

Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due

In the 1960s, abstract painting was a controversial style for Black artists, overshadowed by social realist works. Now, it's claimed its place as a vital form of expression.



By Megan O'Grady
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IN 1998, THE ARTIST Jack Whitten, then 58, jotted down 32 objectives, a manifesto of sorts, which included the following:

- Learn to understand existence as being political.
- Avoid art-world strategies.
- Erase all known isms.
- Don't succumb to populist aesthetics.
- Remove the notion of me.
- Eliminate that which qualifies as a narrative.
- Learn to live by the philosophy of jazz.
- Only fools want to be famous (avoid at all cost).
- Remain true to myself.

Published posthumously in his 2018 book, “Jack Whitten: Notes From the Woodshed” — a collection of studio logs, essays and poetry spanning 50 years — the list points to some of the tensions, formal and psychic, that shaped his art (for jazz musicians, to “go to the woodshed” means to work in solitude, trying out ideas and testing instincts before taking them public). Growing up in Jim Crow Alabama, Whitten was barred from the public library but, by 1960, he was in New York, studying art at Cooper Union. The Abstract Expressionist Norman Lewis (a Black American) befriended and mentored him; so did Willem de Kooning (a white European). Art allowed Whitten to bridge the country's racial divides with a practice that embodied the possibility of individual freedom and improvisation within larger social identities. His insistence that painting was *about* something ran counter to — or expanded upon — the Minimalist ideals of the time, which privileged form over meaning (“Erase all known isms”). “Abstract painting that addresses subject is what I want,” he wrote. “I want something that goes beyond the notion of the ‘formal’ as subject.”

In America throughout the 1960s — as the civil rights movement crested, calls for Black Power sounded and the Black Panther Party was birthed — the aesthetics of Black artists became itself a kind of revolutionary proposition. In 1965, after the assassination of Malcolm X but several months before the passage of the Voting Rights Act, landmark legislation that prohibited racial discrimination in the American electoral process, the poet LeRoi Jones (who would later change his name to Amiri Baraka) founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater School in Harlem, effectively inaugurating the Black Arts Movement. The writer Larry Neal, his collaborator, described the movement's goal to create art that “speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America,” one objective of which was nothing less than “a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic.” Figurative painting and sculpture were key components in how this reordering took place, and some of the most enduring visuals from the movement were explicitly realist depictions of Black people, heroes, history and activism. There was the “Wall of Respect” mural, painted by the artist William Walker and others in 1967 on the side of a building in an African-American neighborhood in Chicago, which included stately portraits of figures who fought for equality, like Marcus Garvey, W.E.B. Du Bois, Nat Turner, Aretha Franklin and Muhammad Ali. There was Archibald Motley's scene of a lynching, “The First One Hundred Years,” which he worked on for much of the '60s and completed in 1972. There was Faith Ringgold, who developed a style she

described as “super realism,” and whose work confronted viewers with unflinchingly rendered scenes of racial tension, as in the 1967 painting inspired by uprisings in Newark, N.J., and other cities at the time, “American People Series #20: Die.” There was Elizabeth Catlett — who once said that art “must answer a question, or wake somebody up, or give a shove in the right direction” — whose remarkable sculpture “Black Unity” (1968), a raised fist sculpted out of cedar, evokes the Black Power movement’s enduring symbol.



Norman Lewis’s “Alabama” (1960).

Abstract painting, with its focus on formal subtleties, color and more subliminal messaging, may not have tidily fit into this narrative of freedom and revolution, yet it was a vital component of the era. The origins of Black abstract painting can be traced back to Norman Lewis, who started out as a social realist painter before World War II — 1940’s “The Dispossessed (Family),” in which a recently evicted family, trying to comfort one another while surrounded by the detritus of their middle-class possessions, is among the saddest artworks of the 20th century — before entering increasingly abstract realms in subsequent decades. Disillusioned by the hypocrisy of America fighting against the racist ideologies in Europe while still segregating its own military, and struggling far more than his white peers to find galleries that would display his work, Lewis’s painting became more expressive and free-form, while remaining rooted in an African-American identity. “Jazz Band,” from 1948, is a masterpiece that simultaneously suggests the wild improvisations of bebop and the seemingly random scribblelike shapes that would make Cy Twombly famous a decade or so later. As the civil rights movement

