

# circle of friends

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART



# INTRODUCTION

*Circle of Friends* is the first exhibition presented by the Alper Initiative for Washington Art in the American University Museum. The Initiative, the gift of Washington artist and philanthropist Carolyn Alper, has many objectives. It seeks to be a meeting place for people and ideas, but its most important contribution to the Washington region will be its ability to promote an understanding and appreciation of its art and artists, both from our past and present. Out of this understanding will come opportunities to exchange perceptions, and perhaps, rewrite the history of Washington art.

The concept behind *Circle of Friends* grew out of the oft-made observation that women artists are more likely to participate in formal or informal communities of support than men. I thought that approaching the history of Washington art from the perspective of artistic communities of support could provoke some fresh insights and understanding. I used the occasion of a concurrent exhibition in the museum, *Renée Stout: Tales of the Conjure Woman*, as the lens through which we will view Washington's artist communities and cultural production from 1985, the year Stout arrived in Washington, until the present.

Certainly, both men and women stand to benefit from participating in the peer critiques they learned to depend on in art school, or to gain from professional networking opportunities and the exchange of ideas that artistic communities can provide.

There is the contention, however, that women

participate in these communities more than men because they are more willing to provide and receive emotional support, or are freer to express their female experience in gender-segregated groups.

Art can be a lonely profession for both men and women, but at least one writer of self-help books for artists states the majority of participants in artist groups are "women between the ages of thirty and sixty... Some groups may be women-only by design... Other groups are often comprised exclusively or primarily of women by default because society stigmatizes men who ask for help."<sup>1</sup>

This gender imbalance could be the result of the social stigmatization described, but it is also a healthy reaction by women artists to the patriarchal social systems that seek to dominate women. The history of women's art in the twentieth century can be seen as the history of groups formed to share insights and struggles for empowerment against the patriarchal system. Clearly, historically, men haven't needed to form these groups for empowerment since they've always had the old-boy power networks watching their back.

Whatever the reason, when I asked Renée Stout if there were people she turned to from the time she arrived in Washington until today, she quickly provided me with the names of sixteen women who influenced, inspired, counseled, or otherwise provided

her with physical, spiritual, or emotional sustenance, or just plain moral support. Stout was aware of the work of all of the artists but never actually met a few of them until recently. She described the group this way:

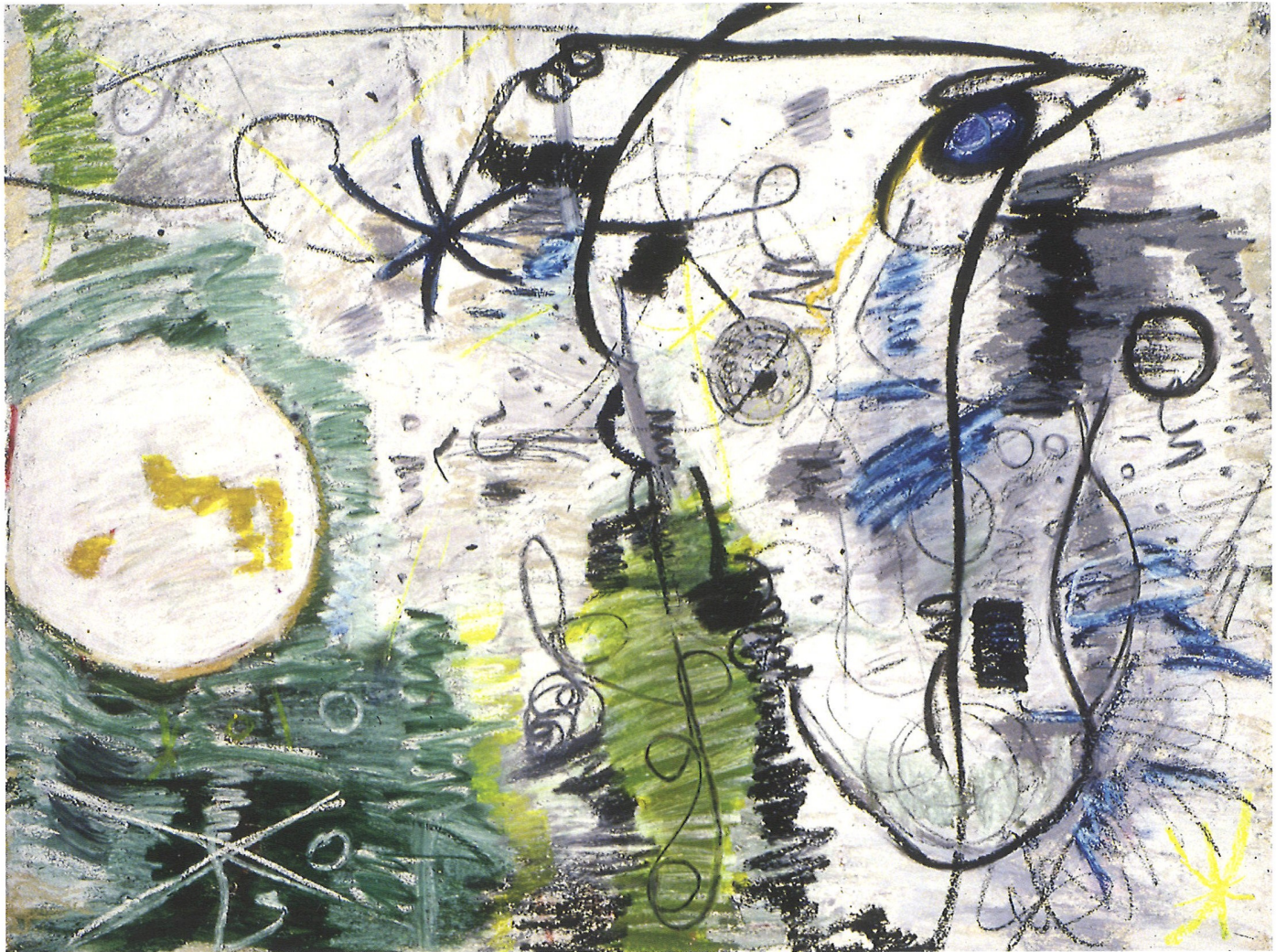
*It's a kind of cross section of female artists who all have the experience of being influenced by living and working in the DC area at one time or another and who have each contributed to the artistic personality of this area with their individual creativity. Talking to or watching all of them contributed to my own experience of living and working in this area.*

