Art Market

How Black Artists, Dealers, and Collectors Are Boosting the Careers of Their Younger Peers

By Antwaun Sargent
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Ayana V. Jackson, *Tignon*, 2016. Courtesy of Mariane Ibrahim Gallery.

Clay Apenouvon's work in Mariane Ibrahim Gallery's booth at Seattle Art Fair, 2015.

At the Seattle Art Fair in the summer of 2016, the Togolese artist Clay Apenouvon wrapped the booth of Mariane Ibrahim Gallery, a local black-owned contemporary art space, in ripped-up black plastic bags. Inside this installation (entitled *Film Noir*, 2016) were partially visible works by the gallery's artists of African descent, including photographs by the African-American self-portraitist Ayana V. Jackson.

"It was mostly about making visible what is invisible…that's the discrimination that has resulted in the exclusion of Africans and African-Americans in the collections of museums and in the art market," said Ibrahim, adding that visitors who asked to see behind the plastic bags were told "I won't show you unless, you eventually buy."

The gallerist, who won The Armory Show's inaugural $10,000 "Presents" prize this year for her solo presentation of German-Ghanaian artist Zohra Opoku's work, said the installation was intended to answer an important question in today's commercially driven art market: "How do you," she asks, "reflect the politics of who you are in what you do?"

One answer is to be found in the swiftly expanding art market ecosystem owned and operated by black artists, gallerists, curators, and cultural workers. By founding their own frequently for-profit spaces (galleries such as Welancora Gallery, Long Gallery Harlem, and Medium Tings) and curating their own shows, they are opening up residencies, curatorships, and positions of leadership and power to people of color, who are grossly underrepresented in the arts industry. Their endeavors have the potential to reshape the art market for black artists and help generate critical scholarship, institutional attention, documentation and sales, both for past generations of black artists who were passed over by white curators, and today's contemporary black artists.

Works by Vaughn Spann at Jenkins Johnson Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery.

In September of this year, Karen Jenkins-Johnson opened a Brooklyn outpost of her 21-year-old San Francisco Jenkins Johnson Gallery, with an emphasis on promoting emerging black artists and provide opportunities to black curators. The project space's first few shows have focused on younger black artists who have had little market exposure, such as the Yale MFA student Vaughn Spann and painter and sculptor Leonardo Benzant, subjects of the current show "Homeostasis," curated by black curator and Aljira Center director Dexter Wimberly.

"Working with artists at the beginning of their careers is wonderful," says Jenkins-Johnson, who recently pledged $50,000 to the emerging artist program at San Francisco's Museum of African Diaspora in a separate show of support for black artists. "On the other hand, you also have the responsibility in building their markets," she added. Although the project space does not have its own roster and really exists as a space for experimentation, Jenkins-Johnson will nonetheless seek to place the works in institutions and in private collections. On the opening night of "Homeostasis," three works by Spann sold for a total of $30,000.

This move towards self-reliance and a self-contained ecosystem is rooted in the fervor of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960s and '70s, when long-marginalized black artists and curators created their own institutions and galleries, such as the Studio Museum in Harlem, the Watts Towers Art Center in Los Angeles, and Just Above Midtown (JAM) in Manhattan, the first space dedicated to work by artists of color in a major gallery district. Their impact resonates to this day: JAM supported the early careers of artists like David Hammons and Lorraine O'Grady. Institutions such as the California African American Museum and the Studio Museum still play a vital role in exhibiting and training black artists and curators. The Studio Museum's artist-in-residence program has helped launch the careers of artists such as Kerry James Marshall, Mickalene Thomas, and Jordan Casteel, and the museum is also where

curators including the Whitney Museum's Rujeko Hockley, the Museum of Modern Art's Thomas Lax, and MCA Chicago's Naomi Beckwith got their start.

The current movement continues this decades-long project of integrating black artists into mainstream museums and the broader market. But it is distinguished by a new level of wealth and access that black artists, gallerists, and collectors can marshal to create commercial and institutional opportunities for their peers, both within mostly black spaces and throughout the larger art world.

Mickalene ThomasPortrait of Qusuquzah2002Yancey Richardson Gallery

Jordan CasteelCharles2016The Studio Museum in Harlem

To be sure, many of the most commercially successful and critically established black artists are represented by white gallerists, who have the connections to important white collectors (since most wealth in the U.S. is still in white hands) and public institutions that have helped these artists establish wider markets and have their art placed in august institutions. But these older black artists are using their clout to ensure that the younger generation have opportunities to show their art.

Brooklyn Museum trustee Mickalene Thomas, who is represented by the global gallery Lehmann Maupin and in the past year alone has been the subject of two solo museum shows, created her traveling curated series *Tête-à-tête* five years ago, with a goal of turning the gallery into a "collaborative space that shows how we see the discourse around our art as peers," she said. During a 2016 iteration at Art Basel in Miami Beach, she showed the emerging black photographer, John Edmonds, in a group show at David Castillo Gallery, one of Edmonds's first appearances in a major gallery context, which also led to a sale of his photograph for $3,000.

"As I push forward and expand, I'm interested in how I can bring other artists with me," Thomas said.

Brooklyn-based artist and curator Derrick Adams, who is represented by Tilton Gallery, has taken a similar approach since he began curating in 1996, at Rush Arts Gallery, which throughout the 1990s worked specifically to support artists of color.

"In the late '90s there weren't a lot of spaces that featured a lot of young, under-recognized artists of African descent," said Adams, who said he gave Kehinde Wiley, Wangechi Mutu, Jacolby Satterwhite, and Leslie Hewitt their first Chelsea gallery shows during his 13-year tenure there. He is continuing that

work at Jenkins Johnson Projects, where he curated the two inaugural exhibitions, which featured mostly artists of color.

