

The Mercury News

Review: ‘Soul of a Nation’ at de Young a powerful look at frontlines of black history

‘Soul of a Nation’ looks at how Black Power became cultural force

By **ROBERT TAYLOR, CORRESPONDENT** |

PUBLISHED: November 20, 2019 at 9:30 am | UPDATED: November 20, 2019 at 2:30 pm



Barbara Jones-Hogu's stirring 1971 work "Unite" is part of the "Soul of a Nation" exhibit at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

“Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” exhibits more than 150 works, from small-scale photographs and intimate totems to wall-size abstract paintings. All this, by more than 60 African-American artists from coast to coast, fits into the timeline of just two decades, from 1963 to 1983.

But what a time it was, from the art world to the streets, and it's embraced by San Francisco's de Young Museum and its director, Thomas Campbell.

"The artists featured in 'Soul of a Nation' were on the front lines of creating social and political change," he said. "The work is as relevant today as it was when created."

The curator in charge of the de Young's installation, Timothy Burgard, had an edgier take. The historical artwork's core messages retain their relevance, "showing how far the nation has progressed, but also how many important issues remain unresolved."



Betye Saar's painting "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima" is on display at the de Young Museum in San Francisco (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

Certainly the power of the images is undiminished. The exhibit has a four-month run at the de Young (through March 15), giving visitors an extended opportunity to explore, to be startled and moved. And to consider the long-term effect of art with a message.

Major names in American art are here, among them Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar and Elizabeth Catlett. But other artists may be unfamiliar, collected by exhibit organizers in a sweep across the country.

The exhibit originated at the Tate Modern museum in London but, thankfully, 42 relevant works have been added to the de Young showing, including 20 works representing Bay Area artists.



Wadsworth Jarrell's 1971 painting of Malcolm X, titled "Black Prince," is on display at the de Young Museum. (Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco)

Here is Betye Sayre's "The Liberation of Aunt Jemima," depicting the stereotyped "mammy" figure holding a broom in one hand and a rifle in the other. Sayre notes that Angela Davis credited the artwork with starting the black women's movement.

Here is Norman Lewis' "Processional" (1965) an abstract black-and-white painting of vertical strokes crowded into formation with a sense of urgency. It was inspired by the marches from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to protest the murders of Civil Rights activists Jimmie Lee Jackson and James Reeb. As the painting's caption notes, "Lewis' line of marchers glows like a beacon against the darkness."

Here is Wadsworth Jarrell's still-dazzling "Revolutionary (Angela Davis)" (1971), a large-scale acrylic portrait with words from the activist's speeches surrounding her like jewels. In contrast nearby, in the "Black Heroes" gallery, is the evocative painted-fabric "Crossing Guard" (1970s) by the late Oakland artist Marie Johnson Calloway.

Many of these works have immediate dramatic impact. Others draw visitors closer and then crackle with meaning.

Roy DeCarava's treasured black-and-white photographs include "Five men" (1964), depicting an unnamed group with stunned, serious expressions. We learn they've just left a memorial service for the four girls killed by a Ku Klux Klan bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama.

Noah Purifoy created his "Watts Riot" and "Untitled (66 Signs of Neon)" (1966) from the detritus of the 1965 Watts rebellion, including melted neon signs. The twisted and tangled metal of Melvin Edwards' "August the Squared Fire" (1965) evokes Watts as well.

Charles White's painting "Mississippi" (1972) depicts a seemingly stoic figure wrapped in heavy fabric. He is surrounded by points of the compass, but the "S" for South is replaced by a bloody handprint. White's maternal family is from Mississippi and he begins his explanation, "We've had five lynchings in my family..."

One gallery features artists who developed a personal abstract style without explicit political or social content. At the time, other black artists and critics felt abstract art could not represent "self-determination and empowerment," the exhibit curators point out. "Others saw a direct connection between abstract experimentation and the pursuit of political freedom."

Although the exhibit emphasizes New York, Chicago and Los Angeles, it also points out Bay Area developments. Among them are the Rainbow Sign cultural center founded in Berkeley in 1971 by Mary Ann Pollar, and such exhibits as "Twentieth-Century Black Artists" in 1976 at the San Jose Museum of Art.

There's a regional outreach, too, in a wealth of events at the de Young during the exhibit's run. There are forums devoted to murals, hip-hop and Huey Newton; all are listed on the museum's web site. Even Oakland favorite Uhuru Foods & Pies (named for the Swahili word for freedom) is on hand. Not in a painting — but in the sweet potato and chocolate pecan pies served in the de Young café.