

DANCING ON THE EDGE OF THE ABYSS

Abstraction by African American Women
Artists in The Cochran Collection



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In 1960 Columbus-born artist Alma Thomas signed and dated *Red Forms* (fig. 1) in the bottom right-hand corner, substantiating the date of execution and conferring her “seal of approval.” *Red Forms* is very likely from a group of similar expressionist watercolors that she showed to one of her mentors, Professor James Herring, soon after their completion. (In 1922, Herring had founded the Department of Art at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and had recruited Thomas as the program’s first matriculating student around the same time. They remained close until Herring’s demise in 1969.) The series, which features patches of thinned-down pigment overlaid with black lines and spatters, was a milestone for the artist: the first images she had ever created directly from her imagination, that is, without a referent or motif from the observable world.

In a radio broadcast from late 1972, the artist recounted Herring’s strong reaction to her change in painting style and lack of recognizable imagery: “[H]e said he had never seen watercolors done like that, and that the critics would give me very bad criticism, and it would hurt me.”¹ This very specific anecdotal evidence of resistance to artwork that privileges formal issues—in both composition and materiality—rather than mimetic (or imitative) representation encapsulates the historical challenges faced by many artists over the course of the 20th century. Happily, Alma Thomas ignored James Herring’s counsel and persevered (until her own death in 1978, actually) in the pursuit of work that foregrounds the elements of design, among them: line, shape, form, texture, color, value, and balance. Indeed, the same could be said about the other 15 makers whose prints, drawings, and collages also appear in the exhibition *Dancing on the Edge of the Abyss: Abstraction by African American Women Artists in The Cochran Collection*.

WHAT IS ABSTRACTION ANYHOW?

Conditioned by physiology and framed by psychology, all vision is subjective. Image makers who distill nature down or invent whole cloth then compound their subjective vision with an uncommon or innovative visual vocabulary, sometimes making it difficult for other viewers to “translate” the artist’s experience-cum-representation into something recognizable and understandable. Abstraction presents a philosophical conundrum, one that may ultimately threaten or exasperate some beholders: non-illusionistic images of minimal means foreground process and medium (“Is that all?” “My kid could do that!”) while at the same time holding complex cultural associations (“I don’t get it.” “How does something seemingly so simple carry so much historical baggage?”).

An explanation here about the semantical nuance between “abstract” and “non-objective” is in order. For the purposes of this catalogue the term “abstract” concerns images based in nature that dissect the motif into components or that reduce the subject to pictorial essentials, such as



1 | Alma Thomas (1891–1978)
Red Forms, 1960
Watercolor on paper
Gift of Miss John Maurice Thomas in memory of her
parents John H. and Amelia W. Cantey Thomas and her
sister Alma Woodsey Thomas G.1994.20.115



2 | Constantin Brancusi (1876–1957)
The Newborn, 1920
Bronze, 5 3/4 x 8 1/4 x 5 3/4 in.
Museum of Modern Art 605.1943



3 | Rocio Rodriguez (b. 1952)
August 31, 2011, 2011
Pastel, oil pastel, and pencil on paper
Gift of the artist G.2012.42

Constantin Brancusi's *The Newborn* (fig. 2). “Non-objective,” on the other hand, denotes images derived, not from nature, but from the artist’s imagination or from the medium’s inherent qualities; there is no referent from the visible world. (To note: in common parlance, “abstract” has come to cover both forms of non-illusionistic representation.) A work like Rocio Rodriguez’s *August 31, 2011*, (fig. 3) exemplifies this second strategy, emphasizing color, lines, and shape, as well as aspects of making: chalkiness, or transparency. The majority of sheets featured in *Dancing on the Edge of the Abyss* were also created using this latter approach.

THE ADVANTAGES OF BEING A WOMAN ARTIST:

Working without the pressure of success.
 Not having to be in shows with men.
 Having an escape from the art world in your 4 free-lance jobs.
 Knowing your career might pick up after you're eighty.
 Being reassured that whatever kind of art you make it will be labeled feminine.
 Not being stuck in a tenured teaching position.
 Seeing your ideas live on in the work of others.
 Having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood.
 Not having to shake on those big cigars or paint in Italian suits.
 Having more time to work after your mate dumps you for someone younger.
 Being included in revised versions of art history.
 Not having to undergo the embarrassment of being called a genius.
 Getting your picture in the art magazines wearing a gerilla suit.

