sharp-

[Continued on page 67]

Alvin Douglass: untitled, 1963, soap and lyester on masonite, 36 inches high.



James Yeargans: *No Room at the Hotel*, 1965, 28 inches high



emma Amos (born in Atlanta in 1938) always knew she would be an artist. As a woman of African descent she dared to dream to be a professional painter and printmaker. After graduating from Antioch College in Ohio, Central School of Art in London and New York University (NYU), she honed her skills at Robert Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop, and worked as a designer/weaver for textile master, Dorothy Liebes. While attending NYU, she was asked to join *Spiral*, a group of black artists that included Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff and Charles Alston. Amos originated and co-hosted *Show of Hands*, a crafts show for WGBH Educational TV in Boston in 1977-79, and later became a Professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University.

Blurring the distinction between "high" and "low" art, Emma Amos's explorations in different media—etching, monoprints, silk collagraphs, photography, painting, fibre, sewing—result in seamless works of art. Amos incorporates fibres and printed cloths which, when combined with gestural strokes of paint, create fields of color and texture that enmesh drawn and painted figures and photographic images. In her paintings, she exploits the tensions between photographic and painted illusion. She has always found photography "interesting because it seems not to lie when in fact it

does—it's very selective about what it shows." Moreover, bordering her paintings with African fabrics, Amos sews, appliques, embroiders and occasionally quilts with her own weavings, Kente cloth and batiks. Her large canvases hang unstretched, evoking, at once, the form of European prestige tapestries and the African diaspora.

and scholarship about modern and contemporary art, have galvanized Emma Amos. She understands that cultural production affects social values and norms—how we view others and ourselves. In other words, art matters.

Amos's exhibition, *Changing the Subject*, 1994, at Art in General, New York, was a watershed event, for it marked

publicly a maturation of her political content and aesthetic virtuosity. Amos's signature style, growing out of the late 1980s to early 1990s, is an amalgam of an often highly charged political critique and a dynamic color field that acts as a backdrop for her multi-vocal dialectic surrounding issues of representation. With historical and political references that center upon race and gender in the series *Changing the Subject*, Amos notes, for example, in *Tightrope*, 1994, that she "looks autobiographically at race, sex, and identity." Her interest in herself as a pictorial subject continues from earlier work. Yet, in this painting she aligns her identity not only with women of color but with all women. The title easily conveys the idea of people who precariously juggle the demands life and society



One Who Watches, acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders and photo transfer, c. 1995; 52" x 42". Photograph by Becket Logan.

During the course of her artistic career, Amos has been deeply involved in feminism and the politics of culture. Collaboration and friendships with women artists, involvement with feminist publications like *Heresies* and *MEANING*, and awareness of the exclusion of women and people of color from the critical discourse

thrust upon them—matriarchs, mothers, wives, impoverished people and people of color. In *Tightrope*, Emma, who wears an American flag/"Wonder-Woman" leotard (obscured by a black negligée), is both warrior and seductress; the attributes of true womanhood are veiled by popular conceptions of womanhood.

Next, there is the subject of exclusion. X's proliferate in *Tightrope* and other paintings. The "X"-mark denotes cancellation, deletion, invisibility, absence and error. X's represent for Amos, "how hardly anyone gives a damn what I say as an artist or what black people have to say."

"X" also refers to Malcolm X (who continues to be an esteemed black political figure in Africa and the U.S.) and what "X" symbolized—a canceling of the slave-name and the legacy of slavery. Further examination of *Tightrope* reveals another subject: colonialism. Amos, the tightrope walker, achieves delicate balance holding artist brushes in one hand and a shirt depicting "Mrs. Gauguin's" breasts in the other. Red arrows in the corners of the painting point to the pictorial source of Amos's shirt: the late nineteenth century artist Paul Gauguin's *Two Tahitian Women with Mangoes*, 1899. After reading Gauguin's journals, Amos comments, "I considered him anew and imagined he must have abused Te Iha Amana, the thirteen-year-old second 'Mrs. Gauguin,' whom he bought from her father to be his model, housekeeper,

concubine and intermediary to the island's people." Would Gauguin be the famous post-Impressionist artist if it were not for the assistance and presence of Te Iha Amana, and for Tahitian culture? Te Iha Amana's plight serves as an inspiration for several other paintings in this exhibition, including *The Overseer*, 1992, *One Who Watches*, 1995 and *Malcolm X, Morley, Matisse and Me*, 1993.

Amos issues a scathing criticism of the exploitation of cultures that Westerners have deemed "primitive" in the development of modernism. Black urban vernac-

ular is incorporated in the title *Yo Man Ray Yo*, subverting the "high" art status of Man Ray's photograph, *Noire et Blanche*, 1926, upon which it is based. Ray's photograph clearly illustrates the idea of contemplating the primitive. In Amos' painting, the African mask in *Noire et*

out the terrain of the black body. In the United States, the African American is the late modern primitive. The legacy of Josephine Baker and *Le Revue Nègre* continues to Hip-Hop. Black culture is the essential signifier for cultural modernism and post-modernism. At issue is agency.

Who controls or possesses the black body as an object of desire and economic exploitation affects how we comprehend black culture.

By referencing masterpieces of modern art history Amos focuses particularly on primitivism and the global subjugation of people of color and women in *Malcolm X, Morley, Matisse and Me, Overseer, Work Suit* (based on a nude self-portrait by Lucien Freud) and *One Who Watches* (based on Gauguin's *Spirit of the Dead Watching*, 1892, that, in turn, refers to Edouard Manet's *Olympia*, 1863). In *Work Suit*, Amos inversely appropriates the ubiquitous Western image of the male artist holding his palette of paints and brushes with a nude model—usually a reclining woman—before him. Amos's allusions to this and similar canonical works address "the covenant of silence about the prerogatives that white artists have." That sym-



Work Suit, acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders and photo transfer, c. 1994; 74 1/2" x 54 1/2". Photograph by Becket Logan.

Blanche is replaced with the head of a young, beautiful African American woman. The black woman—unlike the mask—surreptitiously gazes back at the white woman. Black passivity and anonymity are transformed by a meaningful glance and a real black person.

Not only the Tahitians of Gauguin, the Africans of Picasso, Braque and Matisse, but the African Americans of Mapplethorpe and countless other artists demonstrate how the black body continues to stand for sensuality and sex, possession and power. Primitivism lingers in mapping

bol of power, the objectification of women, especially black and brown women, refers to the close relationship between colonialism and modernity and post-colonialism and post-modernity. This history of art confirms Amos's own experiences.

In these recent paintings, Amos addresses racism in the professional art community. A particular grievance is against institutions that exhibit or collect only those works by African American artists that show identifiable black figures. Such curatorial choices have compelled Amos to depict a multicolored mix of skin



Tightrope, acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders and photo transfer, c. 1994; 82" x 58". Photograph by Becket Logan.

tones and white subjects in her paintings. In response to art market restrictions, some African American artists have censored themselves. As she has remarked, "By calling attention to problems of self-censorship and the compartmentalization of artists by race and gender, I was, and still am, rebelling against the expectation that a black woman does paintings only of and about black people."

Postmodernism typically emphasizes a work of art's representation of social and political history and related issues that take precedence over aesthetics and technical skill. For Emma Amos, they are equally important. Moreover, postmodernist art is not represented by any one avant-garde style. Consequently, Amos can choose without jeopardizing artistic credibility. Her sequence of paintings is anecdotal, but the objective of each is the same: to argue constructively against norms in the field of art as well as society. Her responses are reactive and reflexive; she ably uses her paintings as a means to analyze and assess cultural production, authorship, meaning and consumption. Amos is quintessentially postmodern because she questions the validity of canonical traditions and institutions that for so long have been biased against the inclusion of women and artists of color, especially blacks. By insisting on her own particular perspective, she risks the critical longevity of her work. However, she

states, "I accept the idea that my art will become dated. I don't believe work is timeless, but the nuances of meaning may be lost unless you know the history." Look closely at these paintings and remember.

Sharon F. Patton

Sharon F. Patton is the Director of the Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, and is the author of African American Art (Oxford University Press, 1998).

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

2000 *Blackness in Color: Visual Expressions of the Black Arts Movement*; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY (book/catalogue).

Dream Worlds: New Surrealism at the Millennium; Attleboro Museum, Attleboro, MA.

1999 *Seeing, An Overview*; Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster, PA (solo).

Looking Forward, Looking Black; Elaine Jacob Gallery, Detroit, MI, and Hobart & William Smith College Gallery (catalogue).

Re-Righting History: Work by Contemporary African-American Artists; Katonah Museum, Katonah, NY (catalogue).

A Coloring Lesson; Walter Bischoff Galleries, Deutsch-Amerikanischen Zentrum, James F. Burns Institut, Stuttgart, Germany (solo).

A Conversation: Emma Amos and Builder Levy; A.R.T., New York, NY (solo).

Wrapped in Pride: Ghanaian Kente and African-American Identity; Newark Museum, Newark, NJ.

Odyssey Series, and A Reading at Bessie Smith's Grave; Civil Rights Museum (solo).



Tribal Headdresses Twentieth Century, oil on linen canvas with African fabric borders, c. 2000; 34 3/4" x 43 1/2". Photograph by Becket Logan.

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EMMA AMOS

Art as Legacy

By Lisa E. Farrington

Beyond the customary assessments of Emma Amos's (b. 1938) art as vivid, kinetic, and often acerbically witty figurative portrayals, lies a personal leitmotif that has not before been examined. A continual thread that runs throughout many of Amos's compositions relates to what is termed in psychoanalysis as "The Family Romance"—a phenomenon that links artists (from the ancient Egyptian innovator Imhotep to the modernist Picasso) with their pasts as well as their futures, and with a family legacy that can either be real or invented or a combination of both, as is the case with Amos. Before undertaking such an examination, however, it is necessary to review Amos's life and work, to provide a foundation on which to base a discussion of the artist's espousal of the theme of "art as legacy" or genealogical process.

Emma Amos once said: "For me, a black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act."¹ This frank and pithy observation aptly signifies what it means to be perennially at the mercy of race and gender bias in the art community—a state of affairs that persists, despite the fact that revisionist art history and curatorship, intended to address the invisibility of women and minorities in the canon, is now a half century old. Minority male artists continue to face racial obstacles; majority women artists are yet confronted with sexual bias; and women artists of color must regularly contend with both forms of chauvinism (which makes Amos's unremitting resolve and longevity as an artist—not to mention her visionary creativity—so extraordinary²).

After a prodigious childhood of art study (taking classes in fine arts at Morris Brown College at the tender age of eleven), the Atlanta-born Amos enrolled in Ohio's Antioch College. There from 1953 to 1958 (B.F.A.), Amos studied fine arts and textile weaving under the art department chair and stained glass master Robert Metcalf. Although Amos never pursued the art of stained glass, the strong emphasis on linear contours and the often iridescent palette of her mature works suggest that she absorbed much from this discipline. Amos also spent a total of two years year abroad studying at the Central School of Art in London (receiving her diploma in 1959), where she learned etching techniques under Anthony Harrison and studied painting with the British abstractionist William Turnbull.³

By the early 1960s, Amos had relocated to New York to join two prestigious printmaking studios: Letterio (Leo) Calapai's

studio, which was part of Stanley William Hayter's Paris Atelier 17, and Robert (Bob) Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop. Making her first attempts to breach New York's mainstream art scene in the hope of securing a commercial dealer, she encountered that implacable wall of exclusion that so many young artists experience.⁴ She also discovered that artists of color were additionally handicapped, being, as she put it, "not in that East Hampton clique."⁵ In other words, since "who you knew" was as operative a concept in the art world as it was in the corporate world, African-Americans (who, at the time, rarely had access to elite collectors, dealers, curators, and the like) were perennially marooned just beyond the perimeter of New York's art inner circle.

