The Hypenated-Experience: African-American Art Enters the Mainstream

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The American experience is undergoing reappraisal as we enter the last decade of the century and begin a new millennium. Our constitutional belief in the inevitability of equality in the economic and social spheres is falling prey to the realities of capitalist competition. And, in the wake of this increasing inequity, we are becoming both cynical and realistic about the homogeieity of our cultural identity. By accepting the multiculturalism that animates American life, we must reject as outmoded the concept of the "melting pot." America's system is no longer seen exclusively as a filtering and equalizing process resulting in a generic "American" type. In an economy and culture of choice the spirit of postmodernist revisionism has resulted in acknowledgment and celebration of our disparate heritages. We have become distinctive hypenated Americans, grouped by genetics--as Italian-American, Hispanic-American, African-American--or by predilection--Gay-American, Pro-Choice American, Politically-Correct-American--proud of our differences and ready to promote them.

But the attempts of each group often fail to penetrate "mainstream" American awareness; resistance born of fear of change and difference takes the guise of repressive rightist polemics, follows age-old patterns of prejudice, and feeds on the ignorance born of a failed educational system and widespread intellectual passivity. The accelerating re-ghettoization of ethnic groups condemned to marginality both cultural and economic has led to further misunderstanding of contributions made to the American psyche by such venerable hyphenated groups as the African-American population. One of our earliest immigrant--uniquely <u>forced</u> immigrant--groups and paradoxically both the least and most

assimilated, the African-American cultural contribution has been confined to the fields of entertainment and sports. Their visual artists have fared less well, finding that their work remains largely unappreciated in their own country.

It is difficult for African-American artists to express their complex identity, given the historical repression of their origins and the segregation of their communal experience. Threatened by the impoverishment of their society and stripped of their history by pre-revisionist historians, African-American artists have nonetheless bridged the void, translating the ethnic experience. With the acceptance of multiculturalism a small window-of-opportunity has opened within the art world for these messages. Postmodernist receptiveness has multiplied opportunities in both stylistic and situational realms.

There are a number of African-American artists pursuing a variety of stylistic choices ranging from history painting to conceptual installation, who are aided in their search for mainstream recognition by the presence of Black History month, a favorable--if temporally ghettoized--situation that dictates public accessibility each February. In these and other such institutionalized "windows," artists have begun the translation of ethnic experience for mixed audiences sorely in need of the lucid exposure given by such avatars of the movement as Adrian Piper, David Hammons, Faith Ringgold, Robert Colescott, Houston Conwill, and Howardena Pindell. Their work effectively succeeds because they utilize formally overlapping pictorial strategies ranging from a lyrical abstraction to mergers of craft and folk technique tinged with personal ~~irony~~ and often politicized irony.

The gritty urban environment forms both the source and locus of David Hammons' streetwise art, a combination of scrappy arte

povera materialism in site-related and -specific installations. From his Harlem neighborhood he collects refuse, embellishing trees in empty lots with discarded liquor bottles, or arranging these in elegantly loopy configurations--adaptable to museum and gallery. The ironies inherent in Hammons' work, currently touring in a retrospective titled Rousing the Rubble, are explicit in these cycles redolent of despair and self-destruction. In the Higher Goals installation in Brooklyn, the last of several such fragile references to basketball and its singular seduction, the message is implicit; these totemic objects point to an avenue to the mainstream, but one still closed to the majority of its targeted minority, who must sight their goals elsewhere. His irony, however, is most overt in "How Ya Like Me Now?," Hamoons' contribution to Jesse Jackson's controversial political aspirations in 1988, shown here at P.S.1 rather than on its original public site in the nation's capitol.

