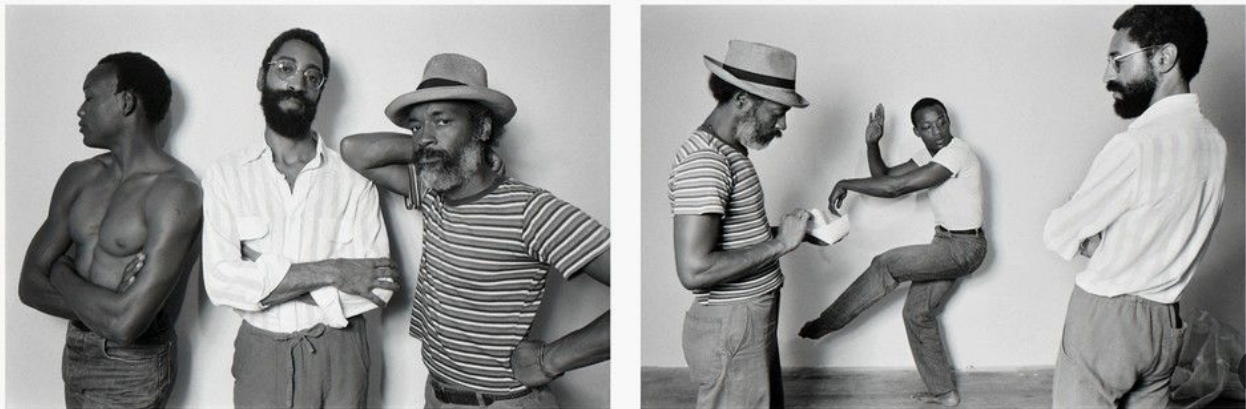


Art Market

This Dealer Fought for African-American Artists for Decades—Now the Market Is Paying Attention

Nate Freeman May 1, 2019 12:40 pm



Dawoud Bey *David Hammons, Bill T Jones, Philip Mallory Jones at Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery, 1983, 1983*
Rena Bransten Gallery

In the early 1970s, when a graduate student in her early twenties named Linda Goode Bryant was trying to start a gallery in New York City devoted to formally subversive black Conceptual artists, the dealers on 57th Street, for the most part, turned up their noses. She couldn't even find someone to rent her space.

“When I called realtors to try and find a space on 57th Street, most of the realtors hung up,” Bryant said recently over the phone. “They said, ‘Well, what kind of gallery are you going to have?’ And I said,

‘I have a gallery that shows the work of black artists’—*clink*. Every time, you know—*clink*.’



Norman Lewis, *Celestial Majesty*, 1976. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery.

Now, decades after Bryant opened Just Above Midtown (JAM) in 1974 and helped launch the careers of artists such as David Hammons and Howardena Pindell, visitors to the VIP preview

of Frieze New York this morning saw much more than just a booth of JAM artists—Frieze presented an entire multi-booth section devoted to the gallery’s legacy. (The Museum of Modern Art is also getting set to pay tribute to Bryant; on Tuesday, it announced that it will mount a show about JAM in 2022, curated by Thomas J. Lax.)

For the second year in a row, the organizers of Frieze New York asked a curator to put together a section at the fair devoted to a single art dealer—a sort of mini-exhibition that takes place across a few booths at a fair; very much the product of a curator’s vision, but also featuring works for sale. Last year, Matthew Higgs asked a group of galleries to bring work by artists whose careers were boosted early on by Hudson, the uncompromising Lower East Side dealer who watched as his artists got big, even as his gallery stayed small. Case in point: In 2018, Takashi Murakami—who had one of his first U.S. shows at Hudson’s Feature Inc. gallery—was featured in a booth presented by Gagosian, and David Zwirner showed a selection of Raymond Pettibon works.



Lorna Simpson *Rock*, 2019
Hauser & Wirth



Lorna Simpson *Magician*, 2019
Hauser & Wirth

For this year's edition, the fair asked Franklin Sirmans, the director of the Pérez Art Museum Miami (PAMM), to honor Bryant and the artists she championed long before the mainstream art market embraced them. Some of the artists Bryant showed at JAM now have the full machinery of mega-galleries promoting their work all over the world. Norman Lewis will be presented by Michael Rosenfeld

Gallery, while Lorna Simpson will be presented by global powerhouse gallery Hauser & Wirth—which, according to sales reported at Art Basel in Hong Kong in March, is now selling new works by Simpson for more than \$400,000.

In an interview with Bryant and Sirmans a few days before the opening of the fair on Randall’s Island, they discussed how the special section came together, and JAM’s legacy—not just in the world of gallery circuits and art fairs, but in the institutional context, as well. Sirmans said developments such as PAMM’s Fund for African American Art—which has been endowed by Jorge Pérez and the Knight Foundation since 2013—and the increasing prominence of black board members at U.S. museums in general can both be partly attributed to JAM.

“I think of somebody like A.C. Hudgins, who’s been close to JAM forever—that’s somebody who serves on the board of MoMA now,” said Sirmans, referring to the art collector who has been on the Museum of Modern Art’s board since 2012 and recently joined the Rauschenberg Foundation’s board.