Amos persevered, taking printmaking with Bob Blackburn, Riva Helfond, and Anthony Harrison (who was in New York teaching at Columbia University). She received her M.A. in 1965 from New York University, where she became reacquainted with a family friend who was a professor there, the famed WPA muralist and founder of the Atlanta University art department, Hale Woodruff. She also gained entrée into Spiral—the now-legendary Civil Rights art group co-founded by Woodruff, Romare Bearden and other prominent African-American artists.⁶ In May 1965, two years after Spiral's founding, the group mounted its first and only exhibit, "Black and White," in a rented gallery space at 147 Christopher Street. Works in the show were limited to a black and white palette in deference to the Civil Rights crusade. Amos was represented by an etching (now lost) entitled *Without Feather Boa*—a nude portrait bust of the artist staring indifferently at the viewer from behind a pair of dark sunglasses.⁷ The work's title—an allusion to an absence of feminine accoutrements—and its matter-of-fact nudity allude to the sitter as a "soldier" of the Civil Rights crusade and, in the artist's words, "as a woman without beauty but with confrontational power."⁸

Although the exhibit was successful, Spiral was plagued by internal philosophical conflicts. A number of members wanted to express their social engagement without losing their individual artistic identities; others advocated a centralized formal philosophy, following the example of the Impressionists. There also was disagreement over whether the group should be interracial. Members wrangled over everything from aesthetic standards to the dangers of

"ghettoization" that might result from all-black shows (Amos avoided black exhibits until it became apparent to her that these were sometimes the only venues for black artists⁹). Nevertheless, Amos thrived intellectually in the group and especially remembers conversations that revolved around Pan-Africanism and its French incarnation, *Negritude*, and the extent to which African-American artists might participate in this global initiative.¹⁰

From Bearden she learned about African-American artists she was unfamiliar with, such as the celebrated modernist Jacob Lawrence. She was exposed to the idea that one's status as a minority and one's role as an artist could (and perhaps should) be corollary facets of one's artist's persona, and to the notion that "black art"—art that made a political statement and served the Civil Rights agenda—had value and purpose. While somewhat resistant to the deliberate creation of "black" art, she came to accept that ethnicity could have a place in creative decision making, while not necessarily dominating that process. She believed, for example, that jazz was an ideal artistic exemplar of African-American cultural identity, and that *Spiral* might have survived longer, and perhaps had greater impact, if its members had been able to conceptualize a visual arts program that was in some way comparable to jazz—unique to the black community and yet expansive enough to encompass myriad individual tastes and styles.¹¹

A recent work, *Let Me Off Uptown* (2000; front cover), epitomizes her lasting engagement with this "jazz" credo. Dominated by a blue palette, similarly hued Kente cloth trim, and gold metallic glitter, *Let Me Off Uptown* is an exuberant celebration of the music, dance, and culture of jazz. Diminutive clothed, nude, and semi-nude couples tumble, leap, and whirl together in a quivering frenzy amidst disembodied pointing fingers that direct the viewers gaze. Most rousing in this eclectic mix of bodies is its diversity—of ages, complexions, poses, and costumes. For example, miniature dancers wear fifties bee-bop outfits, swimsuits, leotards, body stockings, tailored dress suits, and sixties thigh-high boots and mini skirts. A few dance nude with fully clothed partners; blacks cavort with whites; and youths are teamed with elders.

This glittering array of revelers surrounds the main attraction—a large-scale "swinging" couple swathed in a green circle that serves as a spotlight. Dressed in a well-cut black suit, bright yellow shirt, and slick brown dancing shoes, the middle-aged male figure holds aloft his straw hat, revealing a balding pate. He is partnered with an attractive younger woman who wears a sexy red dress, strappy high-heels, and whose tightly curled blond hair and gleaming café-au-lait complexion provide dazzling visual foils for her older, darker partner. Conspicuous in this painting, in addition to the age gap that is breached by the central couple, are the wide-ranging skin tones of all the dancing figures, from dark brown to peaches-and-cream; which brings us to the topic of color—one of the most salient characteristics of Amos's oeuvre.

If one were to attempt to codify Amos's aesthetic modus operandi, the apposite classification would have to be "colorist," in the tradition of Titian and Delacroix. Her incandescent palettes and use of multihued fabrics are veritable

monuments to the artist's prodigious sense of color. Yet, for Amos, color is imbued with an undeniable agitprop agenda:

Every time I think about color it's a political statement. It would be a luxury to be white and never to think about it.... We're always talking about color, but colors are also skin colors, and the term "colored" itself—it all means something else to me. You have to choose, as a black artist, what to make your figures....butterscotch, brown, or really black. White artists never have to choose....¹²

Amos's sensitivity to color was acquired in childhood when she and her playmates ruminated on their own differing complexions. When they asked their parents to explain this phenomenon, Amos remembers that they were told tales of miscegenation—disclosures that hinted at sexual assaults on enslaved and colonized women of color the world over—which made a significant impact on Amos, as her work bears out. As one historian put it, "Color has a very personal significance for all African-American people and this significance also underlies Amos's work."¹³ Indeed, Amos anticipates the arrival of a quixotic moment in our culture when the word "color" might refer only to the elements of the rainbow, or to her palette, and not to the politics of race.

Amos has, nevertheless, enjoyed being a painter of "color"—reveling in the ever-changing skin tones of her people. Before she could afford to hire models, she used herself for this purpose, altering her own fair complexion at will for each painting. As she once explained, "I can make myself look a lot blacker.... I'm always handy and I just look in the mirror. It's fun because I can do lots of variations on me.... Black is beautiful ... and that's something to remark upon and to make a record of."¹⁴ Her representation of many complexions in *Let Me Off Uptown* exemplifies this outlook. It also accurately characterizes the diverse devotees of jazz seen in Harlem, to which "Uptown" refers. Finally, the painting serves as a belated response to the dilemma that Amos and other *Spiral* members faced in their attempts to codify a visual program that would parallel jazz music.

Prior to *Spiral*'s demise in 1965 (soon after the close of its exhibit, when escalating rents caused the group to lose its Greenwich Village gallery and meeting space¹⁵), as a member of what was otherwise an all-male confederacy, she was aware, even as a young artist, of the conspicuous absence of other women: "I thought it was fishy that the group had not asked Vivian Browne, Betty Blayton Taylor, Faith Ringgold, Norma Morgan, or any other woman of their acquaintance to join. I was probably less threatening to their egos, as I was not yet of much consequence."¹⁶ Amos quickly came to realize that the New York art scene was "a man's scene, black or white." Even her participation in *Spiral* was often limited to that of an observer, particularly when, as she put it, "the old boys settled into age-old fights with each other" (although she did feel that, when offered, her opinion was valued).¹⁷ Furthermore, Amos felt isolated from other African-American women artists, with whom, for the most part, she was unacquainted. Amos recalls that, within the context of *Spiral* discussions, even a

distinguished artist like Elizabeth Catlett (b. 1915), the internationally renowned sculptor and printmaker, was referred to as “the wife of Charles White,” an African-American artist to whom she was married briefly during the 1940s.¹⁸

During the 1970s Amos taught textile design at the Newark School of Fine and Industrial Arts, and weaving on her own looms (she owned eight) at Threadbare, a yarn and weaving shop on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village. Amos prospered as a weaver, likely due to the nascent Feminist Art Movement and its attention to fabric art and artists. Even so, Amos knew better than to advertise herself as a weaver in fine arts circles, where conventional art hierarchies persisted: “Well, I certainly knew not to admit that I was a weaver because people held it against me. It was just a smart thing to keep your mouth shut and not to admit it.”¹⁹

Historically, as Amos was obviously aware, women artists who worked with fabric were rarely viewed as more than artisans, no matter how innovative their designs or intricate their techniques. However, in the late 1970s, when Amos became co-host of a WGBH Boston television series on crafts entitled “Show of Hands” (for which Amos herself wrote the pilot), she resolved her “weaving” dilemma. The series, which aired in thirteen episodes over a period of about eighteen months, featured local Boston woodworkers, ceramicists, weavers, and stained glass, quilt, and jewelry makers. The experience, though ephemeral, offered Amos a lasting solution to being a “closet” weaver—it inspired her to incorporate handcrafts into her paintings—an aesthetic decision that would mark all of her future work.²⁰ Over time, Amos’s ability to obfuscate the high/low art divide by consolidating the so-called “fine art” of painting with the “artistry” of textiles became nothing short of alchemy and the fulcrum of her signature style.

Through the years, Amos has traveled the globe in search of the fabrics that she integrates into her paintings and her multimedia prints, which include silk collagraphs and hand-cut stencil prints on plush fabrics. Indeed, Amos spent more than a decade, beginning in 1961, working in the studio of Dorothy Liebes (1897-1972), a renowned textile designer from the 1930s to the 1950s; and many of Amos’s designs were translated into unique carpets, produced by the prominent Bigelow Sanford Carpet Company. Although she redeployed her efforts after Liebes’s death, Amos’s *Harmony Rug* (2002; Pl. 1) is a noteworthy example of the artist’s ongoing affinity with this medium.

An intrepid retro design, *Harmony Rug* is shaped to resemble both the letter R (as in “rug”) and a grand piano, complete with keyboard. The rug brandishes Amos’s signature De Stijl palette of primary colors plus yellow, black, and white. It also displays a forthright chevron pattern that circumscribes an oval with a hand and outstretched fingers that suggest piano playing. The carpet’s wool threads are thick and plush, approaching a shag texture, though shorter in pile length. Finally, its title refers to musical harmony as well as the visual harmony of forms and colors that the design entails. Playful, inventive, and skillfully executed, *Harmony Rug* embodies those qualities of jazz which the artist has favored since her Spiral years. Amos’s technical and design expertise extends not only to carpets, but also to the conception of patterns for

upholstery, window treatments, and clothing fabrication—virtuosity that is evident in her meticulous selections of textiles with which to frame her paintings—textiles that are at once sumptuous, harmonizing, and vigorously graphic. She prefers Kente cloth (strip textiles woven by Asante men in West Africa) and Kanga cloth (brightly colored pieced fabric first made by Swahili women in the 1870s). She also utilizes *Bogolanfini* textiles (dye-impressed with protective symbols by the Bamana women of Mali), as well as wax-dyed batiks made in Holland and exported to Africa. Amos deftly manipulates these exotic fabrics to flank and complement her unstretched canvases and to enliven the surfaces of her prints.

The decade of the 1980s brought new changes and challenges for Amos. She became a professor at the Mason Gross School of the Arts of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and she began to work in painting and print series. Following cycles focused on sports (football, basketball, and swimming), she began her as yet ongoing *Falling Series* in 1988. Featuring her now characteristic and self-assured figurative style, these works are predicated on the artist’s need to infuse her work with visual dynamism. In Amos’s words, “The metaphor of falling helped me to discover that I wanted to invent people in the air, because that was a way of having absolute movement. They are not standing on the ground, in doorways, or looking out of windows. There’s nothing that is stationary. [They are in] flux.”²¹

Amos finds inertia corrosive to her work and goes to great lengths to eliminate all that is static. She even employs energized brushstrokes to render concrete the very atmosphere that envelops her figures. Works from the *Falling Series* such as *Will You Forget Me?* (1991; Pl. 2) illustrate the extent to which Amos is able to effect impulsion by way of an assiduous attention to figural poses and to the deployment of paint and linear thrusts. Here the downward propulsion of the plummeting woman is realized by way of her posture—slightly oblique with hands above her head and legs apart—and by the buffeting of the figure’s skirt and hair, and the surging brushwork of the background, which reprises the figure’s directional momentum.

The rush of movement achieved in this work functions emblematically to express the hurtling passage of time within the artist’s own life. An autobiographical piece, *Will You Forget Me?* portrays Amos tumbling, and it pictures her mother, India, in the oversized photograph that the artist holds above her head. India, who died in Atlanta in 1979, was a twenty-year-old university student when the original photo was taken, and she stares out at the viewer as if into her own future, which in the artist’s present has become the past. In this deft assimilation of photography into painting (a distinguishing characteristic of Amos’s work), the artist disputes the anachronistic notion that “the camera never lies.” Instead she ascribes to the literary theorist Roland Barthe’s contention that a photograph, by virtue of its promise of veracity, is, in fact, more deceptive than a painting, which one naturally assumes to be artifice.

Amos recognizes implicitly that a photograph has the ability to alter time perceptions far more persuasively than a painted image. “I love the irony of photography,” Amos once



Fig. 1. Emma Amos, *Odyssey: Mules and Men* (1988), oil and acrylic with laser transfer photography on Sekishu rice paper, 72" x 40". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

remarked. "The two together [painting and photography] provide a way of manipulating memory."²² While Amos (who both shoots her own and collects antique family photos²³) acknowledges that a photograph can document a particular moment that might otherwise be forgotten, she also embraces the fact that one can rework a photo (either in orchestrating the scene or in the developing process) to act like a Freudian "screen memory"—one that is altered by subsequent experiences and permanently fixed in reification. The result is an artifact which, ironically, contradicts Barthe's theory even as it confirms it. Amos's transformative use of photography gives rise not so much to deception as to a deeper truth by transforming what is essentially a visual medium into one that is intensely conceptual.

