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From the Archives: Frank Bowling on Why It's Not Enough to Say 'Black Is Beautiful,' in 1971

BY *The Editors of ARTnews* POSTED 07/21/17 10:47 AM

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Benny Andrews, *Did the Bear Sit Under a Tree?*, 1969, oil on canvas with painted fabric collage and zipper.
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"It is as though what is being said is that whatever black people do in the various areas labeled art is Art—hence Black Art," Frank Bowling wrote in the April 1971 issue of ARTnews. For the Guyanese-born painter, then 35, that was more than a little reductive. Using work by a number of his male colleagues, including Melvin Edwards, William T. Williams, Al Loving, Dan Johnson, and Jack Whitten, as examples, Bowling, who lives and works in London and New York, wrote that the term "Black Art" discounted the formal considerations that went into their abstractions. On the occasion of a Bowling retrospective at the Haus der Kunst in Munich, a Loving show at Art+Practice in Los Angeles, the just-closed Williams survey at Michael Rosenfeld in New York, and a survey of art in the age of the Black Power movement at Tate Modern in London called "Soul of a Nation," which includes some of the artists that Bowling considered in his essay, titled "It's Not Enough to Say 'Black Is Beautiful,'" it is republished in full below. —Alex Greenberger

"It's Not Enough to Say 'Black Is Beautiful'"

By Frank Bowling
April 1971

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“It’s Not Enough to Say ‘Black Is Beautiful’ ”

By Frank Bowling

April 1971

The problems of how to judge black art by black artists are not made easier by simply installing it; here a painter examines the works of Williams, Loving, Edwards, Johnson and Whitten as both esthetic objects and as symbols expressing a unique heritage and state of mind

Recent New York art has brought about curious and often bewildering confrontations which tend to stress the political over the esthetic. A considerable amount of writing, geared away from history, taste and questions of quality in traditional esthetic terms, drifts towards “relevance,” arbitrating social balance and even quotas. For such writing to be serious, it must consider the artists’ intent. Intentions, however, cannot be kept within formalist or literalist confines, even when the works display strong formalist or minimalist aspects. That the answers to questions of intent seem to match demonstrations of formalist or literalist content, thus freezing the whole dialogue, leaves a highly complex, often fugitive and hence largely ignored area still to be investigated.

Much of the discussion surrounding painting and sculpture by blacks seems completely concerned with notions about Black Art, not with the works themselves or their delivery. Not with a positively articulated object or set of objects. It is as though what is being said is that whatever black people do in the various areas labeled art is Art—hence Black Art. And various spokesmen make rules to govern this supposed new form of expression. Unless we accept the absurdity of such stereotypes as “they’ve all got rhythm...,” and even if we do, can we stretch a little further to say they’ve all got painting? Whichever way this question is answered there are others of more immediate importance, such as: What precisely is the nature of black art? If we reply, however, tongue-in-cheek, that the precise nature of black art is that which forces itself upon our attention as a distinguishing mark of the black experience (a sort of thing, perhaps, only recognizable to black people) we are still left in the bind of trying to explain its vagaries and to make generalizations. For indeed we have not been able to detect in any kind of universal sense The Black Experience wedged-up in the flat bed between red and green: between say a red stripe and a green stripe.

If formalism drove painting out of the arena of Action, and painting got to be more about itself as “process” and “thing” (we are not likely to forget the late Ad Reinhardt), painting didn’t just isolate from questioning; it drove itself and the artists to declaring not just simply the works, but themselves, in a talismanic role. The art may be a simple box, but the artist remains a magician.



Frank Bowling, *Texas Louise*, 1971, acrylic on canvas.