At institutions around the country, Sirmans added, there are now more black collectors and patrons on museum boards—including the

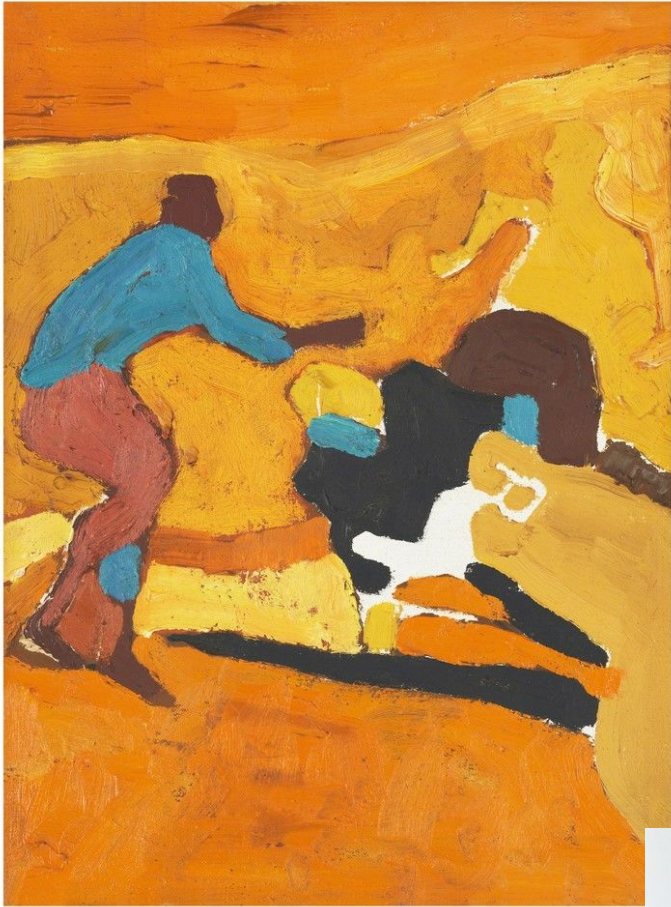


Senga Nengudi performing Air Propo at JAM, 1981. Courtesy Senga Nengudi and Lévy Gorvy.

one he directs.

“I know for me personally, coming to Miami, it was like—I walked into a room, and there were several people there who looked like me and knew the history of these artists,” he said. But for a long time, that was not the case.

“Why is she here?”



Howardena Pindell *Untitled (Baseball)*, 1966



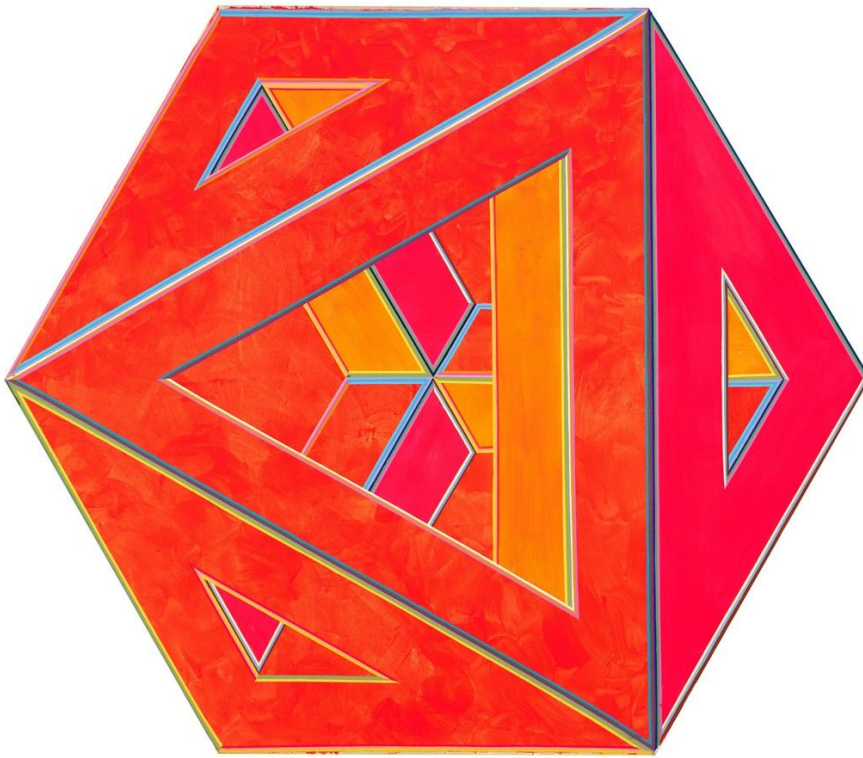
David Hammons *Champ*, 1989



Bryant started JAM as a way to show black Conceptual artists who had no other place to exhibit, and immediately started to cause a stir among her more staid colleagues in the neighborhood. David Hammons had his first New York show in 1975 at JAM, and it proved radically different from what was being shown among the old-guard spaces. Titled “Greasy Bags and Barbecue Bones,” it featured lines of black hair glued to fat-soaked brown bags from a fried chicken joint.