In *Will You Forget Me?*, the unease reflected on the face of the falling artist as she clings to her "precious" photograph signifies Amos's battle to maintain a connection across the divide that separates her corporeal world from the afterlife that has enveloped her mother, and from a past in which her mother lived and breathed.²⁴ Amos physically and psychologically struggles to maintain her grip on her mother, who threatens to become an ebbing memory rendered here by the artist, significantly, in sepia tones. The historian Robert Henkes has perceived Amos's facial expression in the painting as fearful. Indeed, Henkes sees fear as the sentiment most salient in this series, indicative of "a lack of security, having nothing to which to anchor oneself there is only limbo."²⁵

Henkes's choice of the word "limbo" is interesting and begs the question, with regard to *Will You Forget Me?*—who resides in this limbo? The artist? Her mother? Or do both linger there, as is implied by the nebulous blue and grey environment surrounding them? Henkes further argues that the fear expressed by Amos in this cycle embodies, "the loss of the past that no longer can serve the present or the future."²⁶ Anyone who has ever lost a parent will confirm that the emotions associated with such an event can be overwhelming; and although the pain of loss may diminish over time, as Henkes suggests, a reformed sense of vulnerability and irretrievable security often supplants mourning. Venerable parents such as Amos's mother act as anchors for their children. They are the roots that hold the family tree firm; they bond their children with the past and simultaneously propel them into the future. *Will You Forget Me?* actualizes the universal phenomenon of parental loss and all the thorny sentiments associated with it.

The vagaries of the human condition, so palpable in Amos's kinetic "falling" pictures, is a theme that presents itself with equal cogency in her more literary works centered on motifs of family and heritage. This substantive body of paintings and prints incorporates, as its cornerstone (rather than kinesis) a beguiling dynamic which, as mentioned earlier, Freudians term "The Family Romance." In essence, this idiom describes an Oedipal, and as such genealogical, phenomenon that occurs when children unconsciously elevate their parents to divine or royal status and, in doing so, make themselves heirs to a noble legacy. According to the distinguished art historian and psychoanalyst Laurie Adams, artists and their creative predecessors (who may or may not be their actual parents) relate in a similar Oedipal manner. Evidence of the particular forces at work within the context of the artistic Family Romance appears "not only in ideas and myths about art, but also in the behavior of artists and in the images they create."²⁷

Expanding upon the theories of eminent psychoanalysts Ernst Kris, Otto Kurz, and Phyllis Greenacre; and citing classic Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Medieval, and Renaissance texts, Adams has argued convincingly that human history is inundated with instances wherein the dual attributes of paternal divinity (which is transposable with concepts of royalty) and creative genius are assigned to a long list of real and imagined personae (including Daedalus, Narcissus, Imhotep, the Christian God, Michelangelo, Rembrandt, Raphael, and others). Adams has also analyzed

the psycho-subliminal relationships that exist between artists and their parents, mentors, muses, and creative forerunners, and she has situated the role of divinity (conceptually embodied in such terms as “divine inspiration” and “God the Father”) within this genealogical dynamic.²⁸

God (who ideologically represents every father and, by implication, every parent) is perceived in all manner of Biblical, mythological, historical, hieroglyphic, literary, and graphic works as the original divine “artist.” That is to say, he is the first “creator”—the first “architect” of the world; the first “sculptor” of man; and the first “parent” who created children—the consummate act of creativity. However, while genealogically, “gods precede artists as original creators,” the reverse can also occur when artists are elevated to divine status and become, in essence, gods themselves. Adams gives the example of Imhotep, the builder of the Zoser step pyramid in the third millennium B.C., who was elevated to the status of a god for his creative genius and worshipped at Heliopolis. Other instances occur with Rembrandt, whom Chaim Soutine called a “god”; Raphael, who was crowned the “god of painting” by Ingres; and of course, Michelangelo, who was known during his lifetime as *il divino* and whose lasting exaltation “reveals the fine line between human and godly creators in our minds.”²⁹

The profound and perplexing psychological correlations between divinity, royalty, paternity, and artistic creativity can be traced to one of the most universal and enduring childhood questions, “Where do I (babies) come from?”—a query that, as Adams notes, “has a parallel in the history of art.”³⁰ Artists and their chroniclers, from Pliny to Alberti to present-day theorists and critics, have endeavored relentlessly to answer their own version of this primal question: Where do artists come from? In the answers, artists are constantly being identified—and identify themselves—with the creative masters (i.e., parents and teachers) who preceded them. Indeed, the history of art itself has been written as a genealogy, with each school or period seeming to grow naturally (or with conscious antagonism—much like offspring) out of the preceding one. A passing look at any art history survey (even the revisionist texts) bears this out, with the tables of contents reading virtually the same from one to the next. Clearly, Family Romances within the context of art are constructed, either mindfully or subliminally, to parallel the biological human family. But that is precisely what makes the Family Romance so appealing as a stratagem for codifying art history or an



Fig. 2. Emma Amos, *Odyssey: Hunting* (1988), oil and acrylic with laser transfer photography on Sekishu rice paper, 72" x 40". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

individual artist's life and work, and so attractive to artists as a rubric from which to create their art and identity.

Such existentialist themes have a direct bearing upon Amos's oeuvre, particularly on those works that explore both the tangible and abstract genealogical ties between Amos and her own predecessors. Themes of this genre first became integral to the artist's iconography in the 1980s, when her art began to reveal a particular brand of the Family Romance that was at once multilateral and inspired. Included in Amos's *soi-disant* lineage are, above all, her biological parents, especially her mother, India, who is the subject of a number of works including *Will You Forget Me?* Other Amos forebears include artist elders, mentors and teachers, a variety of African-American literati and public figures, and master painters of the past whose works Amos willfully and cleverly has mined for form and content.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Amos created a number of images that disclosed the palimpsest framework of her conceptual family tree. *Will You Forget Me?*, for instance, directly addresses parental lineage by picturing Amos holding a photo of her mother above her head. With this gesture, Amos quite literally “elevates” India to an exalted (if not overtly “royal” or “divine”) position. In another painting, *Katherine Dunham* (1988; Pl. 3) Amos invents a somewhat loftier Family Romance and links it first to India and then to herself. This piece, dedicated to one of the most celebrated dancers and choreographers of the twentieth century, features a portrait of the famed artiste in a yellow turban and white jacket. Amos chose to honor Dunham (1909–2006) in this work in response to the latter's unparalleled life.

More than a dancer, Dunham was an intellectual. She studied anthropology (as did India) and earned bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degrees in the subject from the University of Chicago, as one of the first African-Americans to attend that institution. Dunham specialized in the evolution of African dance in the diaspora, particularly in Haiti and Brazil. Beginning in the 1930s, she founded and directed dance schools in New York and St. Louis; and she enjoyed a lifelong career as an international performer and as a professor of dance at Southern Illinois University. Dunham's devotion to black cultural studies and causes earned her numerous honors including the Presidential Medal of Arts and the French Legion of Honor.

Amos emblazons Dunham's name in a yellow cartouche (not unlike those seen on Japanese *ukiyo-e* prints), the colors of which are echoed by the vertical yellow striping that flanks the

storyline (written by the artist) recount the births, lives, genealogy, and personal achievements of various Amos family forerunners. Amos writes that grandfather Moses “became the first black pharmacist registered in the state.” Grandmother Emma was “elegant and cultured.” “My father ... was elected to the Atlanta City Executive Committee in 1953, making him one of the first black men to be elected to public office since Reconstruction.” “My brother Larry ... went on to receive MBA and Law Degrees from Indiana University.”³²

The *Odyssey* narrative also muses about the Native American blood that runs through the veins of the Amos family and of so many African-Americans, and the white blood that marks the violent history of miscegenation. “My father’s grandfather was white. An Irishman named Donnelly from Hogansville. He raised red-haired, blue-eyed Minnie, my other grandmother, as a servant to ... her white half-sisters.”³³ The account continues with the artist’s experiences with segregation, discrimination, and an alarming family confrontation with members of the Ku Klux Klan. The text finally chronicles the Amos family’s friendships with, and appreciation for, black literati, artists, and jazz musicians. In sum, *Odyssey* is a testimonial to the long line of “skilled and literate people” from whom the artist hails.³⁴ As such, it reifies the Family Romance articulated in *A Reading at Bessie Smith’s Grave* and reaffirms Amos’s intellectual and creative birthrights.

Begun in 1990, *The Gift* (Fig. 3) appropriates the familial refrain of *Odyssey* and expands it to encompass a more contemporary dynasty—the artist’s own. Amos, who married educator Robert Levine in the mid-1960s, bore two children—a son Nicholas in 1967 and a daughter, also named India, in 1970. As its title suggests, *The Gift* is precisely that—a bequest from Amos to her daughter on her twentieth birthday. The work consists of portraits of women artists, friends, and colleagues who exerted significant and positive influences on Amos. Featuring more than forty acrylic paintings on paper, *The Gift* portrays African-American artists including among many Camille Billops, Helen Ramsaran, Faith Ringgold, Howardena Pindell, Elizabeth Catlett, Clarisa Sleigh, Lorna Simpson, Vivian Browne, Carol Byard, and Nanette Carter; Euro-American artists and critics such as Miriam Schapiro, Mira Schor, Joyce Kozloff, Lucy Lippard, and Moira Roth; and the Native American artist Kay WalkingStick.³⁵

Representative of the eclectic network of supportive women Amos has known and been inspired by, this cycle “confers” a comparable legacy upon her daughter; and since Amos realized that her “gift” would at some point leave her studio and reside with India, she chose to recycle a number of these portraits, which appear in other works such as the 1991 acrylic painting *Giza and Faith*, and in several prints from the circa 1992 Women’s Series, including *Camille Remember Me*, *Have Faith*, and *Elizabeth Catlett*, *Emma and India*. Amos summed up the objective of *The Gift* when she stated, “There’s something powerful and strong about women artists, about womanhood.”³⁶ The maternal and sisterly legacy that Amos passes on to her daughter completes the artist’s Family Romance by enclosing a new generation within the embracing arms of its precursors.

Fig. 4. Emma Amos, *Great Grandpa Jefferson* (1997), acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders, 59 x 22". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.



Besides the monumental works Amos devoted to the concept of lineage, she also produced a cycle dedicated to “heroes.”³⁷ Indeed, her very use of the term “hero” to define the series connotes the elevated rank of the subjects. Intrepidly breaching the craft/high art divide, in *Great Grandpa Jefferson* (1997; Fig. 4) and *Muse Picasso* (1997; Fig. 5), Amos shaped her designs into clothing patterns for a woman’s skirt and top, and for a kitchen (or painter’s) apron, respectively. Both personae offer ideal subjects for commentary on the Family Romance—Jefferson for his attachment to Sally Hemings, who bore him a family of black children, and Picasso for his looming presence as one of the “fathers” of abstraction and for his fascination with African sculpture (which situates him tacitly within the same African heritage as Amos).

The title *Great Grandpa Jefferson* establishes Thomas Jefferson’s position not as a president but as a grandparent within the artist’s implied Family Romance, and within an African-American family to which he contributed numerous offspring. Amos’s portrait of Jefferson, set inside a circular pendant on the skirt of an African-inspired outfit, is encircled by a ribbon and rests upon a backdrop of heraldic banners. Insinuated by the placement of Jefferson’s face on a woman’s skirt is Sally Hemings, with whom he began a love affair after his wife Martha’s death. (Hemings was the daughter of Martha’s father, John Wayles, and his slave Elizabeth). Jefferson apparently remained faithful to Hemings for the remainder of his life, and together the couple had seven children, two of whom passed into white society after being freed by their father.³⁸

In *Muse Picasso* (a pun on Musée Picasso), Amos centers Picasso’s portrait on an apron, within a green oval stamped with his name. The canvas areas are overlaid with chevron patterns, not unlike those seen in Bakuba textiles, and the



Fig. 5. Emma Amos, *Muse Picasso* (1997), acrylic on linen canvas with African fabric borders, 60 x 32". Private Collection. Photo: Becket Logan.

outer edges are trimmed with Kente-style cloth. In five medallions that surround Picasso's likeness, Amos has rendered an image of African herdsmen (at the top), two African sculptures whose eyes have been altered so that they seem to stare at the Spanish "master," a masked face from the lower right portion of Picasso's 1907 *Les Femmes d'Alger* (which he based on a Pende sickness mask from the Kongo), and Amos herself, looking up at her "muse" from the hem of the apron.