All of the women in *Circle of Friends* contribute to a community that made the Washington region from the 1980s to the present an interesting and provocative place to live and make art. For the exhibition, I selected work by each artist from the time they knew Renée best, and then I asked them to write about their relationship with Renée and what it was like being an artist in Washington at that time.

On behalf of the students and friends of American University, I want to thank Yue Li for her curatorial assistance, The Wolpoff Family Foundation for their support of this catalogue, and most especially Carolyn Alper for her beautiful gift to our community.

Jack Rasmussen  
Director and Curator  
American University Museum  
at the Katzen Arts Center  
Washington, DC

<sup>1</sup> Grant, Daniel. *How to Grow as an Artist*. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2002.



Joyce Wellman, *Someone Different*, 1989. Oil stick on paper, mixed media drawing, 50 x 38 in. Courtesy of the Artist.

Photograph of Joyce Wellman by Sharon Farmer.

# JOYCE WELLMAN

Working in Washington, DC has been a joy. I came here from NYC in 1979 and worked at Percy Martin's W.D. Printmaking Workshop. At W.D. I found a wonderful group of printmakers who nourished one another, exhibited together, and watched each other's work grow. Percy Martin's goal was to provide a place to create prints in a non-judgmental supportive environment where everyone was welcomed. For a small fee of \$250 dollars a year he gave each of us 24/7 access to the studio on Lamont St., NW. Percy Martin wanted to see printmaking grow. His small and intimate workshop was modeled after the Robert Blackburn Printmaking Workshop in NYC, who Percy admired and emulated.

Migrating to DC has been a springboard for me as an artist. I began my life as an abstractionist/printmaker in DC at Percy's W.D. Printmaking Workshop growing my printmaking craft. My artistic voice has grown to include paintings, drawings, commissioned works, installations, and new works I describe as "word works," a set of paintings, drawings, boxes, and constructions and poetry. So working in Washington, DC has been and continues to be a blast!

I met Renée, who I consider to be an artist's artist, in the mid 1980s. I was well on my way to creating these stream of consciousness abstract expressionist large scale drawings included in *Circle of Friends*. Renée was on her own path searching for an individualist voice and unearthing inspiration from a similar space—magical, unknown and distinctively African American "Hoo Doo" inspired works. She digs from the well of what I like to call the "Reader, Seer, and Advisor" filled metaphysical space and "other worldly" so to speak, and whose roots reach back to the African continent's music, dance, and religion. And I love that stuff—an unknown but known mystery—filled space! I think Renée discovered my work when we showed together at the Anacostia Museum in a show called *Gathered Visions* in 1991. The exhibition was of African American women artists working in DC. More recently in 2010 Renée introduced me to Troy Staton of New Beginnings Barber Shop. The barbershops and beauty parlors are cultural outposts in the African American tradition. Troy was transforming his shop once a month into an art gallery, showcasing the wealth of local artists in Baltimore and around the region. Troy is himself an avid collector who in his words seeks to "bring art to the community and the community to art." Troy called on one of my favorite artists, Renée, to help find other like-minded souls interested in community art projects to join him. So Troy's first solo show was my exhibition at New Beginnings, and it was because of Renée's vision of sharing her art—making connections again!



**Joyce Wellman** (b. 1949, New York, NY) began her artistic journey in the early seventies in various printmaking studios in New York City. By 1981, she had relocated to Washington, DC.

Throughout her career, Wellman has been discovering a means to create an art vocabulary that included vibrant colors, cryptic marks, shapes, and symbols that reference mathematics, anthropomorphic forms, and personal references to growing up in a household where "the numbers" were played.

While Wellman continued to make prints, her focus in the mid 80s turned to painting, mixed media, and drawing. The use of textures, vivid colors, mark making, and a process-orientated approach helped her communicate through abstraction.

Since 1998, Wellman's paintings, prints, drawing, and mixed media works have been exhibited, published, and collected in the DC Metro area, nationally, and internationally. Wellman's works can be seen in the permanent collections of the US Library of Congress

Division of Prints and Photographs; permanent collection's of the US Embassy, Nairobi, Kenya; and the US Embassy, Monrovia, Liberia; Georgia Museum of Art; Center for Material Culture Studies, University of Delaware; Print Collection of the New York Public Library; James Lewis Museum of Art, Morgan State University; North Carolina A&T State University; Zimmerli Art Museum, Archives for Printmaking Studios; and Rutgers University.

[WWW.JOYCEWELLMAN.COM](http://WWW.JOYCEWELLMAN.COM)