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This issue of Number Magazine explores a growing interest in African American art, artists, and visual culture in Memphis. While all aspects of such a broad topic cannot be covered, contributors highlight local developments in African American visual studies and efforts to document such traditions in Memphis. Documented, African American art history runs parallel to the city’s birth as the epicenter of blues music and culture at the turn of the century. Late 19th and early 20th century commercial photographers were among the city’s first African American professional artists. Local photographers Henry Gaines, James P. Hunt, and the Hokeos Brothers visually recorded images of African Americans that celebrated their beauty and achievements. The first masters of the medium established a precedent for the city’s best-known photographer, Ernest Withers. Two of the essays examine the work of African American photographers in Memphis.

Graduate students in the art history program in the Department of Art at the University of Memphis reveal how the discipline of art history has changed since the sixties, transformed through scholarship seeking new ways to study and understand visual culture. They address contemporary issues in the study of American and African American art, such as the influence of colonial photography in the installation pieces of artist Carrie Mae Weems, and the impact of cultural, social, and political movements in the visionary images of artist Minnie Evans. Reviews of recent exhibitions of African American art draw attention to Memphis Brooks Museum of Art and its commitment to arts outreach and education in this area, as well as the museum’s collection of artworks by African American artists, including the work of local photographers.

Working on this issue has whetted the appetite for more investigative projects waiting for some adventurous graduate students include documenting the history of art appreciation and training for African Americans at Lemoyne College. Segregation prohibited African Americans at Lemoyne College. Segregation prohibited African Americans at Lemoyne College. Segregation prohibited African Americans at Lemoyne College. Segregation prohibited African Americans at Le

The first director was experienced muralist Vertis Hayes, master artist of the famous Harlem Hospital Murals, (1936). In 1936, he directed the Federal Art Center in Memphis from 1936-1938, and shaped the art department at Lemoyne until 1946. One of Hayes’ most impressive works was installed in 1940, a forty foot, long mural depicting the history of George Washington Carver, and the black farmer in the Social Sciences building at nearby Jackson State University in Mississippi.

Another prominent local artist in need of attention is Reginald Brown, who taught the Fine Arts at Lemoyne College during the fifties. He painted the beautiful mural of Christ, complete with Egyptian, Chinese, and western symbols, at Second Congregational Church, that can still be viewed in all its glory. He reportedly painted a similar mural at Mason Temple. Morris was also known for his portraits of the city’s African American leaders and elite.

Recently, several local and visiting artists have shown how the blend of the city’s unique visual and historical past lends itself to the creation of innovative, diverse, and challenging works of art. They include Richard Low’s “guardian” art performance in Nathan Bedford Forest Park, the Rhodes-Hill Mural in downtown Memphis sponsored by the Center for Outreach in the Development of the Arts at Rhodes College, and Tobacco Brown’s Douglas High School mural in the historic Douglass community in north Memphis.

In addition, several institutions and individuals continue to impact developments in this direction. Joymerey Gallery brings a global perspective and presence to the city under Director Robert Bano and co-owner, artist wife, Brenda Jostey. They convert both the culture and creative work of people around the globe, show after show after show. Combine all of these fascinating activities with the visionary goals of Eloe Perry, dedicated to building a significant collection of African American art in his hometown.

I am inspired by all that I see. Memphis looks more and more like an epicenter for the study and celebration of Arts from the African Diaspora. Don’t Stop Now!

Earnestine Jenkins & Associate Professor of Art History at the University of Memphis
Peace in a Time of Conflict: Minnie Evans, American Artist

Minnie Evans (1932–1987) is usually described as an outsider or self-taught African American artist from Wilmington, North Carolina. It is always noted that she experienced fantastic dreams and visions that inspired her to begin creating works of art. The term outsider art is difficult to define in relation to creative work as serious as that of Minnie Evans. “ Outsider” has been applied to everything from the unskilled work of “folk” artists to art considered naïve and unsophisticated. From what do these works of “folk” artists to art considered unschooled work of “folk” artists to art considered naïve and unsophisticated.

In the final analysis, Minnie Evans was neither accepted by others when respected elders or religious leaders in the community decided that her talents derived from God and therefore made her chosen or special.