The expression on Amos's face appears to be one of consternation, as if she is not certain of the inspiration that her supposed muse and artistic predecessor provides. Indeed, the word "inspiration"—which, within the context of the Family Romance, can be read as "divine inspiration"—is inscribed in blue just beneath Amos's self-portrait, as if to explicate why she stares up at Picasso. He, like the artist's mother in *Will You Forget Me?*, is elevated above Amos, thus preceding her in lineage and suggesting his implied "higher" (i.e., divine or royal) position. The word "master," too, is painted along the red border to the left of Amos's medallion, invoking such idioms as "father," "master painter," and "slave master," not to mention "master of the universe." The reference alludes to the male-centered lexicon of art historical discourse, as well as to the thorny kinship between Africans and Europeans, both politically and artistically. Given Picasso's unabashed appropriation of African statuary in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, one might be compelled to ask, who indeed is the progeny and who the progenitor, or, will the real muse stand up?

There is a further meaning to the term "muse" as Amos applies it in the work's title, the implications of which are imbedded in other words inscribed along the painting's red border. Included are names of Picasso's own muses as well as his biological offspring. Other words inscribed, such as "passion" and "desire," describe his feelings for them as well as for his art. Within the mainspring of the Family Romance, art and family (especially children) are one in the same; both are products of the artist's creativity.

More genealogically charged even than these terms is the word "seminal," which appears within the yellow band below the African herdsmen and their oxen. Amos has inscribed the word below a suggestively virile image of bulls (not coincidentally a favorite motif of Picasso). As a biological term, the word is ponderous with the weight of associations with male virility and dominance, and its use in art criticism implies that original genius or divine inspiration must be male-centered; it is not surprising that many feminist historians have found the term objectionable. Amos inserts it here as both a statement and a question. She allows the word to hover above Picasso's portrait, and above the images of the African masks he tapped for inspiration. Amos has also written along the painting's border the names of the African peoples whose sculpture provided the sources for Picasso's Afro-cubist idiom: Ibibio, Ibo, and Dan.

The words "master," "domination," and "fear," which share canvas space with the designation "seminal," urge viewers to contemplate the overwhelming presence of the alleged godfathers of modernism (such as Picasso, Cézanne, Matisse, Van Gogh, Dali, Pollock, and any number of others one might

name) within the genealogical history of art, and the effect of this constructed hierarchy upon women artists. Amos's *Muse Picasso* and *Great Grandpa Jefferson* belie assumptions that the icons of white male artistic supremacy are either legitimately seminal or genius. By questioning these long-standing convictions, Amos creates a fissure into which she can place herself and tout her own seminal (or perhaps, more appropriately, "ovarian") nature. With the "heroes" cycle, Amos seems to move discreetly beyond the precincts of the Family Romance, which calls for the veneration of others, and to suggest that her worthiest ideal might lie not in others but in herself. Her major paintings of the latter 1990s and beyond—some of her strongest—decisively supplant ancestor worship with an upsurge of self-analysis and self-reverence, and the results, such as *Studio Air* (2003; Pl. 5), are assuredly formidable. But, that is another "romance." •

Lisa E. Farrington is Associate Professor of Art History at Parsons, the fine arts division of The New School for Design, New York. She is the author of, most recently, *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* (2005), and is completing a book on Emma Amos.

NOTES

1. Emma Amos, quoted in Sharon Patton, "Emma Amos," in *Art by African Americans in the Collection of the New Jersey State Museum* (Trenton: New Jersey State Museum, 1998), 12.
2. Thalia Gouma-Peterson, "Reclaiming Presence: The Art and Politics of Color in Emma Amos's Work," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints, 1982-1992* (Wooster, Ohio: College of Wooster Art Museum, 1993), 6.
3. Amos, quoted in an interview conducted by Al Murray for the Smithsonian Institution's Archives of American Art, October 3, 1968, transcript, 4-5. (This interview is referred to hereafter as SI-AAA)
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 12.
6. Sharon Patton, *African-American Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 185, 306; Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists from 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon, 1993), 186, 200, 316, 400-02.
7. According to the artist, the print was acquired by the Museum of African-American Art in Washington, D.C., but seems to be no longer extant. Interview conducted by author with artist at her studio, New York, January 8, 2006.
8. Amos, letter to the author, dated June 21, 2001.
9. Gouma-Peterson, et al., "Biography and Chronology," in *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints*, 80.
10. The Pan Africanist Movement was launched with international conferences in London in 1900 and Paris in 1919, and continued in Amos's era with FESTAC—the Festival of Arts and Culture—held in Dakar, Senegal, in 1966, and again in Lagos, Nigeria, in 1977.
11. Amos, quoted in SI-AAA, transcript, 9, 11.
12. Amos, quoted in Betty Wilde, "Emma Amos," Leslie King-Hammond, et al., *Gumbo Ya Ya: Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1995), 1.
13. Gouma-Peterson, "Reclaiming Presence," in Gouma Peterson et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 5.
14. Amos, quoted in SI-AAA, transcript, 9, 11.

15. Patton, *African-American Art*, 185, 306; Bearden and Henderson, *A History of African-American*, 186, 200, 316, 400-02.
16. Amos, et al., "Contemporary Feminism: Art Practice, Theory, and Activism—An Intergenerational Perspective," *Art Journal* 58, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 9; Betty Wilde, "Emma Amos," 1, 24-26, 176-78; Robert Henkes, *The Art of Black American Women: Works of Twenty-Four Artists of the Twentieth Century* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1993), 50-74.
17. Amos, electronic letter to the author, dated May 12, 2006.
18. Amos, quoted in an interview with bell hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right: Making History Visible," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 17-18, 21; Amos, et al., *A Contemporary Feminism*, "9.
19. Amos, quoted in interview with hooks, in "Straighten Up and Fly Right" and "Biography and Chronology," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 22, 80; Patricia Mainardi, "Quilt: The Great American Art," *Feminist Art Journal* 2, no. 1 (Winter 1973): 1, 18-23.
20. Gouma-Peterson, et al., "Biography and Chronology," in *Emma Amos Paintings and Prints*, 80.
21. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 23.
22. Amos, quoted in "Measuring Content," in Jo Anna Isaak, *Looking Forward Looking Black* (Geneva, N.Y.: Hobart and William Smith Colleges Press, 1999), 38; and in Patton, "Emma Amos: Art Matters," 42.
23. One of Amos's most prized photographic collections is one she inherited from her godmother's husband, George Shivery, who documented indigent blacks in Mississippi and Tennessee in the 1920s and 1930s. Valerie J. Mercer, "Emma Amos: A Skillful and Imaginative Printmaker," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 33-34.
24. Amos, electronic letter to the author, dated July 19, 2006.
25. Henkes, *The Art of Black American Women*, 127.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Laurie Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis* (New York: HarperCollins, 1993), 73.
28. Ernst Kris and Otto Kurtz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 53; Phyllis Greenacre, "The Childhood of the Artist" and "The Family Romance of the Artist," *Emotional Growth* 2 vols. (Madison, Conn.: International University Press, 1960; reprinted 1971); Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 73-83; Sigmund Freud, "On the Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex" and "Family Romances," *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London 1953-1973), S.E. IX 235-41 and S.E. XIX 173-79; Homer, *The Iliad and The Odyssey*, each 2 vols., trans. A.T. Murray (Cambridge: Loeb Library Edition, 1978-86); Leon Battista Alberti, *On Painting*, trans. John R. Spencer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966); Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. J. Wykwerdt and N. Leach. (1485; Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988).
29. *Ibid.*; Avigdor W. Poseq, "Soutine's Paraphrases of Rembrandt's Slaughtered Ox," *Kunsthistorik Tidskrift* LX, vol.3-4 (1991): 210-22; Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 78.
30. Adams, *Art and Psychoanalysis*, 75.
31. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right" and "Biography and Chronology," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 17.
32. Amos, *Odyssey* ([New York]: Ratchethead Studios and Selco Graphics, 1993). Also printed in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 35-38, 44.
33. *Ibid.*
34. *Ibid.*, 35-38.
35. Portrayed in the detail reproduced of *The Gift* are, left to right (date painted is also indicated): Top row: India Amos, daughter, 6/1/90; Camille Billops, artist, archivist, 6/4/90; Martha Wilson, performance artist, director of Franklin Furnace, 6/9/90; Joyce Kozloff, painter, mosaic muralist, 6/14/90; Howardena Pindell, artist, 6/22/90; Row two: Sabra Moore, painter, 7/24/90; Renee Green, installation artist, 7/25/90; Faith Ringgold, painter, author, 8/1/90; Shirley King, photographer, chef, author, 8/6/90; Josely Carvalho, artist, 8/14/90; Row three: Judy Blum, painter, 9/20/90; Helen Ramsaran, sculptor, 9/25/90; Mira Schor, painter, writer, 9/26/90; Sharon Sutton, architect, printmaker, 10/7/90; Nancy St. Paul, photographer, 10/10/90; Row four: Marina Gutierrez, artist, 10/30/90; May Stevens, painter, 12/3/90; Miriam Schapiro, painter, 2/3/91; Lucy Lippard, author, critic, 1991; Kay WalkingStick, painter, 3/23/91. The 20 portraits not pictured include: Top row: Mary Anne Rose, painter, 6/24/90; Zarina, artist, 6/25/90; Brahma Yassky, painter, 7/3/90; Carol Sun, painter, 7/23/90; Petah Coyne, sculptor, 1990; Kathy Caraccio, printmaker, 8/14/90; Clarissa Sleigh, photographer, 8/16/90; Vivian Browne, painter, 9/12/90; Joan Semmel, painter, 9/13/90; Rose Viddiano, sculptor, 9/19/90; Row three: Toby McLennon, painter, performance artist, 10/12/90; Lorna Simpson, photographer, 10/19/90; Carol Byard, sculptor, painter, 10/20/90; Nanette Carter, painter, 10/29/90; Claire Khalil, painter, 10/29/90; Row four: Elizabeth Catlett, sculptor, 4/7/91; Susan Unterberg, photographer, 5/16/91; Moira Roth; art historian, author 6/17/91; Fern Logan, photographer, 1991; Linda Peer, sculptor, 1993.
36. Amos, quoted in interview by hooks, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," in Gouma-Peterson, et al., *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints*, 27.
37. Amos, statement to author, New York, January 2006.
38. "Passing" was possible for them because their mother, Sally, was a so-called "quadroon" (someone with one-quarter African blood), and they themselves were "octoroons" (the French colonial term for persons with one-eighth African blood), and as such virtually indistinguishable in physical appearance from whites. For centuries the white descendants of Martha and Thomas Jefferson denied the legitimacy of their black relatives, until in 1999 DNA testing proved that members of both the black and white Jefferson clans were progeny of the same genealogical stock.

Women's Review of Books

www.wcwonline.org/womensreview

Art: 'Committed to Print,' on Political Themes

By ROBERTA SMITH

WITH its new exhibition, "Committed to Print," the Museum of Modern Art, defender of a relatively pure modernist faith, reads cautiously but deliberately where it doesn't often go: into the terrain where art and overt political sentiment mingle and sometimes fuse. The title invites two readings, and Deborah Wye, the organizer of the exhibition, makes good on both of them. She has sought out art that reflects a willingness to go on record, to communicate a strong position or searing fact, and that is also committed to some form of printmaking as the best medium for these messages.

Focusing on prints, limited-edition posters and artists' books made in America during the last 20 to 25 years, this exhibition has a certain physical modesty about it, and a not altogether unwelcome absence of certified masterpieces. But its scope and variety are prodigious. Its nearly 200 items represent 108 artists and collaborative groups. These artists are diverse, including many more women

and minorities than is usual for an exhibition at this museum. They work in a number of differing styles, in all sizes, in all the orthodox print media and in a few less orthodox ones (stencil, offset, work designed specifically for subway cars or stations, for example).

Most importantly, this exhibition is both a survey of art and a walk through the present and recent past of this country and some of its neighbors. It documents artists' responses to a number of the most significant issues and traumatic events of the past quarter century, from the civil rights movement to the anti-nuclear movement, from the political assassinations of the 1960's to the growing homeless population of the late 1980's. Flanked at the museum by smaller exhibitions of Josef Albers photographs and works on paper by Robert Motherwell, "Committed to Print" has an aberrant, incendiary intensity. It's a welcome change of pace for the Modern and an important part of its current "Contemporary Art in Context" program.

However, this is still very much a Museum of Modern Art exhibition. Divided into sections that include

"Governments and Leaders," "Race and Culture," "Nuclear Power and Ecology" and "War and Revolution," it is carefully selected and although overcrowded, well installed. Despite the range of issues encompassed, the show also seems to sidestep some. The section titled "Gender" contains no reference to abortion, nor is there any art dealing with homosexual rights. More locally, one would have enjoyed seeing some of the Guerrilla Girls' recent posters, with their scathing statistical art world analyses, among the ferment. But the exhibition is limited mainly to art that is portable and therefore still collectible. It excludes examples of the mass-produced posters that often appear, usually overnight, on the city's sundry vertical surfaces, although certain works — Eva Cockcroft's anti-nuclear stencil — can be used outdoors. David Hammons's image of Nelson Mandela, also a stencil, has actually been cut from an outdoor site.

