



Art Is (Girlfriends Times Two), 1983/2009 Lorraine O'Grady © Lorraine O'Grady

"There's a double meaning we're playing with here," says Zoe Whitley, curator of Tate Modern's ***Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power***. As well as a showcase of art made during the African American Civil Rights Movement, Whitley wanted to spotlight the crucial but totally overlooked work black American artists have contributed to 20th-century art. "For people interested in abstract artists you might think of Cy Twombly or Robert Rauschenberg," she continues, "but we're showing how African American artists like William T. Williams and Sam Gilliam were important to that movement too."



21 August 1971, We Shall Survive Without a Doubt, 1971

© Emory Douglas / ARS NY, Courtesy of Emory Douglas / Art Resource, NY

The show begins in August 1963, at the time of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, when the American Civil Rights movement was at its peak and art being created within the movement didn't just impact politics, but the art world as a whole. The theme which persists throughout the show is Whitley's look at "the history of systemic inclusion and racism," and how, "in order to do that, one has to address, in the context of gender and race, how that converges to elevate a certain artist and leave others underrepresented". On show are the trends, collectives and tropes that defined the time: collage, photography, clothing designs, sculptures made with hair, abstract expressionism and installation. Showcasing vital pieces of art largely overlooked by art history, the exhibition demonstrates how insidious racism is in a number of different contexts, and points to how those micro-aggressions are still palpable today. Here we present ten leading artists from the show.





Icon for My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People - Bobby Seale), 1969
Barkley L. Hendricks © Barkley L. Hendricks. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

1. Barkley Hendricks, *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman never saved any black people — Bobby Seale)*, 1969

Hendricks' interest in self-portraiture was sparked in the early 1960s, when he visited the National Portrait Gallery in London and studied the great Renaissance and Dutch painters, including Rembrandt and Anthony Van Dyck. In this self-portrait he undermines the white superhero trope so popular in America at the time. Hendricks was openly queer, and made a point to paint the lives of other queer-identifying people. His painting *George Jules Taylor* (1972) is one of his best remembered.

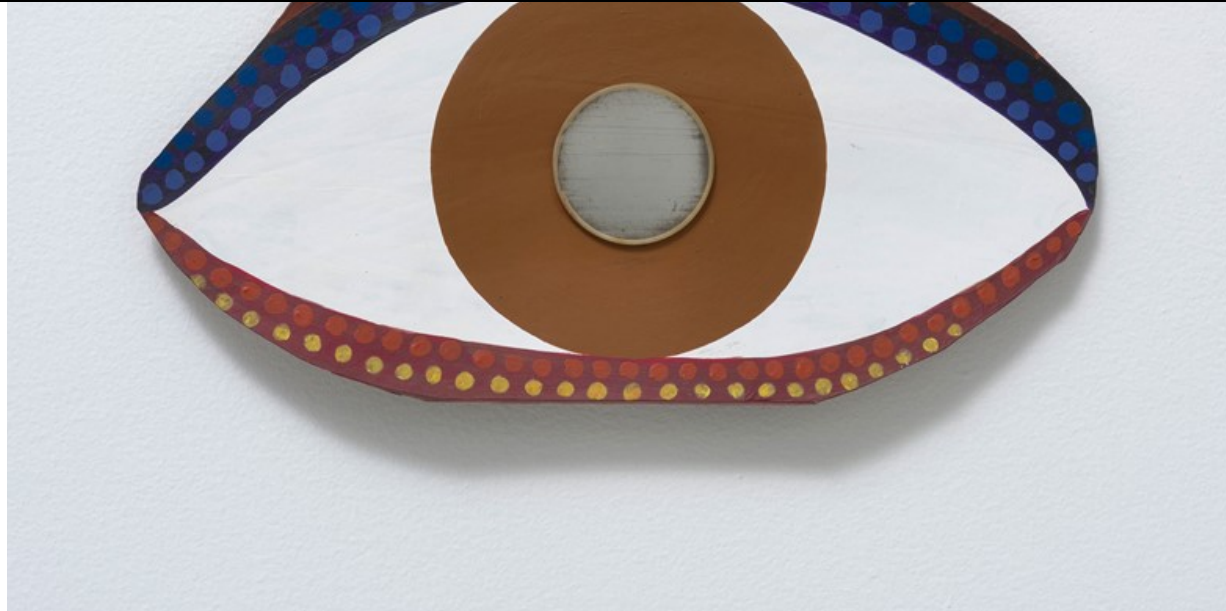


Black Unity, 1968

Elizabeth Catlett, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas © Catlett Mora Family Trust/DACS, London / VAGA, NY 2017

2. Elizabeth Catlett, *Black Unity*, 1968

Washington-hailing Catlett was one of the first people in the US to get an MFA. After she graduated, she travelled to Mexico City and started to work in the Socialist Realist tradition popular at the time. In this large wood sculpture, Whitley says the artist created a fist that would have immediately resonated as a symbol of black power at the time, made from mahogany wood “as if it was black skin”.



