



American art

## Rediscovery

### How forgotten African-American artists are coming back into the mainstream

THROUGHOUT history artists' canvases have mostly been stretched on a frame. “Carousel Change” is an exception. This work, painted by Sam Gilliam in 1970, hangs loosely from five knots, a mass of glowing pink, yellow and orange folds like a partly gathered sail. It hangs in the California home of Pamela Joyner, a prominent collector of African-American art. Nicholas Cullinan, who has curated several important American art exhibitions, calls Mr Gilliam “one of America’s greatest living abstract painters”. Which will surprise some, because even in the art world there are those who do not know of the 82-year-old African-American.

Ms Joyner is one of several private collectors who are pushing museums to show more work by black Americans—not just by today’s superstars, but also by their forgotten predecessors. Their efforts are paying off. In 2015 the Obamas hung a new acquisition, a radiant circle painting by Alma Thomas, a pioneering abstract artist, in a prominent position in the White House (pictured). Placed near works by Josef Albers and Robert Rauschenberg, two white men who are much more famous, it was a statement.

On September 24th the president will open the National Museum of African-American History and Culture in Washington, DC: in the lobby is a lustrously glazed installation by Mr Gilliam. The trend is spreading. The Kunstmuseum Basel also

has plans for a Gilliam show. Next month the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris will open an exhibition of almost 150 years of African-American art. And in 2017 Tate Modern will mount a show of mid-20th-century black American artists. Ms Joyner’s 300 works dating back to the 1950s, the subject of a book published this month, will form the basis of a touring show, starting at the Ogden Museum in New Orleans at the end of next year.

The embarrassing, some say shameful, question is how artists like Mr Gilliam and Thomas, and Norman Lewis, another abstract expressionist, were ever forgotten. Lewis was the only black artist to take part in the discussions that founded abstract expressionism at Studio 35 in New York in 1950, alongside Willem de Kooning and Robert Motherwell. Thomas became, in 1972, the first black woman to have a solo show at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Mr Gilliam, early in his career, was given a rare introductory exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

But in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, African-American abstract artists were caught in a lose-lose situation. “The conventional art world expected black painters to paint black subject matter; meanwhile the black community felt that the artistic community should create uplifting images of black people,” Ms Joyner says. Figurative artists, like Charles White, a socialist-realist, were often con-

sidered by museums to be formally uninventive. All found it hard sustaining a presence in what was, by today’s standards, a small, exclusive art market.

Forty years later the picture has radically changed. A younger generation of black American artists—Kerry James Marshall, Glenn Ligon, Kehinde Wiley, Kara Walker, Theaster Gates and Njideka Akunyili Crosby (see following article)—have found international success. Next year Mark Bradford, a social-abstractionist based in Los Angeles, will represent America at the Venice Biennale. Christopher Bedford, director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, calls Mr Bradford “one of the most significant painters of his generation”.

These artists did not forget their African-American predecessors; indeed, they often championed them in discussions about their work. This endorsement has influenced the art market, especially as collectors often start with contemporary art and work back. Mr Bradford is represented by one the market’s leading galleries, Hauser & Wirth, which earlier this year took on one of his inspirations, a 76-year-old abstract painter, Jack Whitten. “The market is hungry for material, and if the material is good—and relatively undervalued—it will eat it up,” says Franklin Sirmans, director of the Pérez Art Museum in Miami. Swann Galleries, which has dedicated African-American sales, confirms that the market for many of the older generation of artists is growing rapidly.

Mr Gilliam’s prices at auction have risen threefold in just three years. Last December a work by Lewis set a record at Swann, making just under \$1m. “Norman Lewis is the founding father of African-American abstract painting and has had a significant influence on the painters of today,” says Mr Bedford.

Market validation is one thing, but for ▶▶

▶ many collectors, it is museums that really matter. In America and increasingly abroad, museums are dependent on philanthropists to collect art, fund exhibition programmes and lend works. Young curators who are keen to make their mark are working more and more closely with philanthropists eager to make a case for under-represented artists. Patrons like Patricia Phelps de Cisneros and Estrellita Brodsky

have helped museums build their Latin American collections. Now philanthropists like Raymond McGuire, a banker, and A.C. Hudgins, a collector, are doing the same for African-American artists.

Ms Joyner says that 30 years ago Lowery Sims, the first black curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, “planted the seed in my mind, that these artists don’t get enough backing from the traditional art

world, so it’s necessary for the African-American community to instigate and participate in their support.” A member of the president’s committee on arts and humanities, a trustee of the Tate Americas Foundation and on the board of the Art Institute of Chicago, she says she approached her art activities “with a mission and a strategy to be a catalyst to reframe history”.

As the displays at Tate Modern and MOMA demonstrate, museum collections are changing. For a few, this represents the triumph of identity politics over aesthetic value. For many more, it is a reminder that museums are not, and never were, neutral spaces; their collections and judgments are shaped by the new as much as they are by new vistas on the old. It is a chance to contemplate a wider, more complex and exciting narrative: how African-American artists show a different version of America, and how some, like Mr Gilliam, have changed the language of art itself. ■