Black Artists: Up Against the Wall

Even the familiar names aren't getting their work shown.

PHOTOS BY FRED W. McDARRAH

Faith Ringgold: at the forefront of the neo-primitivist movement

ART

By April Kingsley

Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man" emerged dramatically into view during the '60s, in art as everywhere. He now appears to be sliding into obscurity. The 1969-72 spate of black art shows has dried up; public monies to institutions sponsoring black art, such as the Cinque Gallery and the Studio Museum in Harlem, are being cut; and resistance to studio faculty quotas and public art projects and commissions (other than those designated for specifically black neighborhoods) is growing steadily. One finds oneself asking, "Whatever happened to . . . ?" about even big name black artists. Now that we're slipping off the peak of black consciousness, the separate inequality of past days is starting to look dashed, that some black artists might begin to be rated with their white peers.

Currently there are fewer than half a dozen blacks spread among the dozen current "best" galleries (Leo Castelli, John Weber, Sidney Janis, Andre Emmerich, Paula Cooper, Sonnabend, Nancy Hoffman, O.K. Harris, Fishbach, Marlborough, Pace, and Max Hutchinson). Other galleries with less space, fewer collectors, and less clout with museums—Lerner-Heller, Cordier & Ekstrom, ACA, Robert Miller, Dintenfass, and Dorsky—have managed to hold on to some good black artists, but many of the best have not yet been caught, or refuse to rise to less gratifying bait than that to which they had been so briefly accustomed. (Women, incidently, have been infiltrating those "best" galleries for years, having successfully made the jump from "hearings" in separatist galleries and shows more easily than blacks.

The main trouble with all of this is that the '70s could have offered optimum conditions for growth of black art. There is no dominant style, patterning is acceptable, increased emphasis is being put on humanism and content, and mythic primitivizing tendencies are blooming. Black artists' African roots and the social, cultural, and political significances of their American heritage could have given them an advantage, especially now that the diversity of black art styles (mainstream, ethnic, separatist, etc.) mirrors a more generalized diversity. The formal strengths of African art, its majestic power, could have conceivably repeated the impact it had on modern art 75 years ago, but this time directly through living artists. The energy is there, but it smolders in isolated fires.

good.

Holger Cahill once wrote about the WPA: "It is not the solitary genius but a sound general movement which maintains art as a vital functioning part of any culture." If Cahill's dictum has been realized in the black art movement, it might have released the same sort of pent-up energies as Abstract Expressionism did in the wake of the WPA. Romare Bearden, who has been accepted by the white art establishment since the early '40s and has been on practically every grant-giving board there is, feels that the WPA was the best thing that ever happened to artists, black or white, and that the present burgeoning funding bureaucracies, with their misguided attempts to judge art qualitatively, are doing more harm than good. "People will rate themselves," he says. "I'd rather see them run a lottery in SoHo than subsidize all those committees."

Bearden has always been one of those favored token blacks. Richard Hunt, Jacob Lawrence, and Benny Andrews also do well; their work is shown in good galleries and is often included in museum exhibitions and collections, and they frequently get speaking engagements and job offers. Some of this attention (but usually grant money instead) flows, or used to flow, to a second select group: Fred Eversley, Sam Gilliam, Richard Mayhew, Alvin Loving, Melvin Edwards, Daniel Larue Johnson, Jack Whitten, Frank Bowling, and William T. Williams. But even these "familiar" names aren't doing very well, especially in galleries and museums.

The crucial first step for any artist is to get his or her work seen; only later can it be judged in the company to which it belongs. Natural percentages make it difficult for minorities to obtain even that first hearing. The large group shows of black art in the '60s (climaxed by MOMA's dual exhibitions of Richard Hunt and Romare Bearden in 1970), helped many artists take that first step, but even more importantly a few good galleries began adding blacks to their stables so that their work could be seen in depth. This raised hopes, which have since largely been

The majority of the recent work I've seen by black artists is powerful. Melvin Edwards's seven years of welded sculpture exhibited at the Studio Museum in Harlem last spring established his consistent superiority in this mode. But "So, who knew?"—and until his work appears at Marlborough, Emmerich, or Tibor de Nagy, where his competition shows, who will? Nothing comparable to Edwards's dense, masklike reliefs out of welded tool and automobile parts has been done since the early work of David Smith, and there is no counterpart to the rhythmic coordination of counter-balanced masses in his large sculptures, with their intimations of vernacular architecture despite the high-level sophistication of their means. Most work in this vein (by Michael Steiner, Joel Perlman, Tony Rosenthal, for example) is technically good, formally pleasing, but emotionally empty. Edwards's work, however, is rich in metaphor, implication, and connotation, with no loss of plastic vigor.

