



# Soul of a Nation

Art in the Age of Black Power  
1963–1983

*Interview by Gwynned Vitello*

“In the 1960s, America was fucked up and didn’t see what some artists or what black artists were doing... My painting were about people that were part of my life.” —Barkley L. Hendricks



**P**ainter Charles White, celebrated this year in a series of retrospectives, recognized the power: "Art must be an integral part of the struggle. It can't simply mirror what's taking place. It must adapt itself to human needs. It must ally itself with the forces of liberation." He is among scores of African American artists featured in *Soul of a Nation*, the blockbuster conceived at London's Tate that testifies to the tumultuous pre-shocks that trembled through the 1960s to the early 80s. It's a show about potential, urgency and dignity, and about a practice that White described as, "the challenge of how beautiful life can be." I learned more about the artists in speaking with Tim Burgard, Curator in Charge of American Arts at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, where the show opens November 9, 2019.

**Gwynned Vitello: There is always interest in how a show originates, but especially in this case. How did a show about our nation originate at England's Tate Museum?**  
**Tim Burgard:** A lot of people ask that question, and I think there are at least two important things to say about it. One is, by having it organized by a British museum in London, with the co-curator Mark Godfrey being British himself, you have what might be described as an almost anthropological perspective. I think Americans are inevitably so close to these issues, historically and contemporaneously, that having someone with a more global, outside perspective

**Every work of art has a moment, has a time...there is nothing like a work of art.**  
 —Sam Gilliam

actually brings less baggage. The flip side is that co-curator Zoey Whitley is African-American, and so, she has that vision and voice, a person who is culturally attuned and sensitive to what it means to be an American and confront these issues. So I think they have the benefit of a sort of dual perspective.

We're the fifth venue, and the first signed up by our director Thomas Campbell. This was a high priority for him to move mountains and make this exhibition happen on fairly short notice, and absolutely every staff member jumped on this to make it happen to our usual high standards. Everyone knows how important this is. I think it's very telling that so many artists are making the effort to attend, finally getting appropriate recognition for their accomplishments. Several, like the brilliantly

endowed Barkley Hendricks, passed away during the run of the exhibition, but we do have his painting *What's Going On*, maybe the iconic image of the show.

**I would think all the major cities would want the opportunity to host this show.**

That's true, and I think it's fair to say that this has been widely acknowledged as one of the "exhibitions of the year," a revelatory, transformative and insightful exhibition that's been long overdue. It's the most comprehensive for this two-decade period of 1963 through '83, and it sort of digs deep into a lot of the issues and artists who are well-known, but has also helped bring to the foreground those artists who have been neglected for decades.

**Whose work has been hanging in people's living and dining rooms, right?**

You can imagine living with a work of art that you love and holds deep meaning. You bought it, in many cases, decades before museums were interested in these artists and their work. Having it leave your home for two years is a big commitment, but what's fascinating is that everyone, both institutional and private collectors, as well, have made the commitment. The only exception is if you have a very light-sensitive work on paper. So, if you have a David Hammons's body print that is made with vegetable oil and powdered pigment, it is inherently a work on paper and light-sensitive, but we've rotated and found other works by him.

**And you will have new works by some of the artists, as well as a focus on locals like Emory Douglas?**

Every new venue inevitably brings to the fore artists and works that have special resonance in their areas, and we have added works by Bay Area artists. Douglas is certainly in the show, and you can expect some of his iconic images. I'm thinking of *Only on the Bones of the Oppressors can the People's Freedom be Founded*. It's very telling that it's 1969, so we see a very militant, beret-wearing futuristic image with a radiating sunset pattern of light emanating from him. He's silhouetted completely in black, with a symbol of the Black Panther party at the bottom of the poster. It very much reflects black power, black nationalism and the Panthers's movement—that is, by any means, if necessary, they will pick up arms to protect themselves, their families, their communities and their children. Compare this to *Afro-American Solidarity with the Oppressed People of the World*. It's 1971, two years later, and all of a sudden, you see reference to Pan-African solidarity and nationalism. Not just thinking locally, but globally in solidarity with the oppressed people of the world. And interestingly, it's a woman, and not only does she have a gun, but she is also carrying a spear. So, Emory Douglas played an extraordinary role in disseminating the purpose and politics of the party.



