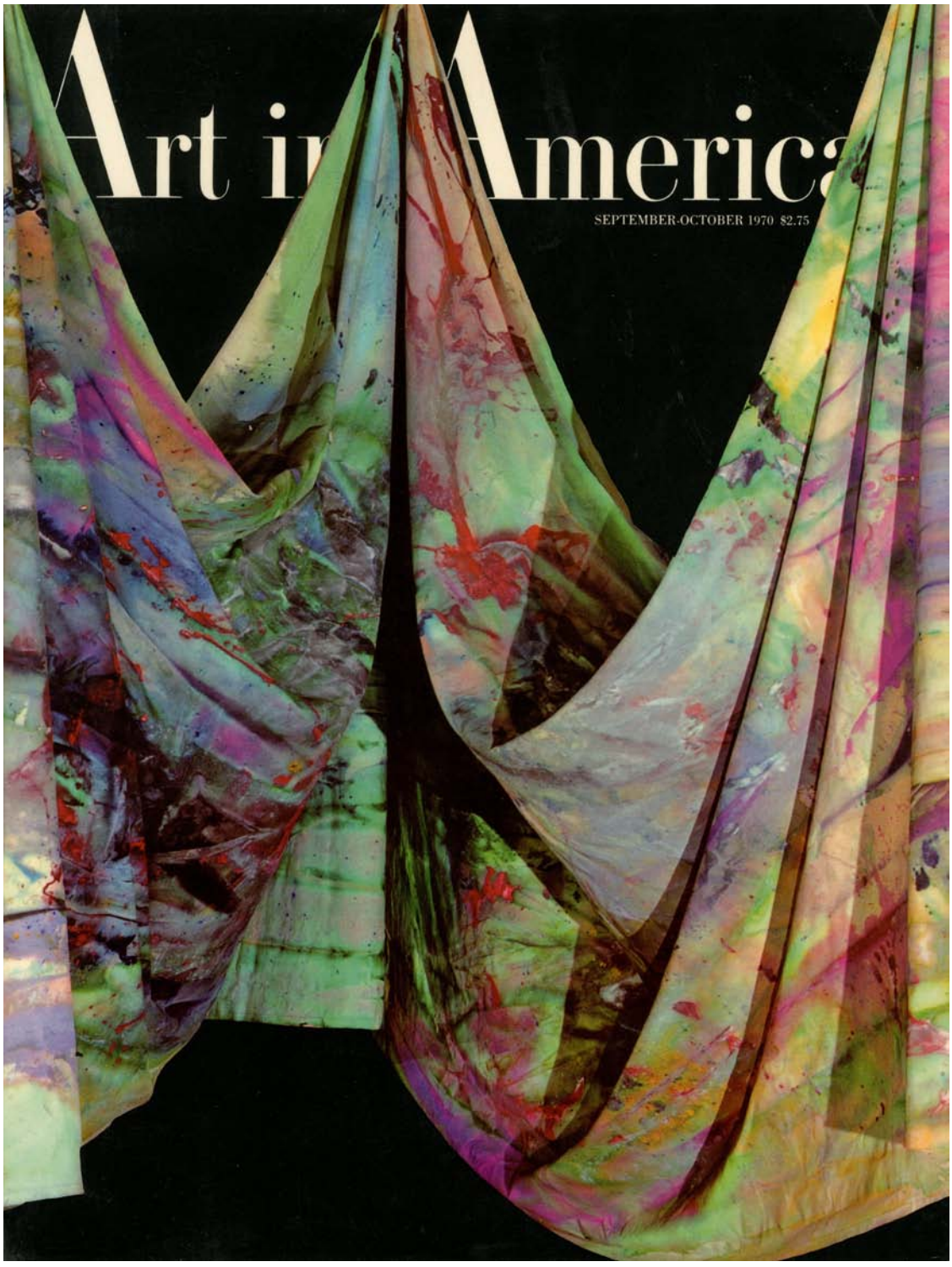
Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67



Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

BLACK ART IN AMERICA

Barbara Rose

Barbara Rose—who has written frequently for this magazine about new talent—has selected a group of works by black artists, some known and some unknown, most of them young, who she feels have special promise

What is black art? For some, "black art" refers to a specific subject matter or content relating to the black experience. Others define it as a rejection of the forms of European art in favor of primitive African forms. In researching this article, I found that definitions of black art varied from generalizations as broad as art made by painters and sculptors of Afro-American descent, to art made in imitation of primitive styles. Indeed, the heterogeneity of activity among black artists has already led to a certain factionalism. Extending from the black nationalist artists exhibiting crude expressionist works in storefront cooperative galleries in Harlem, the range broadens to include thoroughly Europeanized black painters and sculptors living as expatriates in Paris.