“For the most part, that strip from Madison to Sixth Avenue was like ‘Why did you rent her space?’” Bryant said. “‘And why is she here?’”

At the time, Sirmans was growing up in Harlem, some 50 blocks north, with a father who was becoming a pretty serious art collector, buying work from and supporting the careers of Ed Clark and Al Loving. But Sirmans said Just Above Midtown wasn’t quite on the radar of his art patron father—or his own.



Alvin Loving Jr. *Septehedron 34*, 1970
Whitney Museum of American Art

“JAM was always like, ‘*Whoa*, this is something a little *too cool* for my father,’” Sirmans said. “And I didn’t know it very well. When the gallery opened, I was a kid.”

Sirmans said he first encountered Bryant and JAM’s legacies when he contributed to the catalogue for the exhibition “Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art,” which opened in November 2012 at the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. He focused on a JAM artist, Lorraine O’Grady, as well as another, Adrian Piper. He immediately did a deep dive on the space, and began plotting a potential show.

“In the back of my head, at least from that point, was always this idea: ‘Wow, I would love to do a show just about Just Above Midtown,’” he recalled.



Lorraine O'Grady *Art Is. . . (Dancer in Grass Skirt)*, , 1983/2009
Alexander Gray Associates

Bryant has returned to the art world in the last few years after an extended break. After closing JAM in 1986, she went to work for New York City mayor David Dinkins before making documentary films through the Active Citizen Project. In 2008, she started Project EATS, a sustainable farming initiative with farms upstate and on

rooftops in New York City. (Project EATS will have a booth alongside Frieze's JAM tribute section, and 10 percent of the fair's gross from the sale of works in the special section will go to the nonprofit.)

The art world learns to JAM



Ming Smith, *Red Hot Jazz Europe*, 1982. Courtesy of Jenkins Johnson.

Then, in 2017, an entire room of “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power”—the widely celebrated show of African-American

artists that started at Tate Modern before traveling to the Brooklyn Museum, Crystal Bridges, and The Broad—celebrated Bryant and her gallery. Such institutional recognition may have seemed impossible in the 1970s, when Bryant said she had to hand over a list of black artists to the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and plead with him to acquire works by any of them.

But decades later, the stature of galleries clamoring to represent JAM artists is astounding. In addition to the partnerships between the Norman Lewis estate and Michael Rosenfeld, and between Lorna Simpson and Hauser & Wirth, Senga Nengudi will be presented in the fair jointly by New York's Thomas Erben Gallery and Sprüth Magers, which has galleries in Berlin, London, and Los Angeles, though Nengudi is also represented by global powerhouse Lévy Gorvy. Garth Greenan is showing Pindell—though it should be noted that earlier this year, the tastemaking London gallery Victoria Miro announced that it will be repping the artist in Europe.

Dawoud Bey's photographs of performative moments and actions by Hammons will be presented by Rena Bransten Gallery and Stephen Daiter Gallery, while O'Grady's works will be presented by Alexander Gray Associates. And the photographer Ming Smith will be shown by Jenkins Johnson Gallery, which has spaces in Brooklyn and San Francisco.



Dawoud Bey *The Birmingham Project: Imani Richardson and Carolyn Mickel, 2012*

Other JAM artists not included in the special section at Frieze New York are also making strides in the market. Fred Wilson has long been represented by Pace, one of the world’s most powerful art-dealing outfits. Last year, Susan Inglett Gallery announced that, going forward, it would be representing Maren Hassinger. And later this month, Hammons will have his first show in Los Angeles in 45 years—and it will be at Hauser & Wirth’s block-sized campus in the city’s downtown arts district.

“You’ve got so many young scholars and dealers who are now looking back at history—and changing that history or at least making it a more inclusive history,” Sirmans said.



Fred Wilson *Dan-Bashi*, 2018
Bronx Museum: Benefit Auction 2018



Fred Wilson *Untitled (Zadib, Sokoto, Tokolor, Samori, Veneto, Zanzibar, Dhaka, Macao)*, 2011
Maccarone

And despite the strides artists shown by JAM have made in the past decades—and the current demand for work by black artists that has seen new records set every auction season—there is still a lack of African-American presence in the art market and in arts institutions. Last year, *T Magazine* published a story titled “Why Have There Been No Great Black Art Dealers,” noting the relative lack of African-American dealers in Chelsea. One dealer noted in the story that having three black-owned galleries in the same fair in 2017 was still “groundbreaking.” A recent study found that only 4 percent of all curators nationwide were African-American—though that is double the number in 2015, when just 2 percent of all U.S. curators were African-American.

For Bryant, the key is not getting discouraged by such statistics, and taking a leap of faith. In 1974, the artist Romare Bearden told her she would need \$50,000 to start a gallery. She didn’t have anything close to that, but opened her space anyway—because she had other assets to go on. Today’s aspiring African-American gallerists should do the same, she said.

“They can say, ‘Maybe I can’t do it this way, but I have X, Y, and Z resources right now,’” Bryant said. “And those resources don’t have to always be financial. Because I can tell you, it was a family that created JAM. It wasn’t Ms. Bryant by herself.”