"Extending the Notion of Activism," by Cynthia Hawkins, P.h.D. Guest Essayist

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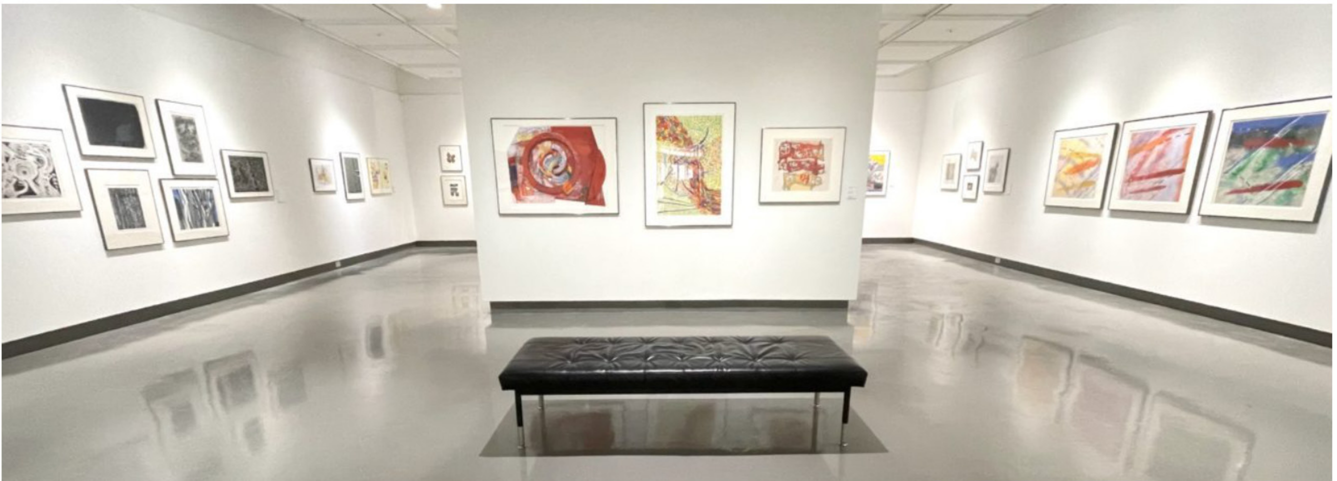
"Extending the Notion of Activism in the Collection of Wes and Missy Cochran's African American Prints and Works on Paper" from the catalog, "Colliding with History," exhibition open through November 12, 2021



INTRODUCTION

The majority of the prints and works on paper on exhibit are abstract works of art that can be thought of as anomalous among African American artists. Since the Harlem Renaissance enigmatic leaders like W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes encouraged African American artists to deeply mine African American culture as a source of inspiration for their work. They wanted artists to celebrate their culture and connect it to the motherland by using African visual elements. Such works of art needed to be readily meaningful, cogent, and unambiguous. However, what is presented here tests that assertion and forces the question of whether and how abstract art can be understood as activist and agency enabling. It is thought that abstract art cannot do the work of activism and protest because it appears ambiguous and its meaning elusive. Therefore, the definition of "activism" must be broadened to include a "visual activism" that is developed out of texts, events, or the multiple contexts of social engagement to catch the more esoteric assertions and instances within the practice of abstract art's activism.

ABOUT ACTIVISM

Activism in the arts is a long-standing practice through which artists have sought to impact their societies, bearing witness to injustice meted out by the powerful and the wealthy, or everyday citizens, for example late Romantic painter and printmaker Francisco Goya and Realist printmaker Honor Daumier. Many of Benny Andrews' etchings, like his Sexism series and Deaths series, are linked to social activism like that of Goya and Daumier. Modernist artists Henry O. Tanner, Lois Mailou Jones, Fred Donaldson, and Charles White, among others, continued the struggle for social and political justice and to shed light on African American humanity and creativity.

Activism is defined in the Merriam Webster Dictionary as "a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue."1 This generalized meaning requires expanding for our purpose here. Some art workers have done so. The Center 4 Art Activism in New York describes art and activism this way:

The goal of activism is action to create an "effect" (realizing concrete discernable change). Art, that is "good art contains a surplus of meaning ... something that moves us, and [good] art stimulates the [viewer/participants] ... or alters our perception. Art is an expression that generates "affect" (is a felt and emotive discernable change).2

The effective and affective actions are precisely what Du Bois and Langston Hughes argued for in the debates of the 1920s during the Harlem Renaissance. These actions too are what Jeff Donaldson, and the black artists involved in the artist's organizations Africobra and Spiral, sought in the 1960s and 70s, many of whom are represented in this exhibition. Their work engaged with the challenges of their moment, and they accomplished that through their singular visions and manipulations of basic visual elements that combine to produce intellectually stimulating, viscerally powerful works of art through abstraction.