©FRANK BOWLING/COURTESY RENNIE COLLECTION, VANCOUVER

The painters I am about to discuss all work in New York. Although they are all black, they have been grouped together almost entirely in relation to their role as artists. They first came together with the curatorial assistance of Lawrence Alloway and Sam Hunter in an exhibition called “5-plus-1” at Stony Brook University in 1969. Of the artists, Mel Edwards and Dan Johnson are sculptors, Al Loving, Jack Whitten, William Williams and myself are painters. It must however be understood that there are many other comparable artists, not necessarily connected with my main thesis but who must be included for reasons which will become clear both in this essay and in the future. These artists are natural inheritors of modernism through the contributions of their ancestors in traditional African and modern art.

The arguments for an African legacy are often over-stressed and at times aggressively asserted. However there’s no denying its emotional and political significance. It is clear that modernism came into being with the contribution provided by European artists’ discovery of and involvement with African works, and their development of an esthetic and a mythic subject from it. But the point I am trying to make concerns the total “inheritance” which constitutes the American experience and that aspect of it with which black people can now (perhaps they always have) fully identify, due to the politicization of blackness. It would be foolish to assume, as some do, that the development of modern art through the contributions of African ancestors is solely the property of blacks, for it is evident that the filtering process must include white consciousness.

I readily admit that this is partly a question of historical placement and time; it nevertheless remains a complex and pressing issue; to wit, a situation which does not shift objective facts, the works or the artists, into areas more readily meaningful. For there is a body of work and there are figures on the scene we simply have to deal with, no matter what the political climate is. At the same time parallel to the question of “intent” there is still the question of standards. How do we judge and salute works by black artists?

I believe that standards exist and complexity of “intent” can be judged by the ability of the individual artist: his ability to fulfill a meaningful talismanic role. But the meaningfulness of the artist’s role in many areas of black life is similar to that of such popular figures as Imamu Amiri Baraka, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver and the late Malcolm X. It is interesting to note how the magic of the talismanic figure has been usurped by establishment art for its heroes at large, where we are led to believe that the most “relevant” artists are those who display the greatest “curatorial sensitivity.” The trouble is that in an open-ended situation like ours, the establishment-hero functions more like an earnest modern Sunday school teacher—that is, hip.

Consequently, the artist-hero becomes a power behind the throne (a Western tradition which goes back to the Renaissance), or, worse, a priest saying his last rites. He is not at all the same thing as a caster-out of spirits, who, it was held traditionally, combined his panache as a showman with the ability to receive, set up and articulate universal vibrations within the confines of a particular community and discipline. My point here is that black anything—energy, life-style, myth, traditions, even

music—is now public property to be used by anyone who cares to, but often this use or rerouting is heavily laced with misinterpretation and bad vibes, producing a kind of hysteria only explainable in terms of politics and suppression.

The problems containing if not yet strangling an assertion that “experience” forges the *content* of art are such that a general statement in today’s open-ended situation is available to any interpretation. The central principle that everything exists which can be analyzed into substance and essence, forces one to shift ground over whether works touted under the black label are consistent and positive examples of Black Art.

This is a complicated business, but if we examine some of the works themselves, certain distinctions emerge. There are the political-realist works of certain New York, Boston and Chicago artists, still committed to a mode with a long tradition in American genre and also in 1930s painting. Such Social Realism, used to create an irrational hyper-reality, permits the play of feelings without necessarily either including or considering the limitations of reality itself. None of it measures up to the impact of immediacy of a television newscast.

Unlike, say, the Surrealist painters, who chose an illusionist style to articulate a heightened sense of the reality of their erotic and dream world, they direct their attempt at captivating a local audience and finding a way out of a cultural dilemma. An example of this is the much reproduced and talked about *Champion* by Benny Andrews. Both the work, which is an ungainly papier-maché, collage and rope job, and the sermon the artist apparently preached (parts of which were duly published in *The New York Sunday Times*) at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts (where the work was shown) for the benefit of a gathering of the brothers and sisters, stress the emptiness of a “magic event” at an exhibition of painting and sculpture which was not successfully turned into theater. (The establishment press and the exhibition itself jeopardized any possible future effort in this area by the inclusion of works which could not be considered even theatrical props, much less art. Press emphasis on this aspect simply turned Andrews’ lecture/happening into the empty gesture of tokenism the Museum intended the show to be.)

