

BILL HODGES GALLERY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BLOCKBUSTER

Rarely Seen, Show-Stopping Works by Highly Important Black Artists

529 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011

27 October – 17 December 2022

NEW YORK, NY, October 20th – Bill Hodges Gallery is proud to present *Blockbuster*, an exhibition of highly significant paintings and sculptures by major figures of African American art history. Carefully curated from the gallery's more than forty-year collection, *Blockbuster* features powerful works that convey a breadth of artistic innovation and phenomenal storytelling – distinguishing the canon of Black Art as foundational to the contemporary art genre. With rarely seen works by preeminent artists Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Richard Hunt, Charles Alston, Beauford Delaney, Edward Clark, Sam Gilliam, and many others, this exhibition draws from the most important works in the collection to demonstrate the heights of Black artistic production. From monumental paintings by Norman Lewis and Merton Simpson to striking sculptural marvels by Richard Hunt and Agustin Cardenas, *Blockbuster* is a celebration of the achievements made by Black artists whose oeuvre reflects on seminal moments throughout art history.

The exhibition's largest painting, Norman Lewis' *New World Acoming'* is a titanic work of compositional brilliance. A crowd of figures, abstracted in geometric frenzy, gather in processional unity under the crimson glow of a ruby-red sun. Enveloped in a burnt-umber haze, the dark silhouette of the congregation is accented by a bright, white glow that seems to emanate from within the crowd. A highly significant work from Lewis' series of Civil Rights paintings, *New World Acoming'* stands alone as a contemplative yet masterfully balanced exploration into rhythm and shadow in a large scale work. Norman Lewis, a pioneer of Abstract Expressionist art, is known for his artistic agility across mediums and dimension. At the onset of his career, his work was largely characterized as influenced by social realism. Like his contemporaries, Lewis saw art as an opportunity to directly engage with civil rights discourse of the time. However, as the 1970s progressed and Lewis' aesthetic became increasingly abstract, his proclivity towards referencing dynamics facing the Black community never waned, evidenced in the organizing spirit at the forefront of *New World Acoming'*.



Norman Lewis (1909 - 1979)
New World Acoming', 1971
Oil on Canvas. 73 x 87 in.
(185.4 x 221 cm)

Another significant and un-missable work featured in the exhibition is Romare Bearden's *The Rites of Spring*. Bearden, a preeminent American painter of the 20th century and contemporary of Norman Lewis,

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was born in North Carolina and grew up in New York City and Pittsburgh. While his early paintings were realistic and often religious in nature, his later works (following his military service during World War II) evolved into his signature semiabstract collage style.

Romare Bearden's *Rites of Spring* is a beautifully balanced watercolor, oil and gouache on cardboard work. Figures with proud features anchor the composition's foreground and background, as they gently



Romare Bearden (1911 - 1988)
The Rites of Spring, ca. 1940
Gouache on Cardboard
31 ½ x 48 in. (80 x 121.9 cm)

glow in rich shades of rust and mahogany. Bearden is well known for his “visual confrontations” when portraying the rituals of daily life, and that sensibility can be observed in this work. A man with a haughty expression gently holds a sprig of greenery between his fingertips as a mother and child gaze towards the viewer with downtrodden and beseeching eyes. It is worth noting that Bearden is not participating in mere agitprop with his work. The artist has been quoted as saying: “It is not my aim to paint about the Negro in America in terms of propaganda ... [but] the life of my people as I know it... My intention is to reveal through pictorial complexities the life I know.”¹ This rings true not only for the implications of *The Rites of Spring*, but also for the expressive and dynamic portraits of Black life in his body of work.

A third artist whose inclusion in *Blockbuster* crystallizes the exhibition’s commitment to highlighting essential figures in Black art history is Merton Simpson. In 1949, Simpson became the first African American to receive the prestigious five-year fellowship from Charleston’s Cultural Education fund; which enabled him to move to New York City after he graduated from high school. After establishing himself as an artist and gallerist, Simpson became a member of the major art collective, Spiral Group, founded by fellow artists and colleagues Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, Al Hollingsworth, and Hale Woodruff. He also had a strong interest in African art, collecting and dealing modern artists alongside traditional works; eventually becoming one of the most prominent dealers of African art of his time. From music to painting, supporting creative expression was a core mission for Simpson, and his legacy as a philanthropist, collector, artist, and pillar of Black cultural production remains to this day.

Prominently featured in *Blockbuster*, Simpson’s *Confrontation II-A* is a striking and nuanced example of the artist’s meditation on race relations in the late 1960s – emerging from the artist’s *Confrontation* series. Simpson’s *Confrontation* series can be characterized by paintings that feature silhouettes and gestures of black and white faces inter-meshed and gridlocked in a charged encounter. In *Confrontation II-A*, the profile of two menacing, abstracted faces clash and merge into one, framed in sable shadow. Like two sides of



Merton Simpson (1928 - 2013)
Confrontation II-A, 1968
Oil on Canvas
50 x 60 in. (127 x 152.4 cm)

¹ Celebrating life as he came to know it through his art was certainly a source of pride for Bearden and for his wife, Annette, who were photographed by Paul Waters as they presented *The Rites of Spring* in Bearden’s New York studio.

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one coin, the contours of each face find counterparts in the other, from the grimacing downturned mouths to the beseeching glints in the figures' eyes – forming a singular visage, mired in internal conflict. Dubbed, “Mr. Mean” by Bill Hodges, this striking, large-scale work holds a special place in the heart of our gallery. Bill recounts first coming across the work in the early 1980's, at Simpson's annual birthday party housed in the artist's Madison Avenue gallery. Ultimately, *Confrontation II-A* found a welcome home at Bill Hodges Gallery after being showcased in a 2005 solo exhibition of the artist's work. Over the years, this work's place in the gallery's collection has grown to represent not only the artistic genius and historic significance of Simpson's career, but the genuine rapport and mutual respect that Simpson and Hodges shared.

At its core, *Blockbuster* is a celebration of the remarkable achievements of the 20th century Black Art vanguard – whose work continues to symbolize a watershed moment in contemporary art. The compelling, thought-provoking, and all-together historic works in this exhibition epitomize not only the best of their genre, but are relics to the gallery's decades-long admiration and demonstrable support of the artists in this collection.

Bill Hodges Gallery is located at 529 W. 20th Street, suite #10E, between 10th Avenue and 11th Avenue. Our closest subway stations are 14th St. & 8th Ave. (A-C-E) and 23rd St. & 8th Ave. (C-E). The gallery is open Tuesday to Friday from 11 AM – 6 PM. Saturday from 12:30 PM – 5:30 PM. Masks and hand sanitizer provided. For more information or to arrange a private viewing, please contact the gallery at (212) 333-2640 or at info@billhodgesgallery.com.