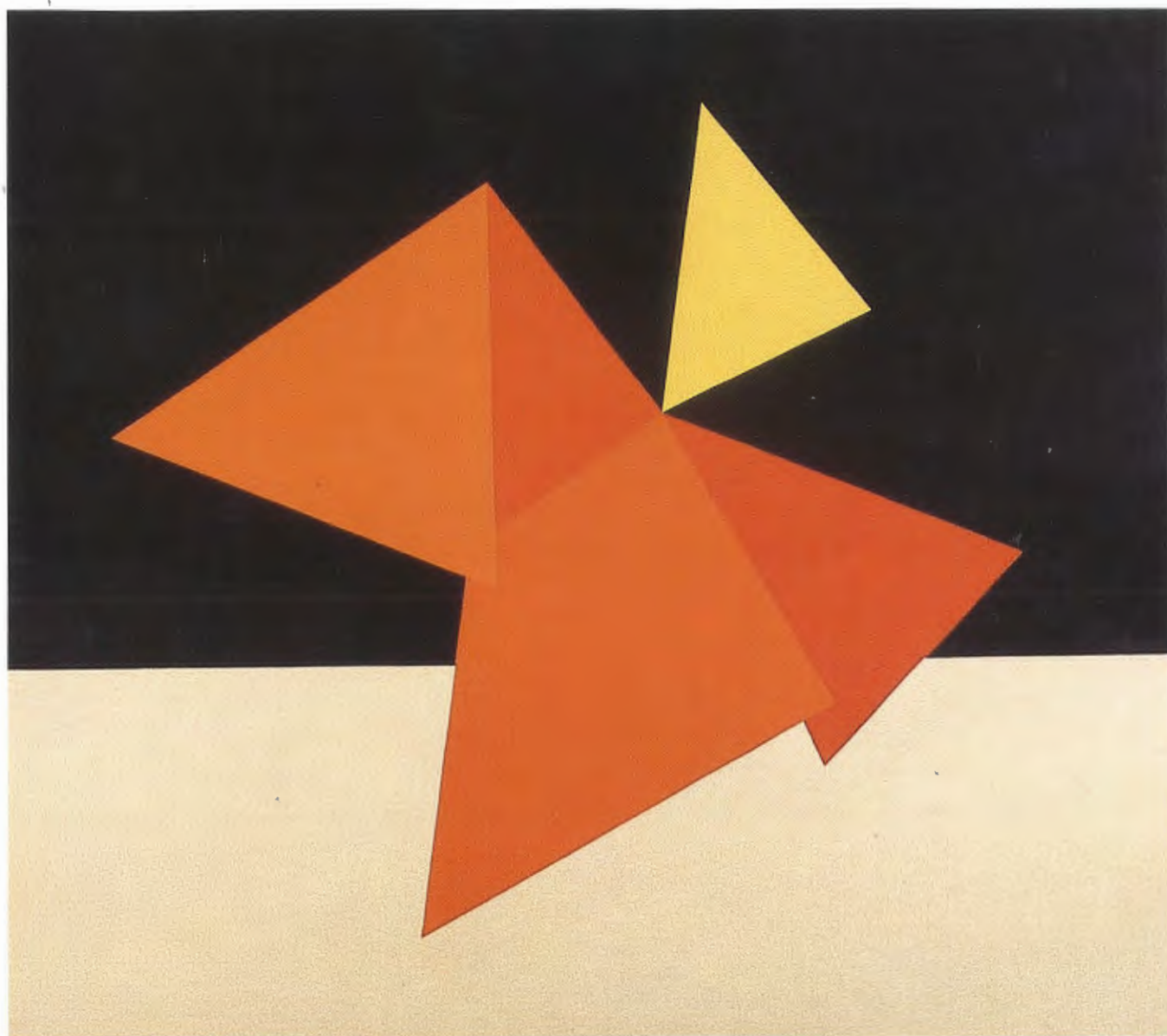


THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN ART



Kubuki, Felrath Hines

VOLUME 10 NUMBER 3 \$8.00

THE INTERNATIONAL REVIEW OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN ART

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Volume 10, Number 3

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JOYCE WELLMAN
Untitled B

1993, Mixed media painting, 50"x 42"

JOURNEYING BEYOND

THE PRINTS AND PAINTINGS OF JOYCE WELLMAN

BY RICHARD J. POWELL

Joyce Wellman is painting again. After years of close-quartered graphic work and scaled-down conceptions on zinc and copper etching plates, images like *Under Sea Life* emerge. Accent marks, abbreviated messages (such as the S.O.S. which occasionally appears in Wellman's work) and abstracted body parts swim in this conceptual ocean. The meaning of the "S.O.S" is "We all need each other," explains Wellman. "Black and white, Chinese, whomever — we've got to help each other. And we can't just talk; it's in the doing."