Still, this exhibition cuts through boundaries that are often carefully maintained. It brings together artists whose names are household words, such as Andy Warhol, with those who are much less known, such as Emma Amos, Elizabeth Catlett and Vincent Smith, three printmakers who deal vividly with civil rights themes. It shows artists for whom a political poster may have been a one-time thing (Jasper Johns's Vietnam War moratorium poster) and artists like Hans Haacke, Nancy Spero and Antonio Frasconi, for whom political struggle of some sort is the heart and soul of their work. It includes works by Ben Shahn and Jack Levine, two very different artists themselves, whose art has its roots in 1930's Social Realism, as well as works by Bruce Nauman, Barbara Kruger and Jenny Holzer, whose political concerns have developed out of Conceptual art's emphasis on language. Yet among the younger generation is also Paul Marcus, whose oversized woodcut "The Auction" employs a 1930's vernacular. Also here are woodcuts by Richard Mock that have appeared on the Op-Ed page of The New York Times, and the stencils of John Fekner that oppose the transportation of nuclear wastes through New York City and that have appeared on the pilings and overpasses of the Long Island Expressway.

The achievement of this exhibition is more documentary and historical than esthetic. It is not so much that art loses out in this equation or is overlooked. On the contrary, art is repeatedly used well, respectfully and originally. It is simply that the various events and issues delineated here are in themselves overwhelming. It is difficult to walk through parts of this exhibition and think that much is right with the world. This is particularly the case in the gallery titled "War and Revolution," where a wall of work expressing opposition to the Vietnam War faces a wall devoted to artists' responses to the United States involvement in Latin America.

But there's something invigorating and compelling about this exhibition, and not just because so much history is encapsulated within so little space. First, it documents the way that, since Abstract Expressionism, certain strains of art have become increasingly engaged with the outside world. Second, it is simply a remarkable display of moral fiber. Time after time, this exhibition shows artists placing themselves squarely in the path of human events and bearing witness through their work.

nett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, during the last 20 years of her life, and the crystalline, off-kilter arrangements of Kandinsky's late work may also have been important to such works as "Fire Festival" of 1951. But the results are not generally derivative. For one thing, Mrs. Mason's best paintings are dramatically small, usually under 20 inches on a side. Their lovely surfaces and subtle compositional adjustments are viewed up close where every centimeter counts, yet their scale is expansive and almost grand.

A poet as well as a painter, Mrs. Mason also had good titles, one being "The Importance of the Neutral Color Red," attached to a painting from 1959 in which four vertical bars of color match size and weight on a neutral ground. At a point when abstraction is being reconsidered from all sides, this is a timely show.

'German Realist Drawings From the 1920's'

David Nolan Gallery
560 Broadway (at Prince Street)
Through Feb. 13

This exhibition brings together the drawings of 18 artists from pre-World War II Germany whose names will be new to most denizens of SoHo galleries, where contemporary art prevails. Works by Otto Dix, Georg Grosz and Christian Schad are on view, but the show is carried by much less familiar names: Wilhelm Lachnit, Rudolf Schlichter, Erich Wegner and Karl Hubbuch.

To some extent these drawings, mostly in pencil, delineate a retrenching of realism that is quite at odds with the descriptive and painterly liberties taken by the German Expressionists, who were these artists' contemporaries. (Both groups, by the way, were viewed as degenerate by the Nazis.) A subtle subversiveness pervades this show, but it is usually arrived at by attempting to show people and things as they really are, although minor distortions abound.

This show will make you think a lot about photography, especially the work of August Sander, who documented the ravages of time upon the human face, and Lewis Hine, who depicted children trapped by forces beyond their comprehension. Like some of Mr. Hine's work, Mr. Lachnit's "Child Laborer" presents a bone-thin creature with a poet's face. His "Blind Man" is equally strong, as is the handsome, slumped gentleman in a three-piece suit in Mr. Schlichter's "Unemployed."

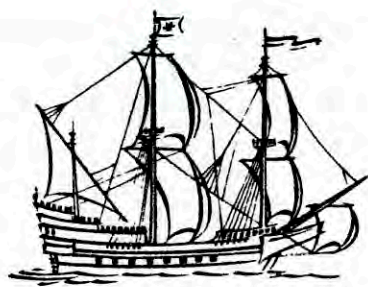
Ultimately, photography may have won out over drawing as a reportorial tool. But the efforts to respond to life's realities with a drawing style initiated by Ingres and shaped by Cézanne, Beckmann and Picasso often yield powerful results. This is an exhibition for both the connoisseur and the social historian.

Alan Uglow

Lorence-Monk Gallery
568 Broadway (at Prince Street)
Through tomorrow

Alan Uglow's latest exhibition is a single installation piece titled "Signals." It presents a form of abstract painting that is both pure and impure in ways that are unusual today. The emphasis here is on perception and the way the eyes and ears can work together and against each other, corrupting and expanding their very different capacities. Four large monochrome panels, one high on each wall, provide floating squares of undiluted red, blue, yellow and black. Four speakers, one to each corner of the gallery, emit pulsations of an entirely

SHOWCASE Auctions Exhibitions



Sir Francis Drake and the Age of Discovery

THROUGH MAY 1

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No Regrets

An art critic looks back on the hard-won achievements of feminist art and the current state of its legacy.

BY LUCY LIPPARD

The following is the text of the keynote talk that opened the Museum of Modern Art's symposium "The Feminist Future" [Jan. 26-27], revised for a lecture during the "WACK!" show at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art in April, and slightly revised again for publication. I'd like to dedicate this talk to the memory of Arlene Raven, Marcia Tucker and Molly Ivins.



Jackie Winsor: *Solid Lattice*, 1970, wood and nails, 27 by 24 by 22 inches.



Joanne Leonard: *Journal (Miscarriage)*, 1973, mixed mediums on paper.

From time to time over the last 30 years, feminism has been relegated to the past and replaced by a grave marker or post (as in post-feminism). I'm going to try to provide some kind of perspective on where we've been and a bit about where we are—not an easy task, as there's no cohesive feminist art movement today, and the wildly varied manifestations of the uncohesive feminist art movement are often under the radar, especially if you live, as I do now, in a New Mexico village. And of course we were *never* all that cohesive. Definitions of feminist art were always passionately contested. It was one of our strengths that there was never a single unified feminism or a single feminist community, despite attempts by the dominant culture to conflate us into a short-lived movement and to blame each branch for the supposed sins of the others.

But I believe there was and still is something that might be called a feminist culture, *not* to be confused with cultural feminism. Feminist culture entails a basic set of values common to socialist, radical, lesbian and various other brands of feminisms. I'm not fool enough to try defining it. But 30-odd years ago a group from the L.A. Woman's Building arrived at these functions for a feminist culture: "raising consciousness, inviting dialogue, and transforming culture." Still sounds good to me. My own version around that time was that feminist culture is "a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life." When I first became a feminist, 37 years ago, I compared it to jumping off a bridge and wondering halfway



Two panels from Ida Applebroog's *"Dyspepsia Works,"* 1978-81, ink and Rhoplex on vellum, approx. 11 by 9 inches each.

down if this was such a good idea. But there aren't a lot of recovering, post-feminist artworkers from that period, if there are any. Feminism changed lives and they usually stayed that way.

Today the notion of feminist community is splintered—in part because of right-wing ascendancies, in part because of post-multiculturalism, and in part because the women's movement *did* succeed in integrating women artists into the mainstream, where they often forgot how they got there. To paraphrase Anthony Appiah, we are in danger of being understood only for our opposition to patriarchal culture, which amounts to "intellectual indenture."

From the beginning of second-wave feminism, which began around 1966 and hit the art world belatedly in 1969-70, representation of and by women in words and images has been the core issue of feminist art. *Unconscious* feminism began for me with the show I curated in New York City in 1966 called "Eccentric Abstraction." I hadn't a clue that the Women's Liberation movement was starting up and I was neck deep in Minimalism (which Clement Greenberg once accused of having "rather feminine sensibilities"; it wasn't a compliment). The work of Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse and Alice Adams (as well as that of the other participants in "Eccentric Abstraction"—Bruce Nauman, Keith Sonnier, Frank Lincoln Viner and Don Potts) existed in a curious location between biological and Minimalist abstraction that was later claimed mostly by women. For all their quasi-ugliness there was something immensely attractive about Bourgeois's small turdlike latex sculptures and Hesse's obsessive syntheses of strength and fragility through materials. They opened up a volcanic layer of suppressed erotic imagery and "body ego" that

somehow I'd been waiting for. It didn't sink in that this imagery was *female* until I became a feminist four years later, on the wings of Conceptual art and the politics of the Artworkers Coalition, the latter also the birthplace of New York's first feminist art group: WAR—Women Artists in Revolution.

At first, in New York, it was all about art. For better or worse, feminist art there was often preoccupied with fending off or competing with the male-dominated mainstream. We spent a lot of that decade remodeling our lives and our textual and formal languages to make room for women's experience. The Slide Registry of Women's Art—which we used to prove that women were doing everything that men were—was kept in my house for a couple of years. The Ad Hoc Women Artists Committee (founded by Brenda Miller, Poppy Johnson and Faith Ringgold) used it to force the Establishment to look at art by women, beginning with the 1970 Whitney Annual. Our tactics at the Whitney were multiple: we issued a fake press release saying the Annual would finally be 50 percent women and 50



Lee Lozano: *Untitled*, ca. 1964, oil on canvas, 66 by 96 inches.

percent "non-white." We projected slides of women's art on the outside of the building. We faked invitations so a lot of us could get inside to do a sit-in at the opening. The museum got wind of that and set up a machine to distinguish the fakes from the authentic invitations, so we traded our fakes to famous people the museum didn't want to evict. We protested weekly on the Whitney's defensive bridge over the moat; we faked a docent's tour; we blew whistles in the stairwells, lipsticked the women's room mirrors, left eggs and unused tampons marked "50 percent women" around the galleries . . . and we got a lot of attention, even from the FBI. Joining us was WSABAL (Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation), consisting mainly of Faith Ringgold and her daughters Barbara and Michele Wallace, who made a big splash for

Faith Ringgold: *Dancing on the George Washington Bridge*, 1988, mixed mediums, 68 inches square.



one female family. WEB, or West East Bag, a national network and newsletter of women's groups with slide registries, was founded in April 1971 when a few of us visited the show "26 Women Artists" I'd curated at the Aldrich Museum. Pretty soon came Women in Art, and The Women's Interarts Center. A.I.R. Gallery inspired SoHo 20, WARM in Minneapolis, Artemisia in Chicago, and a bunch of other so-called separatist groups. The Women's Caucus for Art within the CAA networked with those in academia, and it's still going strong.

At the same time, theories about women's art being different from men's art were blowing in from the



Mary Gallagher and Angelica Gee: Wonder Woman's Revenge, Part 1, 1973, poster.

West Coast, from Judy Chicago's feminist art program at Fresno, and then from Chicago's and Miriam Schapiro's program at Cal Arts—famous for Womanhouse. Then came the dazzling Woman's Building, built with pink tools and bathed in pink spotlights on special occasions. Many of us New York women mightily resisted these ideas at first. But after looking at the slides pouring into the registry, it didn't take long for me to concede that certain forms, images and patterns recurred so often they couldn't

be denied. Whether their source was nature or nurture was subject to debate, a debate that got more interesting when lesbian art was thrown into the mix, a debate that still hasn't entirely subsided.

Eventually it became clear that mere resistance was confining, that we could survive outside the art world and create our own formal and intellectual spaces. "Feminism's greatest contribution to the future of art has probably been precisely its lack of contribution to modernism," I pontificated in 1980. Modernism was about truths, and feminism produced a rupture—a real paradigm shift (to use an overworked phrase) in the 1970s. Truth with a capital T hasn't been the same since. But precisely because feminism escaped or ignored the modernist canon, it has had a huge impact on contemporary art of the last 30 years, and has simultaneously been neglected by historians.

