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The Spiral Group

In the spring of 1963, peaceful Civil Rights activists in Birmingham, Alabama, were battered by firefighters wielding fire hoses and attacked by police dogs. These acts of violence shocked the nation and moved President John F. Kennedy to actively support Civil Rights legislation. Later that summer, during the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his powerful “I Have a Dream” speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.

Between these two pivotal events, a group of Black artists met in New York City to discuss the role they might play in the fight for equality. The group chose “Spiral” as its name and adopted the ancient Greek form as its logo to symbolize an ever-expanding and universal humanism. For their sole group exhibition in 1965, these diverse artists adopted a unified aesthetic, showing only works that were black and white. Their stark palette mirrored the polarized racial relations of the times. Spiral inspired the formation of numerous groups of Black artists interested in exploring the intersections of art and social justice.

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Black Light

Roy DeCarava was one of the first Black photographers to establish a successful career as an independent artist rather than as a photojournalist or studio portraitist. For his collaboration with poet Langston Hughes on *The Sweet Flypaper of Life* (1955), he created compelling images of family life in New York's Harlem neighborhood.

DeCarava was the first director of the Kamoinge Workshop, founded in 1963 by a group of Black photographers. "Kamoinge," from Kenya's Kikuyu (Gikuyu) language, means "a group of people acting together." Seeking "truth about the world, about society, and about themselves," these photographers captured the diversity and complexity of their communities. Many published their photography in *The Black Photographers Annual* (1973–1980), which countered the stereotypes of poverty or protest that the mainstream media typically projected onto Black neighborhoods.

Often printing their work in a rich tonal range of blacks and grays, they developed a photographic aesthetic in which subject matter and style seem unified, and prolonged and careful looking reveals deeper meaning.

Black

Impressions:

Three Graphic Artists in Los Angeles

In 1968, Cecil Fergerson and Claude Booker, art handlers at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, founded the Black Arts Council to advocate for Black artists and audiences. The first exhibition to result from their efforts, *Three Graphic Artists* (1971), featured work by Charles White, David Hammons, and Timothy Washington.

White's *J'Accuse (I Accuse)* series indicts an indifferent or hostile nation that refuses to recognize Black humanity, while his *Wanted* poster series connects the historical oppression of slavery with the persistence of institutionalized racism.

Hammons's extraordinary "body prints" address both deeply personal and provocatively political themes, including self-representation, concealment, oppression, stereotyping, and discrimination.

Washington developed a unique technique of etching into black paint applied to sheets of metal, occasionally attaching everyday objects to the surface. These hybrid works critique the gap between America's ideals and the harsh realities of systemic racism.

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Destruction and Creation:

Assemblage in Los Angeles

These Los Angeles–based artists created work in response to racial injustice in their community and beyond. On April 27, 1962, Los Angeles police entered a Nation of Islam mosque and shot seven unarmed men, killing activist Ronald Stokes. On August 11, 1965, Marquette Frye, a Black motorist, was arrested for reckless driving and accused of resisting arrest. This confrontation triggered the six-day-long Watts Rebellion, which left 34 dead and 1,032 injured, and led to 3,438 arrests and \$40 million in property damage.

Noah Purifoy, John Outterbridge, John T. Riddle Jr., and Melvin Edwards gathered damaged and discarded materials from their neighborhoods and transformed them into works of art. Their powerful assemblages carry dual associations of destruction and creation and commemorate both racial injustice and community resilience. Betye Saar critiques racist stereotypes associated with American popular culture and “ethnographic” African art. Inspired by African and Oceanic objects she viewed in museums and by trips she took to Haiti, Mexico, and Nigeria, she began creating ritual objects and altars. Saar explains, “It is my goal as an artist to create works that expose injustice and reveal beauty.”

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Black Power

Art in the Streets

The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, founded in Oakland in 1966, was one of the earliest organized manifestations of Stokely Carmichael's call for Black Power. Its platform demanded freedom, jobs, reparations for slavery, housing, education, exemption from military service, an end to police brutality, equal justice, and self-determination as a nation.