The inherent problems are not resolved because, like so much bad Surrealist painting, this kind of art is a denial of both form, i.e. painting or sculpture, and that which truly exists in its own right, such as a tree, a table, a box, a man; as against a color or a relationship, in the disciplines of painting and sculpture which are a union of form with matter.

The true reality of particular entities is the embodiment in them of distinct form/matter as a species expressing itself in the spirit of the species, lending itself to being distinguished by such tried and proven (however arbitrary) substantives as, say, language-based systems (there is such a thing as black language in the U.S., as there is such a thing as *Neger Engel* in Surinam, a well-known source for the continuation of certain African forms in the New World). And people may agree to observe certain rules only, perhaps because of man’s inherent drive towards order. Then knowledge of that reality consists in the apprehension of the *specific* (unmistakable!) in an expression of the group mind of that species. It is in this sense that one cannot deny the claims made for such artists as Dana Chandler, Gary Rickson and Benny Andrews, who probably right deserve their reputations as having produced Black Art. But the divorce between art (painting) and life (politics) fractures or blocks the suggestive or evocative intention to call up the spirit or the situation or event; what remains are peculiarities, in a journalistic sense, of an event. What is missing is the feeling, the complicated response, not as history, even instant history, not now as television or radio, but as direct “inherited” experience.

A work of art with the power of making actual or implicit the nature of the species immediately apprehensible to sense perception and *more*, must also stand up to a rigorous analysis consistent with that which is “inside” the given discipline. The essence of the articulated experience may belong solely to the species; it constitutes its essence, and not what was contrived by politics, fashion or mannerisms. Thus it might be discovered that the species Black may have a *face* as part of its essence, whereas its *color* is merely an accident. Color does not in any way define *black*. It is not enough to say “black is beautiful.”



William T. Williams, *Trane*, 1969.

©WILLIAM T. WILLIAMS/COURTESY MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY, LLC, NEW YORK/THE STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

The traditional esthetic of black art, often considered pragmatic, uncluttered and direct, really hinges on secrecy and disguise. The understanding is there, but the overwhelming drive is to make it complicated, hidden, acute. Being *up front* is so often given a double edge, often turning such things as language inside out. What was overlooked in Mel Edwards' barbed wire and chains show at the Whitney was its wit, in the tradition of Duchamp, kept afloat by Robert Morris and Les Levine. The elegance and deliberately loose-hanging serial geometry were a sure cover for painful implications. The fact that so many critics missed the point is a lesson in the separation of white from black. Inherent in this delivery is the bondage neurosis in top hat and kid gloves. This particular museum exhibition was not a game, but controlled criticism gone beyond anything Minimal or anti-form art had achieved. In terms consistent with the convention of dropping hints, Edwards "drew" a linear pyramid directly in a material whose identification is with agony; it is not the same activity as Morris or Olitski invoking the state of Fallen-on-the-floor. And Edwards' unforced delivery is the opposite of political-realist art. He reroutes fashion and current art convention to "signify" something different to someone who grew up in Watts rather than to "signify" only in the meaning of Jack Burnham and his colleagues. Never mind the implication of the "free *drawing*" of a pyramid as opposed to *building* one. The work was like taking the Classical tradition and Humanism by the ear and making them face reality from the inside. The trouble is if your gaze is elsewhere, only an act of violence will redirect you, and, as I've pointed out elsewhere, *don't burn the museum down*; this will only bar you from the art experience. Watching the museum burn is a *spectator sport*. Tangling with barbed wire hurts.