Please send \$ and commits to:
 Box 1056 Cooper St NY, NY 10276

GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

- 4 | Guerrilla Girls (active late 20th century)
The Advantages Of Being A Woman Artist, 1988
 Screenprint on paper
 Tate P78796



- 5 | Howardena Pindell (b. 1943)
Free, White, and 21 (detail), 1980
 Video
 Museum of Modern Art 585.2008

FREE, WHITE, AND 21...OR NOT.

For centuries, women artists have faced systemic gender bias in the art world of schools, galleries, and museums (fig. 4). The opportunities for African American artists were even fewer. Following in the footsteps of forebear Henry Ossawa Tanner, many, among them Beauford Delaney, Barbara Chase-Riboud, and Ealy Mays, relocated to Europe, where they found more support, both moral and financial. To address the intersection of these issues head on, exhibition artist Howardena Pindell wrote, directed, and starred in the groundbreaking video *Free, White, and 21* (fig. 5). This time-based artwork, an unusual “one-off” for the artist, is both an allegory of privilege and a confession of disadvantage. As such, it not only captured the multi-layered frustrations of African American women artists in the late 1970s, but it (among other activist encounters and images) also threw down the gauntlet, demanding extensive changes to the prevailing art world paradigms.

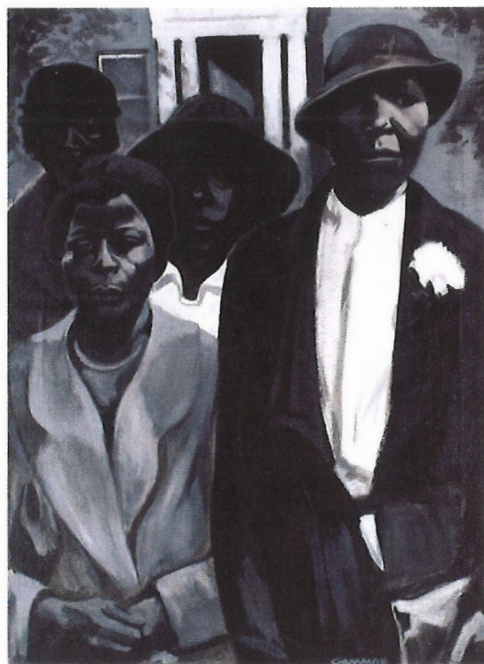
Back story: To counter long-standing, systemic racism in the Jim Crow era, African American leaders in the early 20th century began to form a unified front behind the ideology of “racial uplift.” This philosophical position advocated for the equal status of blacks and whites, pointing to the intellectual, economic, and cultural contributions made by prominent, educated African Americans as primary evidence that all humans have the same potential. Lowery Stokes Sims has offered a succinct recapitulation regarding these historical circumstances. “Despite the fact

that African art was an important source of modern art and its more abstract manifestations,” she notes, “the position and situation of African Americans in America in the period between the two world wars made figuration the obvious path to follow to create affirmative cultural self-images and counter vicious stereotypical ones.”² Augusta Savage’s *Lift Every Voice and Sing* (fig. 6), for example, a recent Museum acquisition, imaginatively meets these strict criteria.

This positive, moralizing force persisted past mid-century, where it came, at last, into conflict with a younger generation’s impatient black nationalism. These opposing viewpoints played out in the art world, too: the assimilationists promoted, at turns, positive social realism and universalizing abstraction; the activists and separatists avoided formalist abstraction altogether in their promotion of easily readable images of African Americans with power and agency (fig. 7). Post-war African American women artists who favored non-figuration had to diplomatically navigate this additional layer of challenge. If, as performer Nina Simone would have it, “[i]t’s an artist’s duty to reflect the times in which we live,” then the faction of the black community in the late 1960s and early 1970s who believed the advances of the Civil Rights Movement were inadequate implied through their strident rhetoric that African American artists who continued to plumb the depths of non-figuration were part of the problem rather than part of the solution. “All progressive artists,” Black Panther artist and illustrator Emory Douglas declared, “take up their paints and brushes in one hand and their gun in the other.” Despite this prevalent discourse, the artists in *Dancing on the Edge of the Abyss* and other African American creatives of similar mind forged ahead along their own paths, “even as this pursuit was viewed by some as being inherently Eurocentric and formalist,” Saul Ostrow explains, “and its black practitioners in denial of their identities and responsibilities.”³



