

HYPERALLERGIC

The Black American Women Who Made Their Own Art World

We Wanted a Revolution at the Brooklyn Museum tracks the shape-shifting radicalism of black women artists, authors, filmmakers, dancers, gallerists, and public figures between 1965 and 1985.

by Jessica Bell Brown August 7, 2017



Howardena Pindell, *Carnival at Ostende*, 1977, mixed media on canvas, 93 1/2 x 117 1/4 inches

On the heels of the Civil Rights movement, in a 1971 *New York Times* article, Toni Morrison made a terse assessment of the downstream effects of second-wave feminism, as observed by black women:

What do black women feel about Women’s Lib? Distrust. It is white, therefore suspect. In spite of the fact that liberating movements in the black world have been catalysts for white feminism, too many movements and organizations have made deliberate overtures to enroll blacks and have ended up by rolling them. They don’t want to be used again to help somebody gain power — a power that is carefully kept out of their hands. They look at white women and see them as the enemy — for they know that racism is not confined to white men, and that there are more white women than men in this country, and that 53 percent of the population sustained an eloquent silence during times of greatest stress.

Morrison’s indictment of the exclusionary politics of white feminists seems eerily prescient for today’s times, especially in the immediate aftermath of Trump’s election. Black women, as the novelist recounts, “had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may very well have invented herself.” What Morrison gets at here is that black women have held and will continue to hold space for each other as a mode of survival. What comes to light in *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–85* at the Brooklyn Museum, perhaps the most important exhibition New York has seen in recent years, is that in spite of an art world that tried to keep them on the margins, black women artists fostered individual and collective modes of expression through self-determination and networks of care.

This sterling exhibition, historicizing two decades of black women artists’ cultural production, begins in the three galleries surrounding Judy Chicago’s magnum opus of feminist art, “The Dinner Party” (1974–79). Each section is so dense that it could be its own exhibition. Viewers begin in the 1960s, encountering the Spiral artist collective and the wider Black Arts Movement that followed. In ensuing galleries, co-curators Rujeko Hockley and Catherine Morris present a range of artist collectives and alternative spaces formed in New York at the height of Women’s Liberation in the ’70s. The final galleries chronicle postmodern photography, performance, and multimedia art created in the wake of multiculturalism in the ’80s. Quite poetically, one can’t get to Chicago’s “The Dinner Party,” a permanent fixture of these galleries, without seeing some part of *We Wanted a Revolution*.

Greeting visitors upon entry to the show is Faith Ringgold’s mural for a Rikers Island women’s prison, “For The Woman’s House” (1971), and Maren Hassinger’s sprawling constellation of wire rope sculptures, “Leaning” (1980). Together, these works foreshadow the show’s inter-subjective lens on black women’s identities, their friendships, and their political realities. “Leaning” is about a kind of unified presence, across space and time, quietly illuminating the power of collectivity. More than tempered anger at a racially exclusionary art world, a theme of bold refusal is present in the 242 artworks and pieces of archival ephemera on display.

Keen visitors will quickly discover points of connection between the artists on view and an overall ethos of care permeating each gallery, which is supported with vitrines of rich historical documents. For example, not only is Lorraine O’Grady a conceptual artist, but *We Wanted a Revolution* reveals that she was also a publicist for other artists, as shown in a press release announcing Senga Nengudi’s performance of “Air Propo” (1981) at Linda Goode Bryant’s black avant-garde gallery Just Above Midtown. Documentary photographs of Nengudi and Hassinger in the Los Angeles-based Studio Z collective’s performance “Freeway Fets” (1978) hang in the same space. The curators arrange artworks and archival objects to sharply narrate the ways black women artists persevered by way of their practices, despite how inhospitable the art world could be.