**You will also have Ruth Marion-Baruch's photos?**

She got permission from the Black Panthers to photograph them day to day, on-site. Over the winter of 1968-69, they were given an exhibition at the de Young, which garnered 100,000 visitors, which in the pre-King Tut blockbuster era, is really astonishing. There's the famous photograph of the Alameda Courthouse, and they're wearing the "Free Huey" Black Panther Flags, as well as photos of the famous breakfast program, where they provided meals for children. We'll have at least

**The ghetto itself is the gallery for the revolutionary artist.** —Emory Douglas

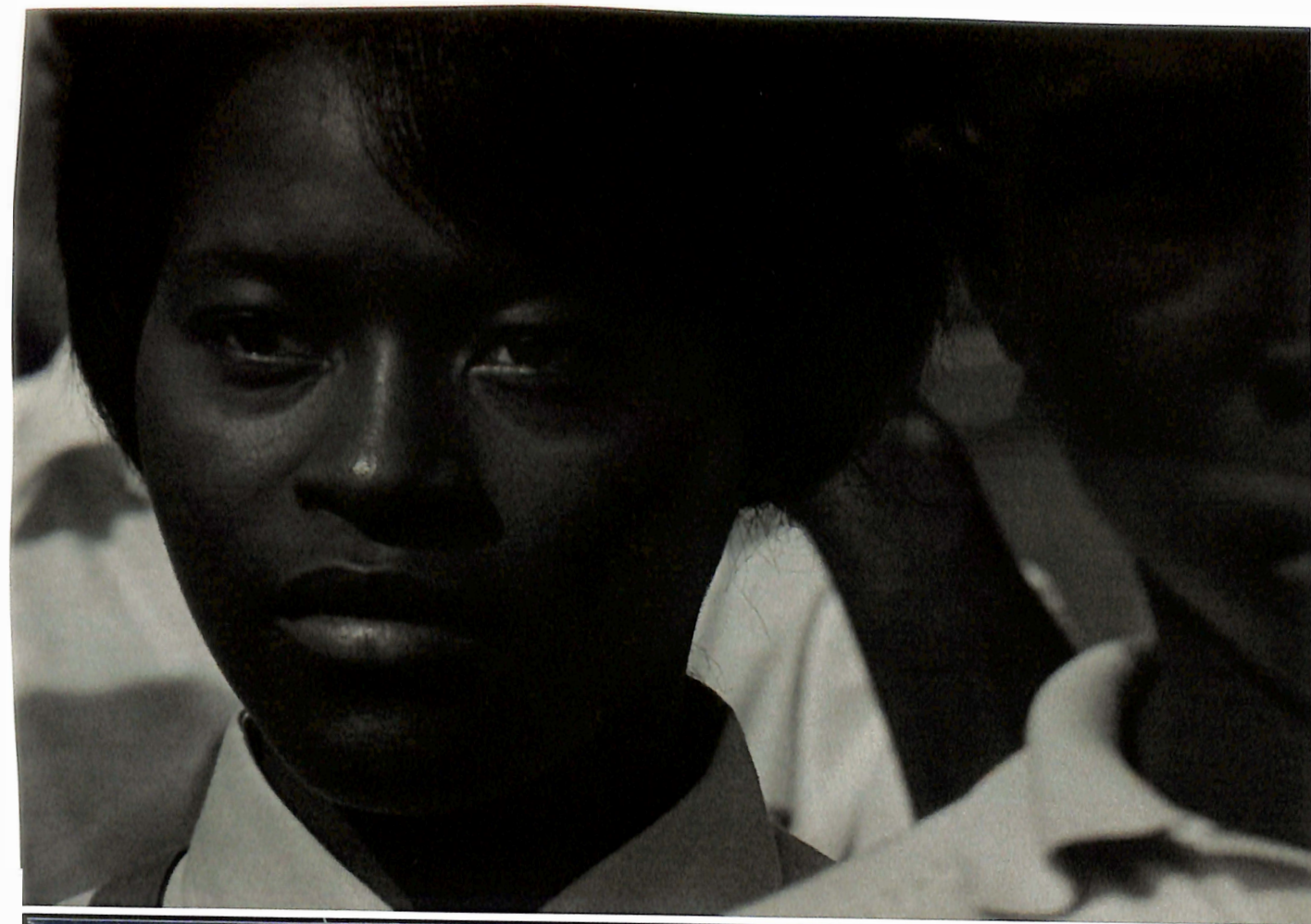
twenty of the photos, just mounted on the walls as you enter the show.

