

Sisters of the Revolution

By ARIELLA BUDICK APRIL 29, 2017



Howardena Pindell, *Carnival at Ostende*, 1977, mixed media on canvas, 93 1/2 x 117 1/4 inches

There's something uncanny about walking into a corner of the past and finding it almost indistinguishable from the present. *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965–1985*, at the Brooklyn Museum, is ostensibly a historical exhibition about a period when outrage crystallized into fresh artistic expressions. The fluent survey focuses on a forgotten generation of committed women who joined alliances yet also lifted their separate voices above the collective shout. They formed a constellation of groups such as Spiral, the Black Arts Movement, Where We At, and Women, Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation. Now, decades later, the causes they represent remain shockingly current, and their distinct sensibilities come together in a show that is at once motley and unified.

One of its stars, Betye Saar, battled vile stereotypes and emerged with an intricate beauty that mixes violence and nostalgia. Saar was a printmaker when she encountered the works of Joseph Cornell at the Pasadena Art Museum and instantly shifted gears, fitting astrological references, Tarot symbols and occult signs into small boxes. The Watts riots and the assassination of

Martin Luther King sent her reeling towards politics. In *Black Girl's Window* (1969) she assembled a grid of colorful signs — a skeleton, a lion, moons, stars, a fierce eagle bearing a shield emblazoned with the word “Love” — on the upper panes of a wood-framed casement window. On the lower half, a girl presses her face against the glass. She could be locked in or left out; either way, her curiosity is a form of power that will soon bear her aloft. Saar’s metaphorical flourishes took a darker turn when she enlisted Aunt Jemima, a symbol of contented servitude, into the ranks of Black Power. In her hands, that old-timey cook with the ingratiating grin became a stealth freedom fighter. Saar affixed her face to a jug of California wine and stuffed a red bandanna into the spout to make a friendly-looking Molotov cocktail. *Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail* (1973) is a call to arms. The show elevates these latter-day Joans-of-Arc who rediscovered the potent combination of weaponry and art. The subject of Dindga McCannon’s mixed media construction *Revolutionary Sister* (1971) sports a Statue of Liberty crown and McCannon’s own ammo belt, merging a fashion statement with a political one. (Social change came slowly, but guerrilla style took off. In a nearby display case, a *Jet* magazine issue featuring a black woman with a headscarf and bullet belt bears the headline: “Black Revolt Sparks White Fashion Craze.” The laziest way to confront a revolution is to appropriate its costumes.) In 1971, McCannon, Vivian E. Browne, Faith Ringgold and others formed the Brooklyn-based collective Where We At, and mounted what they claimed was “the first Black Women’s art exhibition in known history.” The group’s members had come to realize that the Black Power movement reinforced patterns of patriarchy, while mainline feminism revolved around a white, middle-class core. African-American women wanting to be liberated had to do the job themselves. Nearly 50 years later, curators Catherine Morris and Rujeko Hockley are still making the same case.

The show segues from muscular representation to more nuanced meditations, many of them incubated at Linda Goode Bryant’s Just Above Midtown gallery. Abstract paintings by Howardena Pindell glow enigmatically. *Carnival at Ostende* (1977), for instance, breathes through a screen of confetti — bright, handmade dots scattered over a pale expanse. The title refers to works by James Ensor, the eccentric Belgian artist whose skeletons, masks and monsters supercharged ordinary alienation and malaise into trenchant social critique. Paradoxically, the heart of this show about political art consists of art that is not explicitly political. Senga Nengudi loaded nylon stockings with sand or rubber and then twisted them into suggestive, surreal organisms. A photograph documents her eerie Rapunzel, a performance/ritual from 1981 that involved a dilapidated building, a window and a pair of grotesquely distended pantyhose. That same year, Blondell Cummings blended mime, dance and performance into a singular creation. For *Chicken Soup*, a video that plays on a constant loop, she dug into childhood memory and acted out a few hours in the life of her grandmother as she cooked, cleaned, gossiped and prayed. Cummings was not an activist; she explicitly denied that *Chicken Soup* had any political overtones. And yet the piece, which turns the traditional, homebound life of one black woman into a universal spectacle, nurtures the seeds of protest. It is loving and wistful, a nostalgic ode to a domestic culture born of racial and economic constraint.

The exhibition ends in the mid-1980s with Lorna Simpson and Carrie Mae Weems. Simpson once described how, when she and Weems and a third African-American classmate were students at University of California, San Diego, people often confused them despite the discrepancies in shape, size and age. “Our presence was as interchangeable as it was invisible,” Simpson said. In part to combat that erasure, Weems and Simpson each merged text and photography, subtly affirming their separateness in the face of a society that insisted on shoving them into the same mental box. Weems conceived *Family Pictures and Stories* (1978–84) to refute a 1965 government report blaming “the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society” on the breakdown of black family life. She countered bureaucratic bigotry with documentary-style pictures of her clan in all its messy complexity. Her father and mother, aunts and uncles appear in captioned photos, while in a recorded narrative she recounts their stories and idiosyncratic passions. This show comes at a time when issues of fairness and freedom are burning again, and when negotiation and incremental change can feel like futile strategies. It’s salutary to look back at a time when art drew its mission from a mixture of ire and hope. The artists here were — and many remain — angry but never jaded.