

'Soul of a Nation' Opens in New York Where Many of the Exhibition Artists Were Active During the Civil Rights, Black Power Eras

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"Pittsburgh Memory" (1964) by Romare Bearden

HOW SHOULD AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS respond to the Civil Rights Movement? The question was central to the organization of Spiral, the New York artist collective formed in 1963 in advance of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The 15-member group including Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Reginald Gammon, and Emma Amos, the youngest and only female member, was short-lived, yet pivotal. Spiral mounted only one exhibition in 1965 and dissolved later that year.

The issues Spiral artists debated—how to best express themselves at a time when matters of race and rights were dominating the national discourse—reflect the organizing themes of “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” which opened today at the Brooklyn Museum. The exhibition spans 1963-1983 and considers the challenges artists faced in their quest to make art that was formally and materially complex, but that also spoke to their experiences as African Americans.

At the Brooklyn Museum, “Soul of a Nation” features more than 150 works of art by about 60 artists spanning a wide range of mediums, from painting, sculpture, and photography to clothing and performance. Amos, Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Frank Bowling, Sam Gilliam, David Hammons, Barkley L. Hendricks, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Jack Whitten, and William T. Williams, are among the artists represented in the exhibition. Works are arranged based on a variety of themes, including regional groups and aesthetic styles, such as Spiral, the Chicago collective AfriCOBRA, L.A. Assemblage, and East Coast Abstraction.

The groundbreaking survey opened at the Tate Modern in London in 2017 and traveled to the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark., earlier this year. The debut of “Soul of a Nation” in New York is particularly significant because it marks the first time the exhibition is being presented in a city where many of the participating artists were based, their work was produced, and significant events around institutional politics and the state of opportunity for black artists occurred.

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BENNY ANDREWS, "Did the Bear Sit Under the Tree," 1969 (oil paint, fabric, and zipper on canvas, 50 x 61.75 x 2.25 inches). | Private Collection, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

Spiral's sole exhibition, "First Group Showing: Works in Black & White" (1965), was presented at 147 Christopher Street in the West Village, the space where they regularly gathered.

The Studio Museum in Harlem became a locus for artists of African descent when it was established in 1968, though the path in the early years wasn't smooth as opinions about the politics of art and race varied widely and were brought to bear on what was exhibited. Among its many historic shows, the museum mounted AfriCOBRA's first two exhibitions in 1970 and 1971.

The Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) came together in January 1969 with a goal to increase the representation of African American artists in museum collections and exhibitions and also to promote the hiring of blacks in leadership and curatorial roles

at New York art museums. Members included Bearden, Lewis, Benny Andrews, and Cliff Joseph.

A week after its formation, BECC protested outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art where the exhibition “Harlem on My Mind” was on view. The group also demonstrated in front the Whitney Museum of American Art during its presentation of “Contemporary Black Artists in America” in 1971. The show grew out of pressure from BECC and featured 28 artists. The Whitney declined to hire a black curator, however, which was also among the group’s demands. In response, they protested—24 artists pulled out of the Whitney show, and BECC mounted a counter-exhibition with their work. BECC was also in communication with the Museum of Modern Art during this time, between 1969-1971, about diversifying its practices.

Founded in 1974 by Linda Goode Bryant, Just Above Midtown (JAM) exhibited works by Senga Nengudi, Hammons, Lorraine O’Grady, and Howardena Pindell, among others. Initially located at 50 West 57th Street, JAM is the first gallery in a major gallery district dedicated to showing the work of African American artists. The influential and experimental black-run space eventually moved downtown, operating out of two more locations before closing in 1986.

Artworks by the artists who prompted and participated in these transformational events and activities are displayed in “Soul of a Nation.” In the exhibition catalog, the broader historical context of the groups and movements that defined the period is further explored. In addition, in London and in Bentonville public programming, artist talks and panels were organized to coincide with “Soul of a Nation.”

The Brooklyn Museum plans a similar slate of community events, including a daylong opening celebration with a symposium (which will be live-streamed) and evening dance party tomorrow, Saturday, Sept. 15. The symposium includes conversations among the exhibition’s curators with critics, scholars, and artists such as Gilliam, Ringgold, Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell, and David Driskell, and photographers Beuford Smith, Ming Smith, and Herb Robinson. Further programming is scheduled over the course of the exhibition, which is on view through Feb. 3, 2019, before traveling to The Broad in Los Angeles. **CT**

TOP IMAGE: ROMARE BEARDEN, “Pittsburgh Memory,” 1964 (printed papers and graphite on board, 21.6 x 29.8 inches). | Collection of hallie k harrisburg & Michael Rosenfeld, New York

BOOKSHELF

Edited by curators Mark Godfrey and Zoe Whitley, “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” was published to accompany the exhibition. The catalog features essays

by the curators, explores major movements and moments from Spiral to FESTAC, and includes written recollections from Samella Lewis, Edmund Barry Gaither, David C. Driskell, Jae and Wadsworth Jarrell, and Linda Goode Bryant.