Minnie Evans's experience as a black woman born around the turn of the 20th Century. All of these elements were intertwined and intimately connected with her deep Christian faith.

The style of Evans work has been compared to the indigenous arts of many cultures, such as Africa, Peru, Tibet, the Caribbean and Egypt. It may be the free-flowing use of organic shapes and brilliant primary colors that visually links her work to that of other global cultures and aesthetic traditions. While little is known of direct artistic influences on Minnie’s work, the agrarian lifestyle of the South, where people grew their own food and practiced the beauty of intricate flowers, mythical creatures, giant birds, mysterious faces, angels, devils, cities made up of rainbow colors and what she describes as “the eyes of God.” When she was a child, her grandmother explained that her dreams were caused by a spirit that was calling her, claiming that this was a sign that Minnie was a special child who was going to do something “wonderful in life.” Later, when she was an adult and a married woman, Minnie’s husband was concerned about her visions and drawings until her pastor told him that her drawings were part of God’s plan. It is important to note that Minnie’s understanding of the source of her creativity was always attributed to her Christian faith. Her unusual skills were only acknowledged by divisions of culture, elitism, race or gender.

Although she came to painting late in life, she pursued it with passion. There is no need to judge her work by popularly known as Jim Crow was in full force. By 1918, the United States was embroiled in World War I, and in 1920, the Great Depression engulfed the country. Minnie Evans was not immune from national events. It appears that she did not respond to World War II with a series of untitled drawings done in 1943 that depict bombs exploding amidst trees and what appears to be ancient writing or text. These historical episodes are mentioned because self-trained artists are sometimes discussed as if they were removed or disengaged from current events. It was a few years after the war, in 1949, that Minnie began working as the gatekeeper at Airlie Gardens, where she remained until 1974. During this time, her paintings became more elaborate, resembling an ideal utopia, where mythic gals ruled over a perfect paradise. Minnie’s perfectly enclosed and imagined spaces expressed a yearning for peace and stability at a time when the “real” world seemed increasingly violent and chaotic.

In the final analysis, Minnie Evans was neither naive nor uninformed about the experiences of life. Although she came to painting late in life, she pursued it with passion. There is no need to judge her work by narrowly conceived academic standards. The artwork of Minnie Evans is a joyous vision, grounded in the African American folk tradition and unencumbered by divisions of culture, elitism, race or gender.

Michelle D. Williams is a graduate student in art history at the University of Memphis. Luther King, was most eloquent when expressing this Christian message in words, whereas Minnie Evans expressed similar vision in her artworks. He descriptively innocent renderings of nature perhaps can be viewed as embodying a more complex, well-thought message concerning peace, and living in harmony when placed within the context of social upheaval and political struggle that characterized the era. King exclaimed that “we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” He also wrote, "I have a dream that every valley shall be exalted.” He used such terms to describe nature as a metaphor of peace and justice, while Evans used the visual arts to express a similar message grounded in a shared Christian belief system and a Southern, agrarian life. Both used words and imagery borrowed from and influenced by Biblical texts to evoke an ideal world.

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Before Ernest Withers there was the Hooks Bros., before the Hooks Bros., there was James P. Newton. The history of early African American photographers in Memphis dates back to the early 1890s. In 1891, Memphis city directories listed Henry Floyd as a "soldier, photographer & printer" working in Bluff City, while other photographers were listed in the directory. The name identifiers Henry Floyd as an African American photographer in 1892.

In 1897, James P. Newton, after working for Thoms and Bluff as a photo printer since 1893, opened his own photography business at 12th Street and Walker.

By 1906, G.W. Hamilton published The Bright Side of Memphis, a popular publication on black culture and prosperity, he described James Newton as the longest working professional African American photographer in the city. Newton was considered the best, having built a reputation for beauty, sophisticated images of black Memphians that ranged beyond the city. Until now, only two photographs by Newton, comprising part of the Church Family Papers, were known. More recently, I came upon four more photographs by James Newton included in the book, showing the subject in an appropriate space and context of objects that are readable, like a type of visual narrative.