**A different type style of photography is the work of Roy DeCarava, who has become one of my favorites in the show.**

He is one of the first fine art photographers to really be able to support himself through his

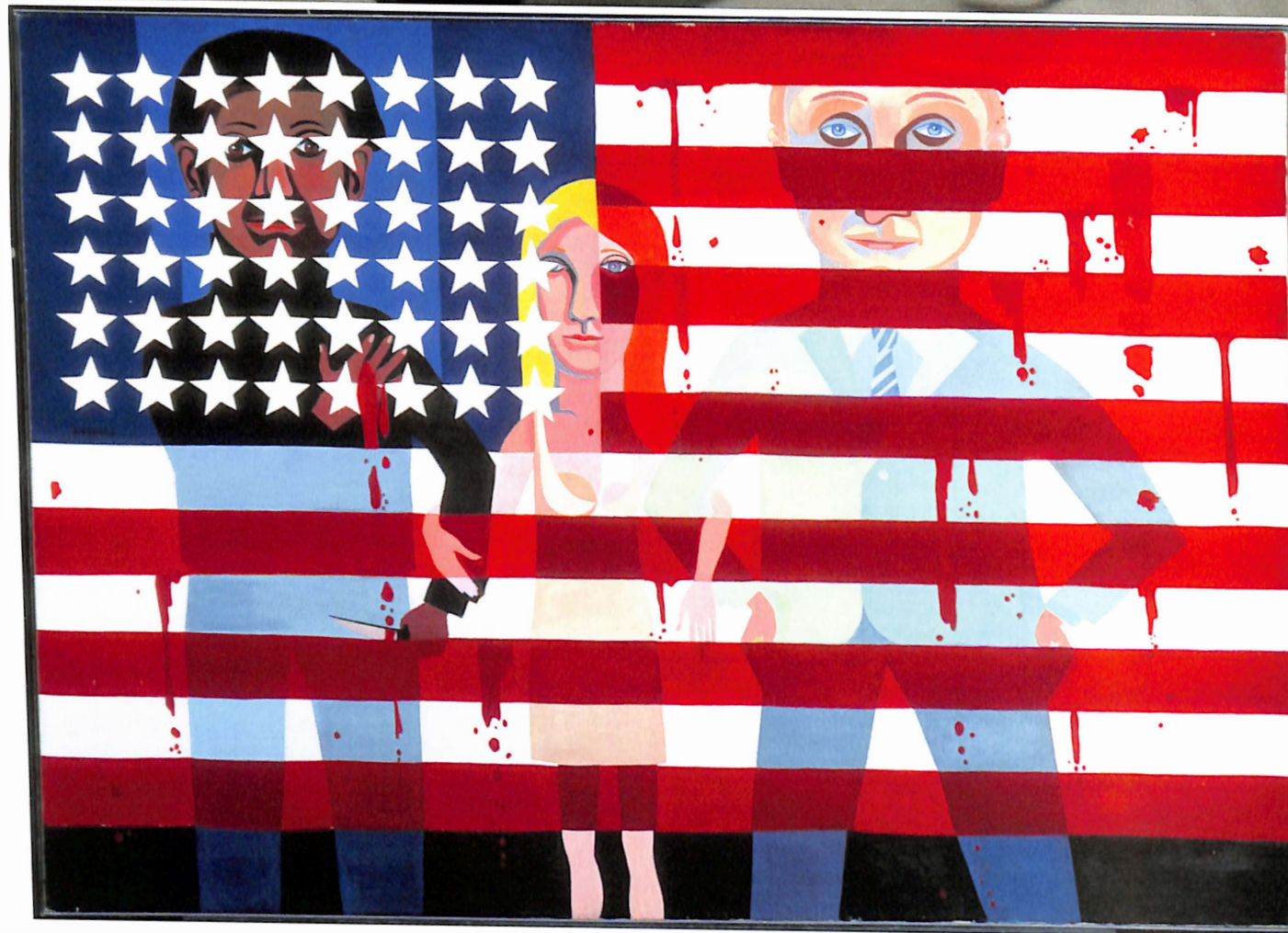






“There were no black images of dignity, no images of beautiful black people. There was this big hole. I tried to fill it.”

—Roy DeCarava



“It’s the 1960’s, all hell is breaking loose, and you’re painting flowers and leaves ... your job is to tell your story, who you are, where you came from.”

—Faith Ringgold

work rather than purely on commission doing portraits or photo essays for journals, magazines and so forth. Look at *Mississippi Freedom Marcher* and note the sense of solidarity of this incredibly beautiful young African American woman, her face in close-up, her colleagues shoulder to shoulder, slightly both in front and behind her. You just feel not only the youth of these marchers, but their sense of determination and optimism combined. One of the aspects that really comes out when you look at an entire wall of DeCarava photographs in the exhibition is being immediately struck by the dark tonal range that is very rich, very luminous, and that you have to work at. It’s not handed to you instantly. You have to let your eyes adjust to this much more compacted tonal range. There might be little or no light gray, but there is a whole spectrum of medium to dark grays and blacks.

Like all great works of art, after you look and think about it, you walk away and realize that it’s a great lesson in the value of deeper looking and thinking, and that’s one of the great contributions DeCarava makes. It’s not just the innovation of subject matter and printing techniques, but like all great works of art, he encourages and inspires the viewer to walk away and apply the lesson they’ve learned to their own daily lives and to everything they look at or talk about.

