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Battle Lines for Change

‘Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties,’ at the Brooklyn Museum

By HOLLAND COTTER MARCH 20, 2014

“A change is gonna come,” the soul singer Sam Cooke promised in his 1964 hit song. And so it did. Officially, it arrived fast, with the signing into law of the Civil Rights Act that year. In reality, its progress was killingly slow, and by then already a decade old.

Today, half a century on, Cooke’s promise is far from being a done deal. But if you happen to have heard the song when it was new, you can still feel the bittersweet ache of faith it evoked in a harsh but acutely utopian time.

The same ache runs, from beginning to end, through “Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties” at the Brooklyn Museum, a vivid record of that time as seen through some of its art. Imaginatively chosen, the show lays to rest the idea that photography was the only memorable visual work the era produced. It plays an important part, but only a part: Most of what’s here is painting, sculpture and collage. Nor, as might be assumed, is this an exclusively black show. The roster is racially and ethnically mixed, the artists varied in degrees of familiarity. Some, like Jacob Lawrence, Frank Stella and Norman Rockwell, are well known, though not necessarily in this historical context. Others — Cleveland Bellow, LeRoy Clarke, Virginia Jaramillo, John T. Riddle Jr. — are rare visitors to our major museums.

The show gets the balance of history right in other ways, too, by letting it be confused and confusing, a thing of loose strands and hard questions.

Are Andy Warhol’s 1964 “ Birmingham Race Riot” silk screens, with their news photos of police dogs attacking protesters, opportunistic or empathetic? Can we look at a 1970 Gordon Parks photograph of the radical young Eldridge Cleaver without thinking of the aging conservative he

would become?

Can we stop thinking about the civil rights era, or any era, as a saga of a few lionized male leaders, and conceive of it instead as the story of thousands of everyday people going about their unsensational lives until, when necessity calls, they show up, line up, shout out and do without, individually and together, for the good of all, even for a good that they are aware they may never personally experience?

As organized by Teresa A. Carbone, curator of American art at the Brooklyn Museum, and Kellie Jones, associate professor of art history at Columbia University, such questions are built into the show right from the start.

The first things you see are two images you most likely don't recognize. One is a 1963 painting called "Honor Roll" by May Stevens, which takes the form of a high school-style list of achieving students, but is inscribed with the names of black activists, including James Meredith, who, at a very early point, put themselves on the line in the battle for university integration.

The second introductory picture, "Witness," dated 1968, is a paint-and-fabric collage by Benny Andrews that doesn't look political at all. It's a figure of an elderly black woman standing, apparently lost in thought, in front of a wood-slat house. She could be anyone, anywhere, though she is from someplace quite specific.

Andrews, a New York-based artist who died in 2006, painted her after making a trip to rural Georgia, where he'd grown up, the child of a sharecropper. She, too, is from that place, part of that culture, as the rough patches of fabric she's composed of suggest. Far from centers of political action, she's one of the unnamed people who see much, say little, or are at least little heard, but on whose hard lives and labor more celebrated histories rest.

The rhythm of the show is like this. It shifts between the topical and the symbolic, factuality and abstraction, the same way its soundtrack alternates protest chants, pop songs and hymns. Richard Avedon's 1963 photograph of a defiantly segregationist George Wallace hangs within sight of Charles W. White's idealized 1961 charcoal drawing of a young black woman reading. Edward Kienholz's funky, newsy 1961 assemblage "It Takes Two to Integrate (Cha Cha Cha)," with its black and white "Freedom Rider" dolls stamped with tread marks, contrasts with Malcolm Bailey's suavely diagrammatic Art Deco-ish painting of biracial captives on a slave ship.

Even in the section of the show called "American Nightmare," which is almost entirely about violence, a balance between document and metaphor holds. Charles Moore's famous

1963 photos of Birmingham demonstrators under police assault are here. But so is Jack Whitten's response to that incident: an all-black painting punctured by a gaping hole, like a peeled-open wound, with a photo embedded, barely visible, deep inside.

The most moving statement of the theme, though, comes in three large paintings that form a chapel-like enclosure. On the right is a 1969 Philip Guston image of cartoonish Klansmen, on the left a smoldering Norman W. Lewis painting of what looks like a field of burning crosses; and in the middle Sam Gilliam's magnificent 1970 "Red April," a wide pale curtain spattered with blood-red paint and inspired by the 1968 murder of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Another thematic cluster, "Politicizing Pop," holds fewer surprises, though a 1967 etching, "Black Man and Flag" by Rupert Garcia, which turns the stripes of the American flag into prison bars, acknowledges the resistant vitality of the Chicano movement in California in these years. And a small 1964 painting by the British artist Pauline Boty, mashing up images of John F. Kennedy, protesters under assault, and the flaming body of a Buddhist monk, brings both a non-American perspective to the show and a reference to the war in Vietnam, which figured increasingly in the fight for racial equality.

"There's no such thing as a single-issue struggle," the black poet Audre Lorde wrote. "Revolution is not a one-time event." By the end of the 1960s, the civil rights movement had spawned an array of liberations. One of them is touched on in a small section labeled "Sisterhood," which is ushered in by something truly great: a 1965 video of Nina Simone performing her song "Mississippi Goddam." She's in must-see top form: furious, funny, glamorous, down-to-earth, a liberation movement unto herself. Divine.

The section as a whole, however, feels perfunctory, which is too bad. African-American feminism, which was on a different track from, and basically excluded by, the mainstream women's movement, is ready for close study, though there's not much material to go on here.

Still, we get a multiracial, tonally subtle painting of three women by Emma Amos. Posters by the Chicago artist Barbara Jones-Hogu pack a wallop. And Jae Jarrell's witty, two-piece, graffiti-tagged "Urban Wall Suit" is a reminder of the role that fashion played, from Black Panther berets to back-to-Africa dashikis, in tailoring new identities.

Directly or not, Africa is everywhere in the show. It's there in Barbara Chase-Riboud's sculptural tribute to Malcolm X based on a masquerade costume; in Ademola Olugebefola's woodcut still lifes of African sculptures; in a 1964 Romare Bearden collage of masks; in the patterns in a four-part painting by Joe Overstreet, "Justice, Peace, Faith, and Hope"; and even, maybe, distantly, in a glorious, wall-filling painting of cosmic geometries by William T. Williams.

The African connection has particular pertinence this week, as the Brooklyn Museum is hosting, through Saturday, the Triennial Symposium on African Art, a heady, idea-packed, international scholarly event. But no pretext is needed to see this show as part of a global picture.

It's a political and cultural picture in which African-America's push for change in the 1960s set a powerful example for, and learned from, the world. It's a picture in which art is a moral force. Why is the mainstream art world these days so afraid of that idea? Art is, and has always been, in deep, complex ways, about ethics. This is certainly true of the work that emerged from the soul-forging, promise-believing civil rights years.

Only the free have disposition to be truthful,

Only the truthful have the interest to be just,

Only the just possess the will-power to be free

W. H. Auden wrote those words. Millions of Americans of color — and color is a metaphor for many identities — have truthfully, justly and powerfully lived them. Still do.

“Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties” remains at the Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, through July 6; 718-638-5000, brooklynmuseum.org. It travels to the Hood Museum at Dartmouth College in Hanover, N.H., this fall, and to the Blanton Museum of Art at the University of Texas at Austin, in the spring of 2015.

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