**5/12/2016**

**Reconsidering the Heroic**

Every age has its heroes, and some heroes transcend time and place. In America, as in most places, artists have the opportunity to create images that capture the essential stories of their time, and some works surpass the confines of the art world and become a common visual language. Emanuel Leutze’s *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, Grant Wood’s *American Gothic*, and Jackson Pollock’s *Autumn Rhythm* *(Number 30)* are works of art that are so frequently reproduced and widely recognized that through sheer repetition they come to stand for something great and heroic in the American character—celebrating nation building, agrarian life and bold formal experimentation respectively. American art is filled with heroic stories and mythic figures drawn from world history, biblical stories and everyday life in the United States. From narrative paintings documenting the great deeds of the founding fathers to the “birth” of the American avant-garde that Abstract Expressionism represented in the mid-twentieth century, the diversity and complexity of American culture is often reduced to just a few key movements and works of art that tell the story. This is how the canon of art history evolves, with a select group of great works of art receiving sustained critical attention and broad exposure, but many other stories left untold. If museums are one of the primary places where these American myths are born, have been preserved and presented to the public, museums also have an important role to play in presenting alternative stories. *Modern Heroics* presents an opportunity to reconsider and hopefully to expand conceptions of the heroic, both in terms of the subjects of the artists and the artists themselves.

By beginning with expressionist paintings from the 1940s and ’50s and tracing expressionist tendencies in the work of African-American artists up to the present, *Modern Heroics* revisits the romantic idea of the artist as a cultural leader and heroic figure that was popularized with Abstract Expressionism in the mid-twentieth century. The Abstract Expressionists—a group of New York-based artists painting in mostly abstract styles—tended to paint on a large scale and to use painterly or gestural (unrehearsed, physical) approaches to painting. Whether justified or not, Abstract Expressionism came to represent a high point in American art, leading post-World War II American culture in a bold new direction, away from the horrors of two world wars. Since most official narratives left out many great African-American painters—heroes and mythmakers in their own right, often working just outside the spotlight of mainstream critical attention—the process of revising American art is a cumulative and ongoing project.[[1]](#endnote-1) *Modern Heroics* takes a fresh look at expressionism in African-American art through one collection built over many decades.

With its diverse permanent collection and early commitment to exhibiting African-American art, the Newark Museum is especially well positioned to organize original exhibitions that present alternative narratives. In particular, the Museum’s mission to exhibit the art of today set an early standard for a broad and inclusive exhibition program, and Newark’s history of exhibiting African-American art dates back to at least 1927.[[2]](#endnote-2) Following an exhibition model that the Newark Museum initiated in 1944, *Modern Heroics* focuses on modern and contemporary art that reflects both local and global African-American communities, showcasing recent acquisitions and important historical works. Several of the works in *Modern Heroics* are exhibited for the first time here, and many others have not been shown for decades. Of the twenty-four artists represented, three were included in the 1944 exhibition *American Negro Art*; four were included in the 1971 exhibition, *Black Artists: Two Generations*;and seven others were included in a subsequent exhibition in 1982*, Black Artists at the Newark Museum*. *Modern Heroics* reasserts this practice of exhibiting new artists alongside collection artists, and celebrates the diverse talent represented in the collection and in the community of living artists who are engaged with the Museum.

Beauford Delaney’s painting *The Burning Bush* (1941) is the earliest work included in *Modern Heroics*, and a conceptual starting point for the exhibition. A compact, thickly painted composition of an abstract landscape, *The Burning Bush* reinterprets the Old Testament story in which God appeared to Moses as a burning bush: divinity and nature seem to converge in this forceful scene. Delaney happened to play an important role in building Newark’s permanent collection of African-American art. In 1943 he made a gift to the Museum of a work on paper made that year, titled *Portrait of a Man* (figure 1). This pastel drawing became the second work by an African-American artist to enter Newark’s permanent collection. A series of handwritten and typed letters between Delaney and Beatrice Windsor (director of the Newark Museum from 1929 to 1947) reveals a simple but significant exchange that was catalyzing for the growth of the collection. Ms. Windsor, who knew Delany personally, made a gift to him of several frames, and as a gesture of thanks Delaney made a gift to the Museum of his work. In the correspondence between Delaney and Windsor both expressed sincere appreciation for the other’s gift,[[3]](#endnote-3) and the following year Newark organized its first original show dedicated to African-American art—an exhibition to which Delaney, Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden and ten other artists lent their work directly.[[4]](#endnote-4) Nearly half of the artists included in that 1944 show are now represented in Newark’s permanent collection, a living testament to the Museum’s commitment to the art of today.

All of the works in this exhibition are expressionistic, directly communicating to viewers through highly keyed color and monumental scale, as in the work of Emma Amos, Bob Thompson and Mickalene Thomas; through radically abstract narrative styles, as in the work of Purvis Young, Nellie Mae Rowe and Shoshanna Weinberger; through gestural approaches to painting demonstrated by Herb Gentry, Claude Lawrence, Sam Gilliam and Shinique Smith; or through the use of unexpected vernacular non-art materials in the work of Kenseth Armstead, Kevin Sampson and Chakaia Booker. Transmogrification, allegorical figures and layered narratives are recurring strategies found in the exhibition, as mythical and spiritual beings converge with everyday people in familiar and unfamiliar settings.

