August 18th, 2013

In Conversation: Modern African American Art

by Jeanne Schinto

Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts

Photos courtesy Smithsonian American Art Museum

"Me, we." The two-word rhyme was Muhammad Ali's impromptu response when at Harvard University in 1975, toward the end of his commencement day address, an audience member shouted, "Give us a poem!" How perfect can off-the-cuff get? In life, "Me, we" is all we really need to remember. Often, its equivalent is all we really need to say. Tragically, its opposite, "Us, them," has done more damage to humanity than probably any of us cares to think about right now.

Gordon Parks (1912-2006), ***Harlem***, circa 1948, gelatin silver print. ©1948 Gordon Parks Foundation.

As I walked through a preview of *In Conversation: Modern African American Art*, on view since June 1 at the Peabody Essex Museum (PEM) in Salem, Massachusetts, I heard Ali's voice before I saw his photograph by Gordon Parks. A mix of celebrity interview, training sounds of boxing, and audio from Ali's 1965 fight with Sonny Liston was part of the exhibition's soundscape. It formed a rich, aural accompaniment to the visual image of Ali jumping rope in a gym, his balletic feet about a foot off the ground.

Loïs Mailou Jones (1905-1998), ***Moon Masque***, 1971, oil and collage on canvas.

The soundscape that goes with Thornton Dial's mixed-media *Top of the Line (Steel)* includes samples from news reports about the riots sparked by the Rodney King beating and the noise of steel-working. The track well suits this work by Dial (b. 1928), a former migrant farmer and steelworker who made his objects from automobile parts and other industrial and household detritus. But it's also meant to resonate with two other objects nearby, a painting by Frederick Brown of John Henry, the legendary steel driver, and a welded steel sculpture by Melvin Edwards (b. 1937), called *Tambo*, commemorating the South African political leader Oliver Reginald Tambo (1917-1993).

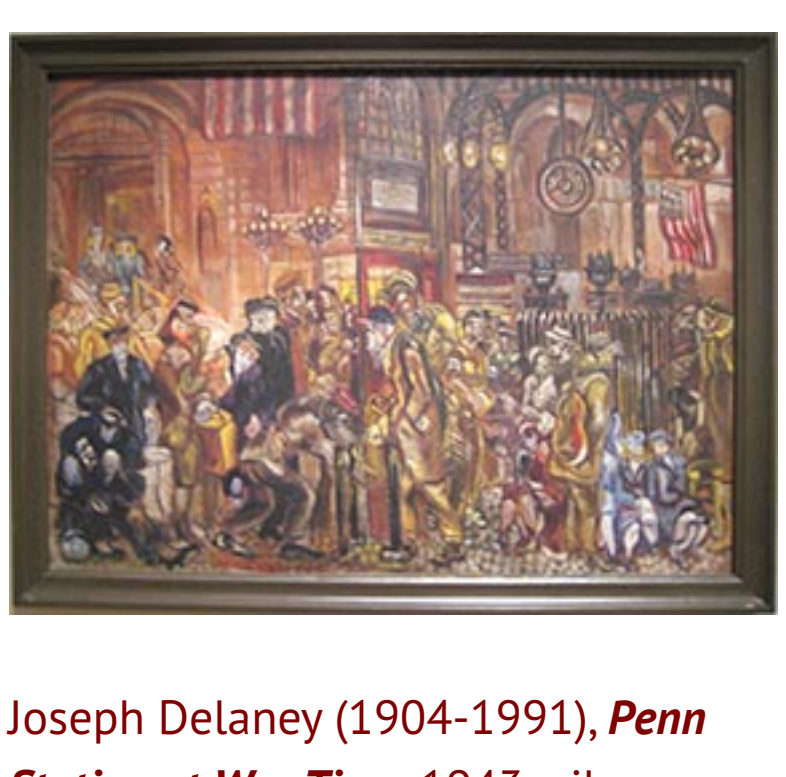
John T. Biggers (1924-2001), ***Shotgun, Third Ward #1,*** 1966, tempera and oil on canvas.

Robert McNeill (1917-2005), ***New Car (South Richmond, Virginia)***, from the project "The Negro in Virginia," 1938, gelatin silver print. ©1938 Robert McNeill.

The title of this exhibition is a prompt, suggesting we look at each object in the context of its neighbors. It might also remind us to listen to the conversations in our heads. Is it "Me, we?" Or "Us, them?" Until American art by African Americans is fully integrated into art museums in our country—unlikely to happen until a number of related things change—that is the special challenge facing everyone.

Malvin Gray Johnson (1896-1934), ***Self-Portrait***, 1934, oil on canvas.

