

VOGUE

On a Mission: Pamela Joyner's Activist Art Show Arrives in New Orleans

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by JULIA FELSENTHAL



NORMAN LEWIS, AMERICAN, AFTERNOON, 1969
COLLECTION OF PAMELA JOYNER, 14.2014, THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

This summer, the artist Kara Walker created a stir on the Internet when she disseminated a provocative announcement of her fall show at the Sikkema Jenkins gallery in New York. Written in wry carnival barker-ese, Walker's press release anticipated the controversies that would inevitably arise in the exhibition's wake, and in her audacious, bombastic diction, even seemed to invite them. In a subsequent artist's statement, she struck a more deflated tone. "I know what you all expect from me and I have complied up to a point," Walker wrote wearily. "But frankly I am tired, tired of standing up, being counted, tired of 'having a voice' or worse 'being a role model.'"

Her statement shone a spotlight on the outsize expectation still borne by African-American artists to “represent” their race and to make socially engaged work that in some way explicates their blackness. That matter of “what you all expect from me” is also at the heart of *Solidary & Solitary*, a new traveling show of work by a group of black abstract artists—Walker not among them—opening this weekend in its first of seven venues, the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans. Curated by the Baltimore Museum of Art’s Christopher Bedford and Katy Siegel (also the pair behind Mark Bradford’s *Tomorrow Is Another Day* at this year’s Venice Biennale), the show’s title refers, as Siegel tells me by phone, “to that pull between the pressure to represent your collective identity, and the drive to be free, to be only yourself.” In a brochure that accompanies the exhibition, the curators offer some historical context for that tension among African-American artists: “The battle waged by brave individuals against the conforming masses is central to the American story, but the reality was, and is, considerably more complicated. For black artists . . . there was enormous pressure to work in a recognizable, representational mode, be it social realism or the ‘Negro Idiom.’ Voices in the dominant American culture and the black community alike demanded identifiable signifiers of race and, in the latter case, of uplift and protest.”

Solidary & Solitary draws almost entirely from the holdings of the prominent, married Bay Area collectors Pamela Joyner and Alfred Giuffrida. In her press release, Walker expressly rejected the term activist; Joyner embraces it. She calls herself a “cultural activist,” and refers to the collection, now more than 300 pieces strong, as “mission-driven,” both in terms of the art she chooses to buy (her husband is the silent partner in their shared enterprise) and her indefatigable championing of the artists who make it. It wasn’t, she admits, always that way. “I just needed some things to hang on the wall,” she remembers, chuckling. “That’s really where I started.”

Joyner, 59, grew up the daughter of teachers on the South Side of Chicago, where, as a child, she made weekly pilgrimages to the Art Institute to commune with paintings by Picasso and Seurat. While she was earning her MBA at Harvard (she would put it to use on Wall Street, where she ran a private equity marketing company) she crossed paths with the Metropolitan Museum of Art curator Lowery Stokes Sims. At Sims’s suggestion, Joyner began, about 20 years ago, buying paintings; eventually her focus narrowed to abstract work by artists of the African diaspora, primarily African American, from the 1940s onward.

“I realized there was a deeper story I could tell,” Joyner remembers, “that would hopefully make a difference.” She saw an opportunity to revise the historical record to reflect the work of black nonrepresentational painters whose contributions had long been ignored, and she approached the task of doing so with business school savvy. “I remember calling Lowery up,” Joyner tells me. “I said, I’m going to write a strategy! We’re going to have an execution plan. We’re going to work really hard to change the narrative.” (The response from Sims, who had spent her career fighting an uphill battle for greater institutional inclusion of black artists: “Good luck with that!”) Thus was born the Joyner/Giuffrida collection, a project, as Joyner told the *New York Times* last year, “no less ambitious than an effort to reframe art history” (and one, she adds, in which she has benefited greatly from the groundwork laid by trailblazers like Sims).

Joyner is speaking to me by phone from New Orleans, where she’s just arrived to oversee the last days of the Ogden show’s installation. “When I asked them to consider taking on this project,”

Joyner says of Siegel and Bedford, “I said to them I promise not to micromanage. I did make one qualifier. I said that group shows focused on black artists have a long history. Some of those shows have been transformational. Some of them have been less additive to the conversation, and those have very often had the characteristic of being an unaffiliated amalgam of artists, where the only common factor is that they happen to be black. So what I said was, let’s just not have a plain vanilla black group show.”