**Speaking of black and white, that was the theme of the Spiral Group, which opens the show and got the art movement rolling.**

The members of Spiral were all living and working in New York City and knew each other very well, as the art world was generally quite small then. Many of the artists crossed paths with each other and, in this case, found common motivation in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. They were also inspired by events in the South, especially Birmingham, also known as Bombingham at the time. I think it was a real turning point to see Theophilus “Bull” Connor, the Commissioner of Public Safety, unleashing fire hoses and German Shepherd attack dogs on protestors, many of whom were teenagers. The artists got together and decided, “What can we do? What should we do?”

But it’s also very revealing for one of the other major themes of the exhibition, which is the issue of figuration versus abstraction and social content versus freedom of expression. That’s when they tried to decide, when mounting the exhibition, what the content of the exhibition should be. Should it speak to these issues explicitly? So the disagreements, even within the Spiral Group, were such that they decided to exhibit works in black and white. That would be open-minded enough to allow everyone to participate but give them artistic latitude to have the freedom of expression they demanded for themselves.

**Which is an underlying theme of the exhibition.** This came down to a very core issue, especially



for the artists working in what appeared to be abstract modes, as they’ve talked about how they were often accused of being traitors for the cause, as in, “You cannot ignore what’s happening in this country. You must step up and take action through your work.”

There certainly is a subtext running through a work, like Norman Lewis’s *America the Beautiful*, with its flickering flames. Many of those artists pointed out that abstraction itself represents an avant-garde form of expression, a freedom of expression that has deep roots in African cultures, as Picasso famously discovered for himself when he appropriated African art that he saw in the Trocadero Museum in Paris and incorporated to help formulate his own works. These works of course, have thousands of years of tradition behind them. Artists working in abstract modes

“How do you make a form that forces a painting to be an experience that is not necessarily easy to see, handle or look at?”