Through reams of historical documents and papers, the curators unflinchingly recount instances of racism and exclusion, from the feminist cooperative AIR Gallery to Donald Newman’s controversial 1979 *Nigger Drawings* show at Artists Space and even the Brooklyn Museum itself. During a town hall event at the institution in 1971, its director at the time, Duncan Cameron, appeared open to criticism yet ostensibly defended the Museum’s exclusionary practices regarding the women and minority artists who were vying for representation; there was widespread outcry. Ringgold, leading members of the Women Students and Artists for Black Liberation, initiated the meeting. Amid budgetary and administrative struggles, Cameron resigned in 1973. Forty-four years later, we finally have a show centering the recent history of black women artists — and not one relegated to the Brooklyn Museum’s long-shuttered community gallery.

The exhibition’s archival vitrines present blunt reminders of painful and contested histories, but they also exhume buried stories waiting to be told. Correspondence between Howardena Pindell and Goode Bryant reveals an intimate tenderness and warmth. In a letter to her gallerist sent from Rio de Janeiro, Pindell wrote: “I’m spoiling myself rotten — doing nothing much but going to the beach and walking around the most beautiful people ... the climate is fantastic — even bought myself a string bikini and almost let it all hang out.” These words were written by the same hands that sewed and stitched together the intricate, unstretched canvas of “Carnival at Ostende” (1971), which hangs on an adjacent wall. To think of these letters in relation to Pindell’s video piece “Free White and 21” (1980), also on view, humanizes the artist. In “Free White and 21,” Pindell interrogates, through witnessing and autobiography, the psychic violence of racism and the slow degradation of one’s spirit in the face of constant micro-aggressions; this juxtaposition drives the point home that the political is also deeply embedded in the personal, and that taking a moment of reprieve in Rio could be just as radical as publicly calling out the art world’s complicity in perpetuating racism and inequality.

The subtitle of *We Wanted a Revolution* is “Black Radical Women, 1965–85,” evoking the question of what constitutes radicalism. Is it an artist’s engagement with protest, activism, and community organizing? Is it the subject matter the artist takes up? Or is radicalism persistence in the face of a constant threat of erasure and silencing? One has to approach these questions with a healthy sense of skepticism here, as art institutions attempt to become more inclusive in their curating, staffing and collecting practices. As a fellow culture worker, I’m saddened at the ways in which the race, gender, sexuality and other identity categories of artists often became politicized with a sweeping lack of criticality inside the space of the museum. But there are no clear-cut or neatly defined answers in *We Wanted a Revolution*.

Visitors will see that artists’ and artist collectives’ political and philosophical concerns shifted across generations, a reflection of intersectional identities and subject positions. The Spiral artist collective, founded in the midst of the social and political upheavals of the 1960s, is evoked in an installation that features a self-portrait by Emma Amos. Spiral, first established by Romare Bearden in Harlem in 1963, had loose aesthetic alignments. The group had famously divergent opinions about what defined black art, and was not inclusive of women — Amos was the lone female member. Around the corner from this section, we see artworks made by members of the Where We At collective, founded by Dinga McCannon, Ringgold, and Kay Brown in McCannon’s Brooklyn apartment in 1971. Their work addresses the perennial issue of black women’s double exclusion from male-dominated black art collectives like Spiral and AfriCoBRA as well as from the white mainstream art world. For Where We At, the solution was for the artists to establish support systems for each other and to eliminate the barriers keeping their art and ideas from entering the world. Where We At’s bylaws outline the group’s aspiration to eventually open an arts academy exclusively for black women.

Meanwhile, activist Barbara Smith’s Boston-based queer black feminist group, the Combahee River Collective, was emphatically intersectional from its founding in 1974. “Although we are feminists and Lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand,” the collective proclaimed in its manifesto. “We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.” Ana Mendieta, desiring to make space for artists of color to articulate the critical terms and contexts for their works, took to curatorial practice, including Pindell, Nengudi, and other artists like Beverly Buchanan and Janet Henry in her groundbreaking 1980 exhibition at AIR Gallery, *Dialectics of Isolation*, part of which is restaged here.