In her own home, Mrs. Clouston is presented as the dignified matron of her household. She is seated in front of a window with drawn curtains but closed blinds. Natural light illuminates the room from the right. Mrs. Clouston's seated figure is placed close to a round table draped in white, on which is prominently displayed a large Bible. Its diagonal placement draws the viewer's eye to the large jeweled cross pendent to her throat. She wears a wide belt around her waist that may have the household name attached to it. Wealth and upper class status are also indicated in the fine style of shoe, tasteful but high quality fabric set off by skilled tailoring and subtle details of design.

I suggest another layer to this story. All of Mrs. Clouston's clothing is dark, perhaps dyed black, which would have been the custom for someone in mourning. Her jewelry is minimal, except for the cross, and even the small drop earrings she wears are understated.

Mr. Clouston does not appear in the portrait. He died in 1904, two years after Newton opened his photography studio on Beale. Perhaps this portrait was taken within a year or so after Joseph Clouston's death, when Dora was still mourning the passing of a beloved spouse. The portrait might be as much a portrait of Newton as a portrait of the elderly widow. Newton has left us an enduring image, suggesting that Mrs. Clouston must be the joys and pains of Mr. Clouston, her family, and privilege.

James Newton’s success in documenting Memphis’ early African American elite set the stage for the most popular professional photographers in Memphis for much of the 20th Century, the Hooks Bros. Robert and Henry Hooks opened a commercial photography studio on Beale in 1917. It was in operation until the 1970s, making it the second oldest African American business in Memphis. The brother’s sons, Charles and Henry Hooks, assumed leadership of the business during the 1940s. Altogether, the four photographers amassed a record of African American life in Memphis that spans about seventy years.

The Hooks brothers continued the tradition of Newton, establishing a reputation as photographers of the black middle-class in Memphis. They worked to achieve a high level of technical skill, producing images that are well-lighted, clear images. These photographs document the development of the city’s diverse urban and social community, from the everyday changes manifest in the wider world. These photographs remain in private collections in Memphis. However, there are few photographs that remain in public collections, documenting the African American community in Memphis. These are the image from the Hooks brothers’ documentation of the development of the middle-class black segment in segregation is impressive. It should be noted that the Hooks brothers’ approach was inclusive. They never accumulated wealth as photographers of the black Memphis community and often struggled to keep the doors of their business open. The working class, middle-class, and the poor, alongside the prominent, all make their appearance in Hooks Bros. photographs.

The work of Charles and Henry Hooks during segregation is remarkable for the impressive array of African American leaders it records. One of the most prominent was Elmer T. Howard (1920-1979), editor, civic leader and minister. Howard was the descendent of famous slaves, Blue and Emma Hunt, who settled at the historic Hunt-Phalen plantation mansion on Beale. Hunt was the beloved principal of Booker T. Washington High School from 1932 to 1959, the first African American to serve on the Tennessee Draft Board, and the first named to the Shelby County Board of Education. He was also a prominent minister, pastoring Mississippi Boulevard Christian Church for 51 years until his retirement in 1973. Hunt remarked that his greatest fulfillment was looking into the congregation every Sunday at members he knew as children.” I visited them, married them, now I see their children here on the Lord’s Day.” The visual parallel to that life affirming statement can be seen in his image from the Hooks Bros. photograph in August 1930. The image depicts the ceremony of marriage for Aaron Johnson and Sallie Sharp. The Hooks brothers’ documentation of the development of the middle-class black segment in segregation is impressive. It should be noted that the Hooks brothers’ approach was inclusive. They never accumulated wealth as photographers of the black Memphis community and often struggled to keep the doors of their business open. The working class, middle-class, and the poor, alongside the prominent, all make their appearance in Hooks Bros. photographs.

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Unless you’re an architecture student or professional, you might not have a clue about what ties together the Beverly Hills Hotel, St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital and the Hollywood residence of Tarzan (Johnny Weissmuller). The answer would be Paul Revere Williams, one of the most successful and versatile architects of his era, and one of the most successful African-Americans of the 20th Century. In Williams’ lifetime, the list of blacks admitted to the clubby white men’s realm of architecture was brief. Williams rarely spoke about the personal or professional challenges of being African-American or the racial tensions that characterized the social life of his time, but in a 1937 article entitled, “I Am a Negro” he addressed the obstacles he had to overcome to become a master of his profession.