—William T. Williams

were also finding new modes of expression in forms like jazz.

**That’s kind of exemplified in William T. Williams’s piece, right?**

*Hawk’s Return* is in the exhibition, and it’s a reference to Coleman Hawkins, a famous jazz musician. What appears, at first glance, to be a purely geometric abstraction, is actually a work informed by the kinds of abstract sounds being created by jazz musicians, going back generations, but also breaking through in new forms like bebop or free jazz. What they’re doing in their work is improvising, and so we find





Above: Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, Mixed media assemblage, 11 7/8" x 8" x 2 7/8", 1972. Collection of Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Berkeley, California, purchased with the aid of funds from the National Endowment for the Arts (selected by The Committee for the Acquisition of Afro-American Art), Courtesy of the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles, California. Photo Benjamin Blackwell



“ I had this Aunt Jemima, and I wanted to put a rifle and grenade under her skirt. I wanted to empower her. I wanted people to know that Black people wouldn't be enslaved by that.” —Betye Saar

“ Art makes you look at your world, and you see other things that give you ways of extending your own vision. Welding opened up sculpture for me.” —Melvin Edwards

Above: Melvin Edwards, *William and Peter*, Barbed wire and chain, 138 5/8" x 220", 1969/2012. Courtesy Alexander Gray Associates, New York, Stephen Friedman Gallery, London. © Melvin Edwards/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



a visual equivalence in painting and sculpture. You might have heavier bass in certain areas, and they might be both physically larger or heavier colors. Lighter, higher sorts of treble notes might, for example, be a lemon yellow.

**I was hoping to see something from Ray Loving, who moved from geometric cubes to torn canvas paintings, away from abstract, when he remarked that, "I was out of those boxes. I had gotten completely out of jail."**

There are only a small number of those deconstructed canvases, but they're quite fragile

**/// In my work, I am concerned with universal equivalents. Am I Black conscious? Yes, but not Black self-conscious."**

—Phillip Lindsay Mason

because he'd already, of course, taken them apart to collage them back together. The one that was originally in the exhibition fell out because it had traveled so much over the past two and a half years. But an artist who reflects that kind of thinking would be Sam Gilliam, whose famous draped work *Carousel Change* is in the show. This is an example where he takes the canvas completely off the stretcher, essentially discards the stretcher as a concept, and works with the draped canvas alone; paints on the floor, paints on the wall, hangs them up on the wall and drapes it in different configurations every time it's installed.

**One reviewer had a definite preference for it being hung in an open fashion, rather than bunched up, where it maybe gave a feeling of oppression.**

Yes, there is flexibility into how his works are

installed, and the point you make is that sense of extension or oppression, depending how you install it. So the more you compress it, the more you extenuate the folds and furls, and it might bring up other associations like bunting. This bunting format is interesting because you associate it with historic bunting. He ties these little knots out of rope at the top of his drapes to hang them on the wall, and these are loaded symbols in an era when lynchings are still occurring. So foremost is that Gilliam is a great innovator. To move the canvas completely from the stretcher and deconstruct the western tradition of painting was remarkable. What's also interesting is this very enigmatic title *Carousel Change*, which is a very conscious choice. It has some resemblance to an actual merry-go-round, that, by definition, keeps going in a circle, a phrase used when people want change and they're not getting it. He's like, "We're just going around in circles here."

**Bunting brings to mind the American flag, which is a subtext for many images in the show.** There's Benny Andrews's *Did the Bear Sit Under the Tree*, where the African American man is shaking his fist at the flag. Is he actually rolling up the flag in order to be seen and heard, or might the flag be rolling over him? The issue of patriotism or charge of being unpatriotic is often used to sort of marginalize legitimate protest or demands for equal rights.