A shared desire for change doesn’t always signal shared political sentiments and positions within and across generations of artists. For Ringgold and her daughter, the writer Michele Wallace, the art of protest was a family affair; they practiced it together at the Whitney Museum, as we see in photographs of the two picketing with the Art Workers’ Coalition in 1971. When taken together, the assemblage works of Betye Saar and her daughter Alison Saar provide a rich intergenerational dialogue about the departures and liberties younger artists took with their artworks as a result of earlier generations’ protests. One sees such a transition of focus from racism to sexism in the black liberatory aesthetics of Betye Saar’s “Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail” (1973) and her daughter’s concerns with the politicization of black women’s bodies in “Sapphire” (1985). “In some ways, I myself felt that maybe I didn’t need to fight that same fight,” Alison Saar said in a recent symposium with Hockley at the Brooklyn Museum, “because I didn’t have hand grenades and hip-sliding mummies with Uzis and stuff like that I thought that maybe my work was less political ... just in terms of telling our own personal stories it becomes political.”

A quiet but equally powerful takeaway from this show is that many of the women represented worked fiercely to champion and safeguard the field of black art history through publishing and establishing their own collections and foundations. The artist and art historian Samella Lewis and the artist and filmmaker Camille Billops both collected and documented African American art and archives while pursuing their own practices. I was touched to know that Los Angeles-based black collector and philanthropist Eileen Norton had loaned to the exhibition O’Grady’s iconic bullwhip and the dress she made of 180 white gloves for her “Mille Bourgeoise Noire” (1980) performance. The costume accompanies O’Grady’s documentary photographs taken at the New Museum and Just Above Midtown. Kellie Jones, the esteemed art historian and curator of *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980* (an important precursor to *We Wanted a Revolution*, appears in some of Lorna Simpson’s earliest portraits of the 1980s. These moments reaffirm Hockley and Morris’s commitment to telling the narrative of black women’s advocacy, patronage, collection, and promotion of each other’s work.

Concerns about the art historical canon aside, the artworks on view here are both stunning and revelatory. Blondell Cummings’s dance performance “Chicken Soup” (1981), shown here as a video projection, is hauntingly good. In it, Cummings (who died in 2015) appears alone on a stage sparsely equipped with a green scarf, a cast iron skillet, a scrub brush, and chair, and proceeds to transform the space into a volatile environment of domesticity and labor. At moments, Cummings combines virtuosic leaps and dancerly lunges with writhing convulsions and repetitive movements as if cleaning a floor or tending to a hot meal on a stove. There is a riveting dissolution of the dance’s legibility as dance with each intensifying gesture. Ming Smith and Coreen Simpson’s expansive photographs of Harlemites deserve their own surveys. Simpson, for instance, portrays queer club-goers and church ladies alike through a luscious, empathetic lens.

Part of what makes *We Wanted a Revolution* so impactful is its consideration of the entire scope of black women’s cultural and political work in its two-decade span. In addition to artists, gallerists, curators, art historians, and dancers, it highlights the work of literary figures like Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, and Alice Walker, *Ms. Magazine* co-founder Dorothy Pittman Hughes, congresswoman and the DNC’s first black woman candidate Shirley Chisholm, filmmaker Julie Dash, and playwright Lisa Jones. When taken together, these women surpassed any specific art historical milieu, but were at the forefront of a persistent, forceful, and diasporally-minded cultural paradigm shift led by and for black women.

We Wanted a Revolution is a part of “A Year of Yes,” a year-long examination of feminism and feminist art marking the 10th anniversary of the Brooklyn Museum’s Sackler Center. The success of Hockley and Morris’s show is a testament to the power of examining narratives with cultural specificity and inclusivity, and what Morrison pointed to as black women’s perpetual self-inventing and self-definition. These works and their histories are worthy of prime real estate in major museums and art institutions. How moving it was for me to see black women, young and old, photographing themselves in front of the exhibition’s opening text and seeing themselves in relation to the art on view. If you build it, they say, the people will come — and perhaps then the revolution finally will, too.