Eye, 1972 Betye Saar, Private Collection © Betye Saar. Courtesy of the Artist and Roberts & Tilton, Los Angeles, California

3. Betye Saar, *Eye*, 1969

Trained as a garment designer and printmaker, Saar's work features in two different places in the exhibition. *Eye* is in the penultimate room, which is a painstakingly accurate recreation of a solo show she held in 1973. She largely made assembled works, for which she took racist memorabilia – pamphlets, literature, advertising, much of it found in LA's famous Rose Bowl market – and subverted it. Throughout her career, Saar continually referenced the visual culture of Haiti and Lagos, which she travelled to in the 1960s.



American People Series #20: Die, 1967 © Faith Ringgold

4. Faith Ringgold, *American People #20 Die*, 1968

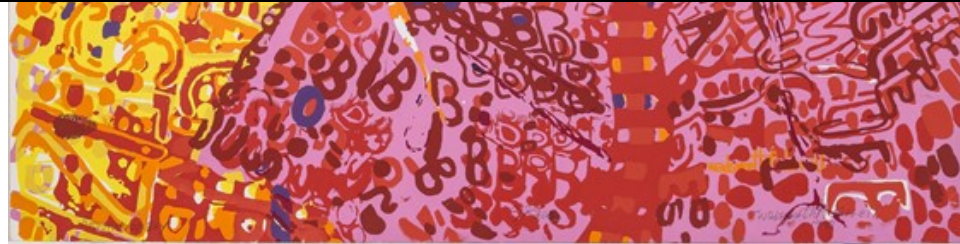
This painting by Faith Ringgold is a significant early work from the Harlem-born artist. In *American People #20 Die*, Ringgold depicts a bloody race riot in 1967, which, with its murdered bodies and expressions of despair, references Picasso's painting *Guernica*. It's a fine example of Ringgold's distinct painting style, which she applied to murals as well as canvases. Despite her love of painting, Ringgold was best known for her children's books and quilts, such as *Tar Beach* (1986), in which an African American family are pictured having dinner on their roof.



5. Roy DeCarava, *Couple Walking*, 1960

"We orbit different groups of artists and responses to the Civil Rights Movement," says Whitley of the exhibition, "but the important thing to remember is that not all the artists in the show agree with each other." In comparison to Ringgold's massacre scenes, DeCarava's image of a couple walking is the perfect example of the contrasting art coming out of the movement. "Every room in the show is led by an artist quote, and you'll see the quotes don't always agree with each other – a lot of the opinions clash," Whitley says.





Revolutionary, 1972 Wadsworth Jarrell, private Collection © Wadsworth Jarrell

6. Sam Gilliam, *Carousel Change*, 1969

In the 1960s and 1970s, Tupelo, Mississippi-born Gilliam became famous for what were labelled his 'drape paintings', tens of metres of dyed canvas draped from the ceiling to make sculptural shapes. During those decades, his star was on the rise and he exhibited at MoMA. Then it all ended. In 2015, he had a major comeback as a key Abstract Expressionist with a solo show at Frieze Masters in London, spurred by his newfound representation at LA's Kordansky Gallery.





Did the Bear Sit Under the Tree?, 1969 © Benny Andrews Estate; Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York, NY

7. Benny Andrews, *Did the Bear Sit Under the Tree*, 1969

Collagist and painter Andrews' 1969 work *Did the Bear Sit Under the Tree* is one of many in the show by people who have contributed hugely to the evolution of modern art but gone unknown in the mainstream. After graduating from the Art Institute of Chicago he decamped to Manhattan where he had a studio on the lower east side, making collages and paintings depicting African American life. With its references to American iconography, a divide between north and south America, and the Black Power movement, *Did the Bear Sit Under the Tree* is a printed fabric collage typical of Andrews' work during that year.





Revolutionary Suit, 1969, Remade 2010 Jae Jarrell, Courtesy of Jae Jarrell

8. Jae Jarrell, *Revolutionary Suit*, 1968

Jarrell's *Revolutionary Suit* is one of the standout pieces in *Soul of a Nation*. She was one of the co-founders of AfriCOBRA, a black artist movement which drew on the history of African art to contribute to the Civil Rights Movement discourse. Inspired by her grandfather's career as a tailor, she combined an interest in the craft with her drive to represent the communities of the the black American diaspora, sewing scenes of community and family life onto women's suits, which she regularly wore herself.



Pittsburgh Memory, 1964 Romare Bearden © Romare Bearden Foundation/DACS, London/VAGA, New York 2017

9. Romare Bearden, *Pittsburgh Memory*, 1964

There is intentionally no chronological order to *Soul of a Nation*. Instead, the show dives deep into movements and trends both well known and totally forgotten. One of the best rooms looks at collage, which Whitley describes as a “quiet room” and features Romare Bearden’s *Pittsburgh Memory*. “We wanted to look at how collage can, and has, represented the American experience,” Whitley says. The painting was used for the cover of the album *And Then You Shoot Your Cousin* (2014) by The Roots, proving its enduring cultural impact.



Trane, 1969

William T. Williams © William T. Williams, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery LLC, New York NY

10. William T. Williams, *Trane*, 1969

Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power runs from July 12 until October 22, 2017 at Tate Modern, London.

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