20 years of African-American art at WCMA

By John Seven
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WILLIAMSTOWN — A new exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art offers a 20-year slice of African American art from a close-knit Los Angeles community. The exhibit examines the way black artists responded to issues like civil rights and how those responses changed over time.

The show, "Now Dig This," opens at the Williams College Museum of Art on Saturday, July 20.

The show's curator, Columbia University professor Kellie Jones, divided the work into four sections that organize the art and artists not only chronologically, but also thematically, in terms of the kind of work being done that reflects the time in which it was being done.

The first section covers the front runners in the movement — early movers and shakers who set the tone for what the artistic community would become, such as Charles White, Samella Lewis and Melvin Edwards, who rose to prominence the late '50s and early '60s.

"The second section is about assemblage," Jones said, "that way of art-making that also connected with ideas of community and protest and assembling as people who are assembling to protest or be activists; that connection between those two words and what I thought was happening in terms of both how the work was made but also how people connected to each other."

"Los Angeles Snapshot" is the title of the third section of the show, meant to be inclusive of involved artists beyond African American ones. It's an effort by Jones to acknowledge that the black art scene was more of a multi-cultural one.

"A different thing about this show is that it's not a 'black' show, where it's only African-American artists in there," Jones said. "There are some nonAfrican-American artists in the show because I wanted to talk about communities across racial lines, which we know is always the case and was the case in the '60s, and also how art crosses racial lines.

"It's a way to start thinking about the real histories of whatever. The way we write these histories, so many people are left out on either side. The reason to write single histories is because they're focused; they're easier. Sometimes in the case of African-American history, it's a response to a more eurocentric history that leaves black people out with their contributions. But this is a way for me to talk about real life experiences."

Images courtesy of Williams College Museum of Art

Suzanne Jackson's 1973 painting 'Apparitional Visitations'

Jones cites artists Daniel Larue Johnson and Virginia Jaramillo as prime examples of why she pursued this section. They were high school sweethearts who married. Jaramillo's career is entrenched in the world and issues that Jones' show addresses.

"Do I just cut her out of the story because she's a Chicana?" she said. "It was a way to talk about friendships and influences and dialogues and community. That's what that section focuses on: the idea of a community that is a multi-cultural community."

The fourth section brings the work well into the 1970s up to 1980, examining post minimalism and performance as the artistic community broadened its canvas.

"They were going into what we would now see as a more contemporary way of working, where artists are not just painters or sculptors, but they do a variety of things," Jones said.

Covering a 20-year period — and a turbulent one at that — means the kind of art being produced by any individual artist changed while still servicing the central message of the community.

"Let's take David Hammonds as example. His earlier works in the '60s are more didactic," said Jones. "They're prints. They're figurative. They're these graphic protest works. You can put them in that category, but by the time you get to the late '70s, he's working with greasy bags and hair, shards of records, things like that. It doesn't really look like the earlier work, although he still has the message to think about."

Jones said although the work of individuals is important to the show, what she really hopes people get out of it is a true sense of the community, and a context for much of it, where you see the collective concerns that lead to the individual work in action.

"People often know David Hammonds as the most well-known figure, but my goal was to contextualize where he came from and the larger community that really supported him as he became a wonderful artist,"

The community that "Now Dig This" captures is one that was born of self-reliance, artists who created their own venues and venues that birthed connectedness to create a system that perpetuated the bonds it helped create in the first place.

"The artists were a community, and they gave birth to the galleries because they had this community that they wanted to show," Jones said. "These people were artists and then they gave up their time and funds to support their fellow artists. That's one way of looking at it. Once the galleries were open and the nonprofit spaces like Watts Tower Arts Center and other spaces [opened], they drew a community, so I think you can look at it both ways."

One of the questions that repeatedly came up for Jones while she was curating the show was what exactly is black art. Some people fretted the show would not be of interest to anyone that was not African American.

"It's a phrase I never use, black art," she said. "I don't believe in it because African Americans and people in the African Diaspora make all sorts of work. There's not something that's 'black.' ... For me, that term is linked to that time period, and it was a very fraught period in terms of defining what is African American in art. Is it something that you can define like music? It's really not."

"What ended up identifying black art as something that was realist, a picture of a black person. That is not black art, I'm sorry. In fact, I have in the show a beautiful portrait of Angela Davis, where somebody might say 'now that's black art,' except it's made by a white person. That breaks that all up."

Jones thinks that the term "black art" is limiting and demands the artist cater his or her work to fit in a category, pretty much the opposite of what most creative people seek.

David Hammons' 'America the Beautiful'

"People don't want to be categorized," she said. "There's a long tradition of people saying 'I want to be understood as an artist and not a black artist, but it doesn't mean I won't draw on things that I have understood from African-American culture and put them in my work.'

"People do that anyway. I don't think it's specific to African Americans, certainly. People are always trying to break out of their thing, whether it's freeing themselves from their parents or their country, their gender, whatever it is."

Jones said there are more popular areas of the black struggle in the '60s and '70s that people know about, but they often don't know how the communities themselves looked at and represented that struggle. Her hope is that "Now Dig This" reveals a rich segment of that time in history that isn't often examined in the mainstream.

"One of the things when the show was up in Los Angeles, one of the most moving comments to me was from some young people who said, 'we knew African Americans were going through a lot during the '60s and '70s, but we didn't know they had time to also make art.'

"That's really the key for me, that people always have time to make art. It may look different because of the material they have access to, or the violence they may be under, or they may be in a very prosperous moment and make big, giant paintings. I think people may know about the Black Panthers and may know about the '60s as an anti-war time or a feminist time or youth movements. But they'll learn more about how artists responded and how African American artists responded — and their friends."