Art &ANTIQUES

Al Loving: Flight to Freedom

BY CHRIS SHIELDS OCTOBER 2018

From hard edge to soft fabric, Al Loving's abstract creations explore the farther reaches of perception and emotion.

Untitled, 1975, paper collage, 27 x 32 inches

Throughout his career, Al Loving maintained that he was an Abstract Expressionist. Whether working with paint, fabric, paper collage, or mixed media, he saw his work as an ever-evolving project creating new dimensions and possibilities for personal expression. At first glance, Loving's hard-edged abstract paintings of interlocking cubes from the 1960s might appear as anything but personal. The cube, however, held special significance for the artist, and finding new iterations of the form and, through it, new possibilities for abstraction became his chosen path for personal and artistic growth and exploration—not unlike Kazimir Malevich with his square-based Suprematism.

Loving explained, "I didn't know what to paint. At the end of my graduate school year I went back and started painting a box, or square canvas, maybe three feet by three feet. I would just draw a square in the middle of that with the paint brush. I would proceed to paint the square, the inside of the square and the outside; it was an Albers square. I decided I would paint the square until I could no longer paint squares." Like Giorgio Morandi's bottles, with each new creation the cube became imbued with Loving's essence, the work a record of his technical and intellectual reckoning with the form and thus with himself as an artist. The artist saw no contradiction between abstraction and autobiography.

Loving's artistic trajectory began in a seemingly more representational vein, as he painted scenes from his own life and experience. He struggled to find his mode of expression, vacillating between abstraction and representation. An early work pictured his wife "conking" her hair. Conking was a particularly significant hair trend among African Americans from the 1920s through the 1960s. The conk hairstyle (derived from congolene, a hair-straightening gel made from lye) involved chemically

straightening naturally kinky hair. Black musicians such as Louis Jordan and Little Richard were known for their shining conked pompadours. The process is sometimes described as a painful one, and this attempt to achieve straight, Caucasian-like hair, seems to reflect the strain and discomfort of cultural adaptation endured by many African Americans. In the late ’60s, the conk would be rejected and pointed to as an oppressive tool of internalized cultural domination, and black Americans would move toward allowing their hair to grow naturally, as a political, stylistic, and cultural expression.

Like hair, art was grappling with the idea of what black expression was. Articles from the ’60s and ’70s in art publications attempted to define “black art,” and Loving’s staunchly abstract work resisted overly simple definition. Born in Detroit in 1935, Loving studied painting at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and became associated with the Once Group organization, alongside icons like Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol. In 1968, Loving relocated to New York City, and his association with the Once Group and its iconic alumni allowed him entry into the New York art world. In 1969, he famously became the first African American to have a one-person show at the Whitney Museum of American Art, “Alvin Loving: Paintings.” Loving remembers, “I said to Dick Van Buren, my downstairs neighbor, ‘Dick, how come the Whitney Museum wants to give me a one-person show when I’ve only been here 10 months?’ He said, ‘Don’t ask questions. Do the show.’” The exhibition featured only six works—four large assemblages of shaped canvases, and two cube-shaped canvases, including *Three Solid Questions*. The painting embodies the spirit of Loving’s endeavor, seeming to unfold before the viewer’s eyes with a slow and pensive deliberateness, at one moment seemingly simple and at the next glance a complex hall of mirrors reflecting alternate ways of seeing the cube. Color, also an important element for Loving, is employed both for illusionist effects and expressive beauty—warm gold, cool blue gray, and hard green lines. The work is a collection of visual ideas; it thinks out loud.

This whirlwind of success could threaten to overshadow the work at its center. Loving’s paintings, however, were technically brilliant and compositionally impeccable. He was an unapologetic abstractionist, carrying on a tradition that followed from his teacher Al Mullen and Mullen’s mentor, the great theorist of abstraction, Hans Hofmann. Loving saw Hofmann as a towering figure: “I felt [Hofmann] was the artist who had to be transcended in order to make a contribution to the history of art,” he said. Loving was also an admirer of M.C. Escher’s visual puzzles, and his own work dealt in similar spatial illusions, emptied of Escher’s representational content and set free to function as pure visual games. When viewing Loving’s two-dimensional cubes, visual pleasure is paramount. His paintings are breathtakingly elegant and yet mind-bendingly complex experiences that bring together the eye and the intellect.

Throughout his career, Loving’s work was exhibited widely in the United States and collected by prestigious institutions including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and The National Gallery of Art. The artist was the recipient of his share of solo shows at galleries such as June Kelly and at institutions such as The Studio Museum in Harlem, but none was to rival his groundbreaking Whitney solo show in prestige and visibility.