Because of the differences of personality and background, not to mention tastes and politics, there are a variety of attitudes the contemporary black artist may have toward the concept of black art. Reviewing the material I was able to gather—and there was a large quantity, since black people are becoming increasingly active as artists in America—I found essentially four attitudes developing among black artists toward the predominantly white American culture in which they are forced to function. Most extreme was the position of artists like James Sneed of the Harlem Art Gallery and Dr. Ademola Olugebefola of the Countee Cullen Library Community Gallery. Such artists wish to establish an autonomous black art movement closely linked with black separatist politics. Working within black communities like Watts and Harlem, directing their art exclusively to the needs of a black public, they reject the modern European tradition as a decadent style serving a white bourgeois Establishment. Many are self-taught, and most paint in neo-primitive or expressionist styles that deliberately evoke the bold patterning and bright colors of African textiles. Their themes stress values basic to the black social struggle: they paint families united or idealized workers and leaders of the black community like Malcolm X and Martin Luther King.

Other black social-protest artists like Dana Chandler, William Curtis and David Hammons, to name but a few, have had extended formal art training. Like social-protest art in general, the work of black social realists is basically illustrational and hortatory. Both stylistically and thematically, it has a great deal in common with the social realism of the thirties, which stressed poster-like clarity, the better to deliver a message which was often a call to action.

Although black separatists and social-protest artists use specifically black subject matter, others, while employing the forms and techniques of modern art, refer either implicitly or explicitly to the black experience as content. In deliberately "funky" idioms, they allude, in forms, materials, techniques or images, to an environment different in many respects from that of white America.

Black and white sociologists recently have argued that Afro-Americans have created a distinctive culture-within-a-culture in America. Up until this point, however, the black cultural contribution has been more acceptable in the popular arts and as entertainment. Now, however, the black artist wishes to make his contribution to what have formerly been considered the "high" arts: painting, sculpture, theater, poetry, etc.—that is to say, the elite arts of the museum and the university. His attacks on these institutions are part of the complex process of cultural democratization that this country is now undergoing. Developing a far more ambitious concept of himself as a cultural as well as a political force in America, the black artist today does not aspire to become a tap dancer, but an architect.

The major source of conflict between black artists and white institutions is that the former feel they are being discriminated against by the latter because their art is being judged exclusively by white European esthetic standards. Establishment tastemakers for their part reject much, if not all, black art on the grounds that it falls short of their esthetic standards. The question of an absolute scale of critical values is being debated today on many grounds. The problem in this context is whether such absolutes as "significant form" exist, and whether art being made by black artists qualifies in terms of a hierarchy of such established values. My own experience with black art causes me to conclude that its quality today is largely on a level with what was produced in America during the thirties. Many of the characteristics of prewar American art—social protest, illustration, deliberate or unconscious primitivism, work derivative of established artists—exist among black artists.

Like the precisionists, realists and American-scene painters who tried to find dignity in native American themes and authenticity in native American forms, many contemporary black artists are attempting to reclaim their own heretofore repressed cultural heritage.

Whether one recognizes the possibility of a uniquely black art depends on one's recognition of black culture as distinct and separate from white American culture. How much of an African heritage has actually been preserved by black Americans, however, is debatable. Yet many black artists understandably feel that their dignity depends on redeeming their own cultural traditions. Within the black community as well as within universities and museums, new attention is being paid to African art. Exhibitions like the recent "Impact Africa" at the Harlem Studio Museum are presented now with regularity.

The direct influence of African art on contemporary black artists is an incredibly complicated matter, since African art was, in the beginning of the century, one of the most important sources for the whole modern movement. Without African prototypes, neither Picasso's nor Brancusi's break with the academic tradition is imaginable. The question is: can a contemporary black artist forget Picasso and Brancusi, turn directly to African sources, and produce anything of consequence in terms of world art?

Barbara Rose's *recent publications include monographs on Claes Oldenburg and Helen Frankenthaler; she is also the author of "American Art Since 1900" and "American Painting." Her criticism in periodicals won the College Art Association's Mather Award in 1966 and 1969. She has taught at Queens College, the New School for Social Research, Sarah Lawrence College, the University of California at San Diego and, most recently, at Yale.*

Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

There is a lesson here, I believe, to be learned from the recent history of American art. American art rose above a provincial level mainly for two reasons: the W.P.A. provided work and exhibition possibilities for thousands of unknown artists (some of whom turned out to be Pollock, Gottlieb, Gorky, Rothko and Reinhardt); later the influx of European artists allowed firsthand experience with the most advanced art. Today the black artist faces a situation analogous to what faced the majority of American artists in the thirties: lack of funds and patronage, lack of exposure and criticism, lack of opportunity to practice technique and to experience the quality of masterpieces, not only of African art, but of all world art. Black artists today need and deserve time and space to work, patronage, encouragement and exhibitions. Wrongs are beginning to be righted, and museums are beginning to acquire works by neglected but genuinely gifted black artists of the past like the Colonial limner Joshua Johnston, and Eakins' pupil, the genre and landscape painter Henry O. Tanner.