In the early to mid-'70s all the now well-worn feminist issues—formal and ideological—were new to us. The art—incredibly honest and often raw—seemed fresh and outrageous. Even the simplest things about women's experience hadn't been said aloud before, displayed in public before. "Feminine" materials and the color pink, orgasm, menstruation, childbirth, menopause, domestic labor, all took on a new and rebel-

lous significance, as did central imagery and explicitly sexual imagery from a female viewpoint. With this reclamation of our visceral identities, there was—and still is—a lot of emphasis on the gendered body: Carolee Schneemann pulling a scroll out of her vagina; Lynda Benglis flaunting a double dildo; Suzanne Lacy playing with animal guts; Judy Chicago's *Red Flag*—a tampon extraction; an Australian poster by Mary Gallagher and Angelica Gee of a woman hurling a bloody tampon at the viewer like a Molotov cocktail.

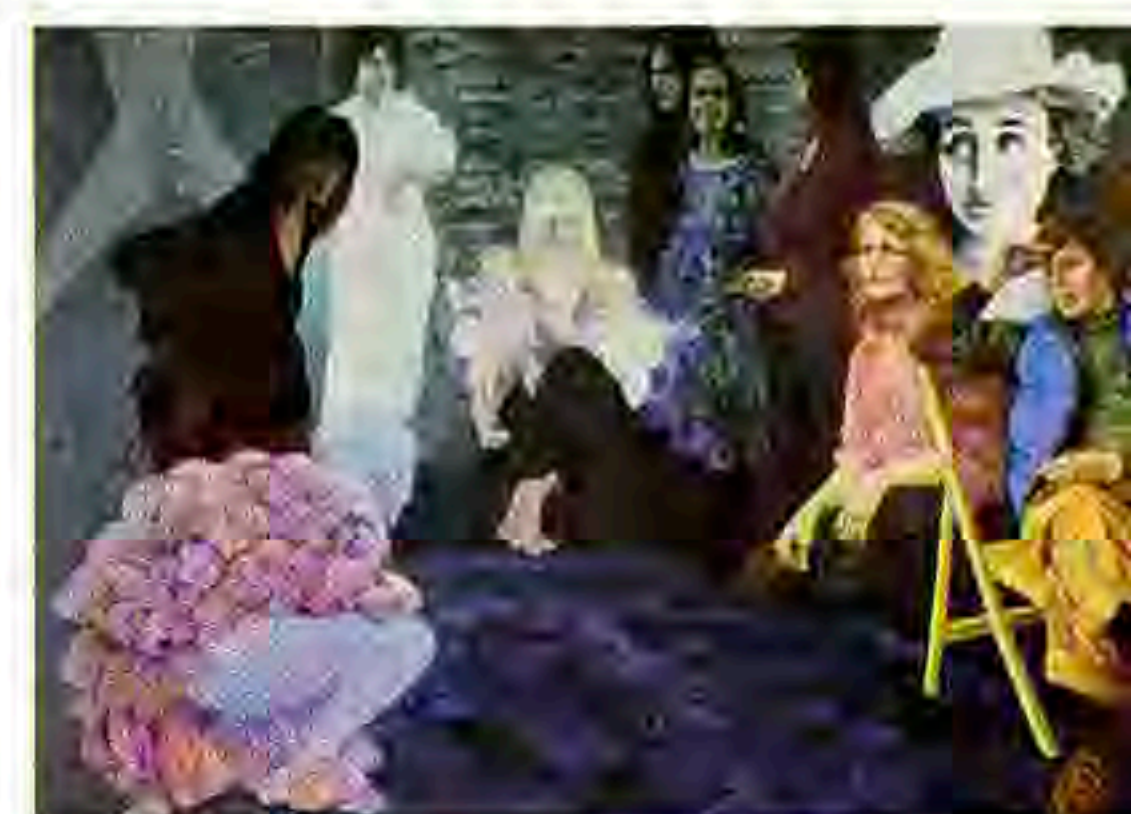
These don't have a lot in common with Joana Vasconcelos's chandelier of tampons at the 2005 Venice Biennale, which was beautiful, but doesn't pack the same wallop these days. A lot of the early claims made for essentialism have fallen to the sharp knives of critical theory, but the obsessively repetitive aspect of women's art and the focus on sexuality were voluntarily constructed from social experience and have remained in the feminist canon.

As Elizabeth Hess has pointed out, when conservative art writers argue that nothing happened during the pluralist '70s, they mean nothing happened except feminist art. One reason it hasn't received its art-historical due is that, like Conceptual art, feminist art was not based on style but on content. It was hard to pin down, a moving target. It was never an art movement per se, with all the implied similarities in style and esthetic breakthroughs, critical triumphs and post-coital exhaustion. It was art made as part of a larger social movement, based on the struggle for across-the-board equality we have yet to see.

At the same time, for all the feel-good and sometimes self-congratulatory rhetoric of the '70s, the integration of women of color into largely white organizations did not go well on either coast. ("Add a woman of color and stir," acridly commented one California critic of tokenism.) The mere idea of integration instead of co-founding and equal beginnings indicates how this became the great failure of second-wave feminism. Good intentions were rampant, but so was ignorance, and sometimes arrogance. We're all struggling for the right to be perceived as subjects of history, acting in it, rather than as objects acted upon. Today the distinction between international (which means mostly European-derived) and global (which means everyone who is still usually left out despite a body of often brilliant post-colonial criticism) is another barrier that has to be breached. What Edward Said called "the violence of the act of representation" was no less important then than now. We are too slowly learning to see the flesh and blood beneath the makeup and the make-believe.

At one point in the '80s, a woman told me I wasn't considered a feminist any more because I was "too interested in the Third World." I was surprised to hear that women were unrepresented in most of the world. But I was also seriously alarmed at such a narrow definition of feminism. It highlighted a problem for feminist art activism, which was the lack of solid ongoing exchange and support for lower-income women and women of color (as though they were offshoots of the generic white middle-class women's movement)—what has now been conflated into a vague

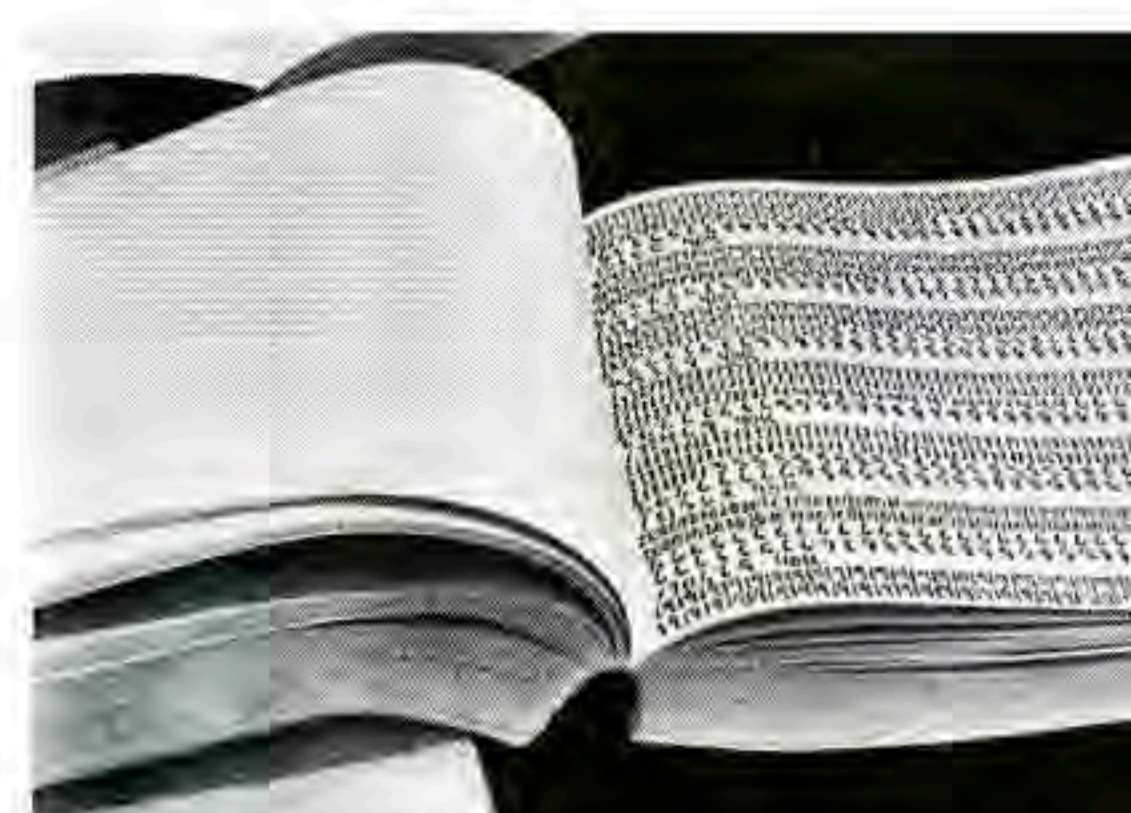
Painting (with floor element) from Emma Amos's "Falling" series, 1988-92.



May Stevens: Mysteries and Politics, 1978, oil on canvas, 78 by 144 inches.



Eunice Golden: Crucifixion, 1969, oil on canvas, 48 by 72 inches.



Hanne Darboven: One page of Jan. 23, 1968, from one of six volumes of the year 1968.

and boundless "diversity." As Audre Lorde wrote, not those differences between us that are separate. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences and to examine the distortions which result from misnaming them and their effects upon human beings and expectation." But I don't think feminist artists given up yet on the polyphonic voice.

I wrote in the '70s and still earnestly believe "women are in a privileged position to satisfy the needs of an art that could communicate the needs of all classes and genders to each other, and get rid of the we/they dichotomy to as great an extent as is possible in a capitalist framework." Only when politics truly internalized can they be effectively communicated through form. Those of us who identified with socialist feminism in the '70s and '80s were struggling with the contradictions between Marxism and feminist horizontal and vertical class structures. As Barbara Ehrenreich observed, "For all the ardent egalitarianism of the early movement, feminism did, in fact, have the unforeseen consequence of heightening class differences between women, ideologically and professionally." And as Navajo/Creek/Seminole photographer Hulleah Tsinhahjinnie has said, "While my mother and aunt were cleaning the house of white women, those women were developing theories of feminism."

Nevertheless, for all the internal and external assumptions that the women's movement was white and middle class, the fact remains that in a 1986 poll, only 26 percent of lower income women refused to identify as feminists, compared to 41 percent of upper income women. A 2005 poll showed 69 percent of women believe the women's movement has improved their lives, but only 24 percent will call themselves feminists. And feminist art's focus on sexuality over the last three decades may have to be reconsidered. A 1990 poll by Virginia Slims showed that poor women were not galvanized by reproductive rights and other so-called sexual issues but by poverty and lack of support from their male partners in child care and domestic work. Domestic violence is a trans-class issue that surely comes in there somewhere. I wonder how much of that has changed, or if it has. This year, Democrats are reintroducing the Equal Rights Amendment. The issues are there; the allies are there; the coalitions remain too few.

I know many of my own epiphanies around race and class came while working with the Heresies Collective, founded in 1976 by about 20 women—artists, writers, a filmmaker, an anthropologist—all



Jenny Holzer and Lady Pink (with Ilona Granet): Tear ducts seem to be a grief provision, 1983, spray paint on canvas, approx. 90 by 115 inches.



Agnes Denes: Wheatfield—A Confrontation, Battery Park Landfill, Downtown Manhattan, summer 1982, two acres of wheat planted and harvested.

white, at that point. We published a journal of feminism, art and politics that lasted 12 years, and established a shorter-lived school—the New York Feminist Art Institute. *Heresies* was the first time I had written about feminism and Left politics within a comfortable context. Each essay was constructed from dialogue with my peers, which included incendiary brainstorming, fierce disagreements, passionate rants, and the inevitable crit/self-crit (criticism/self-criticism for those of you who have never gone around the circle dissecting

virtually everything that was said and done). The magazine's various issues—on lesbian feminism, racism, the Goddess, sex, propaganda, ecology, media and class, women's traditional arts and so forth—were each edited by a separate collective and overseen by the "mother collective," a process by which *Heresies* created an ever-expanding community that survives 30 years later. It's this kind of experience that keeps a feminist in the fold.

Certainly the foundation was laid in the '70s for the more refined theoretical work of the '80s, when "representation" became the dominant focus. Photography, performance and, later, new media, offered appropriate vehicles for women artists trying to compete with the mass media's misrepresentations. When French psychoanalytic theory invaded the academies and photo-text work became de rigueur for feminists confronting a male-led and often misogynist expressionism, these tendencies diluted some feminist issues while integrating feminism into the new canon—the discourse of "visual culture"—distancing it from fine art.