In discussing such labor as activism in the visual arts and abstract art in particular, I want to acknowledge the claims of African American artists to our distinctness and pursuit of artistic personhood that acknowledges the racial self but simultaneously demands the right to be seen as an "artist" placing the work of art front and center. It is through the creation of a "personal form" asserted by Christopher Freeburg in Black Aesthetics and the Interior Life that black artists and other artists of color exhibit their distinctness as artists to community and nation.
However, the practice of abstraction in no way disavows the need to confront injustice and in no way suggests an unwillingness to engage in the struggle. Activist abstract art allows for a wider and more varied interpretation of the images and actionable resolutions to these social and political challenges. Phillip Brian Harper writes in Abstractionist Aesthetics that our conception of realism is indeed a form of abstraction and should not be understood or visually read as actual or as the actual reproduction of the face, the flower, the tree.4 That content may be recognizable, but it is not literal. Therefore, the notion of abstraction occurs in degrees and can work against injustice socially, environmentally, and economically in all its spheres.

EXHIBITING ACTIVISM

Presented here are fifty-two established African American artists who represent an array of printmaking, mark-making, drawing, and collage. From the powerful realism of Charles White's lithograph, The Prophet II, 1975, to Beverly Buchanan's abstracted pastel on paper, Pink Windows are Lucky, n.d. to Mildred Thompson's non-objective screenprint Advancing Impulses, 1999, is an enormous of range of artistic modes and practices are represented in this exhibition.

In Whitfield Lovell's dry point portrait Miss Lorraine,1986, he shares with us her kindness and humanity. Elizabeth Catlett's portrait Virginia,1984, imparts a stoicism, strength, and sense of bewilderment. Meanwhile Benny Andrews' minimalist etching 1972, Growing Up provides us with a sense of a teenager's haughtiness and insecurity. Such expressions of humanity, care, and respect are celebratory recognizable entries into the heart of the art practice of these varied African American artists. They continue a legacy that seeks to reach the heart and mind of Americans and global citizens by presenting the beauty of the people and culture and in Growing Up the everyday normal process of being and becoming. Such works of art elucidate the artists' concerns and responses to their moment in time.

The content of the prints, drawings, and mixed media work include images of African American life through portraiture that reveal strength of character and mythologies of nature. One example is Allison Saar's 2014 Fall, which pictures a woman entwined in nature itself as branches grow from her head and apples fall to the ground. A manifestation of the love and respect the artist receives from a friend is seen in Leon Hicks's 1962 etching, Little Bird, and Romare Bearden's exquisite 1972 collage, The Family, as they lovingly gather for the evening meal. These works clearly denote the historic effort to present black humanity to the society at large and are readily perceived as social activism.
However, the majority of the works in this exhibition—and the Collection of Wes and Missy Cochran—are abstract. Abstractions are based on and out of ideology, nature, science, and politics that uses the elements of art: line, shape, texture, form, space, color and value. With the additions of mark making and

materiality to not only produce prints, drawings, painting, and sculpture, these elements are also used to denote injustice, make statements, take positions, to argue and demand change, and to create beauty, and to innovate while doing so. In other words, abstract art effects activist outcomes just as realistic works of art do.

The ways in which abstraction and the artist's use of symbols can be understood as impactful is operative in many of the works of art presented here. Allison Saar's print Fall illustrates the connection between women's bodies and birth, in the growing and giving of its fruit the print also speaks to the indelible connections between the body, humanity and mother earth. Another work that references the black body is John Scott's Black Butterfly, n.d., a geometric rendering of the cubist butterfly that is fragmented but could be reassembled. In Chains, n.d., an etching by Mel Edwards, the curtain of metal chains suggests the negative impact of restraint and restrictions that can occur in numerous contexts—prison, slavery, poverty—and each leaves the body, the person, and

the community bound. In Mildred Thompson's 1978 series Death and Orgasm I–V, the viewer might see the structures as muscle tissue and flesh that is somehow ruptured or breaking down. Just what that flesh is under pressure from, one is invited to—dared to—speculate. Yet, the fine-lined etched marks within these forms are comprised of transparent openings, dense opaque areas and energetic gestural lines that are deeply engaging. For some, the lack of coordinated structural content might be problematic but for others abstraction is freedom from structure and limitations. It is boundless: a way to see possibilities, to see potential.

