

The Changing Complex Profile of Black Abstract Painters

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS JUNE 4, 2014

Long marginalized by their community and overlooked by the art market, African American abstractionists are finally coming into the spotlight



Howardena Pindell, *Untitled #18* (detail), 1977

“Donald Judd didn’t have to explain himself. Why do I have to?” asks Jennie C. Jones, an African American abstract painter who has grappled with the issue of how her work can or should reflect her race. “Fred Sandback can make this beautiful line and not have to have it literally be a metaphor for his cultural identity.”

Jones, 45, sidestepped the debates around multiculturalism that were raging when she was in school in the 1980s and gravitated toward Minimalism. Yet over the last decade, she has forged a conceptual link in her work between the histories of abstraction and of modern jazz in America—“black guys in the 1950s taking jazz into the concert hall and making it this bluesy hybrid with Bach,” as she puts it.

In her recent show at Sikkema Jenkins in New York, an atonal sound environment accompanied her monochromatic paintings that had acoustic panels attached to the canvases. Strips of fluorescent color painted on the edges of the canvases bounced off the white walls and created a sense of movement, rhythm, and vibration. “This art and music juncture,” she says, “gave me the permission to point to something in the room that said, ‘I didn’t fall out of the sky.’”

The contributions of African American artists to the inventions of abstract painting have historically been overlooked, or else fraught with the kind of questions faced by Jones. “Generations of black abstract painters never seem to be celebrated,” says Valerie Cassel Oliver, senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, where she recently organized “Black in the Abstract,” a two-part exhibition that focused on the history of African American painters working in abstraction. She placed younger artists, including Jones, Shinique Smith, and Angel Otero, in dialogue with members of the older generation, such as Felrath Hines, Alma Thomas, and Romare Bearden, who were producing seminal works in the 1960s.

“You find these artists being marginalized on both ends of the spectrum,” Cassel Oliver continues. “There was this manifesto with the Black Arts Movement that you did work that reflected the beauty of that community in no uncertain terms,”

she says, referring to a group that coalesced in the 1960s to promote social and political engagement in art and literature. “Oftentimes abstract painting is not as celebrated as more figurative work by the black community. From the mainstream art world, it’s just the sense of not being preoccupied with what black artists are doing, period.”

The 1960 canvas *Strange Land*, included in the Houston show, would be unrecognizable to most viewers as a work by Bearden. It wasn’t until 1964, when he started making collages inspired by the rituals and rhythms of African American life, that he achieved acclaim. Bearden and his contemporary Jacob Lawrence, whose subject matter was similar, were the most renowned African American artists of their time. Their sensitive portrayals of black families were the kind of works many thought were needed and that they expected from black artists. Yet Bearden, in his 1946 essay “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma,” bristled at the tendency to critique work by blacks on “sociological rather than esthetic” merits. His extensive experimentation with Abstract Expressionism from 1952 to 1964 has gone virtually unnoticed. The first exhibition devoted to this lost decade of his work is being prepared by the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, New York.

“It took a lot of integrity and a lot of courage for an African American artist to be an abstractionist in the 1950s, ’60s, ’70s even,” says Michael Rosenfeld, who organized “Beyond the Spectrum: Abstraction in African American Art, 1950–1975” at his Chelsea gallery earlier this year. The show brought together what Rosenfeld calls the first-generation African American abstract artists—Charles Alston, Harold Cousins, Beauford Delaney, Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, and Hale Woodruff—and the second generation, including Frank Bowling, Edward Clark, Melvin Edwards, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Al Loving, Howardena Pindell, William T. Williams, and Jack Whitten.

Rosenfeld points out that Norman Lewis (1909–79) participated in the landmark symposium organized in 1950 by Robert Motherwell and Lewis’s friend Ad Reinhardt and held at Studio 35 in New York, where the artists present debated what to call the new art movement. (Abstract Expressionism was the term that eventually prevailed.) Yet Lewis is routinely omitted from the narrative of this defining moment in American art. The first comprehensive overview of his career opens in November 2015 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

Alma Thomas was picked up by the Martha Jackson Gallery in the 1960s and was the first African American woman to have an exhibition at the Whitney Museum in 1972. Yet she is not well known today.

“The African American Abstract Expressionists are part of the same movement as their white counterparts,” says Rosenfeld, “delving within themselves and trying to express something universal.”

While all these artists resisted the pressure to paint images that told stories of black experience, most were very politically engaged. “Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties,” on view at the Brooklyn Museum through July 6, includes works by several committed abstractionists who found ways to meld their art and activism.

The 80-year-old Sam Gilliam, known for his ravishing color-field canvases that he sometimes drapes sculpturally on the wall, painted a monumental canvas stained and splattered all over with hot pinks and reds, titled *Red April* (1970), in direct response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968.

Lewis’s *Untitled (Alabama)* from 1967 shows a crowd of abstracted angular figures in white packed into a bladelike shape slicing through a black field. The artist always disavowed overt narrative content in his work, but the visual suggestion of hooded Klansmen together with the title clearly alludes to the civil rights movement.

“Lewis became a beacon for the next generation, moving into an abstract space and saying, ‘I don’t have to put that burden of representation on my work,’” says Kellie Jones, cocurator of “Witness” and associate professor of art history and archeology at Columbia University. “Somebody like Jack Whitten makes the same decision.”

The Brooklyn show includes Whitten’s *Birmingham 1964*, in which a newspaper photograph of a confrontation in Birmingham is partially revealed under layers of stocking mesh and black oil paint, like a wound that can’t be covered over. The 74-year-old artist, who grew up in Alabama and moved to New York in 1960 as an art student, revered the Abstract Expressionists, many of whom he met at the Cedar Tavern. While Whitten said he felt pressure to make work about the civil rights movement in the 1960s—and wanted to do so—he made a decisive leap into abstraction in 1970.