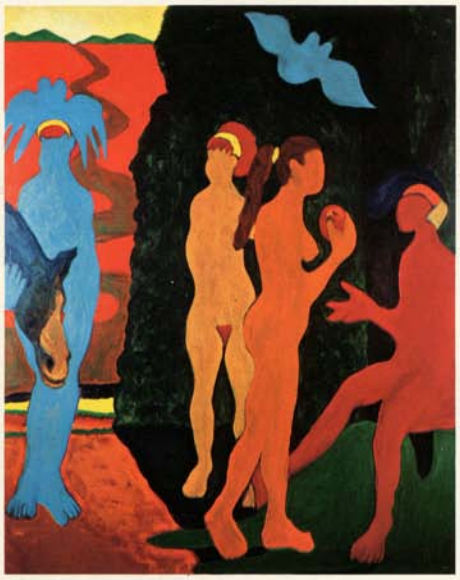
Today the white Establishment is suffering from a healthy collective guilt complex toward black artists. Even though many would prefer the term "black art" to recede from memory as black artists are allowed more opportunities to participate in American culture at all levels, for the present they will use it to attract attention from the media and museums, which need labels in order to operate. Obviously, "black art" is a meaningless term if it encompasses everything from the unconscious surrealism of Minnie Evans to the academic landscapes of Richard Mayhew, to the sophisticated collages of Romare Bearden and the elegant welded sculpture of Richard Hunt.

For the first time, the black artist is in a position to keep pace with if not outstrip the innovations of advanced art. Essential to this development are the community art programs sponsored by institutions like the Brooklyn Museum, the Walker Art Center, the Corcoran Gallery and the Whitney Museum. Providing materials, instruction and field trips, these programs introduce ghetto youths to esthetic experiences closed off to them in the past. Uninhibited by any feelings of cultural inferiority, these young people are at last beginning to find outlets for their creative potential. Their work, with its boldness and directness, and its powerful imagery and expression, points to what black artists might contribute if allowed the opportunity.

My purpose in assembling the photographs on the following pages is to show the great range of work being done by black artists today in painting, sculpture, architecture, graphics and photography. Another article could easily be done illustrating the exceptional work in the minor arts and crafts such as jewelry, ceramics and textiles now coming out of the black community. The diversity and vitality of the work indicate to me the immense contribution black artists have to offer. Whether "black art" exists is basically a political question whose answer depends on the ability of America to become a genuinely integrated nation, both culturally and politically. For the present, however, one thing is manifestly clear: American culture desperately needs the infusion of fresh energy and creativity that black artists are in a unique position to contribute today.

Bob Thompson, Judgment of Paris, *oil, 1954, and* Study for Last Painting, *ink on paper, 1966; both Martha Jackson Gallery, New York*

Although Bob Thompson died in Rome in 1966 at age 29, he left a large body of work testifying to his seriousness as an artist. In paintings like the Judgment of Paris, *he turned the great themes of classical painting into haunted expressionist fantasies. The drawing for his last, unexecuted painting was based on Titian's* Venus and Adonis. *The struggle to record his personal nightmare is apparent in the authentically expressed anguish of his statement.*



(illustrations continue through page 67)

