

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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Emma Amos

Black Bodies

October 19 – December 16, 2017

Reception: Saturday, October 21, 2–4PM

RYAN LEE is pleased to present Emma Amos: *Black Bodies*, an exhibition of paintings by the artist and educator. Amos, known for her witty, probing, and masterfully colored figurative paintings, began her career in New York in the early sixties. She was the youngest and only female member of the African American artist group Spiral and worked as a textile designer for Dorothy Liebes while she established herself as an artist. Spanning four decades, *Black Bodies* highlights Amos's continued celebration of the black body as a source and site of power and beauty.

Throughout her career Amos has used figures to ground her narratives. The black body—whether abstracted, anonymous, or recognizable as her own or that of an important historical figure—serves as agent, theme, and subject of Amos's interrogation. Works such as *Tightrope* (1994) combine postmodern preoccupations like the constructed nature of images and a suspicion of master narratives with identity politics. In *Tightrope*, Amos paints herself in a Wonder Woman suit and black robe negotiating a tightrope strung over a frenetic blur of spectators and disembodied eyes. In her outstretched arms she holds two paintbrushes in an X and a t-shirt printed with a nude female torso. The torso is taken from Paul Gauguin's 1899 painting *Two Tahitian Women*, which appears miniaturized in photo transfers onto fabric at the four corners of Amos's painting, punctuating its border made of African fabrics. Quoting from both the modern art canon and popular culture, Amos makes clear that she is an active and powerful agent—artist and super hero—in a balancing act. She assumes the role of the female artist, while she acknowledges the risk involved in challenging inherited perceptions of the black female body as a sexualized object for visual consumption.

Amos's paintings from the eighties and early nineties remind viewers that the power of images is culturally determined, and that it is necessary to be conscious of and to question the value systems that imbue these images with meaning. The 1995 painting *Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray's Photograph - 1926)* explicitly grapples with these concerns via the figure of Robeson, a singer, actor, athlete and Civil Rights activist. Amos paints Robeson's nude body as it appears in Murray's photograph, taken after Robeson had concluded his football career and graduated from law school. Murray's original black and white photograph appears seven times in a vertical row flanking Amos's portrait, opposite a row of photo transfers of a Greco-Roman frieze. Amos's emphasis on the sculptural nature of Robeson's form, and its juxtaposition with images of classical masculinity, suggest that ultimately all images—and the ideals they promote—are constructed.

Amos's recent work explores the graphic and sculptural potential of her exuberantly painted figures. *Look to the Sun* (2014) will be exhibited for the first time. Amos has written that she hopes her paintings "...dislodge, question, and tweak prejudices, rules, and notions relating to art and who makes it, poses for it, shows it, and buys it." While consistently dealing with fraught themes of the representation and (in)visibility of black bodies, in Amos's oeuvre the black body as form and force remains exalted and empowered.

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Emma Amos (b. 1937 Atlanta, GA) is a distinguished painter, printmaker, and weaver. She was the youngest and only woman member of Spiral, the historic African American collective founded in 1963, as well as a member of the important feminist collective, Heresies, established in the 1980s. Influenced by modern Western European art, Abstract Expressionism, the Civil Rights movement and feminism, Amos explores the politics of culture and issues of racism, sexism and ethnocentrism through her paintings and works on paper. Over six decades, she has employed color theory, innovative printmaking and weaving techniques, photo-transfer and collage. Amos graduated from Antioch College in Ohio in 1958 and the Central School of Art in London in 1960. She subsequently moved to New York and became active in the downtown arts scene, working alongside prominent Spiral artists such as Romare, Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Norman Lewis, Alvin Hollingsworth and Charles Alston. In 1965, she earned her Masters in Arts from New York University and taught art at the Dalton School in New York. She is a former Professor and Chair in Visual Arts at the Mason Gross School of Art at Rutgers University where she taught for 28 years. Her work is held in the collections of the Bass Museum of Art, Miami; Birmingham Museum of Art; British Museum, London; Bronx Museum of Art, New York; Fowler Museum of Art, Los Angeles; James F. Byrnes Institute, Stuttgart, DE; Museo de las Artes, Guadalajara, MX; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Newark Museum; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, among others. Amos's prints were recently included in the British Museum's 2017 *American Dream* exhibition, and her paintings were included in Tate Modern's *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* and the Brooklyn Museum's *We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85*. In 2016, Amos received Georgia Museum of Art's Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson award and was honored by the Studio Museum in Harlem as an Icon and Trailblazer, along with Faith Ringgold and Lorraine O'Grady. In 2020, Amos will be the subject of a retrospective exhibition at Georgia Museum of Art at Georgia University in Athens. Amos still lives and works in downtown Manhattan.