“If I was going to get around Bill de Kooning, first of all I had to go faster than he, and second of all I had to do something much larger than he,” says Whitten, who created a 12-foot-wide tool he called the “developer” to drag paint in a single gesture across the entire picture plane. (This was a decade before Gerhard Richter began his heralded abstract paintings using a similar technique.) Whitten, who shows at Alexander Gray Associates in New York, will be the subject of a major retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art San Diego in September.

As a graduate student at Yale in the mid-1960s Howardena Pindell, 71, also found inspiration in the work of the older generation of abstractionists—namely Ad Reinhardt’s paintings of close-value colors and Larry Poons’s Op art canvases of

circles and ovals. Throughout the '70s, Pindell experimented with color, surface, and texture. She cut out hundreds of tiny paper dots with a standard hole puncher, collaged them onto cut-and-quilted canvases, and smothered them in layers of acrylic, dye, sequins, glitter, and powder. One of them, the pale, luminous *Untitled #20: Dutch Wives, Circled and Squared* (1978), was included in "Black in the Abstract."

"I remember going with my abstract work to the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the director at the time said to me, 'Go downtown and show with the white boys,'" says Pindell, adding that William T. Williams and Al Loving met with the same kind of response. "We were basically considered traitors because we didn't do specifically didactic work."

Pindell, who just had an exhibition at Garth Greenan in New York, says her conscious intention was to explore the esthetic possibilities of the circle when she started on those works. Then she was startled by a childhood memory that came back to her. On a car ride through Kentucky in the 1950s, she and her father, who lived in Philadelphia, stopped at a root-beer stand and were served mugs with red circles on the bottom.

"I asked my father, 'What is this red circle?'" she recalls. "He said, 'That's because we're black and we cannot use the same utensils as the whites.' I realized that's really the origin of my being driven to try to change the circle in my mind, trying to take the sting out of that."

Odili Donald Odita, 48, says that he feels indebted to the persistence of the older generation of black abstract artists who asserted personal freedom in the face of an art market that rewarded cultural and political stereotypes. In the early 1990s, as a young artist out of graduate school at Bennington College in Vermont, where he studied the work of mainstream abstract painters such as Helen Frankenthaler and Kenneth Noland, Odita got a job at Kenkeleba House in New York, owned by the painter Joe Overstreet, who collected and showed work by African American artists. Stunned that he had never heard of these artists, Odita began a project to interview abstract painters from the 1970s and 1980s, such as Pindell, Loving, Edward Clark, Frank Bowling, and Stanley Whitney. Odita's research grew into a series of talks he has given at universities over the years.

"Any kind of formal invention in the work of black artists was seen as, if not second rate, then something done the second time around," says Odita, noting that Clark laid claim to making the first shaped painting—before Frank Stella—and that the king-making art critic Clement Greenberg regularly visited Bowling's studio but never took the opportunity to write one word in support of his work. "In the competition of the avant garde in modern art, these older-generation African Americans felt disenfranchised and marginalized in the race to advance art."

Odita didn't want his own work subsumed under the standard narrative of Stella and Noland, and all this information helped him navigate his path as an abstract artist. Because his family fled the civil war in Nigeria when he was a baby and settled in Ohio, he grew up with the duality of African traditions at home and American pop culture in school. In 1999, he started making geometric paintings in which shards of vibrant colors zigzag and abut in compositions that suggest colliding cultures and emotions.

"I wanted people to identify the trope of Africa with this structure and color and see the patterns of one world and another world pushing into the space of the painting," Odita says. He draws on the palette and designs of African textiles, TV test patterns, the Nigerian landscape, and suburban wallpaper in his work, which he shows at Jack Shainman in New York. "If it's successful, it doesn't end in that trope. Then people start engaging with other things that are occurring—texture, color, the dynamic of the composition, light, what the space creates, how it relates to your body and mind," he says.

James Little, 60, also has an affinity for color, design, and structure in his hard-edge abstract paintings that are strongly influenced by jazz. "I've figured out ways of suggesting movement, rhythm, speed, and how to shift color," says Little, pointing out that de Kooning and Piet Mondrian were also responding directly to jazz. "I felt that abstraction, coming from my background, which was a very segregated upbringing in Tennessee, reflected for me the best expression of self-determination and optimism and freedom. I've had to do an uphill battle in a lot of ways in the art world on both sides, amongst the blacks and whites, but I've just really stuck with what I believe in." His canvas *Juju Boogie Woogie* (2013) was included in "Black in the Abstract."

June Kelly, whose gallery represents Little, has noticed a positive shift in the art world at large toward black abstract painters. "There's a wonderful group of collectors who are more receptive to the work of black abstract painters now," says Kelly. "As they read more and look, they see the need to open up their collections. The writings and exhibitions of black historians and curators such as David Driskell, Kellie Jones, Richard J. Powell, Lowery Stokes Sims, Judith Wilson, and Valerie Cassel Oliver are making a difference."

Jennie C. Jones is thrilled by the large number of black collectors who are now interested in her work. She credits, in part, Studio Museum director Thelma Golden, who has organized such shows as "Energy/ Experimentation: Black Artists and

Abstraction 1964–1980” in 2006.

“Over the last 20 years, she has been really educating black collectors to step away from focusing on the WPA era,” says Jones, who will have a solo show at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston in October. “I have black collectors today who say, ‘I’ve always been in love with Russian Constructivism, and now I feel I can have something close to that but reframed in a new context.’”