

Six Artists Reflect on the Legacy of the Harlem Renaissance

A century later, the first African American modernist movement continues to inspire and challenge.

By Aruna D'Souza - Feb. 18, 2024

Derek Fordjour

Derek Fordjour traces his interest in Harlem Renaissance art to his childhood in Tennessee, where he saw Aaron Douglas's murals at Fisk University, and to his art history classes at Morehouse. "I was completely riveted by the contributions that the Harlem Renaissance artists had made to art history," he said in a recent conversation. "It gave me this alternate canon that really made it clear that I was working out of a rich legacy."

For Fordjour, whose painting surfaces often include acrylic, charcoal, pastel, foil, newspapers and even glitter, the lessons of Harlem Renaissance artists are felt in many ways. "I don't think it's possible to have a conversation about figuration without going back to this very fecund moment of Black artistic development."

He often quotes directly from predecessors. "You can almost graph my crowd scene compositions onto an Archibald Motley Jr., jazz scene. You can see the bones of Richmond Barthé in my sculptures," he said. "They were really sidelined from the main stage of art history back then and for decades after, so I see it as an obligation to enlighten my audience in the way that I was enlightened in those college classrooms."

Xaviera Simmons

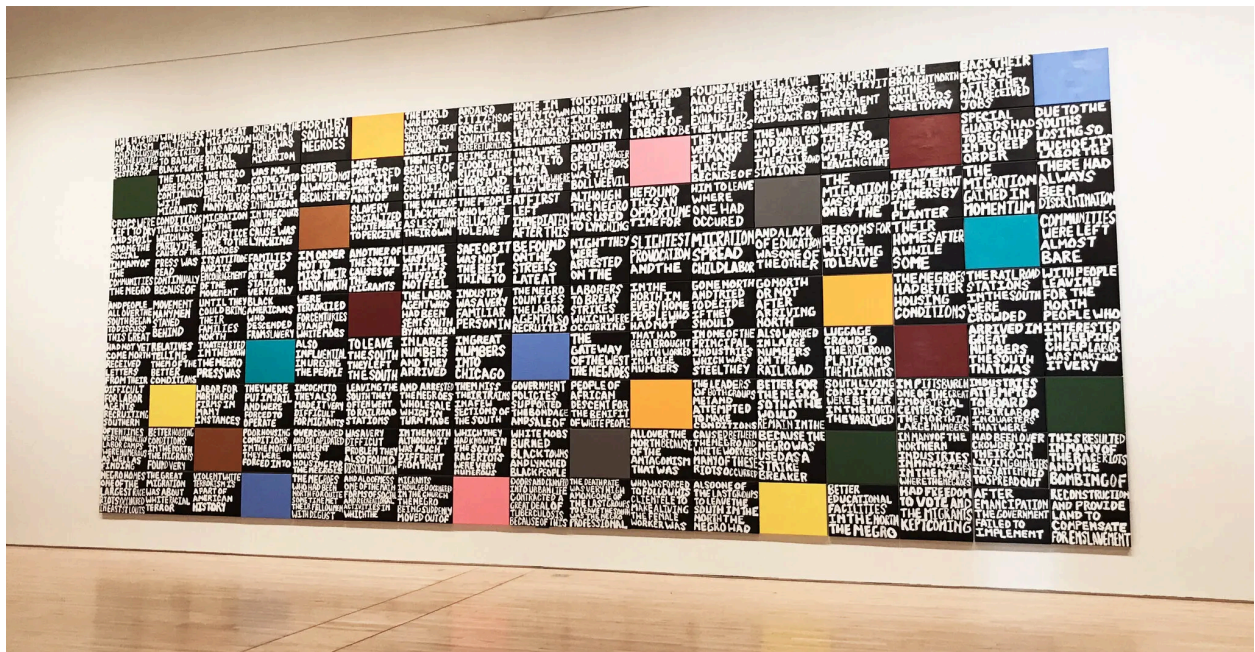
"The Harlem Renaissance has been a part of my lexicon since birth," the interdisciplinary artist Xaviera Simmons said in a recent conversation. But while its celebrated figures, such as Jacob Lawrence, have made their way into her work, she is acutely aware of those who were erased from the history of the movement, especially queer femmes. "There was a certain level of misogyny and oppression against women, and queer women in particular, that I find problematic as I delve deeper," she said.

Simmons's engagement with Jacob Lawrence's "Migration Series" (1940-41) pays homage to and challenges received histories. Lawrence's series is composed of 60 paintings depicting the mass movement of African Americans from southern states to industrial cities up north starting at the turn of the 20th century, each with an accompanying label explaining the scene. "I didn't realize

that his wife co-wrote the labels,” Simmons said, referring to the artist Gwendolyn Knight (1913-2005), who married Lawrence in 1934.