CAROLYN LAWRENCE, "Black Children Keep Your Spirits Free," 1972 (acrylic paint on canvas, 124.5 x 129.5 inches). | Courtesy Carolyn Mims Lawrence



DAVID HAMMONS, "Black First, America Second," 1970 (body print and screenprint on paper, 104.8 x 79.4 inches). | Tilton Family Collection



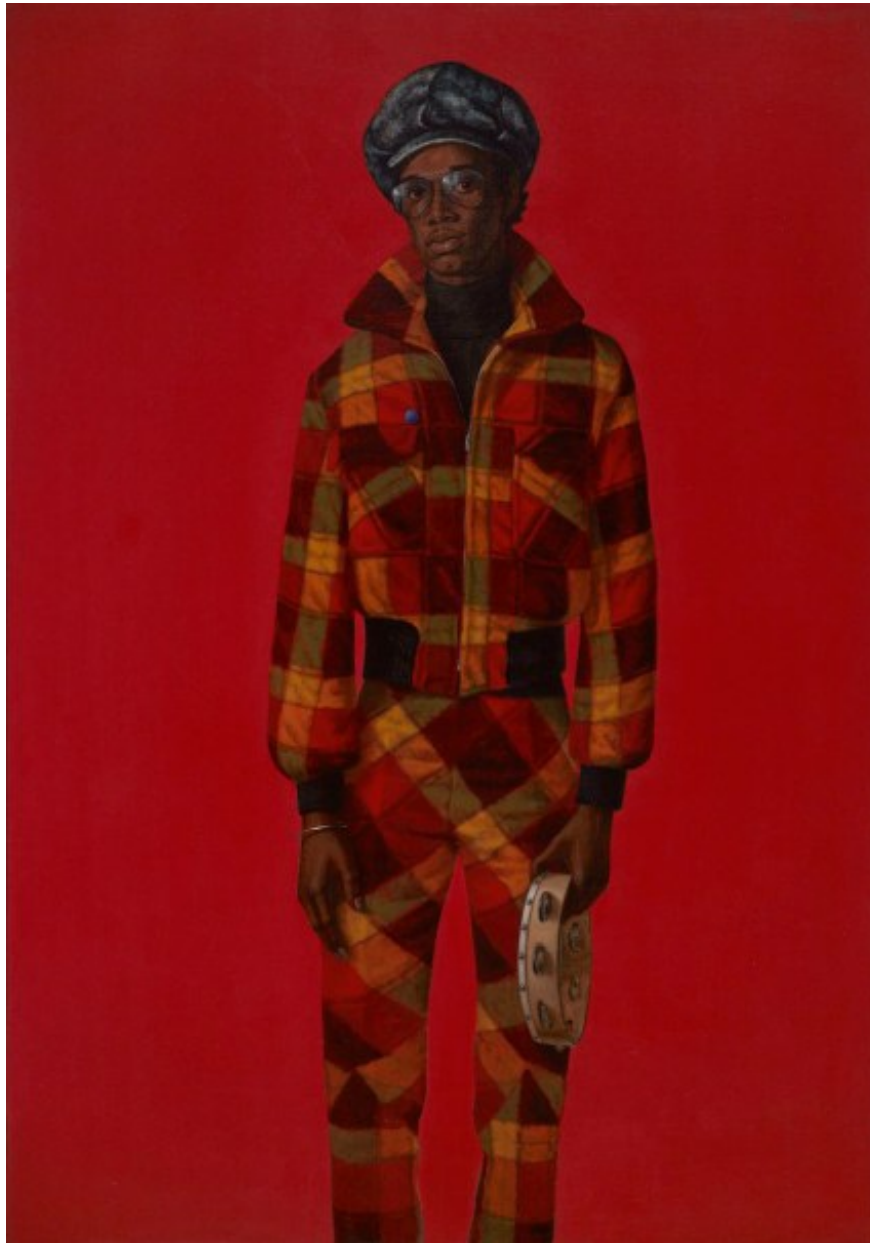
LORRAINE O'GRADY, "Art Is...", 1983 (1 of 40 photographs, c-print on paper 50.0 x 40.6 inches). | Courtesy the artist and Alexander Gray Associates, New York, NY



JAE JARRELL, "Revolutionary Suit," 1969, remade 2010 (wool, suede, silk, wood and pigment, 88.9 x 68.6 x 30.5). | Brooklyn Museum, New York. William K. Jacobs Jr. Fund



FRANK BOWLING, "Texas Louise," 1971 (acrylic paint on canvas). | Rennie Collection, Vancouver



BARKLEY L. HENDRICKS, (American, 1945-2017), "Blood (Donald Formey)," 1975 (oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 50 ½ inches / 182.9 x 128.3 cm). | Courtesy of Dr. Kenneth Montague / The Wedge Collection, Toronto. © Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks. Courtesy of the artist's estate and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York. Photo by Jonathan Dorado, Brooklyn Museum



ROY DECARAVA, "Couple Walking," 1979 (gelatin silver print on paper). | Courtesy Sherry DeCarava and the DeCarava Archives

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