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Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power, review

★★★★★



1 Comment



Benny Andrews's *Did the Bear sit Under a Tree?* CREDIT: TATE MODERN

By **Mark Hudson**, ART CRITIC

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The Sixties was the heroic age of African-American politics, which produced movements and concepts whose implications have reverberated through the world ever since: Civil Rights, Black Power, the Black Panthers. You only have to look at the current Black Lives Matter campaign – which refers directly back to the triumphs and tragedies of that time – and the ease with which its rhetoric has been transposed to this country, to realise that issues of Black identity, Black rights and Blackness itself are as alive as they've ever been: here as well as there.

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All of which suggests that the Tate’s new blockbuster exhibition on “art in the age of Black Power” won’t be just another show of quirky Sixties stuff, but a massing of images and ideas that are still powerfully relevant today. Or that’s certainly what you would hope.

Black Power in the art market; Saatchi's new dealer show; a \$10 million Masterpiece sale

Benny Andrews’s *Did the Bear Sit Under a Tree?* is one of a number of punchy message-driven works that set the scene: the Stars and Stripes rolled back to reveal an angry black man waving his fists both at the Flag and the viewer. If the execution is none too subtle, with the figure rendered in rough-hewn sacking-relief with a zip for a mouth, Andrews wanted to reflect the “raw” aesthetics of his background in rural Georgia.

Where an earlier generation of African-American artists, such as abstract expressionist Norman Lewis, seen in the first room, were marginalised by an art world that was, the show argues, systemically racist, the new generation were determined to fight their way in “by all means necessary”, to paraphrase one of the great buzz figures of the time Malcolm X.



Die, Faith Ringgold Credit: Imaging and Visual Resources, Mo

Dana Chandler recreates the door of the apartment in which Black Panther Fred Hampton was shot in his bed by members of the L.A. Police Department, the wood riddled with real bullet-holes. Faith Ringgold’s *Die* creates a frantic pattern of wild-eyed, bleeding black and white people in which it’s impossible to tell who’s stabbing or shooting who, all in a compelling pop-expressionist style that isn’t revisited in the exhibition or, it seems, the artist’s own work.

If Wadsworth Jarrell’s *Black Prince*, a candy-coloured Op Art portrait of Malcolm X composed of the letters used in one of his speeches, smacks slightly of the high school art project, that’s because this kind of work has had a massive impact on popular notions of what “black art” should be like, from record covers to mural projects. Indeed, if you’ve come here in search of funky retro-cool as much as a history lesson, the fabulous afro-psychedelic posters by Jarrell and his colleagues in the AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bed Relevant Artists) movement won’t disappoint.

This is, however, very far from a show of Black Power propaganda. The initial impression is of a bewildering array of groups and movements with often wildly divergent ideas about what a “black aesthetic” should be, or if there should even be one; whether art should be “about change”, such as the mural projects of the Chicago-based Organisation of Black American Culture, which celebrated African-American political and cultural achievement, or if it should embody “actual change”, as seen in the entirely abstract murals of Harlem’s Smokehouse Associates, who aimed to provide a positive example to the surrounding community.



William T. Williams's *Trane* Credit: Marc Bernier

There are, indeed, whole rooms of very diverse abstract painting in the show, with no obvious connection to African-American culture, until you look at the titles. William T. Williams’s *Trane*, referencing the great bebop saxophonist [John Coltrane](#), is clearly aligned to the “hard-edge” abstraction of Frank Stella and Ellsworth Kelly, with its vibrant overlain rectangular planes. Sam Gilliam’s takes a more immersive Rothkoesque approach in *April 4*, a tribute to Martin Luther King created a year after his assassination, staining and knotting the canvas to create wash-like veils of muted colour dotted with clots of crimson, which “may suggest bloodstains” the texts argue – though the painting doesn’t hit quite the note of transcendence it aspires to.

[The Encounter at the National Portrait Gallery-review](#)

The most powerful work in this section, Melvin Edwards's *Curtain* (for William and Peter), a screen of dangling barbed-wire with a fringe of chains is rather thrown away by being hung out of sight of the show's main drag and too close to the wall. If Edwards's claim that he used the wire simply as "a linear material with kinks", rather than as a metaphor for, say, social incarceration, isn't quite believable, there's a sense in this section of artists with very diverse agendas – that the show can only begin to start exploring – who have had a socio-political role forced upon them by the need to band together as "black artists" simply to get their work seen.

A section on Black Heroes, meanwhile, has been included, you might cynically conclude, to bring in works by "white" artists – Andy Warhol, with a late portrait of Muhammad Ali, and the voguish, but over-rated Alice Neel, with an image of painter Faith Ringgold. If we're to have Warhol at all, why not his notorious Race Riot images of the early Sixties?



Muhammad Ali by Andy Warhol Credit: Jenks Imaging

While the show includes sections on Black Panther posters and powerful street photography with images of marches and riots, the fact that artists have chosen, by and large, not to focus on what the struggle looked like – or indeed provide convenient portraits of Ali – perhaps reflects a common cause with artist Barkley Hendricks's assertion that "I wasn't interested in speaking for all Black folks (but in trying) to be as good a painter as I could be."

Hendricks's own deliciously subversive paintings include *What's Going On*, a dead-pan response to Marvin Gaye's classic song featuring a group of superbly chilled, white-clad "brothers and sisters" – with one of the women stark naked. Whether he's celebrating Shaft-meets-Chic aspirational street cool or sending up the white man's need to co-opt it, the meaning of the work is left admirably ambiguous.

But the show's most surprising and intriguing strand is provided by the so-called Los Angeles Assemblage artists who gave a distinctive African-American slant to the kind of three-dimensional collage pioneered by pop artists such as Robert Rauschenberg. Noah Purifoy's work amasses found objects – chair-casters, pipes, shoe lasts – into mysterious totemic structures that tap into a vein of traditional African belief that runs deep in American culture, while Betye Saar brings a chilling political twist to the form with the likes of *Sambo's Banjo*, where she dangles the image of a lynched man inside a "Sambo" banjo case.



Betye Saar's *Eye* Credit: Robert Wedemayer

This style of sculpture is revisited with renewed confidence in the final room – probably the strongest in the show – in which younger artists use what they see as politically-charged “black” materials to create what feel like anthropological objects from the contemporary street. Senga Nengdudi (born Sue Irons) twists and stretches nylon tights (used by African-American women to create a more “white” appearance), into surreal sculptures, while David Hammons's objects created from black hair cuttings, shattered record-vinyl and fried chicken bones have a transgressive cool that still feels fresh forty years after the event.

This is a rich, absorbing and thought-provoking exhibition with enough themes and ideas to power three shows its size. You could quibble about the way works are displayed, and wall texts that sometimes gloss over difficult facts in their eagerness to identify with their subject. Nonetheless, this is an epic response to an epic subject and without doubt one of the shows of the year.

Until Oct 22; 020 7887 8888; tate.org.uk

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