gained power, Lewis created a kind of topical abstraction, as in the 1960 painting “Alabama,” a menagerie of white shapes against a black background, which from a distance resembles the glow of a raging fire, but up close looks like a cluster of white hoods and crosses, alluding to a nighttime gathering of the Ku Klux Klan. It was also Lewis who, in anticipation of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, which would help elevate the civil rights movement in the national consciousness, co-founded the Spiral group, a loose collective of Black artists in New York that considered the question, “Is there a Negro image?” It turns out there was no simple response, which was also the point: Black art, like Black America itself, was not a monolith, and was therefore irreducible. The Spiral artists’ works were neither uniquely figurative nor abstract, and this conclusion — that there was no one way to be a Black artist, nor to express Black art — encouraged other multidisciplinary movements to grapple with the question of how art should express Black identity. A later collective, Smokehouse Associates — founded in 1968 by the artists William T. Williams, Melvin Edwards, Guy Ciarcia and Billy Rose — expanded on Neal’s guidelines for the aspirations of Black America by installing abstract works in public spaces in Harlem. The idea was that this was the best way to transform a community, to make it “visually and aesthetically better and therefore more human.”

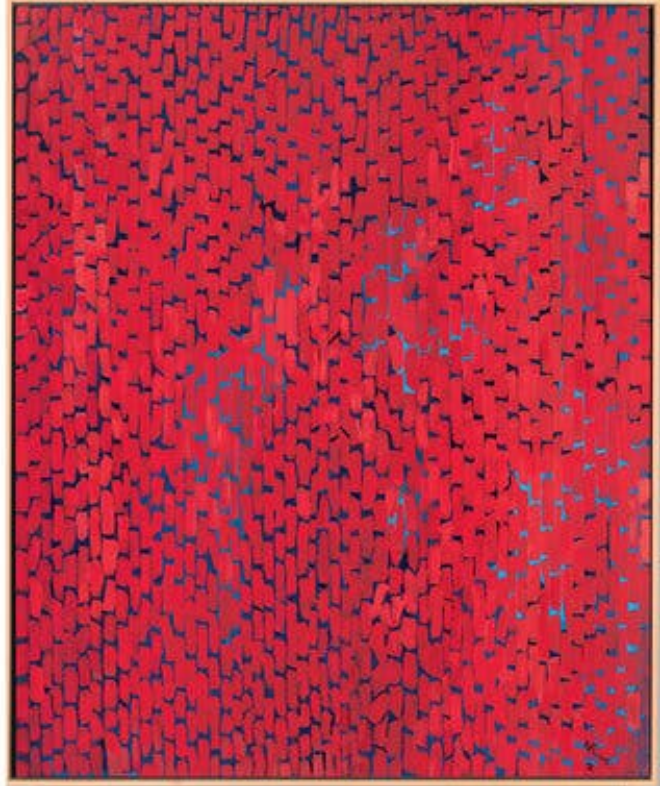


Rashid Johnson, a painter, sculptor, installation artist and filmmaker, in his Long Island, N.Y., studio on Dec. 16, 2020.

THE EXPECTATION THAT Black artists would create representational art that reflects the Black experience continued to resonate throughout the '60s, and is vividly addressed in Whitten's writing. The 1963 killing of four girls in a church bombing in Birmingham, his hometown, touched off a long period of rage, anxiety and existential questioning. For Whitten and other Black artists of his generation, abstraction was something of a lonely course, one that set them apart from the Black Arts Movement. Early in her career, the painter and video artist Howardena Pindell was famously told by the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem to "go downtown and show with the white boys" when she shared with him her abstract work, which also failed to adhere to the feminist narrative of the time. Pindell was certainly not alone in her frustration with having her work perceived solely through her race or gender.

The license to free expression that white artists have been granted by birthright — especially white male artists, so often perceived as the vanguard in visual arts — hasn't been available to Black artists. (Maybe only fools want to be famous, but it's dehumanizing to have your work sidelined and undervalued, as Whitten's was, and is.) Still, generations of Black abstract painters have claimed it: Pindell, with her kaleidoscopic mixed media; Whitten's mosaics of paint and found objects; Sam Gilliam's euphoric spatters of color; Charles Gaines's data-driven renderings of trees. Meanwhile, new works by a new generation have arisen: Shinique Smith's swirly collages; Jennie C. Jones's synesthesia-driven Minimalism; Mark Bradford's abraded urban archaeology; Rashid Johnson's etchings on wood with black wax — all of their art explores what painting can be, and can do, with radical color, texture, scarcity, rhythm, gesture and a refusal to bow to imposed standards. (All these artists are under the age of 60.) Today, Johnson tells me, "There is no battle between abstraction and representation. These are not adversarial positions. It's like suggesting that John Coltrane has less of a voice than Stevie Wonder."

