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WHY HAVE THERE BEEN NO GREAT BLACK ART DEALERS?

by Janelle Zara



Peter A. Bradley is one of New York's original black art dealers and an abstract painter. Credit Sean Donnola

In 1966, two brothers, Alonzo and Dale Davis, set out from Los Angeles on a road trip across the United States, seeking out other artists of color like them. They meant for the trip “to broaden our limited art history experience,” Alonzo says, since African-American artists had been conspicuously absent from his curriculum at Pepperdine University, or Dale’s at the University of Southern California. “We drove from L.A. to Mississippi, up through New York and Chicago, and somewhere between all those cornfields, we thought: it’d be interesting to own a gallery.”

The following year, using Alonzo’s high school art teacher salary, they opened Brockman Gallery, where artists of color — John Outterbridge, Betye Saar, and Noah Purifoy among them — could show and sell their art. They opened in Leimert Park, then a middle-class, predominantly black neighborhood of Los Angeles, and called it Brockman Gallery, after their grandmother Della Brockman, whose mother was a slave from Charleston, South Carolina. Their upbringing in Tuskegee, Alabama, had exposed the Davis brothers to the possibilities of successful black-owned businesses, but their gallery treaded uncharted territory on a number of levels. The overall L.A. gallery scene of the ’60s was influential but small, and focused mostly on white men who made Conceptual or Pop Art; Andy Warhol had his first exhibition ever in 1962 at the Ferus Gallery on North La Cienega Boulevard, which closed just before Brockman Gallery opened. Until then, black artists had been relegated to showing their work at salons and community centers, and both brothers had been specifically advised to get teaching credentials rather than try to make a living as artists. Only one full year had passed since the Watts riots had led to violent clashes between black residents and the L.A.P.D., and the city was still four years away from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art electing its first black board member.

The art world of the ’60s and ’70s in general, “was a hostile environment for black folks,” recalls Linda Goode Bryant, who, in 1974, challenged the white establishment in New York by opening a gallery of her own. Black artists then were still embarrassingly absent from museums (a 1969 show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, called “Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968,” infamously contained no work by black artists) and

there were wild discrepancies in value between white artists and their non-white peers. Realtors, unreceptive to the idea of showing work by “black artists,” would hang up on Bryant, and it wasn’t until she started calling her gallery a place for “emerging artists” that she could secure a space. She went directly to 57th Street, then the financial heart of the art world, and Just Above Midtown (better known as JAM) was born.

“The art world was angry — they were angry that I was there, and that the realtor had leased me the space,” says Bryant. “Dealers would say nasty things to me in the elevator. But, hell yeah, we succeeded on a lot of levels.” JAM became an interdisciplinary community of artists and curators, including Lowery Stokes Sims, the first black curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art; and multimedia artists Howardena Pindell and Lorraine O’Grady, fostering, Bryant says, “an appreciation for what was possible, not those little boxes we had contained ourselves in.”

What these art dealers understood is that the gallery, as an entrée into the art market, is the sole platform for an artist to make a living. And in many ways, galleries are where the hierarchy of power in the art world begins and ends. They discover an artist’s work and promote it to both collectors and institutions; the work rises in value once it enters a museum, and this ultimately leads to more gallery shows. It is an unchanging cycle that for decades artists of color, lacking a commercial outlet, “couldn’t even attempt to break into,” according to Bryant.

In the last decade, major museums have amped up efforts to re-examine the past, unearthing the work of artists who had previously been excluded. For black artists in particular, MoMA hired a consulting curator to broaden its collection in 2014, the same year that the Guggenheim mounted “Carrie Mae Weems: Three Decades of Photography and Video,” the first retrospective of a black female artist in the museum’s history. Institutions nationwide, including the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Pérez Art Museum Miami, have set aside millions of dollars toward the acquisition of African-American art, and in May, the Baltimore Museum of Art made the controversial announcement that it would be deaccessioning works by Andy Warhol and Robert Rauschenberg to make room for work by women and artists of color. It wasn’t until this year, at age 74, that former JAM artist Howardena Pindell had her first major museum survey at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. The desire for museums to patch the holes in art history is strong, but for so many artists, it comes too late; LACMA’s 2015 Noah Purifoy survey arrived 11 years after his death, and the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts’ Norman Lewis retrospective came 36 years after his.