Hence *Solidary & Solitary*, a title cribbed from the Martiniquan poet Edouard Glissant. Black artists who chose to focus on abstraction—particularly those doing so in the mid-20th century and at the dawn of Civil Rights—defied not only the (limited) market demands for work by artists of color but also expectations from within their own communities that art’s purpose was to serve the collective good. Their work asserted a profound and urgent individuality—a rejection of legible sociopolitical messaging—that, ironically, may make the strongest statement of all. “The right of a black man or a black woman to say, ‘I am a creator, my subjectivity is important, I am a masterful painter,’ all of those things become political,” Siegel acknowledges.

But the choice to be nonrepresentative and nonrepresentational did not negate all sense of the communal. Take, for example, the late abstract expressionist Norman Lewis, one of the founders of the Spiral collective, a group that met weekly to discuss what it meant to be a black artist during the civil rights movement. Joyner calls him the Adam (to Alma Thomas’s Eve) of her collection, and his paintings are a focal point of the Ogden show. “I could argue that just the fact that Norman Lewis was creating abstraction in 1946, that act was an act of subversion, or activism, and real bravery, because there was no validation in the environment, in the distribution system, the gallery system, for Norman to be engaged in making that kind of work,” says Joyner. “But Norman was a universalist, a true creative, and he did this work because he was compelled to do the work.” He also served as inspiration to many of the artists Joyner and Giuffrida collect: Richard Mayhew, Jack Whitten, Sam Gilliam, Mel Edwards, to name a few. “Norman Lewis gave a whole generation of abstract makers permission to do what it is they do,” she asserts, “and a beacon to show them how to get there.”

If fierce individual vision is the driving force of this art, that sense of camaraderie and lineage is the other side of the story. These artists are united by their drive to make, to varying degrees, abstract work; by the external pressure that forces them, by virtue of having dark skin, to wrestle with questions of identity; and by the extent to which they turned to each other in the absence of support from formal art world structures. But their work is also formally in conversation in more specific ways. Siegel and Bedford tease out some of those connections in pairings that they refer to as duets: Kevin Beasley and Shinique Smith’s interest in fabric; Melvin Edwards and Leonardo Drew’s use of found objects and materials; Jack Whitten and Mark Bradford’s expansion of the possibilities of paper and canvas; Jennie C. Jones and Glenn Ligon’s minimalism, and, per the brochure, their “sensitivity to what is felt but cannot be touched.”

“It’s always abstraction and materiality working against the known narrative, the given narrative, the social-stereotype,” says Siegel. That’s true, too, in the case of Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, a seeming outlier who appears in the show despite being neither American (she’s British-Ghanaian), nor obviously an abstract artist (she paints portraits of imaginary black figures). “She wants to see that being black can be natural and normal,” Siegel observes, “Not like it’s a big

political statement that the bodies are black, but that she can evade stereotypes by creating them out of her own imagination. So it is abstract in that sense.”

Yiadom-Boakye also sparks a broader observation: “We’re in the process of installing the show,” says Bedford, “and there are all these dramatic sight lines from one gallery to the other. In one glance you see a text-based painting by Glenn Ligon. Then you glance in the other direction and you see an enormous black, wooden construction by Leonardo Drew. And then you see this towering work by Lynette of a man, and that man is staring into Norman Lewis’s gallery, at one of his great paintings. And I guess what it does for me is make the point that this abstract work, nonobjective painting and sculpture, is always embodied. There’s always a body. It’s always social. It’s never just formal.” Siegel puts it this way “This isn’t just to add black faces to the history of American art. This is to change and improve our understanding of American art as a whole.”

These sorts of insights are why Joyner wanted to do the show in the first place: not to shine a light on the marginal but to bring what was exiled to the margins to the center. “The question for me,” she explains, “is how are we going to bake this into the full arc of the art historical canon?” She offers an answer: “It’s for the curators to decide who deserves it. They’re the tastemakers. All you can do is make the case.”

“If I had unlimited resources,” she says, “I would go out and buy Albers, and Morris Louis, and hang them next to like painters because that’s a way to tell the whole story. But since I don’t have unlimited resources, I have to have a discipline and a focus, and a strategy: put the work out there in a world in a way that others will fill in the gaps.”

Joyner, who was a member of President Obama’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, doesn’t seem eager to have an overtly political agenda overlaid on this show any more than these artists want one overlaid on their art. But she also acknowledges that “this is not a moment to sit on the sidelines. Whatever the tools and currency one has, one should deploy them.”

She refers back to those trips as a child to the Art Institute, “how I developed a love of art. If young people with less opportunity could walk into the Ogden Museum in New Orleans, spitting distance from the Ninth Ward, and see the framework of their opportunities in a more comprehensive and optimistic way; if this show can give young makers of color a roadmap in the way that Norman Lewis gave then young makers of color a roadmap: mission accomplished.”

“For me,” she adds, “that’s cultural activism.”