

YALE NEWS

Black leaders talk sports, art

[SARAH STEIN](#) FEB 29, 2016

STAFF REPORTER

Students and faculty at the Yale School of Art held a presentation Sunday afternoon called “Game Recognize Game,” which addressed modern civil rights issues in sports and art.

Over 100 Yale students, New Haven high school students and other members of the community gathered at the Yale University Art Gallery to see Emory Douglas and John Wesley Carlos speak. The discussion between Douglas, former minister of culture for the Black Panther Party, and Carlos, bronze medalist in the 1968 Olympics and famed icon of the Black Power salute, was moderated by Torkwase Dyson of the Yale School of Art and Karléh Wilson '16. The conversation revolved mainly about the symbolism of black power in sports and art.

“Through art and athletics, you try to raise people’s conscious level to a new paradigm, to a new vision,” Carlos said.

Both speakers began by telling the stories of how they became important members of the civil rights movement. Carlos, who grew up in Harlem, said he looked for community leaders, and when he found few, felt it was his duty to be the “Robin Hood” of Harlem and to use his athleticism as a “springboard to help those in need.”

Douglas grew up in San Francisco in the 1950s, where he said discrimination against blacks was prevalent. When young black men were out after a police-mandated curfew, he said, they were often arrested due to racial profiling. Douglas said that because black people could not work or stay in hotels downtown, they began to demonstrate. It was inspiration from these demonstrations that led him to join the Black Arts Movement and then the Black Panther Party about three months after its conception, eventually serving as minister of culture until the group disbanded in 1982.

“Every now and then you would see what was going on in South Africa,” Douglas said about growing up black in the 1950s and '60s. “Then, you’d see the same thing happening in the South. I began to take note of that.”

One topic of interest at the talk was the 1968 Olympics at which Carlos and fellow medalist Tommie Smith, supported by second-place winner Peter Norman of Australia, turned heads by giving the Black Power salute on the podium. Both Carlos and Smith raised their gloved fists and wore black socks and no shoes to represent African-American poverty in the United States.

According to Douglas, the symbolic fist had been around for a long time but became “a real symbol for the black community” after Carlos and Smith showed theirs in the 1968 Olympics. Douglas said that the fist represents determination and fighting for one’s beliefs, while Carlos said he saw it as a symbol of the strength of unity. “Before there was a fist, there was an open hand,” Carlos said. “We look at the fingers as being people of color throughout the world.”

In the late 1960s, the International Olympic Committee argued that Carlos and Smith’s political statement was unfit for an apolitical event like the Olympics. However, Carlos said that he felt it was his “mission on Earth” to make the statement. He also said that it was his and Douglas’s duty, as “gifted” individuals, to use their talent to represent those who have similar gifts and are unable to use them due to inequality and lack of opportunity.

Attendees said they were particularly struck by Douglas’s and Carlos’s use of sports and art to portray political messages, which Douglas does through print media and design. Attendee Alex Jackson ART '17 said he particularly enjoyed seeing the relationship between art, athletics and political messages highlighted by the presentation. He said he was inspired by Douglas’s ability to reach people and spread his message effectively through printmaking.

“It makes you think about how anybody could make political statements in any field that they’re in,” Katy Rosenthal, an attendee and artist from the Fashion Institute of Technology, said. “Any time you find a platform, you can make a statement.”

Attendees Mauricio Cortes Ortega ART '16 and Keiran Brennan Hinton ART '16 said they were inspired by the power of objects, such as Carlos's black glove and black socks, to become symbols that change in different contexts. Ortega said it was amazing how simple hand gestures and articles of clothing can still be symbolic 50 years later.

In a question-and-answer session after the talk, Douglas and Carlos addressed the ways in which young people today can express themselves. Douglas mentioned Beyoncé's "conscience-raising" halftime performance at this month's Super Bowl, and both men talked about how today's black police officers and young black high school students can get involved in the Black Lives Matter movement.

"When you know the rules and you get out and protest, you can break the rules," Douglas said. "Be informed — you're going to be challenged. They're going to try to distort and manipulate and discourage any effort that you make."

Douglas also served as the art director, designer and main illustrator for The Black Panther Newspaper.