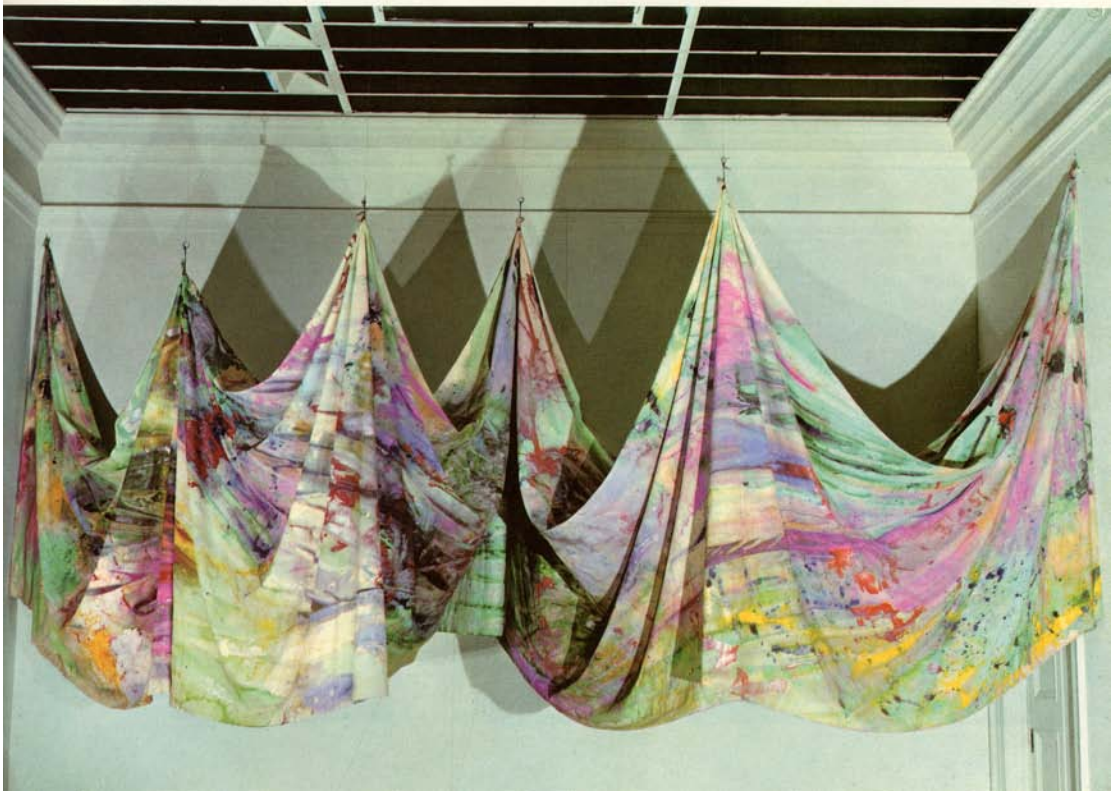
Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

Norman Lewis, Arrival and Departure, *oil, 1968; collection of the artist.*

Among the mature black artists, color abstractionist Norman Lewis is one of the most gifted. His gentle landscape abstractions, with their allusions to nature, clouds, sky and water rely on subtle color contrast to evoke a poetic image.

Sam Gilliam, Carousel Form II, *acrylic on canvas, 1969; Jefferson Place Gallery, Washington, D.C.*

A leading member of the Washington school of color painting, Gilliam has moved away from his early stained canvases (which were indebted to Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland) toward a highly original statement. Like a number of young American painters who are attempting to push abstract painting beyond the easel convention, Gilliam has begun to take his brilliantly spattered and tinted canvases off the stretcher, treating canvas as fabric and draping it informally on the wall or suspending it from the ceiling.



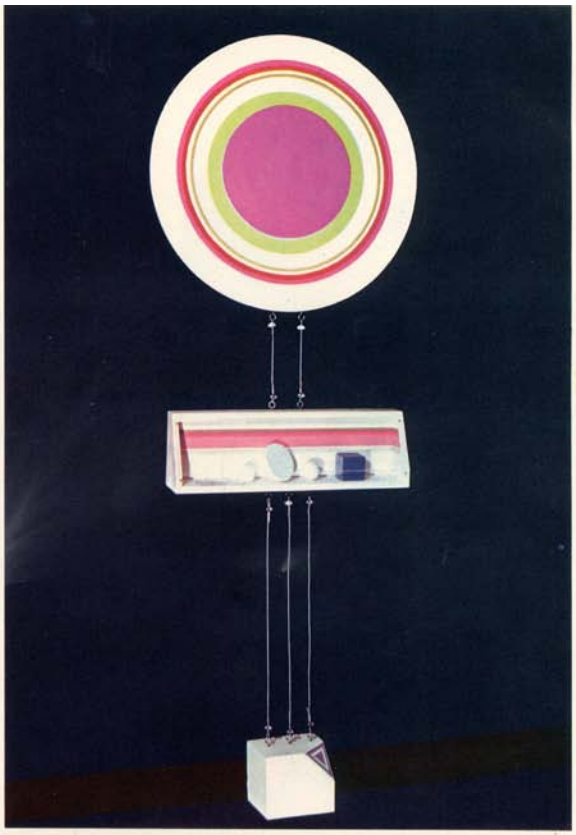
Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

Above: Toony Jones, Untitled, *wood, 1970; collection of the artist.*

Right: James Denmark, Untitled, *wood, 1970; collection of the artist.*

Working in wood, Toony Jones and James Denmark are creating large-scale sculpture with a robust vitality and strong physical presence. Although both are interested in mass and volume, Jones's twisting and convoluted carving, with its fragments of anatomy and organic protrusions, stands in stark contrast with Denmark's architectural assemblage of geometric planes and solids. Similarly the naïve directness of Jones's work, compared with the sophisticated technique and modernist form of Denmark's pieces, reveals the range of expression among black sculptors.

Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67



Alvin Smith, Dreams Are of the Dreamer, *painted wood, 1969; collection of the artist.*

Smith's constructions, although nominally abstract, allude to a secret world of surreal symbols. In this painted wood construction, a geometric format is modified to conform with the artist's fantasy of suspended shapes, floating as if in a dream.

John Chandler, Kulu Se, *acrylic on canvas, 1969; collection of the artist.*

Geometric abstraction is receiving a variety of inflections from black artists. John Chandler's optical abstractions relate to a current style, although his pattern and color are more unpredictable and consequently stronger than conventional op color and design.

Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

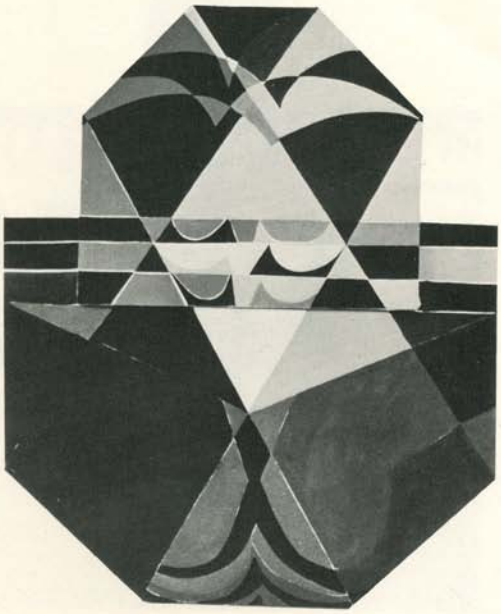
Kenneth Young, Red Dance, *acrylic on canvas, 1970; collection of the artist.*

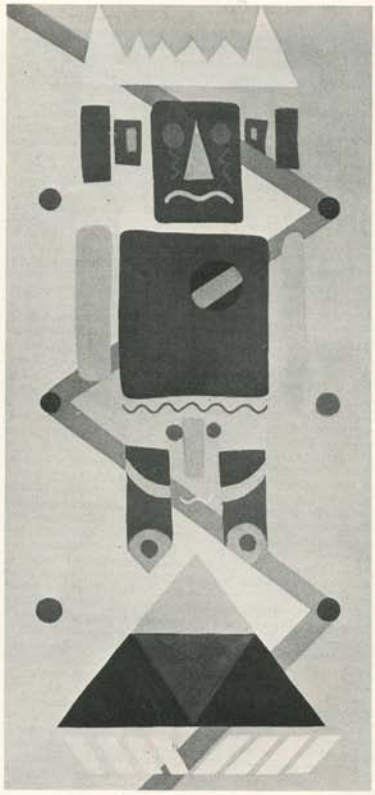
Working within the firmly established context of the Washington school of color painting, Kenneth Young dilutes paint to a watercolor-like consistency, dappling the canvas with a dazzling allover pattern of transparent spots and patches of high-key color.

Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

Right: Joe Overstreet, Ancestral Tomb for Mr. White, *acrylic on canvas, 1969; collection of the artist.*

Evolving his bold patterns and decorative forms from early studies of African art, Overstreet fills in flat areas of his shaped canvases with irregular geometric shapes. Recently he has been suspending some of his canvases from ropes.

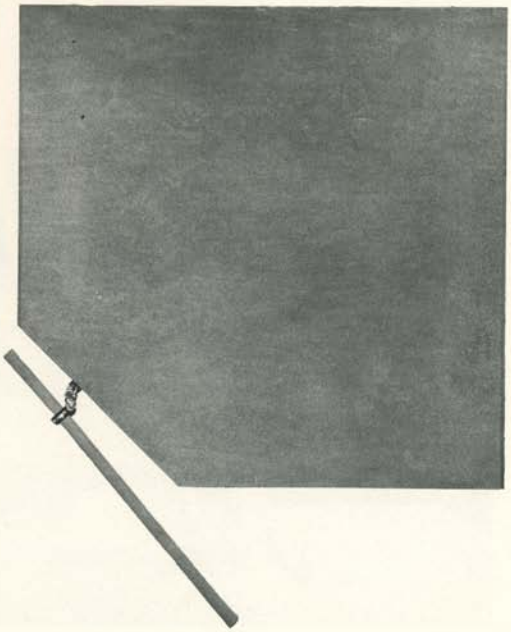




Above: Ellsworth Ausby, Untitled, *oil on canvas, 1970; collection of the artist.*

