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Darby English

Book Reviews

1971: A Year in the Life of Color

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016. 312 pp.;
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Exhibition Reviews

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Darby English's book *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* hinges on two pairs of jarring pictures. One of the images is well known: a black-and-white photograph showing members of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) protesting in front of the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York in January 1971. The sandwich boards atop their overcoats brand an upcoming survey of contemporary art by black American artists—which they had instigated and then disowned because of the museum's failure to hire a black curator—a "racist show." This image has come to signify the sustained pressure that artists and cultural workers placed, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, on the inequities and exclusions at the heart of the institution of art. Without undermining the crucial role that such campaigns have played in opposing racism, English chooses to read this protest against the grain of much art-historical discourse, which has tended to focus on the institutional changes set in motion by art activism and the rigidity of the structures against which they fought. Taking a different track, in this book he considers this historic snapshot alongside a counter-image: the exhibition that the protestors took issue with, *Contemporary Black Artists in America*.

In part, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* engages in a revisionist history of this infamous exhibition, setting aside the criticism leveled by other commentators—such as Susan E. Cahan in *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (2016)—against its assimilation of black artists' work within the modernist narrative peddled by American art museums at the time. In stark contrast, English takes the view that in giving the lion's share of the exhibition to abstraction, the white, in-house curator Robert "Mac" Doty offered a counter-model to the "new black show" proposed by contemporaneous black curators such as Edmund Barry Gaither and Henri Ghent, which tended to stress the legibility of blackness in a wide array of practices. Whereas Cahan sees a contradiction between Doty's emphasis on abstraction as an affirmation of aesthetic freedom from political constraints, on the one hand, and the eminently political theme of the exhibition, on the other, English argues that in inserting abstraction into "black representational space" (53), *Contemporary Black Artists in America* confronted cultural nationalists' homogenous definition of black art and identity. He sees abstraction, in this context, as channeling a visual language of fluidity, mobility, and openness that unmoors subjectivity from racialized constructs. Its prominence in the exhibition, he argues, made it possible "to move from the fixated question 'What makes this art black?' to 'What does this art do to one's conception of race and the notion of the raced subject?'" (144). The book's wager is that, under this lens, the language of late modernism might be politically mobilized to address questions of race and representation in early 1970s America and, implicitly, to rethink the role of art in conditions of extreme political urgency.

Central to English's analysis is the exhibition form as a discursive space that foregrounds art's necessary interaction with cultural politics—in this instance, trusting black modernists' formal experiments with color to the center of the debate on race relations in the United States. Though *Contemporary Black Artists in America* was badly received by both establishment critics and activists at the time, English argues that nearly half a century later it grants us an opportunity to think through the difficulty of holding the terms *blackness* and *modernism* together, and to consider how they might trouble each other. While he runs the gamut of perspectives on this controversial exhibition, it is his careful attention to the artists' positions within this flammable context—their work and their words—that sets this book apart from other exhibition-focused histories in which more vociferous institutional voices sometimes drown out the elusive language of art making. If this

heightened attention to context stems, in part, from its long-standing erasure within art-historical accounts in favor of the agency of individual artists, what emerges from English's painstaking reconstruction of the debate on black aesthetics circa 1971 is that it is black artists' positions that have often remained on the sidelines of art history, especially when they have failed to toe the line of representativeness. In other words, part of the costs incurred by the unflinching campaigns of the BECC and the Art Workers' Coalition for greater equality was that art by black artists too often entered US museums through the back door, as cultural representation. From this viewpoint, English warns us, we might discover that the tables are turned: that "abstraction was *too* political" (93, original emphasis) because it defied the neat compartmentalization of cultural forms according to skin color. And indeed, it is so that I find myself agreeing with him, however reluctantly, that for artists such as Frank Bowling, Sam Gilliam, Ed Clark, Fred Eversley, Alma Thomas, and Al Loving, modernism's "unprejudiced looking," to use T. J. Clark's phrase, gained a new urgency, enabling them to loosen the structure of color both formally and socially—as suggested by Loving's deconstruction of the cube to "express horizontal feeling" (146), or Bowling's desire to make color "totally ambiguous" (189). It is harder, though, to fully stand behind Doty's outright exoneration. English appositely reads the kaleidoscopic picture that the exhibition painted of contemporary art by black American artists "as a foil against race essentialism" (190)—one that compels us to reconsider the snapshot of the protests against the Whitney as an act of both self-determination and exclusion, which entailed the repudiation of black artists whose pursuit of freedom through opacity deviated from black nationalists' endorsement of legible imagery. But this point is made at the expense of the more familiar yet equally important argument that the curator failed to address how analogous coercions operated within the by-and-large white institution of art, his endorsement of abstraction amounting to an acceptance of black culture so far as it conformed to entrenched aesthetic conventions.

