

Resisting “Thingness”: Black Southern Women’s Abstract Art

In recent years, black abstract art has gained a foothold in the mainstream art world.¹ Major museums and galleries have begun to feature the work of black abstract artists in a way never before seen. These moments of recognition are long overdue; for decades, black abstract artists have been shut out of conversations in mainstream art institutions as well as black artistic circles.² Despite this rejection from both sides, black artists have continued to make abstract work that is as timely as its figurative counterparts and that sidesteps some of figuration’s established narratives. That is to say, by removing “the black body” as the central focus in their work, abstract artists have been able to cultivate new conversations. In abstraction, black artists can explore interiority, nature, metaphysics, color, and relationships, *alongside* social justice issues, should they choose. Particularly for people born into and growing up in the segregated South, abstraction is a powerful tool to convey emotion, spirituality, and the self.

Featured in the Metropolitan Museum’s exhibit, “History Refused to Die,” the Souls Grown Deep Foundation’s “folk” artists tell a part of the story of black Southern women’s abstract art. Given the strictures of economic scarcity, social degradation, and physical and

¹ Notably, the National Museum of Women in the Arts’ exhibition, “Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today” and the Baltimore Museum of Art’s “Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art” highlighted black artists’ myriad contributions to American abstract art and began the work of writing a more inclusive history. While not focused exclusively on abstract art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “History Refused to Die: Highlights from the Souls Grown Deep Foundation Gift” added more black Southern abstract artists to the conversation, particularly women artists whose work had long been overlooked.

² While the art world’s exclusionary belief structures and policies (to this day) prohibit many black artists from recognition in various artistic movements, black abstract artists have had an especially difficult time finding audience for their work. Particularly during the Civil Rights and Black Arts movements of the 1950s-1970s, black artists were expected to use figuration to advance social justice issues. Abstract artists, then, were accused of avoiding the pressing issues of the day.

emotional violence under Jim Crow, women like Loretta Pettway, Lucy Mingo, Annie Mae Young, Mary Elizabeth Kennedy, and Lola Pettway made quilts using materials available to them, which became as intricate, symbolic, and layered as any other abstract art that now lives alongside them. However, these quilts are not the extent of black Southern women's abstract art. Black Southern women have also been important contributors to larger artistic movements such as Abstract Expressionism and Color Field Painting. Some artists of note include: Alma Woodsey Thomas, born in Columbus, Georgia in 1891; Lilian Thomas Burwell, born in Washington D.C. in 1927; Mildred Thompson, born in Jacksonville, Florida in 1936; Betty Blayton, born in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1937; Sylvia Snowden, born in Raleigh, NC in 1942; Mary Lovelace O'Neal, born in Jackson, Mississippi in 1942; and Deborah Dancy, born in Bessemer, Alabama in 1949.

Deborah Dancy has noted that while many black women artists have "formal connections" to largely recognized artistic movements, "we have operated out of pretty different experiences." These experiences have led many Southern black women artists to eschew formal labels. Mary Lovelace O'Neal relates: "I'm reluctant to call myself an abstract expressionist or a minimalist. I call myself a painter."³ Similarly, Sylvia Snowden explains: "I have tried for years to make my own style of painting, to paint what is me, so that's why I don't want you to use 'abstract expressionism' when you discuss my work."⁴ Creating from an authentic and personal place requires black women to contend not only with the labels of artistic movements, but also the ways that they—as black, as women, as artists—are and have

³ "A Painter and Social Activist" New York Times, March 1, 2020

⁴ Charles Henry, "An Interview with Sylvia Snowden," Callaloo vol 40 no 5 2017 pp85-86

been labeled. Mammy, Jezebel, Welfare Queen, Primitive, Outsider, even Folk Art and Black Art; these are just a few of the labels used to dehumanize and ghettoize black women and black art. Under the circumstances, creativity in self-definition becomes imperative.

The process of escaping damaging labels shares much with Dancy's description of her artistic process. She states:

For me, the space between abstraction and representation feels like an intermediary region full of potential and trepidation. I try to reconcile how to make an abstract painting interface with this quality of 'about to become'—that thingness where an image begins to take on too much specificity by defining itself; that's the space that excites and unnerves me—because it's a constant struggle to keep the 'thingness' at bay...It comes down to making those features ambiguous enough and the space unstable enough so that they exist just on the verge of becoming, but don't.⁵

Being a black, Southern, woman, abstract artist is the tension that Dancy describes; as a person to whom "thingness" is constantly ascribed, how does one "keep the thingness at bay," explore and express an interior life, and find new ways of evading definitions that would be confining/oppressive/soul crushing? One way is through abstraction, through forcing a conversation outside of blackness and the body, though making a space for a selfhood that is not largely recognized.

⁵ p. 29, "It's a Constant," ArtPulse No 24 Vol 7, 2015

Black Southern abstract artists today are producing exciting work that pulls from, builds on, and continues the conversations begun (and still being shaped) by the women mentioned above. A few artists who would make meaningful additions to a collection of contemporary art include:



Aimee Everett, "My Many Attempts at Touching the Sun" 2018

Aimee Everett, originally from New Orleans, now living in Austin Texas. Everett's circular canvases bring to mind Betty Blayton's. Through line, color, and texture, Everett explores the emotions contained in silences.



Stacy Lynn Waddell, "Women Are Powerful and Dangerous" 2017

Stacy Lynn Waddell, born in Washington DC, whose work plays on the border of abstraction and figuration, that liminal space Dancy describes so well, and addresses social justice themes.



Lanecia Rouse Tinsley, "Silent Things I Know" 2018

Lanecia Rouse Tinsley, based in Houston, Texas, whose abstract expressionist pieces are in conversation with Mary Lovelace O'Neal. Tinsley's paintings are metaphorical, using color, texture, and materials to ask questions about our ways of sensing, forming, and documenting our lives.



Brittney Boyd Bullock, "Signs and Wonders" 2020

Brittney Boyd Bullock, from Memphis, Tennessee. Bullock's textile work breathes new life into the tradition of black Southern women fiber artists by introducing a new visual language. Through assemblage of various unconventional materials, Bullock exposes contradictions in our daily lives and makes space for the sublime.

In these examples and more, black Southern women artists use abstraction to draw, paint, collage, weave, and sculpt themselves into being. As the art establishment attempts to write more inclusive histories, it is necessary not only to recognize black Southern women's

contributions to noted artistic movements, but also to consider how these women expand notions of what these movements were and are. These histories must interpret those “intermediary” spaces at the borders of movements—those places where the “thingness” is inconsistent, hazy, and called into question—as rife with fresh stories, visual languages, and definitions of self. To understand black Southern women’s abstract art, one must center black women. This centering includes acknowledging that black Southern women abstract artists have always existed; that they work in traditions all their own, while complicating other narratives; that they use abstraction to access parts of life and the psyche that might otherwise be unavailable. In black women’s abstract art, long histories and deep emotions combine to create meaningful, hopeful new beginnings.