It has been established earlier that abstract works of art offer the artist many different possibilities to reframe and discuss political and social issues extant at any moment in our changing and evolving society. The next three works, though considered figurative, are highly interpretative, for instance the domestic iron has been part of Willie Cole's practice for many years and the wealth of symbolism inherent in the iron is revealed in his 2012 serigraph The Ogun Sisters. First, what do the Ogun Sisters represent? Ogun is an orisha (a spirit or deity of black cosmological origin) that represents iron, metal work, and war. These two women then are the sisters of Ogun. However, this complex image contains other interesting elements: in the border, the shape of a domestic iron is reinterpreted using dots that allude to cowrie shells (referencing money, and protections of the ocean); in the foreground and on the sisters' chest is the symbol of the element iron; the large graphical symbol at the top represents their brother Ogun. The sisters' masks appear to be of the Dan people, which afford protection to the community. Altogether, this print is about protection, power, and wealth—the good stuff - it also alludes to war. Why war? Because war is waged to acquire wealth, power and seeks to protect it and, sometimes, the people.
In Pray for Me, 1991, Juan Logan's abstract graphic rendering of the Klan comments on the violence of the organization and clearly denotes its capacity for terror without specificity of person, place, or ideology. Radcliff Bailey's UNIA, 2003, also uses graphic design and color to create this mixed media lithograph that salutes the ideals and efforts of the United Negro International Association formed by Marcus Garvey. The UNIA was founded post World War I and Garvey sought to unite the African Diaspora. He provided black communities around the world a political structure that worked for self-reliance and independence; it engaged children and adults, and importantly made a place for female leadership.

What is and how is the landscape rendered with an abstract methodology? There are several examples in this exhibition that extend the idea of environmental activism and the audience perceives those concerns through their historical moment and individual and group concerns. Grey Wood, a 1963 lithograph by Robert Blackburn, appears to be a close-up view of a cluster of gray birch trees native to North America. Yet, it is an abstracted composition and Blackburn's treatment of the trees is gestural. The blue of the background moves the grey trees forward in the composition. Because there is no greenery to be seen, these trees might remind the viewer of the New Jersey Pine Barrens or dying fragile birch trees. It encourages us to take care of the environment. Richard Mayhew's digital serigraph Summertime, 2016, depicts a warm sky and possibly a setting sun, but it could also suggest that a fire is burning nearby, a

drought or dry heat. Summertime is an abstract expressionist composition that is open to interpretation. Another landscape that presents concerns for the environment is sculptor Maren Hassinger's 1990 etching Garden, which combines four repeated geometric squares within a larger square with etched images of dark gray branches across the surface of the print; Garden is a two- dimensional interpretation of her environmental interest.

It is activist for African Americans artists to insist that our artwork is innovative, creative, and seeks the beautiful. The Cochran Collection's abstract prints and drawings are evidence of that creativity and is witnessed in four examples. Mildred Thompson's Wave Function, 1993, is an exuberant interpretation of cosmic and radio waves and Floyd Coleman's 1967 Untitled pastel drawing bears ecstatic and highly gestural linear mark-making that contrasts with the central transparent black circular shape and calligraphic marks. Howardina Pindell's 1980 Kyoto: Positive/Negative series is, in part, about her experiences in Japan. Her innovative combination of lithograph and etching references astronomical maps. The fine marks include arrows spinning, flying, and numbers that all seem to communicate with the other implying a narrative yet to be decoded. Lastly, Hale Woodruff's 1977 silkscreen, A Celestial Gate, is another inventive work based on the symbolism of the Dogon people of Mali. He worked with the same symbols for over 30 years creating fascinating interpretations of their Ashanti gold weights and Dogon architectural markings. Woodruff 's continued investigation with these historiographic symbols and forms create for the artist and viewer a Diasporic connection to motherland, which must be considered as activist.

Where is the activism? These "pure" abstract prints and works on paper engage in the activism that is necessary to remind the world of our audacity to create, tenacity for the beautiful, and to hold onto our individual and collective practice of art.