6 | Augusta Savage (1892–1962)
Lift Every Voice and Sing (The Harp), ca. 1939
 Cast white metal with original bronze patina
 The Fund for African American Art G.2018.6



7 | Reginald Gammon (1921–2005)
Mothers [Scottsboro Mothers], 1970
 Oil on canvas
 The Fund for African American Art G.2017.13

FORMALISM ↔ FACTURE

In its organization as a survey exhibition as well as a selection of objects from a private collection, *Dancing on the Edge of the Abyss* manifests a range of works that fall along a spectrum. At one end, cluster images that emphasize visual components and structure. In *Black Bird* (p. 12), Trena Banks places a few exaggerated icons that originated in the real world—church, cross, steps—at measured intervals across the page. Rachele Puryear’s haunting intaglio *Dark Shadows* (p. 32) doesn’t so much describe a particular location as it employs color, line, and texture to evoke a sense of place. Singular recognizable forms—a metallic fish, a black mask—in Bettye Saar’s *Silver Linings: The Unknown* (p. 38) create moments of variety among other aspects of unity: dots, spots, and crescents, as well as the color blue.

Images that foreground making and development appear closer to the other end of the continuum. Drawing an analogy between aural resonance and visual incident in *Soul Sound* (p. 14), Betty Blayton reveals what happens to ink that is brayed or scraped. Each in their own way, Joyce Wellman (p. 49) and Vivian E. Browne (p. 18) demonstrate the wide variety of marks that etching and lithography, respectively, are capable of producing. *The Meeting of Megnez, Pheceda, and Mizar* (p. 24) by Cynthia Hawkins exhibits scumbling, bleeding, blotting, dripping, and layering. With its basis in nature (sun-dappled leaves of a tree) in concert with the joy of creating (rhythmic bands of brushstrokes), Alma Thomas’s *Untitled* (p. 40) demonstrates that every piece in *Dancing on the Edge of the Abyss* holds formalist elements in tension with self-conscious revelations of how the image was made.

DANCING | EDGE | ABYSS

By now it should be clear that the artists in *Dancing on the Edge of the Abyss: Abstraction by African American Women Artists in The Cochran Collection* faced marginalization on all sides—from black artists who worried that abstraction “erased” the image of African Americans from national consciousness to a post-war art market that heavily favored straight white men. Others, like Alma Thomas, had to grapple with issues around age and physical ability. Nevertheless, they all persisted—and the handsome prints, drawings, and collages that comprise the exhibition bear witness, adverse circumstances notwithstanding, to each of their maker’s singular visions.

According to complexity studies, a recent branch of science that has observed organizational structures within seemingly unorganized systems (like weather patterns or traffic jams), the location of highest generativity is “at the edge of chaos.” Given that the African American women whose work is included in *Dancing on the Edge of the Abyss* were (at the least) triply marginalized—by race, by gender, by choice to produce abstractions—working at the threshold on the verge of the brink—should we be at all surprised by the trace they have left behind of their remarkable creativity?

Jonathan Frederick Walz, Ph.D.

¹Unidentified broadcast, audio cassette; late 1972. Alma Thomas papers, 1894–2000, bulk 1936–1982; box 1, folder 5. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A transcription of this recording is printed in Ian Berry and Lauren Haynes et al. *Alma Thomas*. (Munich: DelMonico Books/Prestel, 2016), 217–218.

²Lowery Stokes Sims. “Essentials” in René Paul Barilleaux. *Something to Say: The McNay Presents 100 years of African American Art* (San Antonio: McNay Art Museum, 2018), 60.