Excluded from most museums, and looking to inspire and mobilize their communities, many Black artists turned to public art. In 1967, the Chicago-based Organization of Black American Culture created "The Wall of Respect," an outdoor mural on Chicago's South Side that celebrated Black heroes. This powerful work sparked the creation of murals in Black neighborhoods nationwide. Smokehouse Associates, which included sculptor Melvin Edwards and painter William T. Williams, created abstract murals and sculptures in Harlem. The group believed that abstract art itself was transformative and could inspire its viewers to embrace change.

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Message to the People:

AfriCOBRA in Chicago

COBRA—Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists—was a Chicago artists' collective formed in 1968 whose members believed in bringing art directly to the people. Several had contributed to “The Wall of Respect” mural. The group sought to create a community-focused philosophy and aesthetic of Black art that addressed social, political, and economic issues and supported Black liberation movements.

While some artists painted portraits of revolutionary leaders such as Malcolm X and Angela Davis, many focused on ordinary people and their families. Adopting a more Pan-African approach, the group changed its name in 1970 to AfriCOBRA—African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.

AfriCOBRA created new visual vocabularies that emphasized “rhythm,” “symmetry that is free,” and “color that is free of rules and regulations.” They likened their vibrant palette to flavored Kool-Aid colors. Their manifesto declared, “We want the things to shine, to have the rich luster of a just-washed 'Fro.” Their fusion of images with texts, words, and letters underscored their belief in the power of visual and verbal language to foster self-empowerment.

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Black Heroes

As an art student in the mid-1960s, Barkley Hendricks visited numerous European art museums. He was struck by the absence of Black subjects, who typically were excluded from Eurocentric traditions of figurative painting. Returning home to Philadelphia, he began painting distinctive images of friends and acquaintances that project strength, pride, and confidence.

Black portraits are an empowering public assertion of Black identity and agency, both for the sitter whose likeness is commemorated and the artist whose skill is displayed. The accomplished self-portraits of Faith Ringgold and Hendricks achieve both goals. As Hendricks explained, “I wasn’t ever interested in speaking for all Black folks. Much of what I was trying to do with my work was to be as good a painter as I could be.”

Some of these paintings, like Phillip Lindsay Mason’s *The Hero*, have mythical subjects. Others, like Raymond Saunders’s *Jack Johnson*, are historical in nature. But most depict everyday heroes who worked to support and uplift their communities. Hendricks observed, “My paintings were about people that were part of my life. If they were political, it’s because they were a reflection of the culture we were drowning in.”

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Abstraction

Many of the artists in these galleries were influenced by developments in abstract painting initiated by the New York School of Abstract Expressionists. They were also interested in recent innovations in abstract art, such as hard-edged painting and stained and shaped canvases, and they tested the limits of their materials and forms.

Although these artists did not make figurative images, their art drew from their lived experiences. For some, this meant making abstract images to honor assassinated political leaders such as Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; for others, it meant connecting their processes to jazz improvisations.

Many abstract artists encountered severe criticism from other Black artists and critics who felt that abstract art could not represent or achieve self-determination and empowerment. Others saw a direct connection between abstract experimentation and the pursuit of political freedom. In a 1971 essay on “Black art,” Frank Bowling argued that artists such as William T. Williams and Jack Whitten were able to reroute “fashion and current art convention to ‘signify’ something different” to Black audiences.

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Just Above Midtown

New York City's Just Above Midtown gallery was founded in 1974 by Linda Goode Bryant, former director of education at the Studio Museum in Harlem. In an era when most established museums and galleries rejected or ignored Black artists, the gallery provided a forum for their art to be seen and sold.

Just Above Midtown made a commitment to exhibiting new work, like Houston Conwill's installations and performances and Randy Williams's sculptural reliefs. The gallery championed pioneering artists such as Senga Nengudi, whose sculptures reference the Black female body, and conceptual and performance artist Lorraine O'Grady.

Bryant also exhibited David Hammons's radically innovative sculptures, made with objects stereotypically related to Black lives, cultures, and bodies—barbequed chicken bones stripped clean, takeout food bags stained with grease, and hair clippings—and encouraged viewers to discuss them. The gallery's program fostered a welcoming atmosphere. It included \$5 lunches featuring performances, music, and a thirty-minute talk with artists, critics, or curators. Just Above Midtown closed in 1986, having redefined itself with every project.

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