Faith Ringgold's *The Flag is Bleeding* shows that symbol, *e pluribus unum*, "out of many, one." She shows the white woman in the middle, linked arm-in-arm with the black man and the white man, both bleeding from wounds to the heart. The black man's right hand is over his heart, but is it to stanch the bleeding or pledge allegiance? Looking at the thirteen original stars and stripes raises the specter of the prison we are all in. They're like prison bars, and somehow we're all imprisoned by the history of racism and prejudice in this country, as well as the civil conflicts that threatened (and threaten) to tear apart the fabric of the flag, or our nation. Whereas the white woman and man are more visible, the African American man is almost completely obliterated by the field of stars, so you don't see him at first. We decided to hang this by Andrews's painting where there's also this issue of revealing and concealing.

**Thinking about the emphasis on family within AfriCOBRA, the strong women portrayed by Emory Douglas, and Linda Goode-Bryant's work with *Just Above Midtown* as just a few examples, I feel that that women were a big influence in the movement, and not just as subjects.**

I think that's true, and as has happened throughout history, when any group is marginalized by so-called mainstream society, you often find solidarity with each other. I can imagine for the women artists there was a sense of solidarity in a still male-dominated art world. At the same time, the women's movement is rising to the fore, you have Betye Saar's *Aunt*

**/// It was not just a fight being a black person in a white society. It was also a fight being a poor person in a total society."**

—Benny Andrews

*Jemima* as a visual protest in the public domain. Her assemblage, which was first exhibited at Rainbow Sign, the cultural center in Berkeley, picks up a gun to combat the racist stereotypes inherent in the Aunt Jemima corporate logo. A similar one is Elizabeth Catlett's sculpture, called *Unity*, which was also shown at Rainbow Sign.

**Which brings us to another Bay Area connection in artist Phillip Lindsay Mason, who painted *Mary Ann Pollar, founder of Rainbow Sign*.**

We believe that is Pollar, and he portrays her holding a candle, which serves as a beacon, and then the hem of her dress has the symbolic rainbow configuration. His paintings are new to this version of the show, and *The Hero* is another example. The first black superhero, *The Black Panther*, appeared in 1966, and Mason's representation is a very conventional representation in the style of Roy Lichtenstein or Mel Ramos, bursting forth explosively. But in this portrayal, he's wearing a chain around his waist as a belt. Formerly a symbol of bondage, he's transformed it, through his super-powers and abilities, into a symbol of solidarity. The links in the chain represent both his personal strength, but also the collective strength of his communities.

**Actual chains are used in Melvin Edward's *Curtain*, which is very powerful.**

It was his intention to take these very inexpensive objects and transform them. It's, you know, a bunch of wires and chains hanging in a sort of vertical-aligned grid, although it's not a perfect grid, right? As you get closer, you see what appears to be purely abstract with no social meaning. Barbed wire might conjure the American West, but others might see containment or prison. And if you say chains, especially in the context of an African American artist cognizant of history, you consider bondage and realize how he's linked them together. It's a curtain. You can see through, but it's still a barrier, an incredibly loaded symbol for division, black versus white. What's both powerful and subtle in the work is that our definitions of visibility or invisibility are more complicated than they might seem at first glance.

As viewers walk through the exhibition, I think one of the great lessons is that what appears to be opposing aesthetic camps of art do have a lot of common ground. In the realm of art, which parallels the political world we all inhabit, these artists are plumbing the depths of their personal and collective histories, bringing these issues full circle. What struck me most at an all-day symposium in Los Angeles is the depth of emotion these artists feel after decades of neglect by curators, museums, critics, and let's be honest,



**/// I just hope I can materialize something out of all this frustration as a Black artist in America."** —Norman Lewis

Thelma Golden, Director of the Studio Museum in Harlem—"I have good news and I have bad news. This exhibition has never been more relevant." ■

everyone; that they are finally having this moment of astonishing and appropriate recognition. And the most memorable quote of that day was from

*Soul of a Nation opens at San Francisco's de Young Museum November 9, 2019, is on view through March 8, 2020 and travels to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston in April 2020.*