Right: Marvin Brown, Location Piece, *wax, formica, adhesive and gummed rubber, 1970; collection of the artist.*

Among the black painters creating original geometric abstractions are young artists such as Ellsworth Ausby and Marvin Brown. Ausby's frontal image, referring to the simplified design of primitive textiles and carvings, derives from the African tradition; Marvin Brown, on the other hand, has arrived at an original style of minimal painting. Using monochrome, Brown often adds interest to his literalist canvases by emphasizing their soft surface and rich texture through the use of the unconventional medium of flocking.



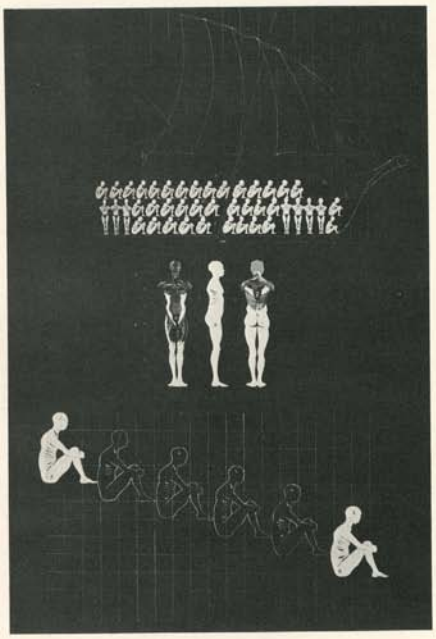
Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

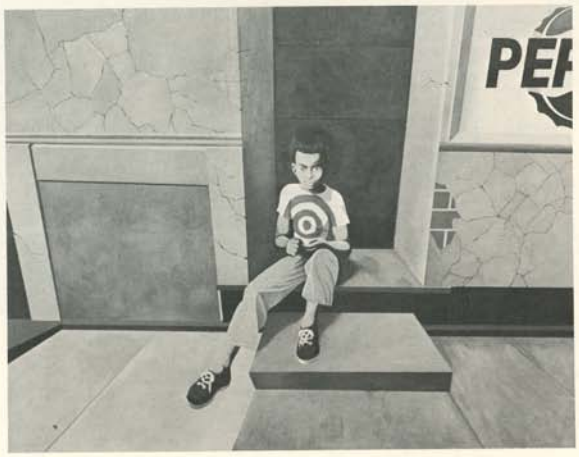
Ben Jones, Leg, *plaster cast with acrylic painting and glitter, 1969; collection of the artist.*

Ben Jones's painted casts of fragments of the human anatomy combine the literalism of recent representational art, like Jasper Johns's paintings with direct casts, with allusions to specifically African rituals, such as tattooing and face and body painting. The result is a case in point of the relativity of sophistication, for Jones equally emphasizes the developed esthetic sense of both sources.

Malcolm Bailey, Untitled, *acrylic on masonite, 1969; collection of the artist.*

Twenty-two year-old Pratt Institute graduate Malcolm Bailey was one of the most interesting new talents in the last Whitney painting annual. In his highly formalized paintings, he combines the schematic representationalism of the blueprint with a pointed social statement. This painting of a slave ship shows both black and white trapped within the same restricting context.





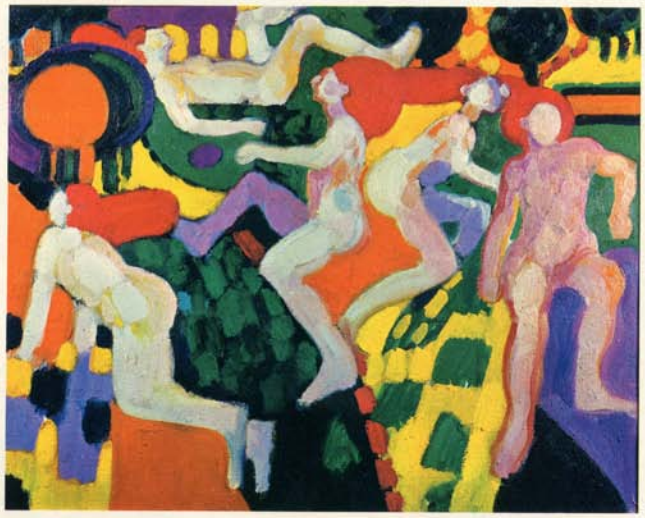
Phillip Lindsay Mason, Manchild in the Promised Land, *acrylic on canvas, 1969; collection of the artist.*

California (Berkeley) artist Phillip Lindsay Mason uses the simplified realism of pop art to paint angry images of a black American scene, with its cracked and peeling ghetto walls, and homeless brooding children.

Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

Emilio Cruz, Figure Composition No. 6, *oil, 1964; Zabriskie Gallery, New York.*

Figure painter Emilio Cruz uses the bright palette and flat decorative shapes of the fauves. His content, however, is often drawn from personal fantasies, darker in mood than any fauve theme. Like Bob Thompson, Cruz was significantly influenced by the expressionist style of the late Jan Müller. Recently Cruz has emphasized the surrealistic content of his work, painting in a hard-edge manner with few traces of expressionism.



Faith Ringgold, Die, *oil, 1970; collection of the artist.*

A teacher at Manhattan's High School of Music and Art, Faith Ringgold takes her direction from the mock-epic style of pop art. Initially shocking the viewer with her strong subject matter into overlooking her sense of composition and craft, she points to a solution to adult violence— a pair of children who clutch each other in mutual self-protection.

Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

Fred Eversley, Untitled, *plastic, 1970; collection of the artist.*

An outstanding West Coast artist, Fred Eversley is creating increasingly sophisticated molded plastic sculpture whose sensuous surfaces and subtle light effects are the hallmark of the L.A. school. Utilizing complex optical effects such as curved forms that appear interchangeably convex and concave, Eversley is producing work of elegance and formal complexity.

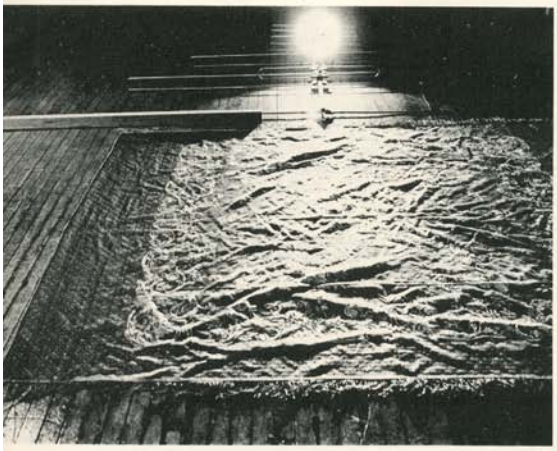
Barbara Chase Riboud, Malcolm X, Monument II, *bronze and wool, 1969; collection of the artist.*

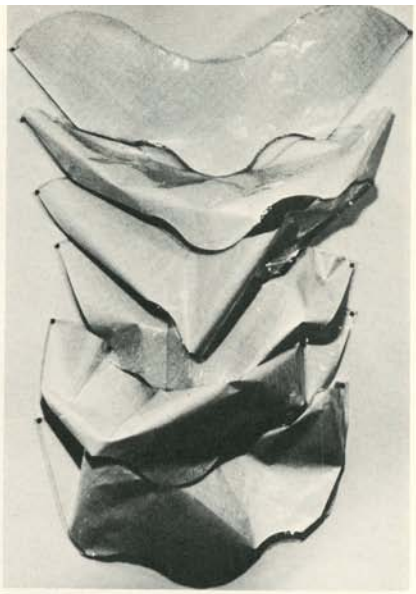
Barbara Chase Riboud is a young American black artist who lives in Paris. Using highly original combinations of bronze and silk and bronze and wool, Miss Riboud creates sophisticated reliefs and free-standing sculpture. By dedicating works to a black hero like Malcolm X which reach beyond national as well as ethnic boundaries in their international sophistication, Miss Riboud seems to be saying that it is not necessary for a black artist to confine himself to social protest themes to make a genuine statement.

Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

Robert Gordon, Untitled, *mixed media, 1970; collection of the artist.*

Among the black artists attempting to extend the boundaries of art in an experimental direction is Robert Gordon. Often using fabrics, objects, colors or images commonly associated with a ghetto milieu, Gordon is currently creating "anti-form" environments with found objects and lights.