Also in the late '70s and early '80s, a range of young artists' collectives revamped public art, often with a feminist twist, as a new generation of major women artists—among them Jenny Holzer and Kiki Smith—arrived on the scene within new young mixed-gender collectives and a retro punk art scene. (Some of us older lefties had trouble with the retro part but it was a great shot in the arm not only for feminism but for activist art groups.) In 1985 the Guerrilla Girls burst onto the scene with the posters they called "cultural terrorism." They were followed up by PESTS which did the same for artists of color.

All this in the mid-'80s, when, *not* at all coincidentally, the art market was in lousy shape, and art about gender—feminist and queer art—was briefly touted as the hottest item around. Thanks to the culture wars of the late '80s, many of the original feminist issues were reframed (though Karen Finley and Holly Hughes never attracted the support that came to Serrano and Mapplethorpe). The queer renaissance, with ActUp, Lesbian Avengers, Dyke Action Machine and Gran Fury, brought a renewed energy to feminism, sadly embraced in part due to the AIDS crisis and reactionary politics.

In the '90s, young feminist artists, trying to toss off the blanket of deconstructivist jargon and to revivify the imagery of feminist art, looked back to earlier work by Hesse, Bourgeois, Nancy Spero, Harmony Hammond and many others. Paralleling ActUp's media savvy and art-aware successes, WAC—Women's Action Coalition (often misidentified as Women's Art Coalition)—was created in infuriated response to the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill debacle and the William Kennedy Smith and Mike Tyson rape trials. WAC was not an artists' group, though it came out swinging at its political targets with terrific graphics, but artists were among its founders and leaders. It was a national women's SWAT team, activated by daily injustices, swooping in like Wonder Woman to claim public space with the galvanizing beat of its drum corps. During WAC's too short but dynamic life, chapters sprang up around the country,

In the early to mid-'70s the art seemed fresh and outrageous. Even the simplest things about women's experience hadn't been said aloud before, displayed in public before.



Ilona Granet: Curb Your Animal Instinct, 1986, enamel on metal, 24 by 26 inches.

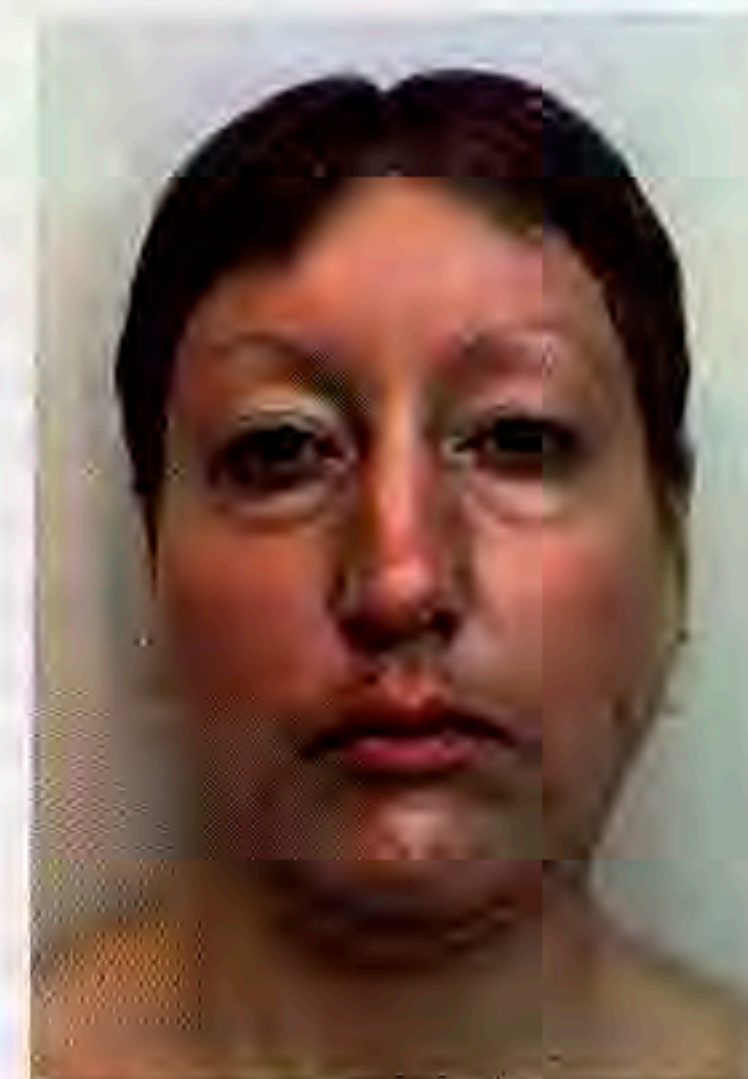
giving women artists a place to rekindle their anger, to inform their artmaking with communal experience again, to back up their art with action again.

All along there has been a certain tension between practice and theory, activism and academism. While the limitations of untheorized strategy were acknowledged, the often exciting theory being created on the ground has been mostly disregarded in the ivory towers, which led to a mutual distancing.

Actions left untheorized tended to disappear from history, if only for lack of serious consideration. On the other hand, the '80s proved that there are also limitations to overtheorized strategies. Theory does not invalidate activism nor vice versa. Activist art, creating its own political context, can also generate ideas just as ideas can generate activism.

Not being a theorist, I never saw any reason why all these vital and shape-shifting ideas couldn't co-exist. I wrote optimistically about "Both Sides Now" (the title of a show I did at Artemisia in Chicago in 1980). Clearly it's dangerous and it's dumb to confine people to imagined essences, to totalizing histories from which there is no escape. But it's equally dumb to throw the baby out with the bathwater, to reject all subjectivity, roots and origins as mere swamps of stereotype, limitation and prejudice. The stories that define us can be liberating as well as constricting. This remains a fertile area not just of opposition but of serious possibilities. A simple either/or won't work and it's not the point. For instance, recent biological research is coming up with some facts about the gendered brain that we are going to have to weave into our assumptions. It will only get more interesting.

Thinking back, I've regained my admiration for that ultimate in eye-opening truisms: "the personal is political." This modest phrase—now admittedly a cliché—was the baseline for cultural, radical and



Detail from Martha Wilson's I make up the image of my perfection/I make up the image of my deformity (shown), 1972, two color photographs by Alan Comfort.

socialist feminisms, with emphases differently placed in each branch. In the hands of feminists and other activists, it remains a living and dynamic proposition, a brilliant way to translate lived experience—positive and negative—into political action. The “political is personal” is not the opposite of this credo, but its other half. Martha Rosler for instance talks about inserting public narratives into private life and vice versa. The lesbian collective that publishes the journal *LITTR*—a worthy heiress to *Heresies*—suggests that we “build private insurrections that loosen public ground.” When we understand who we are in a historical sense we are far better able to understand what other cultural groups are experiencing within a time and place we all share.



Yolanda Lopez: Portrait of the Artist as the Virgin of Guadalupe, from the “Guadalupe” triptych, 1978, oil and pastel on paper, 30 by 24 inches.

Feminist art brought with it the resurrection of content, of narrative forms, traditional arts, autobiography, performance, documentary photography, affinities with the politics and creativity of global cultures—all ways of bringing the details of daily life into the art context where they can be understood within a broader frame. I’ve always been obsessed with the collage esthetic that defines so much feminist art—a layered, cumulative mode. From Hannah Höch to the Guerrilla Girls to Barbara Kruger to Deborah

Bright, collage or montage has always been a particularly effective medium for a political art. Humorous and hard-hitting, it can bring separate realities together in endlessly different ways. Collage or montage, though it was first exploited by modernism, is also the core strategy of postmodernism. It represents a dialogic approach. Collage is about shifting relationships, juxtaposition and superimposition, gluing and ungluing. It’s an esthetic that willfully takes apart what is or is supposed to be and rearranges it in ways that suggest what could be. Collage *makes something* of contradictions. It contains the possibility of visual puns, accessible contrasts and irony. It’s also the medium of surprise, which can shake us out of our stupors.

Collaboration is the social extension of the collage esthetic, and it characterizes a lot of women’s art. Collaboration has long been a weapon against the powerful sense of alienation that characterizes late capitalism, which divides and separates through specialization at the same time that it homogenizes. Putting things together without divesting them of their own identities is a metaphor for cultural democracy, the diametric opposite of a global corporate culture; this has been the impetus for the proliferation of new young international collectives.

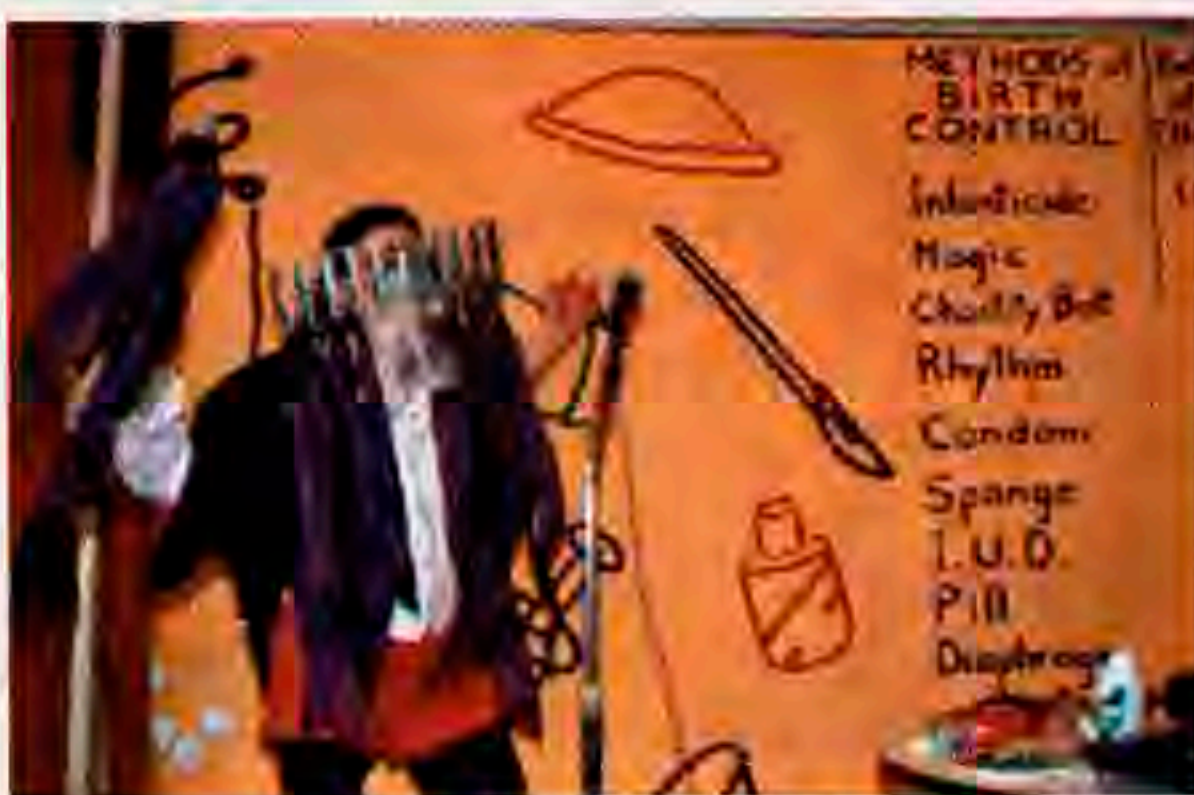
Feminists engage with the world. Not to do so is among the most unethical decisions



Sabra Moore: A Roomful of Mothers, 1985, mixed mediums on paper.