Although his work made a significant impact on the architecture of his time, especially on the image of Los Angeles in the popular imagination, information about Williams is limited and scattered. Williams’ office records were destroyed by fire during the 1992 Los Angeles riots. As of early 2006, the accessible body of knowledge about Paul R. Williams consisted of two publications by his granddaughter, Karen Hudson, an elegant 1993 photographic compendium that includes a chronological list of projects and a children’s book about William’s life; an unpublished proposal because of her interest in 20th Century architecture, and in high school when he was planning his future, a teacher advised him that as a black he would have difficulty acquiring clients. Fazed by the prospect of discrimination but determined not to submit, Williams pursued his vision by studying design and engineering and working in leading architectural firms. In 1922, he opened his own practice and soon became well known for his work in Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Brentwood and other enclaves of wealth that, ironically, excluded African-American residents. During his career, he designed approximately 3,000 buildings in Southern California, across the country and abroad and became a leader in the local, state and national architectural and cultural communities.

Among his many awards, Williams was the first African-American to be elected a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (1957). Williams was orphaned at the age of four and raised by a foster mother who devoted herself to his education. During elementary school, he was the only African-American in a multi-ethnic school that served the vibrant mix of ethnicities in the young city. From an early age, Williams was interested in pursuing a career in architecture and in high school when he was planning his future, a teacher advised him that as a black he would have difficulty acquiring clients. Fazed by the prospect of discrimination but determined not to submit, Williams pursued his vision by studying design and engineering and working in leading architectural firms. In 1922, he opened his own practice and soon became well known for his work in Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Brentwood and other enclaves of wealth that, ironically, excluded African-American residents. During his career, he designed approximately 3,000 buildings in Southern California, across the country and abroad and became a leader in the local, state and national architectural and cultural communities.

Among his many awards, Williams was the first African-American to be elected a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (1957). Williams retired from his practice in 1973 and died in 1980 at the age of 86. Leslie Luebbers, director of the Art Museum of the University of Memphis and manager of the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts, was led to take up the original AIA Memphis project because of her interest in 20th Century architectural history, which she says has focused almost entirely on modernist design to the exclusion of most of the built environment. Like many skillful and successful architects who worked in a variety of styles including modernist ones, Williams is barely acknowledged in scholarly discourse. Luebbers wrote her doctoral dissertation on California architect Charles W. Moore, who embraced stylistic plurality and admired Williams’ work and his concern for designing livable architecture that was sympathetic to its surroundings.

“Plus,” she emphasizes, “who would not be astonished to consider what he accomplished, especially as an African American. Even today blacks represent 1.5% of America’s registered and practicing architects. He was an extremely fine architect, admired for the originality and integrity of his designs and the perfection he insisted upon in their execution. It’s absolutely necessary to reconstruct knowledge of his career before his buildings, which are succumbing to fires, earthquakes, remodeling and demolition, are gone. The project is trying to lay a foundation of information that will inspire others to take up the work of researching and telling more of Paul R. Williams’ compelling story.”

For more information about this project, visit www.paulrwilliamsproject.org

The Paul R. Williams Project

In 2006, the Memphis Chapter of the American Institute of Architects (AIA Memphis) proposed to tell his story and honor his achievements in a small exhibition and approached the Art Museum of the University of Memphis to collaborate. Quickly, it became apparent that a more comprehensive approach was necessary to develop basic resources, hence the multi-phased Paul R. Williams Project, the primary purpose of which is to expand knowledge about Williams and his career; inspire research; support new scholarship and develop K-12 design education curricula using Williams’ career as the primary example. The investigation has resulted in a website, www.paulrwilliamsproject.org, with an expansive and growing bibliography now approaching 1000 citations, a gallery of 400 vintage photographs of Williams’ projects accompanied by fascinating historical notes, and news about efforts to preserve his buildings and other current developments. This summer, under the leadership of Dr. Donna Haral of the University of Memphis and Heather Koury of AIA Memphis, an institute for teachers will result in the web availability of teachers’ curricula, educational resources and a blog for on-line discussions. The exhibition is in development for fall 2010. The Paul R. Williams Project is supported by grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Graham Foundation for Advanced Studies in the Fine Arts.

