

HYPERALLERGIC

ARTICLES

How Black Modern Artists Defied a Singular Narrative in 1971

1971: A Year in the Life of Color studies two exhibitions essential to the ongoing relationship between black American artists and modernism.

Jessica Bell Brown | January 18, 2017



108" x 84"

Peter Bradley, "Hemming" (1971), acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84 in. (image courtesy the artist)

“There is a lot of history that this history sits on,” [Melvin Edwards](#) chimed in from the audience of [Darby English’s book talk at the Whitney Museum of American Art](#). The history Edwards was speaking of was *The Deluxe Show*, a little-known exhibition that appeared in August of 1971 at the dilapidated DeLuxe Theater in the Fifth Ward of Houston, Texas. Edwards is a sculptor and master metalworker who also grew up in Fifth Ward, one of the first black communities in the city where this extraordinary exhibition occurred. English is an art historian, and his new book, [1971: A Year in the Life of Color](#), is the first to discuss *Deluxe* in depth.

1971

A Year in the Life of Color



Darby English

With the support of powerful art collectors Dominique and John de Menil, artist Peter Bradley wrestled his artist buddies in from New York and they descended upon the poor black neighborhood to bring art to the people. This show featured rising stars and the biggest names in contemporary art such as Kenneth Noland, Sam Gilliam, Richard Hunt, Jules Olitski, and Larry Poons. Even Clement Greenberg, champion of Color Field painting and post-painterly abstractionists, with cowboy hat in tow, made an appearance during the installation of *Deluxe*. It is credited as the first integrated art show of black and white artists in the US.

The art world has changed much since 1971. Edwards, and a handful of other black artists working abstractly, like Edward Clark, Fred Eversley, Alma Thomas, Tom Lloyd, William T. Williams, Jack Whitten, have received recent critical attention in the form of museum exhibitions, elite gallery representation, and now, a deepened art historical context for their work within the wider frame of late modernism. Many of these artists worked abstractly in the “post-civil rights” age, during a time when conceptual art reigned supreme, and modernists, suddenly, according to English, “were forced to work against the grain.” Some would argue that as African Americans, their belief in the modernist project came at the expense of being on the wrong side of the cultural politics of the time, and an emphasis on figurative representation. But what would modernism make of these artists?



Artists Peter Bradley, Jack Whitten, and Mel Edwards say hello following tonight's program with Darby English. The art historian discussed his new book, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, with David Breslin, the Whitney's DeMartini Family Curator and Director of the Collection.

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Enter *1971*, which takes as its starting point a most urgent year in aesthetic and racial politics. English's object of study are two exhibitions essential to the ongoing relationship between black American artists and modernism: *The Deluxe Show* and the *Contemporary Black Artists in America* exhibition at the Whitney Museum, preceding *Deluxe* in the spring of 1971. In his book, English magnifies “an unprecedented brief

swell of dissent within black political culture” that year, centering his study on the status and relevance of “color” as an aesthetic and social obsession. For so long, historians of African American art were unable to move past prioritizing representation. This he took up in 2007 with *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness*, a provocation to move away from racialized readings of art. In an email, English likened 1971 to a kind of prequel to *How to See a Work of Art in Total Darkness* that instead focuses on “historical agents” — artists and curators — who challenged such oversimplified readings in their studios and with the shows that they staged. “Can’t we get clear of these degrading limitations and recognize the wider reality of art, where color is the means and not the end?” artist Raymond Saunders writes in his landmark essay from 1967, “Black Is A Color,” reprinted in full in 1971.

In English’s view, *The Deluxe Show* and the *Contemporary Black Artists in America* framed artists’ work in open-ended ways, beyond societal structures of segregation and separatism. It is a chapter in art history that he uncovers with rich and meticulous archival research and a fresh perspective on how this multicultural moment was essentially erased from the story of American art.

For the 1971 *Contemporary Black Artists in America* show at the Whitney Museum, a really long, sprawling geometric painting titled “WYN...Time Trip I” by Al Loving greeted visitors off the elevator. To English, this was a “completely incomprehensive statement” for an exhibition that, in title, colludes the artist as a racialized subject, pegging the art as an explicit expression of their blackness. The exhibition was not without controversy, and many black artists were apprehensive. Some even pulled their works from the show. The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, whose members included artists Benny Andrews and Clifford Joseph, protested in January, months before the exhibition was even mounted.



Melvin Edwards, "Some Bright Morning" (1963), welded steel, 14-1/2 x 9-1/4 x 5 in. (image courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York. © 2014 Melvin Edwards / Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York)

In front of a window of a gallery in the Breuer building, Fred Eversley had planned to install a 72-inch pink acrylic disc, that when refracting light and images from inside the space and the outside world, would fill the galleries with pink, effervescent light. At the talk, English captured Eversley's proposed plan as an example of art's capacity to make space "for people to come together and come apart without calamity." Perhaps the message is that, despite circumstances of racial tension and social upheavals, artists found autonomy in their studios, and even worked collaboratively, across racial lines in the case of *The Deluxe Show*. However, work like Eversley's, known for his futuristic, machine-fabricated convex lenses, was not without criticism within the black community. "What is a pink disc going to do to help me get free?" English recalls the political arguments among artists.

For a show that promised to reveal to the public the most current developments in black aesthetics, as English remarked at the talk, Robert Doty, the white curator of *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, "placed the stress on abstraction in a show full, [of] a motley crew of things." The result was an understanding of black aesthetics that was markedly unstable. So while the show has been historically seen as controversial, and even unsuccessful, English argues Doty was up to something worth revisiting.

1971 clears space for art historians, curators, and cultural producers to complicate black artists' participation in modernism as a multicultural process, not as a separate or oppositional endeavor. We know of Wifredo Lam and Lois Mailou Jones's and other black diasporic artists' vexed relationship to Surrealism and primitivism, artistic and literary movements that started in Europe and co-opted black bodies and black cultural forms. But how can we contemplate the radical openness of a comparative investigation of Jules Olitski and Peter Bradley, Alma Thomas and Barnett Newman, Ed Clark and Frank Stella? Would such a provocation shift the way we write about art history and how we curate shows? *1971* captures quite concretely a shared moment in the art world when color defied any singular narrative.



Ed Clark, “Yenom (#9)” (1970), acrylic on canvas, 72 x 113-1/2 in. (image courtesy the artist)

This summer, *Soul of a Nation* debuts at Tate Modern, a show that reflects on the Black Power Movement and art that emerged within and immediately thereafter a Civil-Rights? context. Recently, the Museum of Modern Art held two widely attended talks with Faith? Ringgold, Lowery Stokes-Sims, and Susan Cahan. These conversations about art,? cultural politics, and equity are not just being held in the academy; they are happening? on the front lines of culture, in our museums and galleries. Are we experiencing a? moment of institutional self-reflexivity? What can the past tell us as we reflect on the? present looming political landscape of a Trump administration? It is not too late to ask? ourselves these difficult questions on art and politics, as culture workers are charged? now more than ever to be attuned to matters of inclusion.

“We must widen our view to include the intraracial politics of the movement itself, specifically the denials of representation entailed in the pursuit of formal political? representation and the fervent disavowal of strong public manifestations of mixed