

## Vision & Spirit: African American Art | Works from the Bank of America Collection

Curated by Dexter Wimberly

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*Here we go, here, here we go again  
Trayvon'll never get to be an older man  
Black children, they childhood stole from them  
Robbed of our names and our language, stole again  
Who stole the soul from black folk?  
Same man that stole the land from Chief Black Smoke*

-- American rapper, actor, narrator and writer, Common, "**Black America Again**"

*Vision & Spirit* is an exhibition composed of more than one hundred paintings, prints, drawings, photographs, and mixed media works by 48 artists born in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Highlighting key aspects of their lives, as well as the important objects they created, the exhibition focuses on these artists' strength and resilience as creative forces whose work continues to shape our understanding of the world. The idea of resilience is incredibly fitting in our current times as we witness seismic shifts in American life that will undoubtedly have a profound impact on the art being made from this day forward.

I began writing this essay six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, three weeks before the 2020 Presidential election. It feels as though my entire life as an African American has been laid bare before me during these trying times. I found myself turning to art, which has always been my refuge. It has offered me space to work through my thoughts, fears and anxieties. The works in this exhibition took me on a personal journey of love and self-discovery when I needed it the most.

Artists have always mattered. Whether it's Lorna Simpson, whose work challenges narrow, conventional views of identity, history, and memory using the African-American woman as a visual point of departure, or Dewey Crumpler, whose examinations of the lure of contemporary pop culture in his mixed media works explore global consumer capitalism, I have been inspired by these artists to push forward and develop new ideas.

While no one knows what the future holds, as a curator I am committed to providing a platform for artists whose work looks forward, contributes to our progress, and guides us toward greater equity and understanding. The theme of this exhibition is resilience and how African-American artists have shown this through their work. But what does resilience mean in this context? Is it perseverance? Is it staying power, or is it something much deeper? I think resilience reflects our strength and our humanity.

In a 2006 interview in *The Brooklyn Rail*, artist Whitfield Lovell posed a provocative question, “What were people doing, and who were they, between the Emancipation Proclamation to the Civil Rights Movement? Were they walking around barefooted and scrubbing clothes for white people? Or were they going about the business and the necessities of living their lives? When they got together in groups and as a community, were they obsessing about what the white man was doing to them? Were they sitting around talking about how oppressed they were? No. They were living their lives. They were eating, breathing, cooking, having sex, reading, writing, and occasionally going to get their photos taken.” Lovell’s own work is inspired by images from archives of photographs, tintypes and old postcards from the end of the Civil War to the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>i</sup>

This musing from Whitfield Lovell brings me to the work of James VanDerZee, the iconic Harlem Renaissance photographer who opened his studio in 1916. Harlem was only then becoming a haven for African Americans, and during the next five decades VanDerZee would photograph African Americans of all social classes and occupations. He took thousands of pictures, mostly indoor portraits, occasionally venturing out to photograph the Harlem scene. Although VanDerZee photographed many of the African-American celebrities who performed or lectured in Harlem, most of his photographs were studio portraits, including weddings and funerals, family groups, teams, lodges, clubs or people simply wanting to have a record of themselves in fine clothes.

While researching the artists in this exhibition I was inspired by the countless examples of resilience I encountered. From the late 1940s into the 1970s, photographer Henry Clay Anderson created a remarkable record of the lively African-American community in Greenville, Mississippi. In his work, *A Beauty Pageant*, women proudly strut their stuff in an African-American beauty contest in segregated Mississippi. Anderson portrays these contestants similarly to the way a national contest would have appeared on live TV—by shooting his photographs as if from the best seats along the runway. Yet this pageant, with its asphalt stage and chain-link and barbed-wire backdrop, is a far cry from glitzy televised contests. In fact, many beauty pageants at that time, including Miss America, allowed only white women to compete. It was not until 1970 that the first African-American contestant reached the national Miss America competition, two years after the Miss Black America Pageant had been inaugurated in protest. Clay’s portraits are a testament to black Southerners who considered themselves first-class citizens, despite living in a deeply hostile America.<sup>ii</sup>

I am deeply moved by contemporary artists like Chelle Barbour whose collage work re-imagines the body of the black female through the lens of Afro-Surrealism. Barbour’s characters cast a wide net in terms of how they are perceived. Whether the image reflects chameleons, agent provocateurs, goddesses, muses, warriors or spies, Barbour’s college portraiture conveys notions of allegory, desire, fantasy, femininity, fragility, tension, and the inherent complexity within the black female imaginary. This is juxtaposed with the subtle and distinct beauty of Willie Little who uses raw materials, multimedia and installation to create visual narratives that explore old traditions and examines his own history through the representation of community and family ties.