Williams was born in Los Angeles in 1894 to Lila Hudson, an elegant 1993 photographic compendium that includes a chronological list of projects and a children’s book about William’s life; an unpublished proposal because of her interest in 20th Century architecture, and in high school when he was planning his future, a teacher advised him that as a black he would have difficulty acquiring clients. Fazed by the prospect of discrimination but determined not to submit, Williams pursued his vision by studying design and engineering and working in leading architectural firms. In 1922, he opened his own practice and soon became well known for his work in Beverly Hills, Bel Air, Brentwood and other enclaves of wealth that, ironically, excluded African-American residents. During his career, he designed approximately 3,000 buildings in Southern California, across the country and abroad and became a leader in the local, state and national architectural and cultural communities. Among his many awards, Williams was the first African-American to be elected a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (1957). Williams retired from his practice in 1973 and died in 1980 at the age of 86.

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Lara Winkler is a freelance writer and journalist in Memphis.
The Alex Haley Interpretive Center

The entrance to the Alex Haley Interpretive Center is at the west end of the building, surfboard from the house and museum. Courtesy of Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects.

During the one-hour drive north from Memphis to Henning, Tenn., on Highway 55, drivers will notice, in small towns and on farms, a variety of concrete block buildings with corrugated metal roofs. These may be barns or sheds, grocery stores or automobile dealerships, even houses. That indigenous style informs the design of the Alex Haley Interpretive Center in Henning created by Louis Pounders of the local firm Askew Nixon Ferguson Architects.

The Center stands on a heavily treed, one-acre site behind Haley’s grandparents’ house. It is distinguished by a steeply pitched metal roof that serves to a point like a ship’s prow, while solid concrete block walls anchor the building to its footing in the soil. It’s a sleek, vertical, modernist structure, with a porch of the white wood bungalow in Henning. Haley, who was born in Ithaca, N.Y., and was brought to Henning when he was six months old, lived with his grandparents from 1921 to 1929 and spent subsequent summers with them. Roots was published in 1976 and won a Pulitzer Prize. “The state increased the budget slightly, and the impetus for the project was lost. It wasn’t until 2006 that interest in the center and funding revived, and the project received new approval to move forward,” said Pounders. “The project went fairly smoothly once it restarted,” said Pounders. “The state increased the budget slightly, which we needed, and the building was finished in August of 2008.”

The building, including site enhancements, the boardwalk that connects the Center to the Haley house and improvements to Haley’s tomb, cost $1,244,000. “We’ll have the bids out within two or three weeks,” said Cowles, “and depending on whatever issues have to be resolved with the fabricator of the display, the exhibit designer on the team. Three-and-a-half months from being finished, we released the bid package for the exhibit, but the state sort of put that on hold, not officially, but they just stopped paying attention. We were ready to open, but there were no exhibits. It’s frustrating. You don’t want to see a perfectly good, new building sitting empty and deteriorating.”

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A recent visit to Henning, however, revealed the center locked and empty. “I don’t know,” said Pounders. “We still have an exhibit designer on the team. Three-and-a-half months from being finished, we released the bid package for the exhibit, but the state sort of put that on hold, not officially, but they just stopped paying attention. We were ready to open, but there were no exhibits. It’s frustrating. You don’t want to see a perfectly good, new building sitting empty and deteriorating.”

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Carrie Mae Weems is a graduate student in art history at The University of Memphis. Concerning Western notions of beauty. Weems links the African and African Diaspora experiences in her work through the use of recycled images and text. The two images of Nobosodru are placed as end photographs, turned so that Nobosodru directly engages the slave daguerreotypes placed in between. The European scientist Louis Agassiz commissioned the daguerreotypes taken by American photographer Joseph T. Zealy in 1850 as “scientific” studies of race. Weems deconstructs the voyeuristic view of her enslaved subjects by sandblasting carefully selected texts onto the glass surface of the prints, such as “YOU BECAME A SCIENTIFIC PROFILE,” “AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL DEBATE,” “A NEGROID TYPE” or a PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE. Juxtaposing texts over the naked and scarred bodies of enslaved black women and men confronts and negates these images of 19th Century racist iconography. Like many contemporary artists of color throughout Africa and the African Diaspora, Weems recycles controversial images and artifacts from the past, in order to create new artworks and objects characterized by resistance and an alternative aesthetic expression.