And so, in yet another era in which artists of color are continually called upon to solve, in essence, the problem of their own marginalization, there's a defiance in opting *not* to represent. For the last decade or so, more figurative forms of expression (by artists of color and white artists alike) have dominated the commercial sphere, driven, perhaps, by a desire for art that grants a certain access to its critical intentions, to a shared conversation about Issues of Our Time. The return of portraiture in particular seemed to give recognizable shape to gulfs within the art world itself. The selection of Kehinde Wiley by Barack Obama and Amy Serrano by Michelle Obama to paint their presidential portraits in 2018 was a watershed moment in the history of portraiture, calling attention to the stark lack of faces of color in institutions and galleries alike. What better way to address absence, after all, than with presence?



Left: Howardena Pindell's "Memory Test: Free, White & Plastic (#114)" (1979-80).
Right: Alma Thomas's "Mars Dust" (1972).

That the art market might be eager to satisfy a craving for forms of creative expression that empower or engage with our sense of injustice is understandable; so, too, is the falling down in the critical realm. Writers and scholars may feel more potential solace in speaking about art that's clearly invested in racial uplift than they do in unpacking a kind of existential conundrum that demands a great deal more of its viewer and denies the relief of a comforting directive. Now that the spotlight is moving back to nonrepresentational art forms, with it has come a fuller picture not just of Black art but of art itself, and of the artificiality of art-world taxonomies, of oppositional labels and styles that are, in fact, a great deal more porous than they're made out to be.

THIS INCREASINGLY REFLECTIVE mood has brought a welcome spotlight to past innovators, bringing the 87-year-old Gilliam, the 77-year-old Pindell, Whitten (who was 78 when he died in 2018) and others of their generation fresh acclaim. Beginning in 2017, museums in Baltimore, New Orleans and Chicago showcased an entire lineage with the Joyner/Giuffrida collection of African American abstraction, which includes works by Whitten, Gilliam, Edwards and a number of younger artists. Gaines has a new installation opening at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art this spring, inspired by his research into the Dred Scott decision of 1857, in which the Supreme Court ruled that Black people were not U.S. citizens and therefore could not sue in federal court. In October, Pindell showed (in addition to her first video work in 25 years), five new paintings — some collagelike pieces with text, others expanding on her body of work

involving textured abstractions encrusted with paint and paper chads — at the Shed in New York City. The 74-year-old McArthur Binion signed with his first gallery and had his debut solo museum show only eight years ago, after a nearly half-century career; his hand-drawn grids have become increasingly intimate through the years, more recently appearing layered over personal documents or photographs in a kind of autobiographical abstraction.

Gilliam recently showed three different bodies of new work at New York's Pace Gallery, including an enthralling set of beveled-edge canvases that appear from a distance as largely black or white, but up close contain entire galaxies of colored flecks, their layers of sawdust and paint creating an impression of great depth, as though one could fall into a painting and float away, suspended within its force field. (The paintings pay homage, in their titles, to some of his personal heroes, including Serena Williams and the late civil rights leader Representative John Lewis.) But for anyone who hasn't been in the same room as a Gilliam painting, perhaps the best place to discover his work is at Dia Beacon in upstate New York, known for its collection of Minimalist and Pop Art, and where, in 2019, the artist installed "Double Merge," two grandly scaled canvases he painted in 1968, retwisted and draped from the ceiling to span the entire room, creating a double rainbow, essentially, of melting colors with a double history, a now and then, attached: the tension between the past in which it was made and our own uneasy present. When Gilliam was liberating paintings from the wall, Jimi Hendrix was at his most psychedelic and social revolutions were taking hold around the globe. (Gilliam has spoken of music as a metaphor in his way of approaching "the acrobatics of art.") While viewing these works, one might consider what has and hasn't changed since the two canvases were painted, or the almost unbearably tender display of beauty and mystery in the face of a callously technological age — or (as I did) one might feel time disappear entirely, such is the exhilarating receptivity of the work in a contained space: a phenomenon that surpasses mere comprehension.



McArthur Binion, an artist whose Minimalist and often abstract paintings have garnered fresh attention, in his Chicago studio on Dec. 18, 2020.