As a student at Bronx Community College, Wellman was on the receiving end of a decisive S.O.S. It came from a friend and would determine the course of her life. "Black kids in New York City public schools need more strong black role models!" was the message. Considering herself a "revolutionary" after joining protests to demand black studies at Bronx Community, Wellman heeded her friend's call and enrolled at City College as an education major. Teaching was one of the most constructive forms of activism, she felt. After graduation, however, the Fate that hunts down artists, intervened in the form of no available teaching jobs in her field. The fledgling revolutionary reluctantly returned home for help. Wellman's father, a kitchen worker at a Harlem junior high, offered to talk to his principal on her behalf.

"Can you teach arts and crafts?" asked the principal.

"Yes!" — Wellman's ready reply. More than, "either this job or no job," she sensed that somehow the opportunity at hand was meant to be. Soon after, she heard about free art classes at the Studio Museum.

At the Studio Museum, Wellman studied with printmaker Valerie Maynard. Searching for "anything that was free," she also attended the Public Theater's photography workshop and the Printmaking Workshop of New York City. PMW was organized by Robert Blackburn to provide evening classes where emerging artists of all ages can learn the techniques of established professionals. (An article on PMW appears in *IRAAA*, vol. 6, no. 4.)

Wellman's early prints were shown at the Cinque, a gallery originating out of the generous concerns of its founders, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis and Ernie Crichlow. One of its purposes was to provide exposure for young African American artists. Gallery director Chris Shelton "was very open, welcoming, giving," Wellman recalls. "I educated myself there. I was very shy, hoping that I could have a show there one day. Chris helped make that dream come true. We hung out. I met other artists. And I felt very lucky — there were no gender issues (e.g., sexual harassment)!"

Another early mentor was Ed Clarke. Helping Clarke stretch and frame his 25 foot-high canvasses, Wellman was inspired to explore her own potential as a painter. Her development as a printmaker continued at the Color Print Atelier under the tutelage of Krishna Reddy, the "father", according to Wellman, of color viscosity printing.

In 1979, Wellman began to make frequent trips to Washington, D.C. to visit family and fellow artists and to work at Percy Martin's printmaking shop. In 1981, she moved to the District.

Setting up shop in the basement of his home and

providing keys for members, Percy Martin gave artists a chance to develop their printmaking skills. "Print makers often work in groups," Wellman explains. "There's a lot of heavy equipment (that young artists usually can not afford on their own). Every Saturday we came together and partied and did work."

Released from regular work from 1980 to 1984, Wellman could concentrate on printmaking. As a teacher in New York, she had put a sizeable amount of her income into tax-deferred annuities: "After two years, I said, 'Let me retire'." She found a house in D.C. and a housemate. Her share of the rent was \$200 a month. "Living was cheap all the way around."

Art and education, art in education, art from education, education from art have formed the intertwined themes of Wellman's life. In 1979, she earned an M.S. in Education from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and in 1981, studied as a Ford Fellow at the Maryland Institute of Art. Resuming full-time work in 1984 as director of the Art Barn Association's Arts and the Aging Workshop Program, a steady salary allowed her to rent a large studio space in Northeast Washington. Wellman's ingenuity as an artist and her training as a teacher combined in the design therapeutic activities for people with Alzheimer's Disease and related disorders. "Combining the roles of artist and educator has been very fruitful," she says.

In 1992, Wellman was appointed director of an arts program administered by the University of the District of Columbia which provides motivation, discipline and training for juvenile offenders at four detention centers. She cites a portrait drawing exercise as an example of how the

program works: "Drawing portraits takes time. You make mistakes and correct mistakes. It does not come to you overnight. The kids say, 'I'll sit and listen, and learn how to draw.' They find something in themselves that they can hold on to and develop. They learn 'I can do something!'"