In 2004, the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art published a catalogue that featured 135 works out of 8,000 from its collection entitled From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried was prominently featured. Since the Weems’ piece is photography-based, the danger of exposure to light prohibits its continuous display. However, whenever the piece is exhibited it evokes profound response from museum visitors. It is particularly admired by the thousands of schoolchildren who participate in the museum’s educational programming.
This Summer’s exhibition at the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, The Prints of Jacob Lawrence: 1963-2000, is revelatory. Organized in conjunction with the DC Moore Gallery in New York and consisting of 81 works, the show makes quite a case for Lawrence's inclusion in the pantheon of not only American art, but of late-20th century art and, in certain moments, the entire history of art. Much like the Prints of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again, this show serves as a reminder of the inevitability of racial significance. The label rightfully points to the 1936 Berlin games, where Jesse Owens single-handedly undid Nazi theories of Aryan superiority, and finds its sources and resemblances throughout the history of art and its subject, Lawrence's inclusion in the inevitably marginalizing category of African-American artists. Lawrence is an artist who deserves acclaim and the successes of black athletes in track events. They are often marked with the flat, lateral quickness of camouflage, but just as easily sink into deep space, only to be undone by their own registration, their prints are indeed flat, even if in the case of some silkscreened works, includes double-digit colors. The proficiency is stunning. The printmaking and the abrupt spatial momentum of mobile, hovering, wavering, sliding, slamming and the hallucinatory envisioning of Creation that he himself would have experienced as a child at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. Michelangelo's cool Neoplatonism is just plain boring in comparison to his infinitely subtle variations on brown as a master class in understated luxury. Compositionally, the works seem to oscillate between the pronounced flatness of printmaking and the abrupt spatial momentum of high Modernism. Michelangelo’s picture planes are highly mobile, Tavern, wavering, sliding, slamming, and oscillating. They are often marked with the flat, lateral quickness of camouflage, but just as easily sink into deep space, only to be undone by their own registration, which reminds us that prints are indeed flat, even if their stacked layers of color argue otherwise. Lawrence, too, is a master of his topics. His FARM/RU series Eight Studies for the Book of Genesis puts to shame Michelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel. While the latter spends most of its energies on bodies and narrative, Lawrence focuses on the captured moment of praying and the hallucinatory envisioning of Creation that he himself would have experienced as a child at Harlem's Abyssinian Baptist Church. Michelangelo's cool Neoplatonism is just plain boring in comparison to Lawrence's undulating figures and painterly pools of ink. This is perhaps the best way to sum up the exhibition, even if at the expense of parsing individual works. Lawrence’s printmaking is so capable, so exploratory, so innovative, so vibrant, so challenging, so revolutionary, much more so than many others who are more central in our consciousness.

It is shameful that Lawrence has for so long been relegated to a second tier of recognition, as is the case with Romare Bearden, Alma Thomas, the artists of Epil and other artists who were unfortunate enough to have lived and worked before Art History knew better than to ignore artists of color. Similar is the plight of printmaking, despite its omnipresence and, in many cases, precedence over other media. It is revealing how many of Lawrence’s protagonists—Toussaint L'Orange and Harriet Tubman, John Brown, Frederick Douglass—unsettled or overthrew the status quo. We would do well to take a lesson from them, and Lawrence, and use this exhibition as an opportunity to further obliterate the remaining obstacles that prevent artists such as Lawrence from receiving their due.

Born in Atlantic City, N. J. in 1917, Lawrence moved to Harlem in 1930, almost in time to witness the peak of the Harlem Renaissance and exactly in time to participate in the emergence of American painting in the 1940s. He first attained prominence in 1941, when New York’s Downtown Gallery exhibited his series “The Migration of the American Negro.” This was preceded by other series—on Haitian independence leader Toussaint L'Ouverture and American legends Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman and John Brown—and began Lawrence’s career-encompassing meditations on race, religion and labor. Three painted series were the bases for many of the prints in the exhibition, and through the paintings may have come first, Lawrence’s prints stand equal, if not superior.