Gilliam's art is also a reminder of why the rediscovery narratives that have burdened so many artists — and Black abstract artists in particular — are so problematic: rediscovered by whom, exactly? Framing art history this way only seems to reinforce the same kind of hierarchy that allows certain names to fall into oblivion while continually recycling others. In fact, the first African-American woman to have a solo show at the Whitney was the abstract painter Alma Thomas in 1972. Gilliam, who was affiliated with the Washington Color School, became the first African-American artist to represent the United States at the Venice Biennale the same year. Both are legends — Gilliam's radical innovation, in the late 1960s, of making paintings from draped, unsupported canvases was a breakthrough — and yet they both fell into relative obscurity for decades.

Gilliam's meaning as a painter emerges through color and form. And yet, as Rashid Johnson, who organized a 2013 show of Gilliam's hard-edge paintings, his series of canvases bisected by precise diagonal bands of color, points out, "It's impossible not to look at those paintings and think of the sort of rigid binaries he confronted." Here we are again, in a new era of national self-reflection, prompted in part by a flood of brutalities captured on cellphone cameras — an era parallel in certain unignorable ways to the mid-1960s, when images from Selma, Ala., were being beamed into living rooms, and white Americans saw what Black communities were up against. The promise of progress — and the failure, by many measures, of that promise — surely isn't unrelated to the renewed interest in artists who defined this time and were defined by it, as well.



Mark Bradford's "Q3" (2020).

AS A CRITICAL and existential investigation, then, abstraction is decidedly relevant to questions of identity or consciousness, even when they aren't immediately legible to viewers. Though sometimes, of course, they are: In 1970, Gilliam painted "Red April," staining a monumental canvas with hot pinks and reds in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. two years prior. Whitten's "Black Monolith" paintings, begun in the late '80s and continued up until the year before his death, were made as tributes to Black luminaries, including Chuck Berry, Ralph Ellison and the former Congresswoman Barbara Jordan. But sources of inspiration, in work that's both intuitive and formally attuned, often aren't conscious choices. Pindell has traced her preoccupation with circles as a geometric form to a long-buried childhood memory of being served, during a car trip with her father through Kentucky in the 1950s, a root

beer with a red circle on the bottom of the mug, marking which glasses were used for nonwhites — as though by focusing on the formal properties of the shape, she could neutralize its insult.

Abstraction's resurgence has also brought welcome attention to questions of lineage, and to earlier transitional figures like the great Beauford Delaney, who was the focus, along with his longtime friend the writer James Baldwin, of a superb show at the Knoxville Museum of Art in 2020. Baldwin famously credited the painter with teaching him how to “see” by pointing out street puddles on their many walks together around New York, pools of water slicked with rainbows of oil, the merging of surfaces and depths and distorted reflections. The artist's extraordinary works from the late 1950s and early 1960s, completed in Clamart, the Paris suburb where his painting turned more definitively to abstraction, captures sunlight at different times of day, reflected through windows, or across turbulent ripples of water — radiant, ominous paintings that, like the street puddles, contain both inward depths and reflections outward. You feel you're looking through Delaney's eyes, but also into his brain. His biographer David Leeming has written of Delaney's auditory hallucinations, voices calling him derogatory terms for his race and gayness. In 1961, he attempted suicide. The fights against being pigeonholed, against being surface-levelled, aren't separate from the battles on the canvas.



Rashid Johnson's “Cosmic Slop ‘Black Orpheus’” (2011).

So many things are abstractions until they become terribly concrete in a person's lived reality, in an awareness of being seen and read a certain way. As Zora Neale Hurston famously wrote in a 1928 essay, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." Now, it's fallen to younger artists to defy, or ignore, such expectations. This new generation includes Bradford, with his recent "Quarantine Paintings" — agitated-looking layers of sanded paint and paper, a topographical map of isolation — as well as the Minimalist painter Jennie C. Jones and her acoustic panels covered in vibrant chromatic harmonies. She showed them last year at the Arts Club of Chicago, alongside a display case of piano keys: in other words, a witty collection of surfaces that resist being taken at face value, that demand to be taken on their own terms. "Beneath every surface lies an identity," Whitten wrote in 1964, in a passage that could have just as easily been written today. "The amount of depth beneath this surface determines the value of its being. What is the depth of America in the year 1964? What is the depth of its people? ... I look at my hand and see my face. I will not rest until every American can do the same."