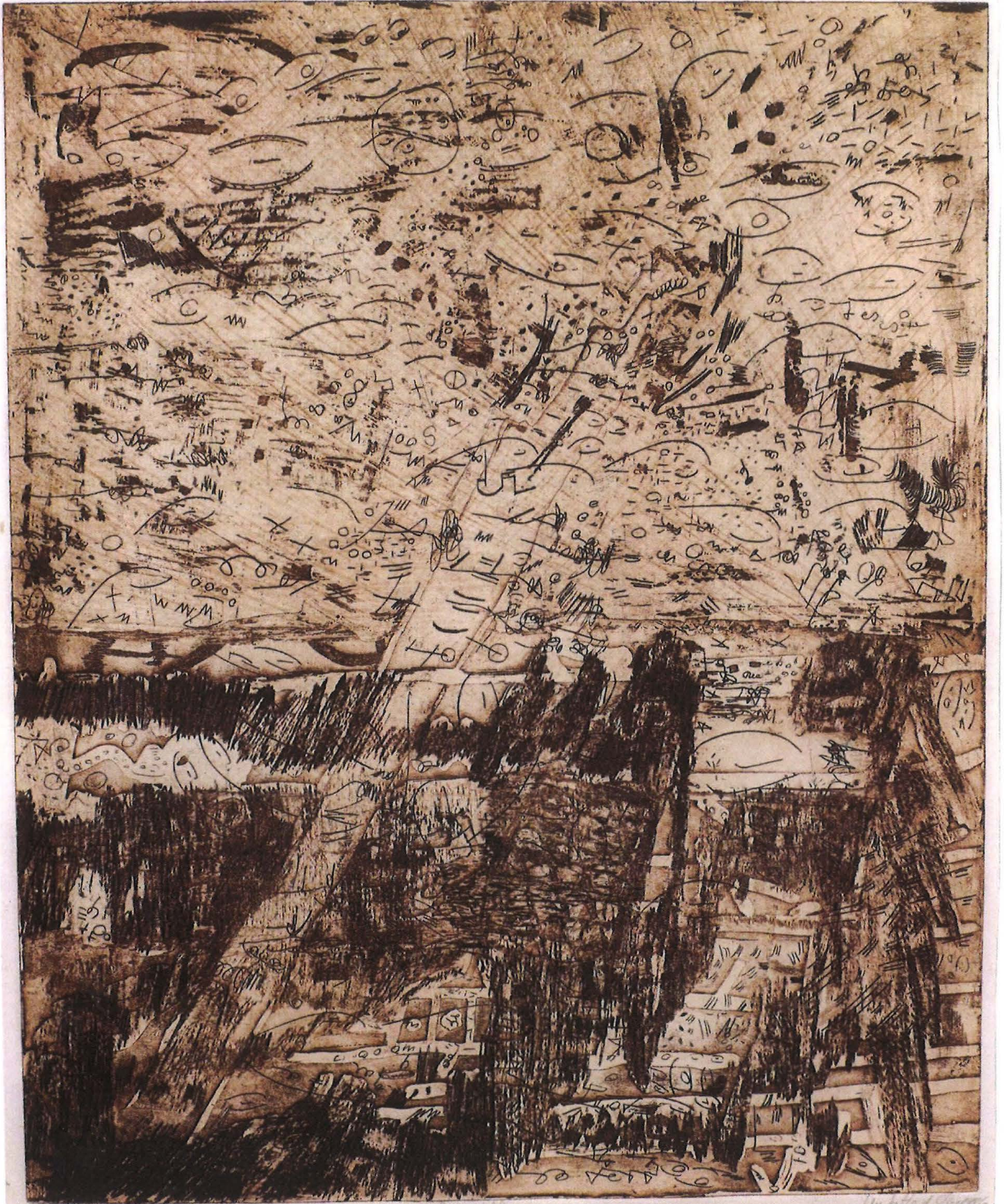
³Saul Ostrow. “Process, Image, and Elegy.” <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/magazines/archives-process-image-elegy/>

Joyce Wellman (b. 1949)

Untitled Sky, 1986
etching

Joyce Wellman was born in New York City. Initially interested in becoming an educator, she received a bachelor's degree from the City College of New York and master's degree from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. It wasn't until nearly a decade later that Wellman pursued an MFA at the Maryland Institute of College of Art. Both a printmaker and a painter, it was during the period between her two stints as a graduate student that Wellman began creating prints. She initially collaborated with Valerie Maynard at the Studio Museum in Harlem and eventually worked at the Robert Blackburn Workshop. She also worked with Krishna Reddy at the artist's Color Print Atelier. In 1981, she decided to transplant herself to Washington, DC, a move that expanded her artistic practice.

Wellman is a multifaceted artist and her oeuvre evidences a complete mastery of spatial interactions. The artist's imagery is rooted in subjects such as sacred geometry, pre-cognition, and the subconscious. She credits her relationships with others as pivotal to the creation of her own work. Wellman has said, "Art is the fuel that carries me on an adventure to discover the mysteries of the universal and the individual self. Because art is both seen and felt, it has the power to engage the body, mind, and spirit." In *Untitled Sky*, a black-and-white etching, the fluidity and erraticism of the artist's marks evoke a dreamscape. Entirely non-objective, the composition generously invites the viewer to make sense of the image's arcane symbol system.



M/25

J. Kelly

White 1/10/06