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We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85

BROOKLYN MUSEUM THROUGH SEPTEMBER 17

In this superlative survey, familiar names mingle with those that deserve much more recognition. The several dozen black women artists whose work is featured did not conform to one style, but they did share urgent concerns, often addressing issues of bias and exclusion in their art—and in their art-world organizing. Senga Nengudi used her remarkable, corporeal abstract sculptures, made from stuffed panty hose, as elements of her performance art, captured in haunting photographs, which are contextualized by correspondence detailing her affiliation with Just Above Midtown Gallery (JAM), a crucial New York institution of the black avant-garde, instrumental to the careers of a number of the artists here. Lorraine O’Grady is one of them: her sardonic “Mlle Bourgeoise Noire Costume,” a pageant gown made of countless white gloves, which she wore to exhibition openings in her iconic guerrilla performances of 1980–83, is wonderful to encounter. Painting is well represented by dense, textured color-field marvels by Howardena Pindell, from the seventies, which are placed in quiet dialogue with Virginia Jaramillo’s gorgeously bright, hard-edge abstractions, from the same decade. A strikingly slapdash self-portrait by Emma Amos, from 1966, centers the artist’s intense, direct gaze. Not surprisingly, there is a great deal of powerful photography on view, from Coreen Smith’s spontaneous portraits of Harlemites in the seventies to Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems’s poignant pairings of image and text, from the eighties. But it’s the ephemera here—the raw documentation and spirited newsletters—that become the exhibition’s fascinating glue, showing these women not as anomalous achievers but as part of a formidable movement.