Concurrently on view in RLWindow is Nicole Cohen: *Library (Donald Judd's)* (October 19 - November 25), viewable from the High Line at 26th Street. For press inquiries, please contact Bridget Casey at bridget@ryanleegallery.com or 212-397-0742.

EMMA AMOS / ARTIST

Artist's Statement

Though I have lived in New York for most of my life, my work often returns to memories of Atlanta, my hometown. Growing up with family and friends in the South that I still love, we all tried many ways to change the order of things. Images come to me of words like *sass* and *back talk* that describe the attitudes of people who actively resisted oppression. My work has often taken shots at assumptions about skin color and the privileges of power and of whiteness.

Even though Atlanta and most cities during my youth were segregated, the arts, schools, and smart creative people were beacons of light. The city was a good place for black people with big dreams, and it continues to be a major site for black colleges, businesses, artists, and political figures. It is important to me to point out that both of my college-educated parents had fathers who were born slaves. This was a good reason for my brother, Larry, and me to believe that we had to continue to excel, as our family had done under much more difficult circumstances.

Many of my paintings, prints, and photographic installations mean to connect more than one form of knowledge or experience with the images within the work. I hope that the subjects of my paintings dislodge, question, and tweak prejudices, rules, and notions relating to art and who makes it, poses for it, shows it, and buys it. The work reflects my investigations into the otherness often seen by white male artists, along with the notion of desire, the dark body versus the white body, racism, and my wish to provoke more thoughtful ways of thinking and seeing. I like being called an imagist but don't wince (too much) when some see my work as merely figuration without noticing its conceptual commentaries on color and black and white. I like that people can read their own meanings into my paintings and that those readings may be quite different from mine. I am interested in who gets acclaim for showing what, and in what being called a "master" often means. I also want people to learn to feel my distaste for the notion that there is "art" and "black art." Yes, race, sex, class, and power privileges exist in the world of art.

After leaving Atlanta at age sixteen to study at Antioch College in Ohio, I worked in several states in the work-study program as well as studied painting and etching at the Central School of Art, in London—graduating from both within a six-year period, by 1959. At age twenty-two, I moved to New York and taught as an assistant at the Dalton School for a year before I began to work as a weaver/designer for Dorothy Liebes. This craft led to my love for fabric, inspiring the borders I have used in my work for many years. The African kangas and Dutch wax prints are substitutes for the time-and-materials madness I exhibited in the 1960s, when I briefly wove line cloth to paint on, as well as to hang as art—an unacceptable gambit since the age of tapestries. After having being well trained in etching in London, I later worked in Leo Calapai's New York atelier and Bob Blackburn's Printmaking Workshop, and in 1965 I earned a master's degree in art education from New York University.

My career (1980–2008) as a Professor II and former Chair of Visual Arts at the Mason Gross School of the Arts has backed a studio practice that includes painting, drawing, making prints and photographic images, weaving, and sewing, along with lecturing, writing, reading, and

looking at art. I am very grateful for that. I am pleased when my work initiates memory, individual observations and thought.

My years as an artist include forty years of marriage with the late Bobby Levine; two children, Nick and India; and art world friendships with Hale Woodruff, William Turnbull, Norman Louis, Romare Bearden, Vivian Brown, Camille Billops, Holly Block, Elizabeth Catlett, Carol Sun, Sylvan Cole, bell hooks, Kathy Caraccio, Mel Edwards, Joyce Kozloff, Jackson Lenochoan, Joan Semmel, Zarina, and many others. We blur the lines that separate black and white artists and art supporters in New York and elsewhere. Having been a member of Spiral, the *Heresies* magazine collective, and many other artists' groups, I appreciate the surge in art across the country and on this precious planet.

<http://emmaamos.com/about/statement/>