This traveling show, drawn entirely from the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., has a special link to PEM's chief curator, Lynda Roscoe Hartigan. In remarks to a group of previewers, Hartigan said that before coming to PEM she spent 20 years at the Smithsonian helping to build the collection "at a time [1983-2003] when many museums in this country simply did not want to think about including art by African Americans in their collections." The richness of the exhibition (more than 100 works by 43 artists, many well known, others not) is a direct result of her efforts.



Joseph Delaney (1904-1991), ***Penn Station at War Time***, 1943, oil on canvas. Schinto photo.

That preview night, Hartigan also issued a directive related to the title of the show. She wanted everyone to tweet about it. She noted further that these tweets would be transferred as "tweet beams" to large screens in the museum's atrium. To help us get started, there were questions printed on cards. They said things such as "How do African American artists influence our understanding of America?" "What do you think makes this art modern?" "What do you hear when you look at art?" "How does art influence how we perceive each other?" In case one didn't have a smartphone handy, iPads were available for use, and young people, wearing badges saying "Tweet Helper," stood ready to assist "those unfamiliar with tweeting."

Allan Rohan Crite (1910-2007), ***School's Out***, 1936, oil on canvas.

Keith Morrison (b. 1942), ***Zombie Jamboree,*** 1988, oil on canvas. Schinto photo.

Initially, I resisted. I just wanted to look. There were excellent examples of so many great artists' works: a joyous Boston cityscape called *School's Out* by Allan Rohan Crite; self-portraits by Malvin Gray Johnson and by Loïs Mailou Jones, along with separate works by each of them; one each by the brothers Beauford and Joseph Delaney, *Can Fire in the Park* (a very different kind of ashcan school here) and *Penn Station at Wartime*; and there was one of the best Hughie Lee-Smith works I've ever seen—a quintessential, surrealistic Lee-Smith dreamscape. Eventually I gave in and dictated something bland to a very nice tweet helper, David Thibodeau, whose name badge gave his other title as "Executive Assistant to the CMO" (chief marketing officer).

William H. Johnson (1901-1970), ***Early Morning Work***, circa 1940, oil on burlap. Schinto photo.

The power of the artworks encouraged real conversations with my fellow previewers. One example surrounded a 1990 silver gelatin print by Earlie Hudnall Jr. of a middle-aged woman wearing a black-feathered hat reminiscent of an actual spread-winged bird sitting on top of her proud head. Someone said that few women could pull off wearing it. It looks uncannily like the headdress worn by Johnny Depp in the new Lone Ranger movie, said someone else. Likewise, there was lots of talk inspired by *Shotgun, Third Ward #1* by John Biggers, a 1966 tempera-and-oil painting featuring the shotgun style of row houses recognized today as an African-American contribution to architecture. It's a motif that Biggers employed many times. But the word "shotgun" has other connotations, and my fellow lookers did not ignore them, particularly considering the era when this image was painted, in the midst of the racial violence of the 1960's.

On the walls of the galleries there were more prompts in the form of numerous quotations from artists, pundits, and literary figures including Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, and, surprisingly, Nathaniel Hawthorne, who lived down the street from where PEM stands today. The quote from his 1852 novel *The Blithedale Romance* says, "The greatest obstacle to being heroic is the doubt whether one may not be going to prove one's self a fool; the truest heroism is to resist the doubt; and the profoundest wisdom, to know when it ought to be resisted, and when to be obeyed."

These are words that every artist understands. Willingness to be taken for a fool is often part of the creative endeavor. It's just that, for African American artists, the creative struggle was paired with a struggle for civil rights. That more basic battle is reflected in many of these works, but just as many pieces "merely" celebrate life. As the wall quote from the cultural critic Touré says, "Our community is too diverse, complex, imaginative, dynamic, fluid, creative, and beautiful to impose restraints on Blackness."

Having written about African-American art sales for *Maine Antique Digest* since 2007, I knew about at least three-quarters of the artists represented in the show including the ones such as Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, and Sam Gilliam, whose works are abstract and give no thematic hint of the racial group of their makers. I had assumed that most people who know about American art at least recognize the more famous names of Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden. Judging from my conversations in the galleries, I was wrong. That's why I'm so glad this show is making the rounds.

After the *In Conversation* exhibition closes at PEM on September 2, it will travel to the Albuquerque Museum of Art in Albuquerque, New Mexico (September 29, 2013-January 19, 2014); Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee (February 14-May 25, 2014); Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento, California (June 28-September 21, 2014); and the Everson Museum of Art in Syracuse, New York (October 18, 2014-January 4, 2015). A catalog, *African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond* (2012), has been published by the Smithsonian American Art Museum and Skira Rizzoli. For more information, see the PEM Web site (www.pem.org).