Using Newark’s collection as the basis for exploring expressionist strategies from the early 1940s to the present, *Modern Heroics* takes a broad view and sets aside categories such as insider and outsider, folk art and fine art. Every time a work of art is placed in a new context fresh insights emerge and new conversations begin. With that in mind, it is important to note that *Modern Heroics* does not attempt to define a single movement or official school of American art, or to suggest that African-American art is always expressionistic. In pointing out expressionist tendencies across a diverse range of African-American art, *Modern Heroics* demonstrates the importance of expressionism beyond the official schools of modern art that we think of as expressionist: German and Austrian Expressionism and Fauvism in the early twentieth century, Abstract Expressionism (also known as the New York School or Action Painting) in the mid-twentieth century, and Neo-Expressionism (the postmodern revival of large-scale painting) in the 1980s. Although both Norman Lewis and Ed Clark are known as Abstract Expressionists, and Beauford Delaney is credited with working in an Abstract Expressionist style early in his career, most of the artists in *Modern Heroics* do not fit neatly into any particular style or school of art.

There are formal and informal lineages besides technique and subject matter connecting these artists, and by placing these works in context, a constellation of overlapping concerns and influences emerge. Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Charles Alston, and Emma Amos were all members of the Spiral group (1963–65)[[5]](#endnote-5), a New York City-based artists’ collective that was not concerned with promoting a single approach to artmaking. This intergenerational group (Emma Amos was the youngest and the only woman in the group) was formed to explore the question of what role African-American artists should play in the civil rights movement. A look at the varied productions of these artists, all now considered significant in the modern canon, shows that they each had their own aesthetic and unique approach to questions of representation.

The stakes were much higher for African-American artists moving between abstract and narrative styles in the mid-twentieth century, when the most influential art critics favored the “pure” (non-figurative) abstraction and universal subject matter of Abstract Expressionism. In other words, African-American artists documenting African-American subjects in postwar America were much more likely to be disparaged by critics as too personal or particular in their focus. Throughout his prolific career Norman Lewis painted many group subjects reflecting a wide range of formal experimentation and varying degrees of abstraction. Lewis’s subjects are, by any objective account, universal in their abstraction and emphasis on communal gatherings and social rituals. Ed Clark was of the same generation as Lewis and shared many formal similarities with other first generation Abstract Expressionists. Clark worked in a fully abstract mode and on an increasingly monumental scale from the 1950s onwards, developing a recognizable style through his unique practice of working on unstretched canvases laid out on the floor using a push broom to paint monumental abstract forms. Clark created an original and visually dramatic approach to painting that merged the language of abstraction with signs of manual labor.[[6]](#endnote-6)

In a literal sense, *Modern Heroics* refers to the common practice of updating and reinterpreting the classical and historical subjects seen throughout this show. By recasting ancient myths and heroic traditions of the past, artists both update and redefine the very meaning of heroics, layering universal and quite specific symbols and messages. Dmitri Wright’s grandly scaled portrait *Black Couple in Bed Looking at T.V.* is precisely of its time—as if it were a snapshot of a typical household in Newark in 1971—and it also references the stately frontal pose of ancient Egyptian portrait statues. Through Wright’s loose, unfinished brushwork, the couple’s clothing takes on the “wet drapery” appearance of Classical marble statues. The gestural treatment of the pillows also gives off the slightest suggestion of feathery wings, and the blue light cast by the television gives the couple’s Afros a haloed effect. Similarly there are halos suggested around the heads of the four figures silhouetted in the foreground of Purvis Young’s *Untitled* (ca. 1988). The scene they are watching over is painfully expressive—a body is being carried through the streets, the long limbed figures gathered around gesturing in lamentation. Informed by the activism of the civil rights movement and his study of old master paintings, Young used his art to speak directly to the community of Overtown, the neighborhood of Miami where he lived and worked, and to draw attention to the hardships and everyday heroics of African-American lives in one particular community. By bringing portraits of real life heroes and Herculean struggles into context with abstract and symbolic works that evoke the heroism of being an artist, this exhibition honors both the artists and their subjects.

1. With the civil rights movement and feminist movements of the 1960s, a slow shift towards more diverse representation in the art world began. Institutions like the Studio Museum in Harlem and Kenkeleba Gallery in New York City began the process of revising the canon to include African-American artists previously omitted from histories of American art. See for instance the exhibitions *Invisible Americans: Black Artists of the 1930s* at the Studio Museum (1968), *Two Centuries of Black American Art* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1976), and *The Search for Freedom: African-American Abstract Painting, 1945–1975* at Kenkeleba Gallery (1991), among many other exhibitions and scholarly texts that have followed. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Archibald J. Motley’s painting *Mending Socks* (1924) was included in Newark’s 1927 invitational exhibition of living American painters (March–April 1927). *The Museum, Science, Art, Industry*; *Newark Museum Association Bulletin*, Volume 1, Number 10, 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Correspondence dated June 18 and June 21, 1943; Newark Museum accession file, 43.137. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In 1931, the Newark Museum presented a large-scale exhibition dedicated to African-American artists, organized by the Harmon Foundation. The 1944 exhibition *American Negro Art—Contemporary Painting and Sculpture* was however the first original exhibition of African-American art organized by the Museum. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Other members of the Spiral group include Calvin Douglass, Perry Ferguson, Reginald Gammon, Felrath Hines, Alvin Hollingsworth, Earl Miller, William Majors, Richard Mayhew, Merton D. Simpson, Hale Woodruff and James Yeargans. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Ed Clark, Herbert Gentry and Beauford Delaney all spent many years living in Paris and exhibiting extensively in Europe, and this physical removal from the American art scene played a definitive role in these artists’ careers. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)