



Kara Walker, Karon Davis and the black female artists retelling US history

Power, a new exhibition in Los Angeles, groups together different generations of African American artists who tackle gender, equality and the legacy of slavery

Matt Stromberg in Los Angeles

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"Shakin' up power! Wakin' up power! Stirrin' up power! Troublin' power! Yes, Lord, power! Send power!" sings Sister Gertrude Morgan, a self-taught African American artist, musician and preacher in her song *Power*, released in 1970. Featuring only her voice and a tambourine, it is essentially a mantra, one which lends its title to a group show of 37 African American female artists that opened recently at Sprüth Magers, the German gallery that launched its Los Angeles branch a year ago, across the street from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Curated by Todd Levin, the exhibition casts a wide net, spanning the late 19th century to the early 21st, and featuring painting, sculpture, photography and video. It also includes so-called “outsider” artists, such as Sister Morgan and Clementine Hunter, and “fine” artists including Lorna Simpson, Senga Nengudi and Betye Saar, though Levin bristles at the distinction. The exhibition is loosely organized thematically, with sections corresponding roughly to figuration, politics, abstraction and craft traditions, looking past distinctions in chronology, geography and media to tell a larger story.

Many of these juxtapositions are effective, such as a 1985 quilt, *String* by Rosie Lee Tompkins, placed near *Bale Variant No 0023 (Totem)* (2014), a pillar of colorful cloth by Shinique Smith, connecting the contemporary artist with the tradition of the Quilts of Gee’s Bend. There are some missteps, however, such as the placement of Karon Davis’s *Mawu* (2016), a delicate figure of a seated black woman cast in white plaster, which gazes up at Renee Cox’s *It Shall Be Named* (1994), a photographic collage of a crucified African American man. Both works are powerful in their own right, without the imposition of an outside narrative.



Kara Walker's National Archives Microfilm Publication M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands: Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road (2009). Photograph: Robert Wedemeyer

“At their best, such exhibitions can function as virtual convenings, uniting artists through threads that have to do with matter,” writes the artist Steffani Jemison in her catalogue statement. “And by matter, I refer not to material but rather to the stuff that makes up our work and its concerns. They propose a new way of thinking about kinship among things and people.”

One of the threads that flows through the show is the painful legacy of slavery, which finds form in Meta Vaux Warrick Fuller’s lifelike busts of a freedman and a freedwoman, and more recently in Kara Walker’s video, National Archives Microfilm Publication M999 Roll 34: Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen and Abandoned Lands: Six Miles from Springfield on the Franklin Road (2009). A departure from her stark, large-scale black-and-white silhouette wall works, the colorful video tells the true story of a black family brutalized by white men during the reconstruction era. Jemison’s video *Escaped Lunatic* (2010-11) follows a Houston-based parkour team as they run and tumble throughout the city, recalling both fictional and historical narratives of black men running from authority, going back to runaway slave chronicles.

“Aesthetically and thematically, there are so many parallels generationally that need to be highlighted,” says the Los Angeles-based artist Brenna Youngblood. “It’s a multigenerational show, and that’s almost unheard of.” Youngblood’s large, black wooden sculpture *X* (2012)

references her minimalist predecessors of the 60s (most of whom were white men), while also connoting their contemporary, the black civil rights leader Malcolm X. Nearby, a work by the pioneering artist Faith Ringgold, *Black Light Series #10: Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* (1969), depicts the American flag. When viewed with head cocked, the two words at the end of the work's title can be read through the stars and stripes. Sonya Clark's intimate weaving from almost 50 years later, *Interwoven II* (2016), also depicts the American flag, this time merged with the Confederate flag, a timely reminder of how much progress still needs to be made.



Brenna Youngblood, *X*, 2012. Photograph: Josh White/Courtesy Honor Fraser Gallery

On the gallery's second floor, tucked away in a cove, is a selection of about 100 photographs from the Ralph DeLuca Collection of African American Vernacular Photography. Taken between the end of the civil war and the beginning of the civil rights era, these photos reflect a range of subjects, from weddings to musical bands, families, mothers, pornography and lynchings. It is a curious addition (would we expect the same from a survey of white artists?), but Levin felt its inclusion was important to lend the work some context, "to show what reality meant to some of these women at the time, and how they were able to still transcend that and create these amazing artworks", he says.

Power is not the first exhibition of its kind, but there is no question that artists of color and female artists are under-represented in the institutional art world. "It's not that there haven't been serious curatorial exhibitions," Levin said, "but in general it seems to be at a slower pace than it is for other genders and other colors." That it took two white gallerists from Europe to mount such

an ambitious show of work by African American women in Los Angeles may seem strange to some, but it makes more sense when you look at the history of Sprüth Magers, who, for decades, has been dedicated to exhibiting the work of female artists who have not received the attention that their male peers have.

Whatever the show's curatorial weaknesses are, the bringing together of such a diverse group of black female artists, many of whose work has not been given its due, makes it an urgent and meaningful exhibition right now.

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