William Williams' work is like Frank Stella's in not being about memory. It's about discovery. There is almost no apparent residue, only amazed recognition as these bright abstractions register their charge to the eye and brain. The flow of energy is astonishing. But before I discuss Williams' work specifically, I want to establish a clear and to me obvious distinction between what Williams does and what Stella has done. Criticism, none the less influential for being word-of-mouth, seems to want to penalize the former. But I contend that this is what we are about: Self-evident change!

Stella and Williams don't share an educational background. One went to Abstract-Expressionist Princeton, the other to Bauhaus Yale. This simple fact is not only important, it's explicit. The influence on Williams' work, for very special reasons (social reasons, if you like, but it is self-evident from the nature of white American art, that he, like so many others before him who also happened to be black, couldn't identify with it) was *not* Abstract-Expressionism. Instead it appears to have been European abstraction of the hard-won sort, represented by people like Albers, or even Johannes Itten. There is something (an attitude, a drive in so much of this energy) recalling the force of the Bauhaus, the inconsistencies of proletarian ambition; the implied, if not actual *kitsch*, of knowing too much and understanding too little, except in the larger societal sense. It is a kind of style and energy which glitters like a newly manufactured brass button.

Much of Williams' early work was close in spirit and execution to Lissitzky. The posture and the placing of forms recalled Russian Suprematism and re-enacted in an uptown situation things one had read about that kind of revolutionary drive. More important however, compare Williams' jazzy, jagged 1968–69 works (when they settle into the format of the dominant rectangle, after the confused burst of first encounter) with Lissitzky or Malevich and one gets a near equivalent of that circle-and-square tyranny dominating the intentful works of the Russians. One begins to appreciate that the content of this work is not about abstract decorative high art, but aggressive hammer blows in the uptight geometry of color and line. Everything in those paintings—colors as line, line as in between the colors—clashes wherever the elements meet in a confused surge of passion. The work is virtually irresistible, hallucinatingly original, when it should be pathetic and disastrous.

In the end there is a reason for this attention toward European abstract revolutionary art, not unlike the late Bob Thompson's absorption in European old masters. Over and above Williams' Yale schooling—in the sense of a talisman—the brother is standing on the corner winning a round of “the dozens,” hands down, against all odds.



Frank Bowling, *Australia to Africa*, 1971, acrylic on canvas.

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The mood has begun to change in his recent work. In a four-part picture like *Overkill*, 28 feet long, what seem like leftovers of Cubist faceting have crept in, creating concave and convex drives, flattering and asserting equivalents or challenges to the surface geometry; but they seem on closer scrutiny more a flirtation with what has come down to us from the flattening of certain spherical forms in the sculptures of Baluba art (with its distinctly spaced out and incised hemispheric curves) than with any of Cézanne's discoveries. The picture switches from positive to negative, which intellectually implies cancellation. This is not such a new idea, in fact it is common currency. The astonishing thing is that just the opposite of the expected response is received. Looking at the painting top to bottom, left to right, the forced diagonal drifts both ways from the pink to the white panel through to the black and the off-blue into green at the end. You begin to want to hold on to *something*.

What is delivered through this hectic drive—a kind of circus go-cart sensation—is the idea that these pockets of space begin to exhaust one (they “giddy” the blood or whatever it is) because the exposed channels of the raw duck support, left like trails of tortured passage, have little to do with flatness, but build almost to relief. Kinesthetically the works begin to collapse

in a confusion between painting and such sculpture objects as pyramids—pyramids which keep appearing in a tactile way, more sneaking up than appearing. It's as if a confusion of forms that once had to do with face masks and the psychological implications of the pyramid have come together to produce something completely original. Most of Williams' work is like this I have difficulty convincing myself that they are paintings, even though painted. *Doctor Buzzard Meets Saddle Head* is almost completely red and green painting. The saturated green field seems to accommodate the busy lines and swirls on the left panel allowing an illusory pyramid of green on the right to assert itself with a kind of no-nonsense dignity.