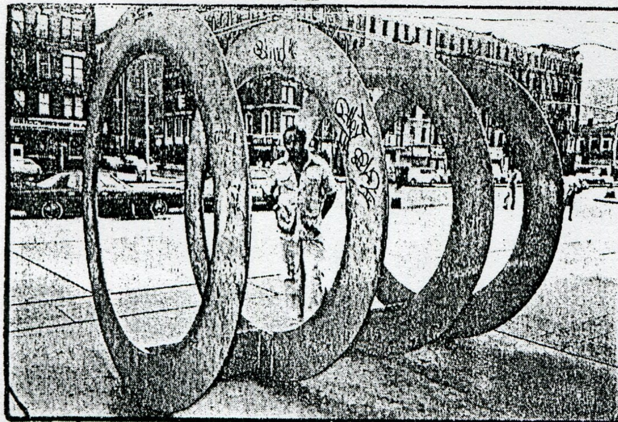
A few new galleries have sprung up outside the traffic lanes of the art-going public that frequently feature work by blacks—the Tim Blackburn Gallery and the community Gallery in Chelsea, Peg Allston's residential show places, and the Consortium on West 62nd Street. Ellsworth Ausby exhibited a few of his brilliant new emblematic, multipartite abstractions at the Consortium last March, but you really have to make the trek to his studio in the wilds of Brooklyn to see his work in depth. A gentle man despite his dreadlocks, Ausby has engineered an exciting synthesis of Constructivism and primitive geometric patterns. His brightly colored canvas strips and sections have a leathery quality that augments the shield or weaponlike connotations of his angled configurations. When stapled directly to a wall, the work conjures up visions of tent art.

William T. Williams's latest paintings in rearrangeable vertical sections also relate to temporary patterned wall-coverings. Obsessed with the diagonal within rectangular bounds, he has been struggling for years to reconcile his expressionist urges with the rigorous formal training he received at Yale. His introspective, sensitive spirit, painfully seesawing through various solutions to this dilemma since his dazzling start in the early '70s, has at last broken through in his new loosely painted, rhythmically structured canvases that offer a profusion of conflicting patterns. The context in which these paintings are publicly seen, however, will be all important in establishing Williams in his rightful place—at the forefront of current tendencies in patterned abstraction and additively structured modernism. No small or out-of-the-way gallery will do.

Edward Clark, who pioneered the shaped canvas in the mid- '50s as a literal extension of his Abstract Expressionist brushstroke, is another painter whose huge canvases demand large clean spaces on well-travelled art lanes. The speeding horizontal lines that set the ellipses they traverse into spinning orbits make Kenneth Noland's stripes look as static as the feet on Balla's dog. The intense golden-orange heat (inspired by African sunlight and topography) in his recent paintings generates enormous energy. They represent a remarkable extrapolation of Abstract Expressionism into intellectualized post-painterliness.

If black men of such high caliber have had difficulty getting their work viewed in proper settings (none of them are currently with a gallery), imagine the problems black women artists face. Finding no solace within the heavily macho black-art movement, most of them identify and associate with the women's art movement instead; but to a large extent they are disenfranchised from both. If they go to Africa to examine their heritage, for example, they tend to be badly treated by their male "betters"; while if they try to socialize like white women artists, they are ostracized in subtle, and not so subtle, ways.

Such is the situation even for Howardena Pindell, a curator in MOMA's print department who shows in the best feminist gallery—A.I.R. in Soho—and the best ethnic gallery—Just Above Midtown on 57th Street. Because she is black, and because she steadfastly refuses to use her museum position to help her career as an artist, she can't get into the "best" non-separatist galleries, despite her substantial reputation as a fine, innovative abstractionist. Currently she seems to be moving out of the obsessive repeat minimalism of former years into daringly decorative, all-over surfaces that are structured within flexible 3-D neo-Cubist grids. In these new stately paintings, she creates a high-level synthesis of modernism and deep-seated archetypal drives.



Mel Edwards: vernacular architecture and a high-level sophistication of means

Betye Sarr, Faith Ringgold, and Senga Nengudi have opted to eschew referencing their powerful, mythic images to modernist developments. The quality of their work, the authenticity of their sources, and their commitment to using imagery drawn from their black heritage should ensure their place at the forefront of the neo-primitivist movement. Instead, they are generally left out of such shows as the "Primitive Myths" exhibition Allen Ellenzweig organized at the Queens Museum last spring.

Linda Goode-Bryant and Marcy S. Philips, who run the Just Above Midtown Gallery, have made a valiant effort to correct common errors of omission in their recent publication, *Contextures* (available at 50 West 57th Street, $9.95). They have rewritten the history of post-war American art to place black artists like Raymond Saunders, John Dowell, James Little, and Manual Hughes within a mainstream context. They invented the term "contextures" to name the often funky, deeply personal, neo-primitivizing styles that are typified by Saar, Ringgold, and Nengudi, as well as Donna Byars, David Hammons, Houston Conwill, Randy Williams, and Wendy Ward Ehlers. All of these artists use detritus in their work—body prints, hair, lint, nylon stockings, cockroaches, and memorabilia. All of the work they discuss is both formally and emotionally compelling. Its significance is obvious, and despite the overly detached and generalized test, one would like to see this book be required reading for all dealers and museum curators. If the work of black artists were more generally known, the conservative, directionless '70s might be revolutionized by a new movement-complex, spearheaded, this time, by blacks. ∎