Wellman, herself, is continuing to stretch as she works on "collaged paintings". Sam Gilliam, the noted artist whose work spans painting, sculpture and environmental "happenings", has been coming to her studio and making suggestions. "That's a pretty big canvas. Why don't you cut it?" he asked. "Tearing, ripping, recreating is a very exciting way to work," she says.

Recent shows include "Works on Paper: Prints by Stephanie Pogue and Joyce Wellman" at the Howard University Gallery of Art and "Metro Art", a solo exhibit at the First American Bank in the District.

"My new works continue to be created from intuitive sources," she says. "While my prints are still an important resource for transmuting inner thoughts, feelings, memories and reflections, I am really energized by my latest collage-reconstructed paintings, drawings and mixed media images. They allow me greater freedom to mix it up, throw it around, and get funkily immersed in the act of pushing and pulling the inner spirit within us all to the surface."

JOURNEYING BEYOND

Joyce Wellman's residency in the District of Columbia, along with her recent retreats into the Adirondacks, have produced an art which, while on the surface may have



JOYCE WELLMAN
Journey to Sun City
1984
Linocut and dry point
16"x 20"



JOYCE WELLMAN
Under Sea Life
1985
Acrylic on paper
22"x 30"



JOYCE WELLMAN
Jungle Journey

1983
Color viscosity etching
16" x 20"



JOYCE WELLMAN
Pathway Dancers

1984
Linocut
16" x 20"



JOYCE WELLMAN
Artist's Alter Ego in Metamorphosis
1985, Color viscosity etching, 20" x 16"



JOYCE WELLMAN
Journey Thru Migration
1985
Color viscosity etching
20" x 16"



JOYCE WELLMAN
4 Thoughts
1984
Acrylic on canvas
38" x 38"



something to do with urban labyrinths and “graffittied” discourses, are actually population zero and spirit-charged. One of my favorites, *Journey to Sun City*, captures the dust-tracked memory and heat of an alive, sweltering environment minus the typical references to architecture and citizenry.

When I asked Wellman if, in *Journey to Sun City*, we were checking out that similarly-named, infamous, Las Vegas-like outpost in South Africa, she said, “If that’s where you want to be.” I understood this to signify (and I think that I’m on the right track here) that what art historian David Driskell refers to in Wellman’s work as “the concept of journeying” means that the *process* of journeying has just as much import as does the destination. This idea is borne out both in the print *Journey to Sun City* and its medium: a combination of several printmaking techniques. This print’s brilliant colors, use of high-effect contrast, and its primordial images conjure a joy and motivation in the *possibilities* of joy and content. Although I prefer the suggestions in this print of a lush, West African-inspired, commemorative cloth, my initial trek into a desolate zone of *apartheid* has its instructive purposes as well.

The fluidity in which Wellman moves from the concrete to the illusory crops up again in early and later graphics. *Creation*, a 1979 print done while Wellman was affiliated with Krishna Reddy’s color printmaking workshop in New York City, and *Block Girls*, a 1984 image, illustrate her range and development. *Creation* visualizes the Adam/Eve/Snake narrative while simultaneously touching on specific tales of “becoming” that are common among the Akan people of Ghana. Perhaps more illustrational than subsequent prints, *Creation* is one of the first prints by Wellman to formally articulate a kind of organic,

almost surreal imagining of the tangible. *Block Girls* puns on its compositional self and on those street corner “thugettes” who’ve got their own. Both prints force viewers to intuit the text more than to read it.

The feeling/sensing/intuiting process is evident in Joyce Wellman’s approach to the figure. From its most obvious realizations, as in *Pathway Dancers*, to its most abstracted embodiments, as in *Jungle Journey*, the human figure in Wellman’s art holds sensuality and a potential for action close to the surface. The white-on-black doodles of *Pathway Dancers* are miniature versions of the titular dancers themselves. Appendages and torso, decked out in waves of design, function on behalf of an *implied* energy. Taking on the shape of anthropomorphic arrows, these figures reiterate Wellman’s paean to “going places,” both in form and spirit. In *Jungle Journey*, these personifications are perhaps more “arrow” than “human”, recalling aboriginal totems and divining rods which mark points of contact for the ancestors, water and/or other life sources. Located imaginatively between *Pathway Dancers* and *Jungle Journey* is *The Water Family*, also directional and pulsating like microscopic cilia.