One minor point, however: The exhibition’s frontispiece, Lawrence’s 1971 poster for the El-fated 1972 Munich Olympics, is treated almost entirely as a work of racial significance. The label faithfully points to the 1936 Berlin games, where Jesse Owens single-handedly undid Nazi theories of Aryan superiority, and Lawrence’s reference is certainly clear, but there is an uncomfortably ‘Jimmy the Greek’ moment in which the label makes claims about Lawrence’s choice of race and the successes of black athletes in track events. None of this is surprising, or necessarily an overt problem, but it sets a precedent for understanding Lawrence through the lens of race alone. All other factors, issues of race and identity were certainly of central import for Lawrence’s work, but it is a short step from this focus to relegating Lawrence to the inevitably marginalizing category of African-American artists. Lawrence’s work is an artist who deserves acclaim without qualification. As this exhibition amply demonstrates, his art transcends his own circumstances and finds its sources and resonances throughout the history of art, and it is against this whole history that it should be measured.

Throughout Lawrence’s work, one sees similarities beyond those ordinarily expected of a mid-20th century artist. The standard Modernist heritage is, of course, present. Cubist flattening? Fauve palettes? German Expressionist woodcuts? Gauguin? Check. Check. Check. But William Bialek, Rubens, Caravaggio and Michelangelo are also clear influences on Lawrence, more than normally acknowledged by the often myopic sense of what might be meaningful to an artist such as Lawrence. Most extraordinary is the way that Lawrence seems to parallel, or even anticipate, other influences. Bruce Nauman, Jeff Wall, and even Japanese Manga seem to be part of what we see. Or, more likely, what we see in Lawrence would become part of that.

What we do see is a technician of the highest order, a printmaker to be esteemed along with Dürer, Coya, Richter and Warhol. Lawrence has clear control over each of his media—lithography, woodcut, and especially screen printing. His palette is richly saturated and, in the case of some silkscreened works, includes double-digit colors. The proficiency is stunning. The screaming primaries of a work such as 1974’s The Road to the Abyssinian Baptist Church are barely undetected. Michelangelo’s cool Neoplatonism is just plain boring in comparison to Lawrence's undulating figures and painterly pools of ink.

While one might expect the unhinged Eight Studies for the Book of Genesis to look like a screenscreened work, it is a lithography. His first major series, Eight Studies for the Book of Genesis, owes as much to international printmaking, and even Japanese Manga, as it does to the French masters and even Japanese Manga, as it does to the French masters. But it is not just the richly variegated blacks, or the luscious colors, or the Paul Klee-like compositions. It is the way that Lawrence seems to parallel, or even anticipate, other influences. Bruce Nauman, Jeff Wall, and even Japanese Manga seem to be part of what we see. Or, more likely, what we see in Lawrence would become part of that. The Prints of Jacob Lawrence, 1963-2000

Memphis Brooks Museum of Art

June 20 – September 6, 2009

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The 1940s, The Migration Series and Last Round Bulls, 1941, Silkscreen, ed. 150, image: 32 1/4 x 24 1/4; paper: 34” x 26” Courtesy of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art.

The 1920s…The Migrants Arrive and Cast Their Ballots, 1974, Silkscreen, ed. 150, 15AP; image: 32 x 24”; paper: 34” x 26” Courtesy of the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art.


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Festival Highlights Southern Filmmakers and Southern Films

The Oxford Film Festival, February 5-8, 2009

The Oxford Film Festival, Feb. 5-8, provided visitors with the opportunity to see 95 films that they otherwise may not have the chance to see on a big screen.

After six years, the Oxford, Miss.-based festival is beginning to show growing pains. Long lines and full theaters marked most of the occasion. Festival directors Michelle Emanuel, Mallory Ferguson (correct w/ 2 ss.) and Mishah Ginn spent much of the weekend working to accommodate larger than expected crowds.

“I think one of the things that makes the Oxford Film Festival such a special experience for all involved … the audience, the filmmakers, the organizers — is that the artists and audience are given the opportunity to meet and mingle and share an experience,” Emanuel said. Unlike other festivals where media and filmmakers are often sequestered in VIP areas, in Oxford everyone comes together in the same theaters, same parties, same lobby areas.

