

VISUAL ART

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'Radical Presence' radiates spirit of contemporary black performance art



MAX FIELDS/COURTESY

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"Radical Presence," an exhibit displaying the works of contemporary black performance artists from the United States and the Caribbean, opened at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts on Saturday. The opening ceremony marked the YBCA as the first and only West Coast venue to house the collection. The exhibit features about three-dozen artists and more than 100 works that fall into a spectrum of live performances, recorded works and visual pieces. Curated by Valerie Cassel Oliver, the exhibit explores the endurance, humanity and agency of black bodies through participatory and peculiar forms.

Spanning three generations of artistic input, "Radical Presence" showcases the largely overlooked canon of black performance, which engages with music, theater, dance and popular culture. Honoring the tradition of performative art, the pieces in "Radical Presence" blur the boundaries between spectator and participant.

Satch Hoyt's "Say It Loud," for example, comes forth as one of the works that deliberately engages the viewer. In the piece, a stack of 500 books on African American politics and culture encircle a

step ladder attached to a microphone. In the background, classic funk singer James Brown's "Say It Loud! I'm Black and Proud!" plays softly. Hoyt deliberately omits the word "black," alluding to the marginalization of black voices. Next to the work hangs a sign that invites viewers to step onto the stepladder and speak into the microphone. By urging the viewer's engagement, Hoyt's piece celebrates voice as the mechanism for agency and celebrates knowledge, quite literally, as the foundation of power.



Student art spotlighted in Honor's Studio Exhibition

Opening performances also invited viewer participation. In Benjamin Patterson's light-hearted "Pond," volunteer audience members created an artistic cacophony of sounds by vocalizing phrases as frogs landed in different quadrants of a grid.

Many of the pieces are provocative — intentionally grotesque and disturbing. They raise eyebrows and evoke cringes, eliciting responses ranging from excitement to repulsion. Through bizarre forms, these works provoke conversations about difficult topics both unique to blackness and universal in scope.

Tameka Norris' "Untitled" perhaps takes the spot as the most shocking piece in the exhibit. During a performance scheduled for opening day, Norris created the piece by cutting her tongue and pressing her saliva and blood onto her canvas — two blank walls. Appearing like faint red EKG lines on a white monitor, her work critically challenges the construction of normalcy, breaking down convention to prove a point.

She places the black female body in an institutional setting and depicts the pain that it endures. Other works similarly highlight important political issues amid curious forms, such as William Pope.L's "Eating the Wall Street Journal" and Jacolby Satterwhite's psychedelic "Reifying Desire" animations.

Aside from its peculiarities, the exhibit also emerges as quite haunting, showcasing relics from the past, such as recorded video clips and performance costumes. Near the entrance of the collection, photographs of Lorraine O'Grady's performance art piece "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire" (1980-83) hover next to two encased items: a pair of gloves and a tiara. In her performance, O'Grady undertakes a satirical role, strutting through various pristine art sites in New York. Her performances serve to critique the racial divides of the '80s and the racial and economic blind spots of the second-wave feminist movement. O'Grady's legacy reminds us to remain critical of not only institutional spaces, but also social movements themselves.

Ultimately, "Radical Presence" asks two important questions. First, how is black performance art historically situated? Second, how do today's artists grapple with the historical context of black performance art without limiting their work? With the deliberation of any canon, there is a real danger to marking what can and can't belong. While archiving a canon, "Radical Presence" also challenges a homogenizing definition of black performance art, including individual artists themselves.

In all, the collection of works from black artists both young and experienced is essential without essentializing. It embraces agency rather than victimization. Bold and unapologetic, the exhibition, indeed, strikes one as a radical presence.

"Radical Presence" is on view at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts until Oct. 11.

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