During this newfound institutional interest, critics and historians have described artists like these as “overlooked,” while the more difficult truth is that they were willfully ignored. But if artists of color were, until recently, effectively written out of art history, black dealers have remained almost entirely absent from the narrative of contemporary art. A black-owned gallery is to this day an exception, though in the last few years, a small group of black gallery owners and directors — taking their cue from an even smaller group of forebears — are working hard to prevent the art world from repeating its mistakes.

Contrary to the assumption that society moves toward equality on its own, the ascent of black artists into the status quo has been a result of diligent actors. It has been helped enormously through a dedicated group that includes Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, a director at Jack Shainman, New York gallery with a roster of largely black artists including Nick Cave, Carrie Mae Weems and the estate of Gordon Parks; Mariane Ibrahim, who founded her Seattle gallery in 2012; the San Francisco-based Karen Jenkins-Johnson, who recently expanded to Brooklyn; and a rising population of black staffers, who for so long were not present in most galleries at all.

But in 2018, even as black artists enjoy growing acclaim, American art continues to privilege the perspective of white men. While Shainman is a longstanding champion of artists of color, Bellorado-Samuels — who has worked at the gallery for ten years — is still one of the few black dealers in Chelsea. This kind of perspective has marginalized black artists in a way that is only just being reversed. All the way back in 1975, a young David Hammons, now one

of the most famous and highly valued living artists who would bring his early paintings into Brockman Gallery while they were still wet, described the phenomenon of white curators lumping black artists together in shows, no matter how dissimilar their work, as if being black alone was their only distinguishing virtue. “Throwing everyone into a barrel — that bothers me, that that’s still happening,” he said. Almost 50 years later, it is still happening, though having more black gallerists helps matters.

“If someone wants to do a ‘black art’ show and put together several of my artists who are only thematically linked only by a thread, we’re going to have a conversation about that,” Bellorado-Samuels says. “We’re the artist’s first line of defense; part of our responsibility is to build their market, and another is to navigate how we talk about them, and how we contextualize them.”

In 2017 Belloarado-Samuels opened We Buy Gold, her own roving exhibition space that began in Bedford-Stuyvesant and currently resides in Chinatown before it moves on again. Unconfined by the art world establishment, it provides space for emerging and mid-career artists, of color or not. Working outside the limited perspective of a predominantly white art world, spaces like hers effectively broaden it.

Likewise, Ebony L. Haynes, director of Martos Gallery, has put on two group shows based on pivotal works by black authors: Ralph Ellison’s “Invisible Man,” and, at the gallery’s project space in New York called Shoot the Lobster, Octavia Butler’s “Bloodchild.” Each showcased black artists without needing to bill itself as an “all-black show.” Karen Jenkins-Johnson, who opened her first gallery in 1996, has been proactively growing the small percentage of black collectors in the art market, and in 2017 opened a second space in Lefferts Gardens dedicated to providing artists of color space to curate. Mariane Ibrahim, who grew up in Somaliland, opened her namesake Seattle gallery with a roster largely of African and diasporic artists as a corrective to all the African folk art exhibitions she had seen growing up. To her, they felt as though, “Europe and America were holding a telescope to Africa with white gloves on.”

The work of Brockman Gallery, JAM, and many of their artists rode the activist momentum of the Civil Rights movement; it was through the persistence of the Black Arts Council (BAC) that LACMA had its first show of black artists, “Three Graphic Artists: Charles White. David Hammons. Timothy Washington,” in 1971. The Davis brothers had to cross picket lines to get their artists in — BAC had subsequently staged a protest of the museum’s exhibiting a nationally recognized name like White’s alongside two emerging artists, inside a small prints and drawings department gallery, no less.

The one universal truism among good gallerists, says Joeonna Bellorado-Samuels, a director at Jack Shainman gallery, is that, “At the end of the day, gallery work is advocacy work.” Similar to the Civil Rights movements of the ’60s and ’70s, more recent political shifts that brought black issues to mainstream attention seep into the art world and push it forward: “Black Lives Matter trickled down into a lot of day-to-day, regular life for people in different quadrants and insular economies,” says Haynes. The art world also recently witnessed the organized protest against the depiction of Emmett Till by Dana Schutz, a white artist, as well as the painting of presidential portraits by two black artists, Kehinde Wiley and Amy Sherald. All of these follow the inauguration of America’s first black president, which Jenkins-Johnson describes as a “sea change”: the normalization of a black man as the most powerful figure in the country.