Other artists, such as Faith Ringgold, loom large. Ringgold's painted quilts are visual equivalents to anticolonial subversions of the English language. These meticulously crafted and celebratory banners combine piecework quilting, figurative acrylic painting, and written stories to recount African-American histories and rich narratives of her own family life. Ringgold's quilt work connects well with that of Murry DePillars - a leading figure in Chicago's African-American arts movement and a member of AfriCOBRA (the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists). AfriCOBRA was founded in 1968 by Jeff Donaldson, Barbara Jones-Hogu, Wadsworth Jarrell and Gerald Williams. Rather than bringing about change through political revolt, these artists used the black identity, its style, attitude and worldview, to foster solidarity and self-confidence throughout the African diaspora. It was a revolution of the mind, body and spirit, and the art reflected this. Known for the color and movement in his paintings, DePillars drew his inspiration from African and African-American history, literature, music, quilt-making and other cultural influences. Early African-American quiltmakers' aesthetics and their insistence on building – rather than sewing – quilts had a major influence on DePillars' work.

Photographer Dawoud Bey spent five years making his first series, "Harlem, U.S.A.," which was exhibited at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1979. As a socially conscious teenager, Dawoud Bey was intrigued by the controversy over the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1969 exhibition, "Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968." The show featured photos, audio and text about daily life in Harlem. It did not, however, include paintings, drawings or sculptures by African-American artists, which sparked protests organized by the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. Bey, then 16, went on his own to the museum, hoping to see the picket lines and find out more, but when he arrived there were none that day. A sense of fate drew him inside. Thus, began his education in photography, influenced by the works of artists like Charles White, Romare Bearden and Emory Douglas, the minister of culture for the Black Panther Party whose graphic art appeared in the organization's newspaper. [Bey's] touchstones in photography included Roy DeCarava, Walker Evans and Gordon Parks, and even his own family's photo albums.<sup>iii</sup>

I see fantastic examples of resilience in the work of Gordon Parks, the prolific photographer, filmmaker, writer, poet, painter and composer whose work addressed racial and social injustices throughout his career. "In fulfilling my professional and artistic ambitions in the White Man's world, I had had to become completely involved in it," Parks once wrote. "At the beginning of my career I missed the soft, easy laughter of Harlem and the security of Black friends around me ... Many times, I wondered whether my achievement was worth the loneliness I experienced, but now I realize the price was small. This same experience has taught me that there is nothing ignoble about a Black man climbing from the troubled darkness on a white man's ladder, providing he doesn't forsake the others who, subsequently, must escape that same darkness."<sup>iv</sup>

Brooklyn-born photographer Jamel Shabazz's work also fits wonderfully within this exhibition's theme. Shabazz picked up his first camera at the age of 15 and started to document his peers. Shabazz, who was also inspired by the work of photographers such as James VanDerZee and Gordon Parks, marveled at their documentation of the African-American community. In 1980, as a concerned photographer with a clear vision he embarked on a mission to extensively document various aspects of life in New York City,

from youth culture to a wide range of social conditions. Due to their spontaneity and uniqueness, the streets and subway system became backdrops for many of his photographs. Like VanDerZee and Parks, Shabazz captured aspects of American life that were rarely seen in the mainstream and transformed the perception of African Americans through images.

I have long been intrigued by the ingenuity in the work of Willie Cole, who is best known for assembling and transforming ordinary domestic and used objects such as irons, ironing boards, high-heeled shoes, hair dryers, bicycle parts, wooden matches, lawn jockeys, and other discarded appliances and hardware, into imaginative and powerful works of art and installations. In 1989, Cole garnered attention in the art world with works using the steam iron as a motif. Cole imprinted iron scorch marks on a variety of media, showing not only their wide-ranging decorative potential but also referencing his African-American heritage. In a 2019 interview in BOMB Magazine, Cole shared: “I call a work of art finished when I sense that it’s just a breath away from being alive. That kind of sums up my schtick, to reveal the life force in inanimate objects. You look at it. You feel it. It looks at you. And you feel it more. [I] am interested in uncovering spirits ... or the life force inside of objects. In ’89 I used the term ‘archeological ethnographic Dadaist’ to describe my practice—because I would go to a location in the city of Newark, [New Jersey], find a telephone, or ironing board, or steam iron, and imagine that I was unearthing sacred relics from an ancient culture ... and then proceed to convince the viewer that it was so.”<sup>v</sup>

It is my desire that *Vision & Spirit* inspires viewers to go on a similar journey of excavation and discovery. In these difficult times it is heartening to know that great art continues to be made with depth, sensitivity and an eye towards progress. I give my respect to the passion, ingenuity and beauty brought forth by the creative geniuses in this exhibition. Contrary to what I believed as a youth, art is two-way conversation. Viewing art is not a passive act. The artist speaks through their work and we have the opportunity and privilege to listen, reflect and be transformed by the experience.

#### Citations

i <https://brooklynrail.org/2006/07/art/whitfield-lovell>

ii <https://americanart.si.edu/education/oh-freedom/rev-henry-clay-anderson>

iii <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/24/lens/dawoud-bey-seeing-deeply.html>

iv <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/12770/gordon-parks-muhammad-ali-exhibition-alison-jacques-gallery-life-magazine>

v <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/willie-cole/>