

BILL HODGES GALLERY

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Black Aliveness: A Summer Exhibition

Legacy Lives Boldly in this Celebration of Black Art

529 West 20th Street
New York, NY 10011
27 July – 25 August 2023

NEW YORK, NY July 21 – Bill Hodges Gallery celebrates the vibrant, varied, and resilient artistic perspectives that comprise the Black art genre with *Black Aliveness: A Summer Exhibition*. Curated from the gallery's forty-year collection of historic works, this exhibition offers a fascinating glimpse of American life through the eyes of African American artists. With works such as Merton Simpson's captivating *Confrontation II-A*, Willie Cole's intricately-beaded *Elegba*, Kara Walker's evocative composition *buoy*, and more, this exhibition brings into conversation a highly important, expressive, and dynamic cohort of Black artists. The curation of *Black Aliveness* is informed by the generative work of scholar, Kevin Quashie. Quashie offers a concept which he terms "aliveness" in his work, urging those who appreciate Black cultural expression to advocate for a world in which one encounters Black being just as it is – rather than only as it exists in the shadow of anti-Black violence. For Black artists throughout the decades, a spirit of aliveness animates the stakes of artistic expression. These artists have drawn from a well of historic perseverance to reflect the story of their communities; in moments both jubilant and somber. This is what constitutes the heart of the exhibition. With paintings, photographs and sculptures that range from distinctly figural to contemplative abstraction, *Black Aliveness* highlights the titanic contributions that Black artists have made to their genre, and celebrates the vivid nature of their legacy, just as it is.

A featured work of interest is the rarely exhibited, uniquely active composition by Norman Lewis, *Games*. Jaunty silhouettes of varying size, form, hue, and species congregate in a circle; anchoring the composition with a dynamic sense of motion. A panoply of moody figures gather in cohort, casting cobalt shadows against the canvas' soft royal background. In the center, two bird-like creatures prod competitively towards a meal they cannot share. Norman Lewis, a pioneer of Abstract Expressionism, is celebrated for his exuberant compositions, informed by the civil rights discourse of his time. Though Lewis' aesthetic is characterized by abstraction, his proclivity towards referencing dynamics within the Black community remains at the fore of his work, evidenced in the communal ethos of folk and figuration embodied by *Games*. Although he passed in 1979, Lewis' life's work is only now beginning to receive proper recognition, celebrated for its lively, dynamic, and facile handling of space, color, and history.



Norman Lewis
(1909 – 1979)
Games, 1965
Oil on Canvas
61 x 36 in.
(156.84 x 91.44 cm.)

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Another highly significant work featured in *Black Aliveness*, Camille Billops' painted ceramic bowl, *Title Unknown* is an exquisite and bold sculpture in the round. Billops' signature style of figurative



Camille Billops
(1933 – 2019)
Title Unknown, 1993
Ceramic
14 ½ x 17 ½ x 17 ½ in.
(36.8 x 44.5 x 44.5 cm)

storytelling takes on cyclical orientation, mapped onto the smooth matte surface of a large ceramic bowl. A colorful tableau of impish figures with exaggerated physiques and expressive features emerge, engaged in various acts of sinful antagonism. Their antics adorn the outer walls of the bowl; a nighttime spectacle of caricature devilment. The energetic commotion in the foreground of the composition is flatly rendered against a soft sable background, evoking the aesthetic style of ceramic narrative art. A lemony yellow border provides a refined halo to the rim, balancing the arrangement of contrasting colors and chaotic characters present in this eye-catching work. Camille Billops, writer, artist, and filmmaker, is known for her fluency across genres and disciplines. A celebrated artist, academic, and archivist, Billops built a profound legacy as a champion of Black cultural production; the reverberations of which will be felt in innumerable institutions for years to come.

Additionally, a selection of works by Jo Ann Jones provides a motif of colorful balance and vignette to this summer exhibition. Jones' paintings and drawings negotiate the intricate space that often exists between history, memory and the self. These meticulously painted, small-scale canvases illustrate spectacles of angst and dark whimsy, which address the complex nature of lived relationships; be it between strangers, friends, or even oneself. The unnerving circus oddity afoot in Jones' *(Re)Birth of a Nation* depicts a series of gaunt puckish figures emerging from the backside of a tipped-over elephant. All beasts don party hats, capturing the profound irony of celebrating such an unnatural birth. Jones' work urges viewers to consider and reconsider narrative paradox in these active compositions.



Jo Ann Jones (1965 –)
(Re) Birth of a Nation, 1995
Oil on Linen Canvas
11 x 9 in. (27.9 x 22.9 cm)

Black Aliveness centers the thematic vibrancy that lies at the core of the Black art genre. The artists represented in this exhibition are known for drawing from the dynamics facing the Black community to produce art which reflects the world both simply as it is, and also as it someday could become. In addition to the artists previously mentioned, this exhibition also features insightful works by **Romare Bearden (1911 – 1988)**, **Willie Cole (1955 –)**, **Harold B. Cousins (1916 – 1992)**, **Richard Hunt (1935 –)**, **Zanele Muholi (1972 –)**, **Adam Pendleton (1984 –)**, **Howardena Pindell (1943 –)**, **Merton Simpson (1928 – 2013)**, **John Tarrell Scott (1940 - 2007)**, and **Kara Walker (1969 –)**.

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.