With colorful works like *The Water Family* as a backdrop, Joyce Wellman’s aesthetic proximity to the so-called “Washington Color School” demands some consideration. While conceptually distant from the systematic rainbow paintings of Gene Davis or the stoic geometries of Kenneth Noland, Wellman’s art does relate to the more

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THE PRINTS AND PAINTINGS OF JOYCE WELLMAN

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expressive offshoots of this group, specifically to the paintings of Sam Gilliam. Her *Journey Thru Migration*, a yellow / sky blue / purple melange of virulent color juxtapositions, recall Gilliam's recent explorations into similar junctures of color and form. But while Gilliam avoids direct references to the human figure, Wellman allows the shapes created by her roller to invoke walking legs, flexed torsos and akimbo arms. In the acrylic on canvas painting, *4 Thoughts* (that bears a coloristic continuity with *Journey Thru Migration*), the links to Gilliam's central leitmotif of color contrasts is over-shadowed by bold figures against painted patterns. The brash, expressionistic treatment of both the figures and ground in Wellman's painting takes the smaller-scaled prints, with their shared emphasis on warm-against-cool and clarity-against-the-enigmatic, to other levels of interpretation.

The journey back and forth between paintings and prints, as in Wellman's journey between the figure and the space surrounding it, reach an apex in the color viscosity etching *Artist's Alter Ego in Metamorphosis*. The play, or *swing* between the composition's primary figure and its pictographic, message-laden context is fascinating. The overriding concerns for Wellman — an art of process, an "implosion of color, form and space" and the triggering of timeless, limitless associations — seem especially at work in this print. But what makes this image succeed beyond Wellman's objectives is a delectable *density*. The confluences of color, closeness and text in this print allow our 21st century receptors to operate at full tilt, factoring out each visual ingredient for its respective effects. The *layers* in this and other works by Wellman join a host of other multifaceted expressions in the African American tradition (black urban fashion, Afrika Bambaataa's polyrhythms, Greg Tate's critical writings) by demanding perceptual simulta-

neity from the audience. A detail of *Artist's Alter Ego in Metamorphosis*, simmering with portent, script-like linearity, lucidly conveys this call to perceptual "alloverness."

Wellman's highwire solo between printmaking and painting elicits at times a reeling sensation, capable of confounding those who find media-leaps a bit too much. But for those who, out of necessity, are conversant in many different languages of art — the painterly, the graphic, the abstract and the figurative — Joyce Wellman's art will, as she says, "lead you into that other self that is interfacing subconsciously with our environment." Joyce Wellman, without question, is pointing us in the direction of unrealized, but attainable, possibilities in art. Our following her along this brilliant-hued, information-dotted and personally-charted path deepens our understanding of the abstract consciousness, as well as expands our appreciation for the artist herself.

Richard J. Powell, assistant professor in the history of art at Duke University, is currently on sabbatical as a W.E.B. Du Bois Fellow at Harvard University.

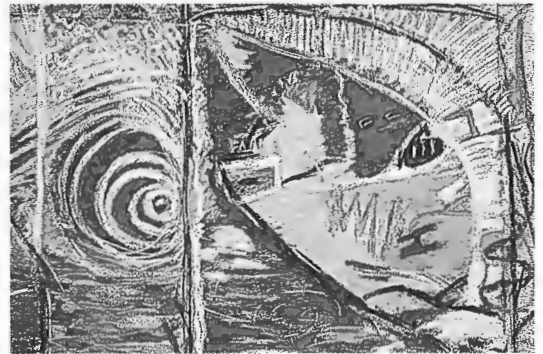


JOYCE WELLMAN
Creation

1979
Color viscosity etching
20" x 16"

JOYCE WELLMAN
Perception and Knowledge, Maelstrom I

1989, 53" x 50"



JOYCE WELLMAN
Block Girls

1984, Color viscosity etching, 16" x 20"



JOYCE WELLMAN
The Water Family

1984, Color viscosity etching, 20" x 16"

