

Hannah Giorgis column Race

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Black art is dangerous, because it marries the personal and political

Hannah Giorgis



Art makes visible the pain that buries itself in the cavities that logic and reason alone cannot access



▲ Bi Kidude performs during a show in 2006. Photograph: Tony Karumba/AFP/Getty Images

To create art amid sorrow or oppression is to insist on excavating meaning from the dull senselessness of pain. It is to be alive and speaking back. Art dives headfirst into the uncharted perils and delights of the human condition. For people whose humanity is often denied, taking that plunge with an audience is inherently rebellious.

In Black Women Writers at Work, a series of conversations with black women whose words shape(d) and shift(ed) movements, poet Sonia Sanchez makes a powerful case for the importance of the Black Arts Movement:

“The black artist is dangerous. Black art controls the ‘Negro’s’ reality, negates negative influences, and creates positive images.”

The text was first published in 1984, almost 15 years after the unofficial end of the Black Arts Movement, and 30 years before the resurgence of activism in Ferguson and beyond, but Sanchez’s vivid defense of black artistic self-determination still rings true.

The beauty of black art lies in its ability (perhaps even its mandate) to marry the personal and political, to arrange festering sores of social circumstance into striking patterns that are hypnotic as they heal. Black art highlights both inter- and intra-community dynamics, playing with shadow and light in spaces that may

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shadow and light in spaces that may otherwise not be illuminated.

Tatyana Fazlalizadeh's "Stop Telling Women to Smile" public art series

addresses street harassment by speaking directly to offenders with publicly displayed portraits of women speaking back against harassers' aggression.

King Texas's portrait series, **BLACKNESS**, documents and celebrates the diversity of the African diaspora across spectrums of gender, sexuality and ethnic heritage. Danez Smith's **poetry calls attention to the heavy burden of anti-black violence** with tenderness and urgency. Kendrick Lamar's music offers **blues-y meditations on working class black life** and **affirmations amid the chaos**.

Art makes visible the pain that buries itself in the cavities that logic and reason alone cannot access. It forces its audience to contend with truths that may otherwise be buried in the perfunctory rhythm of everyday life. Black art is the lifeline that sustains movements and makes sense of the moments theory cannot adequately grasp.

In the wake of the **creative activism** of **#BlackLivesMatter** and other collectives, black art has held communities together when policy and protest are not enough. As **law enforcement continues to kill black people across the country with impunity**, artists have been **coming together** to try to make sense of the horror and pain - and offer visions of a different future.

Afrofuturist works **like Wangechi Mutu's "Fantastic Journey"** allow black artists and their audiences to play with time. Much of the art is quite literally suspended but transports viewers through different periods of Mutu's life, the ancestral history that informs it, and visions of an emergent future. It emboldens audiences to reconceive of black experience by imagining alternate endpoints, to envision a sort of redemption and restoration.

Though not new, afrofuturism's potential to still serve as a vehicle by which black people can envision a different world feels especially prescient in a time in which **non-indictments and non-convictions are a norm** when black people are killed. To insist on taking up space not just in the present, but also in the future, is a radical act when you are all too aware that your untimely death would likely not cause a ripple in the American justice system.

To assert your existence in a homogenous art world is itself a similarly daunting task. In an **interview with AFROPUNK**, Kimberly Drew, founder of **Black Contemporary Art**, a multi-platform community dedicated to celebrating the art by and about people of African descent, shared the motivation behind its creation: "My interest in Black artists stems from my interest in Blackness. Studying art can be a very daunting task for the Black scholar. You're taught to apotheosize certain artists and worship their work in a vacuum. You learn about Pablo Picasso, not **Wifredo Lam**. You learn about Andy Warhol, not Jean-Michel Basquiat. You learn about Marcel DuChamp, not **Adam Pendleton**."

The Black Arts Movement, which spanned the 1960s, was often referred to as the **"aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power Concept"**, and its beginning is generally dated to the month immediately following the assassination of Malcolm X, when **poet Amiri Baraka** (born LeRoi Jones) **moved to Harlem** and established a black arts theatre in the home of the early 20th century **black artistic renaissance** shepherded by the work of artists like **Langston Hughes**, **Jacob Lawrence** and **Zora Neale Hurston**.

Much of the work of the Black Arts Movement **remains resonant today** - powerful not simply in its beauty but also in its commitment to political resistance. Artists of the era, including **Benny Andrews**, **Dindga McCannon** and **Kay Brown**, were less interested in convincing white audiences of their inherent worth and more in representing and (re)discovering the spectacular kaleidoscope of black experience with authenticity and reverence.

Black art, like black people, is not a monolith. It is diverse, expressive and resists simple categorization. Black art exists everywhere - in museums and galleries, on buildings and in the streets, on blogs and digital showcases, on the canvases of our bodies. Like the movements it complements, black art is powerful, personal and feels more present than ever. It challenges audiences, activists and artists alike to do the difficult work of interrogating the subtle biases, deep beliefs, and core values that shape our world in order to change it for the better - to feel so we can be free.

America is at a crossroads ...

interview
John Grace



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