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A Surreal Surrender

by **Semmi W.** | Posted January 20, 2013

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Source: Xlblog.blogspot.com.

By day, Los Angeles operates like a Hollywood starlet. It's rich and always ready for a close-up. Although she's often typecast as a superficial, laidback blonde, L.A. does care about the world; she regularly attends benefit galas and celebrity fundraisers, ready to sign petitions at the drop of a hat. She bonds with A-list stylists and DJs, works out like crazy, adheres to juice cleanses, and goes tanning when she's bored. At night, however, L.A. morphs into a tense being. She is scarred by memories of brutal gang wars, race riots, a notoriously corrupt police department, and a sky-high homeless rate. The cloud of smog that hovers over her is just exhaust from the

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weight she carries.

L.A. leads a double life, and the exhibition *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980* shines a powerful spotlight on her alter ego. Currently on view at New York's MoMA PS1, it showcases a group of pioneering artists who used their work to not only define a new political rhetoric, but also help cement L.A.'s status as a cultural mecca. Specifically, it offers itself as a platform for the black arts scene in Southern California, bringing together a **body of work** influenced by the civil rights movement and black power politics of the 1960s and '70s.

Curated by **Dr. Kellie Jones**, Associate Professor in the department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, *Now Dig This!* brings together 140 works by 33 artists active during this noteworthy historical period, including David Hammons, Senga Nengudi, Melvin Edwards, Betye Saar, Maren Hassinger, John Outterbridge and Noah Purifoy. The exhibition made its debut at UCLA's **Hammer Museum** last year as part of the Getty Foundation's *Pacific Standard Time: Art in LA 1945-1980*. Over 60 cultural institutions across Southern California participated in the initiative, collaborating to help define L.A.'s place in 20th century American art.

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campaign by the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis and All Political Prisoners. Politicians across America received postcards from the committee expressing condemnation and disgust; each note featured White's graphic - a black and white image of a sombre woman, with two budding pink roses beneath her, set on a textured background.

Critics often limit the contribution of black artists during the postmodern period as work that exists outside traditional confines - a related "other" that is perhaps influenced by European or white artists like Matisse, Picasso or Dali, but never quite belonging in the same realm. Such critics consider



Love Letter (1971) by Charles Wilbert White.
Source: heritagegallery.com.

"It's freedom from the shadow of European art," **notes** Judy Chicago, an artist featured in the *Pacific Standard Time* exhibit. In an interview with NPR, she explained how L.A.'s arts scene in the '60s differed from other regions. It was "freedom from the shadow of the art market and of New York. It allowed artists to think about making work and not selling work."

Purifoy who grew up in Watts, a neighbourhood that became the site of exploding riots in 1965, used debris from the uprising to create his sculptures. Fellow artists like John T. Riddle Jr. and John Outterbridge also used the same method of assemblage, turning the aftermath of the Watts Riots into a thing of perverse, unsettling beauty. In the exhibition catalogue essay, Jones explains, "Purifoy, John Riddle and John Outterbridge reinterpreted Watts as a discursive force, emblematic of both uncompromising energy and willful re-creation, using the artistic currency of assemblage."

Charles Wilbert White's 1971 colour lithograph, *Love Letter*, reflects the extent to which abstract images meld with complex realities. It also shows how local artwork not only helped crystallise emotions, but affect social change. White's *Love Letter* was used to protest the 1970 arrest of Angela Davis, an event that triggered a letter-writing



A Lecture on Men
by Semmi W.

black artwork equally beautiful and revolutionary, but argue that the life experiences of artists such as White, Purifoy and Hammons are different. The artwork produced directly addresses social injustices - it is a driving force that is appreciated - however, it is not considered to be exactly the same as their white counterparts.

In truth though, modernist art movements of the 20th century like Surrealism, Dadaism or Cubism were a response to the outbreak of WWI and WWII. European artists like Marcel Duchamp and Picasso were protesting against convention - their work repeatedly objected to war, colonial interests, the Bourgeois and conservatism. They too used art as a political tool. They too understood how you could taste the bitterness in what's sweet, imagine a dream in a nightmare, and laugh while you cry. Art was not just an escape, it was a way to merge realities.



Untitled (1967) by Noah Purifoy, who made sculptures using rubble from the Watts riots.
Source: nytimes.com.