In a sense (not our sense, but painting and sculpture), the subtlety of black experience, as articulated by behavior, is amply demonstrated in several examples from the recent heated past. What however is never fully taken into account, hardly ever acknowledged, is born in the new world. Since time immemorial blacks have had to content themselves with the "sneaky" approach. It is a tradition of subtle, driven awkwardness, now stretched to the breaking point, now suddenly a moment not of release, but of explosion of voluptuous, cynical amusement. Irony and sudden change, complete many-leveled contradiction are stock-in-trade and automatic. This is part genesis of the species and the finely wrought articulation of the sensitive. Many completely successful works by black artists can be viewed as direct, arrogant spoofs generated from a complete understanding of the issues involved in the disciplines. The game of white-face is not the same as black-face. Desperation takes on the image of survival and makes for grim touching irony in the face of extinction.

Robert Farris Thompson in an essay in *Black Studies in the University* points out that Anglo-Saxon America missed "an entire dimension of New World Creativity" and suggests that Afro-Carolinian potters made vessels "as a deliberate gallery of tormented faces in order to vent response to a slave environment." Further in the same essay he quotes a South Carolinian "Strut Gal" (accomplished dancer) of the 1840s: "Us slaves watched the white folks' parties where guests danced a minuet and then paraded in a Grand March. Then we'd do it too. But we used to mock 'em, every step. Sometimes the white folks noticed it but they seemed to like it. I guess they thought we couldn't dance any better."

Several black artists work in certain genres which I take to be pretty awful attempts at this spirit of "jive" (a word black people rarely use to mean dancing).

The work of Al Loving is a different story. Loving's educational background consists of undergraduate work at the University of Illinois and graduate work at Michigan. He also taught for five years in the Middle West. In fact Loving is very much a Mid-West middle-class or professional-class entity. Loving began as an Expressionist, and he still regards himself as one. However much of his early work (portraits of his first wife konking her hair, putting on make-up, etc., in front of a mirror) also implied the geometry it *grew out of*. Rectangular windows, mirrors, etc., echo the fact of the framing edge in a way that convinces through its consistency and persistence. Objectifying impressed itself on Loving through this earlier work *into* geometry to the discovery that "even a box can be a self-portrait." The emphasis in Loving's earlier boxes, apart from self-discovery, is on composition. Then he moved to change the shape of the supports of his canvases from the rectangular to other "viable structures." It was as though such perspectives could clear the confused or confusing Surreal imagery of the work of such an artist as M.C. Escher (whom Loving admires) and declare painting's distinct expressive content through structuring.

This observing through discovery of rules and instant drive towards order, evident in Loving, is consistent with his background; it cannot be fully explained without a full dissertation on this gifted artist's development. His "activated branding," "small fine lines," which seemed so imperative in the segments, the individual hexagonal pieces recently dominant in Loving's work (like being boxed-in, incarcerated) have now given way to color mixing. In this sense one can say that Loving's earlier Expressionist color is changing: "I'm thinking about color as viable structure." Instead of "not being conscious [of color] except whether I like it or not." The interesting thing here is, much as Loving is convinced by his "natural" colorist sensibility, as one follows the progress of his work, the lines keep creeping back. That I could be fooled by an apparent elimination of lines in the big pieces is heartening. But the lines are still there as function in the pure sense. Loving says: "If I could get that's strong enough, the lines would go...but anyway I like what the lines do."

For lots of rarely mentioned reasons, Loving's work denies sedate enjoyment, if less so than Williams'. It is discomfiting like any new kind of art, however much of it may operate within the context of the already accepted, and hence be flippily *understood*. And it demands maximum attention if the black shared experience and heritage are not to go wasted.

Loving's *Timetrip One*, 25 by 12 1/4 feet, consists of 11 hexagonal pieces, painted on primed or in some instances unprimed cotton duck, in totally artificial colors, held together by cunning as well as by experiments with chemical formulas. It is an important work. Even the dense brushing and priming do not let the colors operate as anything more than tints. The opacity