By the time that show was mounted, however, Loving had already begun to “hate” hard-edged abstraction. The interlocking two-dimensional planes that had filled his canvases would soon emerge into three-dimensionality, but in a new, softened state. In the 1970s, the artist began to construct works using pieces of fabric, at first painted and later dyed. The initial spark of inspiration came after Loving’s daughter spilled paint on an unstretched canvas. Seeing the potential of this moment, he tore countless canvases into shreds and began recombining them, not unlike the work of the Italian-American artist Salvatore Scarpitta, who was also using canvases liberated from their wooden frames.

The abstract hanging sculptures that resulted were inspired in part by Loving’s encounter with quilts at the Whitney’s exhibition “Abstract Design in American Quilts” and by fabric works by contemporaries such as Alan Shields, Sam Gilliam, and Richard Moch. In these sculptural works of material abstraction (which the artist still considered Abstract Expressionist), Loving would employ his preternatural knack for composition to organize long strips of fabric into collections of layered planes. Loving was engaging with form in a new way, with works inhabiting a strange space between two-dimensional abstraction and three-dimensional sculpture. These new works appeared to not only bring Loving’s earlier creations into three-dimensions but to deconstruct them, as well, adding just a hint of visual chaos. The precise lines that created the artist’s canvas cubes were now exploded and reassembled, stacked upon each other like so much lumber awaiting its mission.

Loving’s fabric works (and his paper collage works to come) bring to mind John Coltrane’s “sheets of sound” (a term coined by jazz critic Ira Gitler to describe the saxophonist’s unique improvisational style). Coltrane’s technique of rapidly moving from

high to low notes at intervals sometimes outpacing even 16th notes, created new dimensions of sonic texture. These innovations appear to be given physical form in the long bars of colored fabric which Loving composed with a similar combination of daring and precision. Coltrane and Loving were simultaneously working from tradition while deconstructing it, one musically, one pictorially. Both artists however, saw the heart of their work as expression, or as Coltrane would put it, "feeling." In Loving's fabric sculptures, feeling was more evident than previously, the materials allowing for a sensual warmth that his radically geometric canvases seemed to lack.

The approachability and warmth of Loving's fabric works would continue through his next formal evolution. The artist began to produce large-scale paper collages, which would herald a new freedom and spontaneity. Composed of torn cardboard assembled and glued into intensely complex, large compositions, these works represent a meeting place between his soft, hanging sculptures and his harder-edged earlier paintings. Some of the works of this period measure as much as nine feet across and function, similarly to his hanging fabric works, as both sculptural relief and painting. Gravity, however, has been taken out of the equation, and the artist's cardboard shreds are allowed to find a variety of directions besides straight down. Never before had Loving had so much access to compositional immediacy. There had always been a barrier before, whether it was the brush or the sewing machine. With these new works, composition seemed as simple as tearing and gluing, the result being a direct line to Loving's compositional acuity. Here the textural and visual density of collage was combined with an experienced artist's precision and instinct unfiltered, and the overall effect was quite personal. In his 1974 New York Times appraisal of Loving's new work, Peter Schjeldahl wrote, "Indeed, he has titled this packed and sprightly new work with the names of friends: "Paul", "Roger", etc. And one might say that it is on a kind of first-name basis with the viewer. There is a colloquial mood to its use of an abstract visual idiom—not descending to slang, but eschewing formal precisions in favor of the mixed, flowing tones and stresses of conversation."

Loving would continue his collages, and as spiral forms found their way into his compositions, some speculated on a connection to African artistic inheritance. On the occasion of the 2004 solo exhibition "Lighter than Air" at Chicago's G.R N'Namadi Gallery, critic Bridget Goodbody would go as far as to use the term "funkadelic" in describing Loving's work. It would seem that as Loving grew as an artist and a man, black cultural heritage and experience would come to bear more and more on his work in obvious ways. He would explore more organic forms with connections to the natural world, and eventually even return to the cube, which had defined his early artistic identity. Looking back over Loving's career, one gets the sense of growing confidence and comfort with himself and his work, the early struggles with the square giving way to a total mastery of the expressive potential of abstraction.

The search for "blackness" in Al Loving's art seems to be the bogeyman haunting much of the critical writing about his work. It seems akin to the hunt for President Obama's birth certificate—a pursuit that says more about the art establishment than the artist. Nevertheless, one theme recurs through the various forms of Loving creations: There is the need to break free of the bonds of two-dimensionality, whether through illusionistic spatial effects in painting, sculptural wall hangings, or paper collage and to push the expressive capability of abstraction as far as possible. What unifies Al Loving's career is a pursuit of something the tightly-framed, privileged view of white America can scarcely appreciate or conceive of: freedom.