Finding themselves caught in the crossfire between the Whitney and the BECC, many artists pulled out of the show—some in support of the activists' demands that the exhibition be co-organized by a black curator; others, including Peter Bradley, because they refused to be "used as a socio-political football" (197). That summer, Bradley would embark upon a response of sorts to *Contemporary Black Artists in America*, one that also differed from the rebuttal exhibition organized by BECC members at Acts of Art Gallery in Greenwich Village. At the invitation of the Houston-based de Menil art patrons, Bradley put together an exhibition of twenty some abstract works by an interracial group of artists in a disused movie theater, called DeLuxe, situated in Houston's Fifth Ward, a historically segregated district of the city which fell into economic decline in the post-civil rights era. The archive of this exhibition is the source of English's second diptych: a photograph of disenfranchised black youths hanging out in front of a derelict theater, whose blank marquee only flags the dearth of offerings; and an installation shot of the white cube into which the interior of the cinema was hastily transformed, featuring edgy color paintings on shaped canvases and plinthless sculptures carefully scattered on a sandblasted concrete floor. For English, the political dimension of modernism within black cultural politics rested, in 1971, on its efforts to shatter that apparent incongruity; what *The DeLuxe Show* offers up, then, is an image of "a spatially expansive nucleus of turbulent color opened in the midst of a politically monochromatic territory" (208). In the context of this exhibition, the subtly shifting color-field paintings by Bradley and Jules Olitsky, or the spatially expansive—psychedelic, even—uses of the line in works by Loving and Virginia Jaramillo were charged with exploding, metaphorically speaking, the political enclosure of the ghetto. Modernism was here enlisted in a site-specific exhibition-cum-social-experiment that sought to erode the ravaging impact of racialization on individuals' horizons and expectations, particularly those of young people. To do so, English argues, Bradley and his colleagues transmuted the aesthetic formalism promulgated by Clement Greenberg (who was interested enough to visit the show, though not to write a word on it). For them, modernism's potential lay not in its willful ignorance of the conditions of art production—especially not the systemic racism that shaped social and cultural institutions—but in its capacity to reconfigure structures of perception, feeling, and thought. The stark contrast that *The DeLuxe Show* staged between disenfranchisement and self-determination goes some way toward explaining the appeal of a universal language, in this context, as an antidote to the fixation of cultural difference, but it also shows how woefully precarious the language of artistic freedom is when faced with the extreme subjugation of black lives.

There is a third juxtaposition that, though not explicitly addressed in the book, inevitably marks its current reception: the clash between the optimistic modernist idiom of freedom espoused by these artists and the institutionalized racial violence that movements such as Black Lives Matter have once again brought to the forefront of public discourse in recent years. In a sense, the oblique approaches to black liberation that English discusses might seem as far removed from today's climate of political emergency as they were for some in 1971. On this point, his note of caution against the congealment of identity remains as pertinent as it is dissonant. Ultimately, I read *1971: A Year in the Life of Color* as a call for a fine-grained critical language that muddles binary thought structures—structures that are particularly ill suited to think through artistic engagements with intercultural politics, and that appear all the more pernicious now that white supremacist ideology has fully taken up the reins of power in the United States.

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