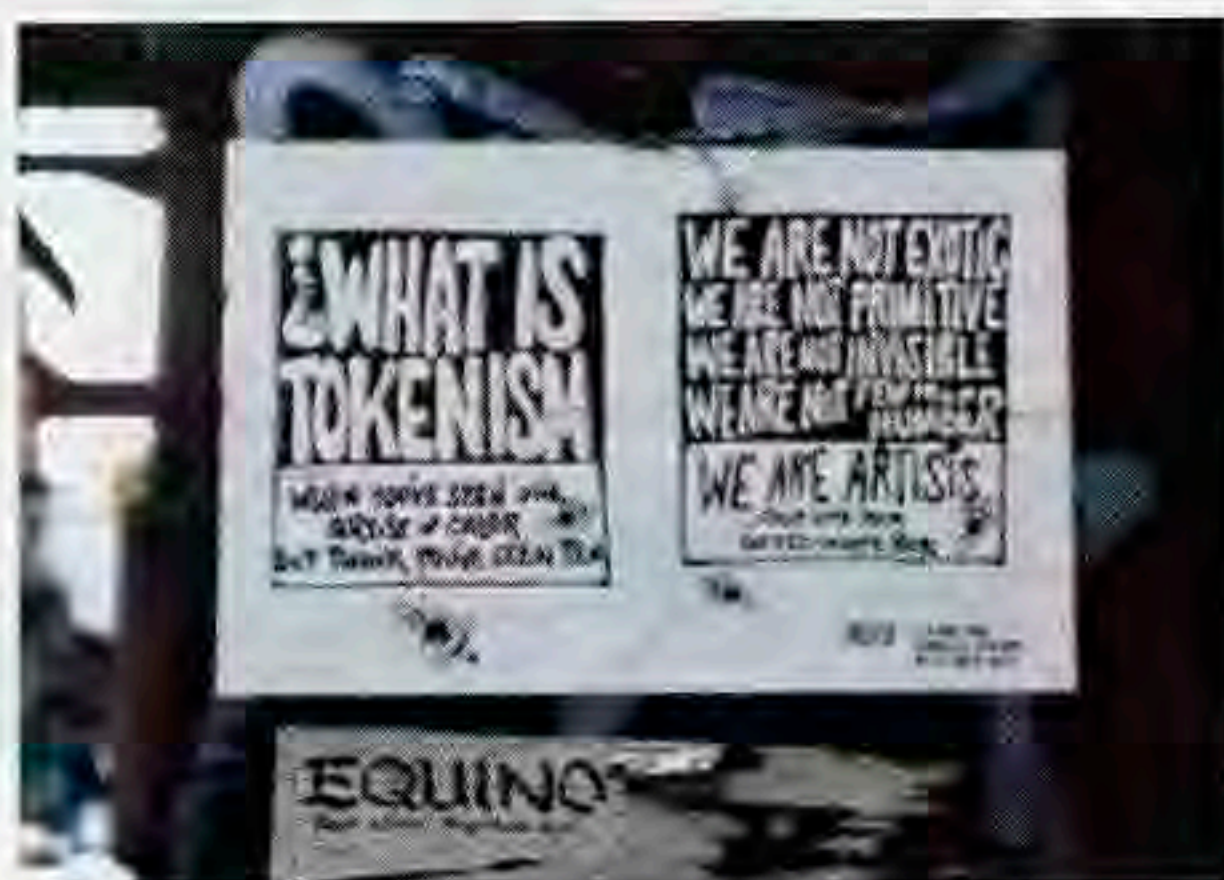


Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie (Creek/Seminole/Navajo): Damn!, 1998, digital image, unset dimensions.



Performance by Carneval Knowledge, 1982.

an artist can make. One positive development in the contemporary diffusion of feminist values is the fact that even the iconic artists of the 1970s have brought their feminism to a wide variety of issues. Suzanne Lacy’s powerful large-scale performances, which claim not only public space but public consideration, have most recently been devoted to youth, in Oakland, as well as in Medellín, Colombia. Mierle Laderman Ukeles has constantly expanded her originally domestic Maintenance Art into the urban infrastructure. Harmony Hammond now makes eloquent minimal abstractions in which the act of painting expresses the queer experience. Joyce Kozloff makes perversely decorative maps of wars, energy inequity and other urgent issues. I could go on and on. The point is that feminist artists are concerned with the global class struggle, with racism, with peace, with environmental justice and so on. The many women active in the current antiwar movement—Women in Black, Artists Against the War, Not in Our Name



Street protest poster in SoHo, 1987, by PESTS, an action group for artists of color.

and so forth—were acting *as feminists* when they insisted after 9/11, “Our grief is not a cry for war.”

One significant stronghold of once-removed feminist art is public/community-based art and the eco-art movement, where women’s “mythic” identification with nature has found new outlets. Environmental issues used to be considered soft politics. Now they are central, as we confront the abyss. Public interventions, community art, and eco-art are all about claiming space for alternative value systems. A lot of the most interesting eco-art is in a sense about gendered space; it often takes the form of projects that may take years or even decades to complete, expanding our current notions of art in time. Feminist art has always applied the principles of generosity and reciprocity to the social structures from which it emerges. I think that’s why much of the best public art is made by women with a feminist consciousness. (The distinction between working for the public and working for the market is an important one.) If some women are gifted synthesists and mediators (and I don’t see that as an insult), what better place to work than on that “fluid membrane between public and private spheres,” to quote Sheila de Bretteville, co-founder of the L.A. Woman’s Building, now head of Yale’s graphic design department. With Susana Torre, Dolores Hayden and others she pioneered notions of gendered space and public art. If it weren’t for these feminist models, I probably wouldn’t have spent the last 15 years working on community planning, writing neo-cultural geography, or curating a show on global warming in which there are 27 women, 10 men and seven mixed collaborations [it will appear at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Sept. 14-Dec. 21].

Ever since the beginning of the feminist art movement there’ve been monotonously repeated complaints from male and female nonfeminists—about how art has no gender and about “separatist” exhibitions. Given the increasing complexities of gender and identity politics in the last few decades, these two points may seem pretty simplistic. But they keep turning up in different guises. The effectiveness of various kinds of separatisms shifts with the times. (Just remember the omnipresence of all-white-male shows we older folks grew up with.) And maybe art has no gender, but artists do. I suspect there are not many thinking women, or men, who would deny, even today, that women’s lived experience—political, sexual, biological—is different from men’s lived experience.

The wishful or even utopian exaggerations of a mythic female power, widespread in early feminism, have fallen to a more skeptical age, which is fine with me. But I can’t help harboring a sneaking nostalgia for the days when it all made sense, when we were enveloped in an exhilarating cloud of ideas and images, when we were sure we could change the world for women



Michelle Stuart: #50, High Falls, NY, 1975-76, mixed mediums, approx. 131 by 60 inches.

within a decade, when we had our own spaces and our own communities, our own culture . . . when we used the word "revolution" and believed it was possible. It was a hell of a lot of fun.

I know cyber feminists are out there even if I can't hear them because I live off the grid and stubbornly don't do the Internet. For a while we had rooms of our own. Now we have chat rooms shared with virtually everybody. Maybe the Web (I think of the 1971 WEB) is the new way to negotiate feminist visual production/practice in a time that is not very hospitable to idealism.



Brenda Miller: Tenstrike, 1973, sisal, 80 inches square.

you can bet I'll stand up for myself." The question is, will she stand up for other women? What's missing today, it seems to me, is the glue that once kept the collage esthetic and feminist community on course. Helen Molesworth said memorably at the MOMA symposium in January that the

One reason feminist art hasn't received its art-historical due is that, like Conceptual art, it was not based on style but on content. It was hard to pin down, a moving target.

notion of sisterhood is "so outdated it almost seems cool." Ouch.

The last six years have been worse than we could have imagined. The breadth of malicious mistakes made by the Bush Administration have hit us with so many issues all at once that sometimes we feel powerless. A more cynical worldview characterizes the early 21st century and its arts, created in the midst of religious fundamentalism, nationalism and war. Our bodies are still battlegrounds, as the recent Supreme Court partial-birth abortion decision makes all too clear. Our anger is as fragmented as our communications, because there is too much to be angry about. A question that came up at MOMA was "is anger essentialist?" I'd say no, anger is essential.

Nevertheless, we are notoriously resilient. Our daughters, daughters-in-law and granddaughters will be, too. There's no question that feminism, with some help from feminist art, has filtered out into the dominant culture and changed the way the world sees and treats women. Despite cultural amnesia and the fear of erasure common to all progressive movements in less than progressive times, the exuberant optimism of vintage feminist art is attracting attention again. Some women's work has even trickled gradually into Janson's *History of Art*. Women have represented the U.S. (as well as France, Germany and many other countries) at the Venice Biennale. *The Dinner Party* has finally found a permanent home at the Brooklyn Museum. The Feminist Art Project out of Rutgers is gathering the forces again. The long-awaited "WACK!" is attracting

crowds at L.A. MOCA. Linda Nochlin and Maura Reilly's "Global Feminisms" is at the Brooklyn Museum's Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, and coming down the pike in November is Mary Garrard and Norma Broude's "Claiming Space," at American University in Washington, D.C. And an e-book titled *From Site to Vision: The Woman's Building in Contemporary Culture*, by Sondra Hale and Terry Wolverton, has just appeared. All of these demonstrate the length and breadth, the staying power, commitment and rejuvenation of contemporary feminist art. Can another feminist art revolution be far behind? Anne Wagner suggested at the MOMA symposium that "political

imagination is feminism's best shot, the key to the future." Griselda Pollock added, "Imagination is how politics operates at the level of esthetics." And this goes for transgendering the issues, as David Joselit put it, educating and incorporating men as well.

So where are we now? On the cusp of a Third Wave? (It has been almost 40 years.) In 2002 Spanish curator Rosa Martinez offered a manifesto for a "New Feminism" that would gather "a series of radical but flexible strategies to reinvent the emotional, sexual, economical and geopolitical distribution of power" and demand "a better distribution of the benefits" of capitalist development, rejecting the "nineties backlash that claims that equality between men and

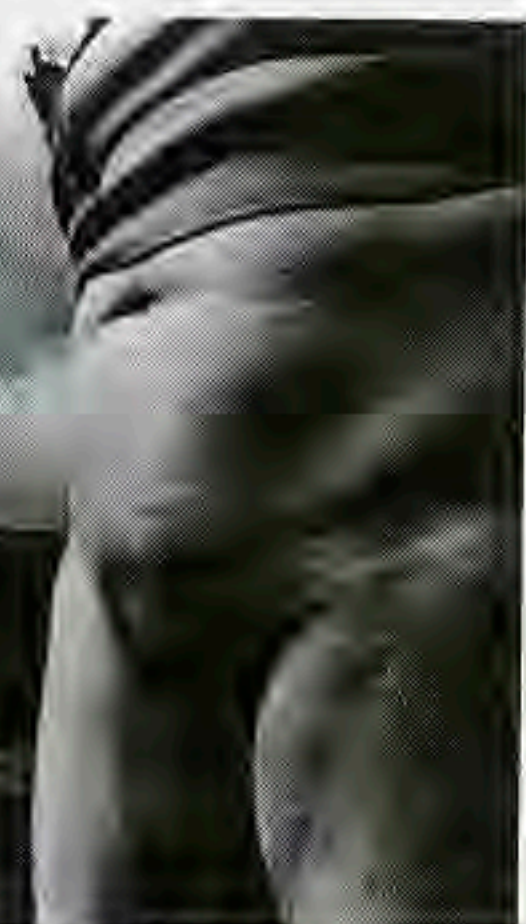


Documentation of a performance by The Waitresses, ca. 1978, a group associated with the Woman's Building in Los Angeles.

women has already been achieved." And many young women are thinking outside the whitewalled room. Taiwanese Hsin-I Eva Lin went on a 45-day strike (no art making, empty studio and leafleting) during a 2004 residency in New York "to call attention to the insecurity of labor in the global economy."

Artist Carrie Moyer wrote recently (I'm paraphrasing) that the real question is whether feminism is recognized as a meaningful historical precedent, acknowledged and cited by artists, critics and historians. Is this Feminist Spring just another blip against the backlash? Time will tell. bell hooks has written about "feminist movement." By omitting "the," she endows our political noun with the forward momentum of a verb. So much for the past, let's get on with the future of feminism. What are we going to make of this window of opportunity? One thing at least is for sure, we'll be post-feminists when our goals have been met, and not before. □

Author: *Lucy R. Lippard is currently working on Scratching the Surface, a critical history of her home turf, the Galisteo Basin in northern New Mexico.*



Anne Noggle: Stonehenge Decoded, 1977, black-and-white photograph.

Significantly, many of the collaborations and collectives that have come back into style involve people working in different countries and communicating via the Internet. It's always a good sign when the exalted egos cultivated by the art world's rugged individualist system are willing and able to work together. And of course, as Mira Schor has pointed out, there have now been at least two generations of artists who can claim an "artistic matrilineage." This has definitely contributed to a certain hunger for feminist action. Today's young feminist artists are unashamedly working off '70s feminism just as artists did in the '90s.

Certainly we should hang onto the f-word and continue to give it new meanings. As one young woman pointed out at MOMA, if we invented another term, it would soon be demonized too. I've been chatting about feminism with younger women, across three semi-generations, and one quite common take is the rejection of any generalizations about women or men. "Feminism is part of who I am," said one undergraduate, "but to make a big deal of it would just be bad for the cause. It shouldn't be an issue anymore. Let's go forward instead of looking back. I may not call myself a feminist, but

Clarissa Sligh: Reading Dick and Jane with Me, 1989, offset printing, 22-page artist's book, 8½ by 7 inches.



Deborah Bright: Black-and-white photograph from the "Dream Girls" series, 1989-90.