Faith Ringgold also continues overt forays into politics, though she has abandoned the flag paintings that marked her entry into the art world in the late 'sixties. Her installation for our Bicentennial in 1976, The Wake and Resurrection of the Bicentennial Negro, has a perversely celebratory air. Drawing in this piece and in her more recent series of painted quilts on the long-denigrated domestic arts, she weaves the rich oral traditions of her Harlem neighborhood into an elevated form more acceptable to the hierarchy-bound art world. These fictional tapestries meld reality and fantasy, the African-American oral tradition, contemporary expressionism with 19th-century craftwork into the soft, protective surfaces of Street Story Quilt. The personal tales written across such works are so familiar that the translation Ringgold seeks comes easily, even in such critical pieces as the

two-part No More War Quilts, which embeds the painful reminiscences within camoflague patterns.

Activist artist/philosopher Adrian Piper has a long history of confrontational work, which cannily utilizes language and photography to subliminally investigate the complex realities of her explosive topics. Racism, sexism, and classism lurk in the rooms Piper installs with scaled-up drawings, cut-out photoboards, and random piped-in sounds. Her piece for the Directions Series at the Hirshhorn, What It's Like, What It Is, pointedly attacks the now-I-see-you, now-I-don't syndrome hidden within our conflicted ideology of opportunity. Her strategies are tied to the philosophical interplay of illogical language, to word and image disparities, unlike the more traditionally narrative conflations presented in Robert Colescott's works. In didactic scenes like Pygmalion from 1987 and the 1990 Identity Crisis, Colescott explores complications brought about by the collision of aesthetic standards and genetics, tangling his images to reflect the subject. While Piper utilizes ubiquitous photographic imagery whose banality masks her criticality, Colescott subverts by compactly massing equally banal objects of desire and coating them in a seductive candy coating of traditional oil paint. Piper's installation Safe, which occupies an intimate space in the exhibition of the current Awards in the Visual Arts competition, is a series of reassuringly middle-class, upwardly-mobile familial groups printed with simple declarations that further the feeling of security and inclusion.

But the contemporary figures in Safe seem assimilated, shorn of the mark of difference, their heritage identifiable only by skin pigmentation. Their social marginality is made the more incomprehensible for their apparent cultural centrism.

The heretofore hidden history of the African-American is

the raison d'etre for Colescott's ambitious cycle of history paintings collectively entitled Knowledge of the Past is Key to the Future. These congested narratives,simultaneously educational and critical, include the pertinent Some Afterthoughts on Discovery, which links slavery to conquest, and General Gordon Romancing the Nile, which implicates British colonialism.

The stereotypical image of the African-American was once thought to be the sole domain of Colescott's work, but David Hammons, series of body prints and assemblages, Spade, also toyed with the negative associations hovering over a simple term. Piper, however, pierced the heart of the problem in her poster, I Embody, locating the fear of the powerful other that lies beneath racism and sexism.

Houston Conwill's installations and performances have been focussed on the use of heritage, but his cultural history has been made participatory in ritual re-creations, meant to aid healing and unification. His great wheels, titled Cakewalks after slave dances, are aligned to cardinal points of geographic significance for African-American culture. These historicist circles are accompanied by texts, pyramidal reliquaries, and other celebratory objects that bring traditional African formal strategies into American context--in a ceremonious and uplifting manner. Inspired by a sense of commitment to history, culture, and community, Conwill's continuities assure us of a positive identity.

This search for a dignified, if hyphenated,identity rooted in ethnicity, has led to works which explore the nature of the self. Ringgold's first quilt, Echoes of Harlem, produced with her mother Willi Posey in 1980, resembles Hammons' series of body prints and hair sculptures in which the results are dependent upon the materials and interactions that comprise personal identity.

When that identity is not only threatened by marginality, but is wiped clean by accident--as occurred with Howardena Pindell after a near-fatal car wreck--reconstruction can commence only with the help of family and community. In her allusive, amoeboid shaped series, Autobiography, Pindell has literally reconstructed her history through the fragmentary collage technique. Postcards sent to others on her travels were cut and interwoven on the scarred surfaces of her unevenly stretched canvases, embedded in glittering debris as memory triggers. Once her own body is traced on that shape, the imprint of the self is assured and art is truly used for healing. As in Hammons' 1974 body print, Pray for America, personal identity and ethnicity are vital parts of the varigated system making up the American experience.