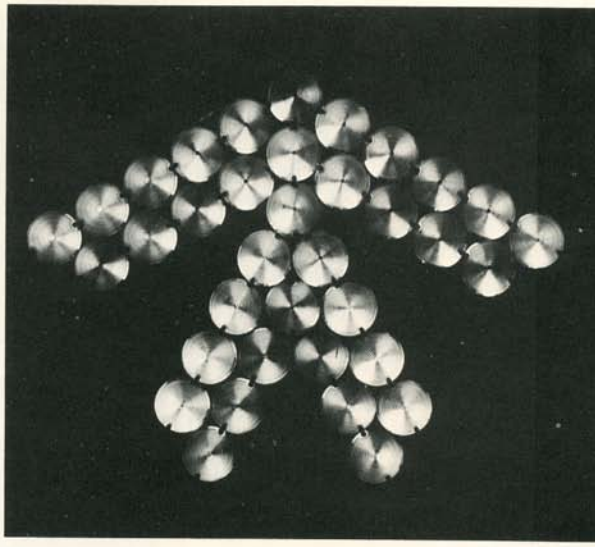


David Stephens, Untitled, *plastic, 1970; collection of the artist.*

Stephens is a young Philadelphia sculptor experimenting in new forms and new media. Casually arranging folded and wrinkled sheets of plastic in this model for a wall construction, Stephens creates a rhythmic interplay of curved edges and surface undulations.

Tom Lloyd, Resawan, *light sculpture, 1968; Howard Wise Gallery, New York.*

Lloyd is a light and intermedia artist whose strictly formal arrangement of light within geometric structures relates his work to the preoccupations of "literalist" artists who seek to go beyond painting in the direction of more concrete actual experiences.



Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

Left: John Dowell, For the Pridgen and the Hunt, *lithograph, 1970; Phyllis Kind Gallery, Chicago, and Martha Jackson Gallery, New York.*

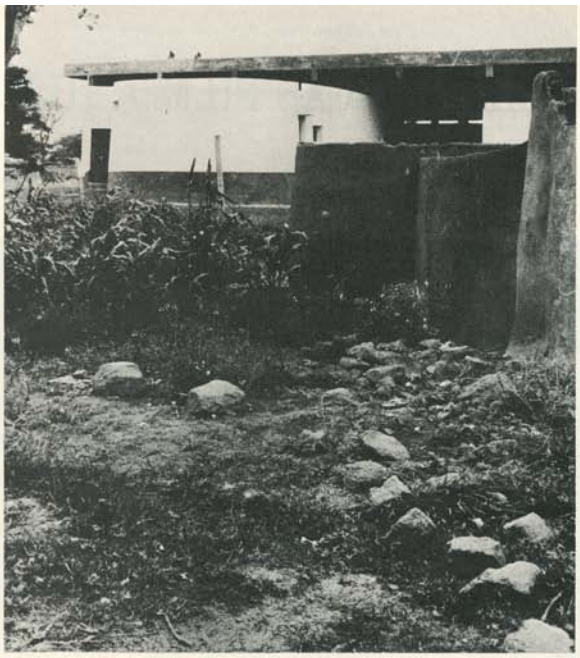
Ademola Olugebefola, Burden of Injustice, *woodcut, 1968; collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Northern.*

Graphics, one of the fields in which black artists are excelling, presents the possibility of reaching a large public and appeals to many socially oriented black artists. They are producing a variety of graphics that range from the African-influenced woodcuts of Dr. Ademola Olugebefola to the experimental prints of John Dowell. (The print at left is a tribute to painter Charles Pridgen and sculptor Richard Hunt.) Trained at Tamarind, Dowell has won more than a dozen awards in a variety of national and international print competitions.

Rose, Barbara, “Black Art in America,” *Art in America*, September/October 1970, cover, pp. 54-67

Max Bond, regional library, Bolgatanga, Ghana, 1967.

Max Bond is one of the new generation of energetic, educated black activists who are beginning to infiltrate American cultural and economic life at levels where blacks were never before permitted to enter. A graduate of Harvard College and Harvard School of Design, Bond has his own firm in partnership with two other black architects, Donald Ryder and Nathan Smith. Bond can afford to speak today without bitterness of how he was advised that blacks could never hope for a career in architecture, since he has proven his advisors wrong. His first building, the library in Bolgatanga, Ghana, refers both to Corbusier's clean functional forms and to the solid construction of local mud-hut dwellings. In a unique position to use African forms because of his firsthand contact with them, Bond has had to confine himself to more conventional architecture because of the nature of the commissions his firm handles, which so far have been restricted to low-cost projects like dormitories and ghetto housing.



Doug Harris, Safil's Decision, *photograph, Alabama, 1966; collection of the artist.*

Photographer Doug Harris combines a strong sense of form with searing social statement. In many respects the ideal social-protest art, photography—along with film—is attracting an increasing number of talented black artists. The photographs of the works of Norman Lewis, Toony Jones, John Chandler, Joe Overstreet, Ellsworth Ausby, Marvin Brown and Ademola Olugebefola illustrating this article were taken by Mr. Harris.