In “They’re All Afraid, All of Them, That’s It! They’re All Southern! The Whole United States Is Southern!” (2019), Simmons’s mural-sized array of canvases covered with hand-drawn text or monochromatic expanses of paint, she highlights Knight’s contribution to Lawrence’s masterpiece. Simmons retains Lawrence’s distinctive palette of blue-green, orange, yellow and gray-brown, interspersing it with handwritten passages from the captions they collaborated on.

The visuals are certainly important, she explained, “but the text, which you don’t really pay much attention to, is just as critical.”



Xavier Simmons, “They’re All Afraid, All of Them, That’s It! They’re All Southern! The Whole United States Is Southern!” from 2019. For this painting, the artist pulled out excerpts from wall labels that Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight wrote for “Migration Series.” Credit... via Xavier Simmons Studio, David Castillo Gallery and SFMOMA

Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall

In Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall’s collaborative project at the Sugar Hill Children’s Museum of Art & Storytelling, “Along 155th Street, Where the Windows Face East,” on view until Feb. 19, the artists delve into the lesser-known but entwined history of Black Americans and South Asian Americans, especially Bengalis, living in Sugar Hill and other Harlem neighborhoods. “It kind of us set us free,” said Dasgupta.

In the 1910s and 1920s, Bengali immigrants landed in Harlem, often marrying Black Americans or passing as Black to evade restrictions on immigration from Asia. Drawing upon the research of the historian Vivek Bald, the artists created a “parafictional” character for their exhibition

named Bahauddin “Bobby” Alam, a sailor turned jazz musician. They turned the east-facing windows of the museum into Alam’s imagined apartment, and filled each set piece with objects and traces that allude to his complicated life’s journey.

The project hits close to home for the pair in more ways than one — Dasgupta is Bengali American and Marshall is Black. A married couple and the parents of a toddler, they modeled Alam’s home after their own apartment, which is just down the street from the museum. “We live in a building that has had an outsize role in the Harlem Renaissance. Artists like Aaron Douglas lived here,” Marshall said in an interview.

In her archival research, Dasgupta came across a single sentence that sparked the project: “I had been looking into Bardu Ali, who was a jazz musician,” she said. He was also Indian, and had been informally credited with having discovered Ella Fitzgerald, she said. “We began to think about how we could go about filling in the gaps of these histories. Creating the character of Bobby then liberated us from dealing with the weight of real life.”

It also liberated them in other ways. “When the world is becoming increasingly nationalistic and insular, it’s a reminder that identity is fluid, and a celebration of love and camaraderie between two groups of minorities that are too often pitted against one another,” Dasgupta said.

Nina Chanel Abney

Nina Chanel Abney’s work channels a wide range of influences — cartoons and comic books, emojis, Henri Matisse, Stuart Davis, and popular culture. Recently she’s moved toward a collage aesthetic, using geometric abstraction and overlapping shapes that come together to depict figures and cityscapes.

More and more, she said, that mix has been influenced by Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. (Bearden, born in 1911, was too young to be considered part of the Harlem Renaissance but his work was deeply indebted to the movement.) “The compositions, the colors, the themes — I think there’s a direct pipeline to me,” she said in a phone call.

Her engagement with Bearden’s work in particular deepened when in 2012 she took part in the Studio Museum of Harlem’s “The Bearden Project,” in which 100 artists made work honoring the centennial of his birth.

A 2022 collage on panel, “Light-Footed,” depicts a dance party of the period, bringing to mind the expressionistic paintings of William H. Johnson. With other works, Abney channels such art historical borrowings through an explicitly queer lens, “which maybe didn’t get so much visual representation back in the ’20s and ’30s,” she said.

Dawoud Bey

When he was 16 years old, in 1969, Dawoud Bey went to the Metropolitan Museum to check out the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition's protests of "Harlem on My Mind" for failing to include a single Black painter or sculptor.

"The demonstrators were fortuitously not there on the day I showed up," he said via email, "so it left me with little choice but to go in and see the exhibition." He had just gotten his first camera but didn't yet know what to focus on. "That exhibition helped me find my subject, reminding me that my own narrative began in Harlem in the 1940s when my mother and father met there."

It did include documentary photography by James Van Der Zee, whose work had a lasting impact: "His photographs depicting Black formal elegance and self-possession became the basis of what became my first project and exhibition, 'Harlem, USA,' beginning in the mid-1970s," he wrote. Bey's portraits of the neighborhood and its residents are startlingly intimate, though he always maintained a respectful distance from his subjects. It was a form of street photography designed to allow both image-maker and subjects to define African Americans against centuries of stereotyping.

Bey believes it's important to continue the "sometimes-heated conversations that Black artists, writers and intellectuals" were having a century ago. "Langston Hughes's statement serves, I think, as a rallying cry and affirmation for Black artists today as it was when he wrote it in 1926: 'We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame.'"