Installation view of "Color People" at Rental Gallery, with work by Bob Thompson, *The Golden Ass*, 1963. © Estate of Bob Thompson. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY. Photo courtesy of Rental Gallery.

“As a black artist who also curates, what I find with black spaces is that they give artists of color a certain level of freedom to explore the material,” Adams said. “By being in a black space as a black artist you don’t feel like you have to be representative of a larger group of people because the space provides the context.”

In another example, Rashid Johnson, who is represented by global mega-gallery Hauser & Wirth and sits on the board of the Guggenheim Museum, curated “Color People” at Rental Gallery in the Hamptons this past summer, a tribute to the under-recognized late black painter Bob Thompson. Through Johnson’s exhibition, gallery owner Joel Mesler was introduced to recent Yale MFA graduate Alteronce Gumby, whom he now plans to show in January at the art fair Art Los Angeles Contemporary, a major opportunity for the young painter, who is currently unrepresented. In a similar vein, Hank Willis Thomas, who is represented by Jack Shainman Gallery in New York and South Africa’s white-owned Goodman Gallery, curated “To Be Young, Gifted and Black,” an exploration of black identity that was shown at Goodman Gallery’s Johannesburg location in 2015. The gallery sold works from that show to prominent South African collectors, and went on to host the French-Guyanese-Danish artist Tabita Rezaire’s first solo show, said Liza Essers, Goodman’s owner and director. Essers also noted it was “To Be Young, Gifted and Black” which first introduced Goodman Gallery to the work of Angolan artist Kiluanji Kia Henda, who she now represents and who recently had a solo show at Goodman Gallery in Cape Town in October, coinciding with Frieze London, where the artist showed a new installation after winning the 2017 Frieze Artist Award.

Black collectors like Raymond and Crystal McGuire, A.C. Hudgins, Kasseem “Swizz Beatz” Dean, and Pamela Joyner are also using their financial weight and positions on museum boards to increase exposure for overlooked black artists and create new opportunities for emerging ones. Joyner, a former

Wall Street executive turned arts patron, is currently touring works from her and her husband Alfred Giuffrida's collection of nearly 400 works by black abstract artists including Sam Gilliam, Melvin Edwards, Mark Bradford, Shinique Smith, and Kevin Beasley, with an aim "to rewrite art history," as Joyner described it in a recent interview. The touring exhibit "Solidary & Solitary: The Joyner / Giuffrida Collection" is part of a five-pronged strategy Joyner is executing.

Opening reception of *Solidary & Solitary: The Joyner/Giuffrida Collection*, Presented by the Helis Foundation at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art. Photo by Chelsea Rousey Photography. Courtesy of the Ogden Museum of Southern Art.

Its other prongs include an artist residency at her home in Sonoma, California, for living artists in her collection, as well as scholars and curators whose work extends the canon and relates to the artists in her collection; sitting on the boards of museums like the Art Institute of Chicago; publishing critical scholarship, beginning with the 2016 book *Four Generations: The Joyner Giuffrida Collection of Abstract Art*; and collecting and gifting major works by black artists to institutions. Earlier this year, she and her husband donated a suite of works by the color field painter Richard Mayhew to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, to help them fill in the gaps of the museum's collection and art history.

Of course, the rise of black-owned spaces has impact far beyond the market, and many prominent non-profit spaces, such as Rick Lowe's Houston-based Project Row Houses and artist Mark Bradford's Los Angeles-based Art + Practice, are positioned as "social sculpture," an expanded concept of art coined by the German Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys, who sought to use art to address societal issues. The Chicago-based artist Theaster Gates described his 20,000-square-foot art space, library, and cultural center Stony Island Arts Bank, in the city's low-income and largely African-American South Side, as "a demonstration of our self-reliance, self-determinism, and worth."

"I always imagined what was most important was this architectural gift in this neighborhood needed to be something that could be used for a public," Gates said. To partially fund the project, Gates used his favorable position in the blue-chip art market and created and sold *Bank Bond* (2013), a series of 100 small note sculptures made of marble partitions pulled from the bank's interior, for $5,000 each at Art Basel in Basel in 2013.

Marc Newsome, installation view of *I Love 3W* at Project Row Houses. Photo by Alex Barber. Courtesy of Project Row Houses.

He also plans to add a printing press to the space called the Black Madonna Press with the $100,000 he was awarded as the 2018 Nasher Sculpture Prize laureate. “Am I concerned that black people have opportunities to create culture? Yeah. Do I understand that the history of American space is that talented blacks get to use space when others no longer want to use that space? Yes.”

Similarly, The Underground Museum, a non-profit space in South Central Los Angeles launched by sculptor Karon Davis and her late husband, the painter Noah Davis, was launched as a place to encourage black artists “to experiment and make the kinds of work they have always wanted to, but never had the chance in ‘white cubes,’” Davis said. But she said it’s become a larger symbol within the community, which until the museum’s opening was “an art and food desert,” according to Davis, and serves the surrounding neighborhood as much as the artists and curators who rotate through its doors.

“Theaster once said, ‘everyone is entitled to beauty,’” Davis said. “I would interpret that as everyone is entitled to green spaces, safe spaces, knowledge, and art. My hope is that by demonstrating the success—both curatorial and in audience reception—of exhibiting black artists alongside artists of all races, other institutions will follow suit.”

Antwaun Sargent

https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-photos-capture-remnants-communist-party