The pioneering black art dealers have all since moved on: JAM closed in 1986, after which Bryant became senior policy analyst for development during the Mayor David Dinkins’s administration and a Peabody Award-winning documentary filmmaker; Brockman Gallery shuttered in 1990, and both brothers continued their respective teaching careers and artistic practices, and Alonzo moved to the East Coast. In the path they cleared, black gallerists continue to disrupt the art world’s homogeneity, one show, one art fair, or one press release at a time.

Why have there been so few black gallerists? Besides the legacy of their historic exclusion, one reason is that starting a gallery takes tremendous resources; Linda Goode Bryant had been lucky enough to find a landlord who would turn a blind eye to her absent rent payments, and a community of artists and curators who would install the parquet flooring for free. Another reason: The predominantly white art world can still be an uncomfortable space for a person of color to navigate, both in the making of art and the selling of it.

The abstract painter Peter A. Bradley, one of New York's original black art dealers, has known the highs and lows of both. As a struggling artist he worked as an art handler at Perls Gallery, an Uptown dealer of Picasso and Modigliani's, until he was promoted to a sales position; as an artist himself, he knew the language of paintings well enough to sell them. As the gallery's associate director he experienced the joys of tailored suits, expensed lunches with Alexander Calder and business trips to Europe; but still, on two occasions, was assailed with an ugly racial epithet. Both times, his boss verbally smacked down the culprits: The Perls, Bradley says, "really protected me big time because I made them a lot of money."

Bradley's position put him in close contact with the art world's high society, which had been closed off to him as an artist; it's how he met dealer André Emmerich, who would give Bradley his first show in 1972. The Whitney had also invited Bradley to participate in the 1971 "Contemporary Black Artists in America," an exhibition in which 15 of the 75 artists withdrew because of the white curator's minimal consultation with experts of color. For his part, Bradley declined because of its reduction of him to a black artist. Instead, with the support of Houston-based collector John de Menil, he put together what is widely considered one of the first racially integrated art shows in the country's history, in Houston's rundown DeLuxe Theater. Here, he put artists of color — including himself — alongside some of the most famous artists of the day, people like Kenneth Noland, Larry Poons and numerous others who were free, due to the color of their skin, to simply be artists, no modifying adjective necessary.

Somewhere between the DeLuxe Show and today, America was forced to confront its longstanding misperceptions on the value of black culture. Alongside the art world, Hollywood is re-examining its own history of exclusion: it clung to the assumption that a film with a black cast couldn't sell tickets until very recently, when the box office success of "Black Panther" and "Get Out" proved that kind of myth untenable. Similarly, the art world had reinforced its own assumption that no one would buy black art by not selling it, only now reckoning with it as a commercial force: In the last 10 years, according to a 2016 Artnet analysis, Glenn Ligon, Mark Bradford and Julie Mehretu — three acclaimed black artists — all joined the ranks of top 10 most valuable American artists born after 1955.

Haynes, happy about the overall climate, is still reticent to hand out pats on the back. "A lot of time has passed that no one paid attention, and no one should be congratulated for paying attention now." And during a time when the representation of blackness within the mainstream has become an increasingly central civil rights issue, to be a black gallerist in 2018 still entails the tedious sidestepping of both the fetishization of black artists, as well as the assumptions of what a gallerist should look like.

Bellorado-Samuels recalls how at a recent dinner, the daughter of a prominent art collector turned to her and asked her if she was an artist. "I said no, and jokingly told her, 'I'll give you three more tries,'" she says. The collector's daughter went down the list: Writer? Publicist? Curator? She finally cocked her head to the side and said, "You're not a dealer, are you?" Incidents like this happen with disheartening frequency. Jenkins-Johnson, who shows at fairs including Art Basel, Untitled and Expo Chicago, regularly watches potential collectors enter her booth and direct their questions to her white employees. It's a symptom, she says, of the "systemic understanding of how bodies should be treated and valued" based on their color. When Haynes experiences these kinds of transgressions, she largely keeps them to herself. "I take the position that making it public might put us in a different category of dealer," she says, noting the tenuous line between leaning into one's blackness and being defined by it.

Progress, however, does reveal itself in small victories. Jenkins-Johnson recalls participating in the 2017 edition of the Association of International Photography Art Dealers fair in New York, where she was exhibiting next to Ibrahim and Atlanta-based gallerist Arnika Dawkins. “That was a groundbreaking time,” Jenkins-Johnson says, “to have three black-owned galleries in one fair.” Her first instinct was to pull out her camera. “I said, ‘We gotta have a photo to mark this occasion.’”