“The audience appreciates being a VIP for the weekend, for many the closest to being an industry insider that they will ever be,” Emanuel said, and the up and coming filmmakers appreciate having their work recognized by its selection, and enjoy the opportunity to meet other filmmakers, especially ones they have met at other festivals. And the celebrities appreciate that we treat them respectfully, but ultimately like the normal human beings that they are.”

The festival opened with a locally made film, Double Dander Confidential and the upcoming theatrically released Sunshine Cleaning, starring Amy Adams.

On Friday, six from Night in Memphis, three-packed theaters had the chance to watch the story of the recently integrated Charleston High School prom.

Morgan Freeman stopped by for the Q&A along with numerous students from the school.

Freeman was not the only celebrity to join the ranks of moviegoers in Oxford. Debra Winger was there to watch the world premiere of her son Noah Hunter’s documentary, Crude Independence. Giancarlo Esposito came for his film Gospel Hill and decided to join the film criticism panel to provide the perspective as an actor and director. Craig Brewer and a group of Memphis musicians highlighted in his new series, Double Dander, was an invaluable educational opportunity for Memphis and its surrounding communities. The photographs in this exhibition are valuable resources that with careful consideration poses great potential for making a statement about the role Memphis has played in American history during the Civil Rights era. As these images reveal, the journey to racial equality was not only a black and white linear struggle, but ultimately like the normal human beings that they are.”

The festival, however, is not about the celebrities. The weekend is for the audience to participate in a more interactive event with filmmakers. Question and answer sessions after each film provided viewers with opportunities to dig deeper into the making of the artistic medium. This aspect is of particular importance for regional filmmakers or for creators of films that focus on the Mid-South. The Oxford Film Festival, while programming films from across the world, also presented over 30 films from Southern filmmakers.

“Southern filmmakers are a continuation of the storytelling tradition that writers like William Faulkner, Eudora Welty and Flannery O’Connor made the South famous for,” said Eirik Jambor, executive director of the Indie Memphis Film Festival. “It has been great to see how the DIY digital filmmaking revolution has allowed more Southerners to tell their stories through the camera lens.”

Indie Memphis, an October film festival for the Mid-South, also highlights contributions from Tennessee and Mississippi filmmakers as does the third festival, Ox-Locates: Memphis.

For Last Lullaby director Jeffrey Goodwin of Shreveport, La., interacting with the audience is what festivals are all about. Goodwin not only screened his film in Oxford and participated in a Q&A, but he went to a film class at the University of Mississippi the Friday of his screening to discuss the making of the movie. “The feeling I got was of an intelligent, honest audience,” Goodman said. “They weren’t going to just throw out loose compliments. They were genuinely interested in hearing what I had to say and were going to use my comments to help them formulate their thoughts on the film.”

Goodman said all festivals have different types of participation. “Some festival audiences just throw themselves at you. I felt that the audience in Oxford was more reserved and a challenging yet engaged audience.”

Jennifer Mander is a graduate student in art history at the University of Memphis.


Melanie Addington watches too many movies and then blogs about them at www.oxfordfilmfreak.com
In 1959, a show called New Images of Man that challenged the current domination of abstraction opened at the Museum of Modern Art. The exhibit included figurative sculpture and paintings from Europe and the United States and featured many of the painters — Diebenkorn, Golub, Bacon, Appel and de Kooning — whose work was well-represented at the exhibition. The show moves the viewer through the aggressive paintings from post-war America, to the ambiguities of German art, to the viewer through the aggressive paintings from post-war America, to the ambiguities of German art, to the complexities of the British. 

British painter Francis Bacon’s tri-part “Three Studies for the Portrait of Hanry Moraes” depict a mutation, a change, a shift in the model. Bacon is an impressionist, except that instead of depicting changes in light he is more interested in the morphing of bone and blood as a head turns in space. Hanging next to the work of his friend and nemesis, Lucian Freud, Bacon’s paintings appear airy and economic, concerned with flux, not the heanness of Freud’s bodies. Freud’s paintings are monuments to his prolonged gaze. They are the epitome of paint reified into flesh; this is absolute mimesis: paint and subject are the same. Freud’s bodies are clothed. They are the product of a conscious decision to depict mutilation and violence, “The artist seems to have no belief, but that the thing he believed in was the evacuating, the emptiness. He provides a brilliant memento mori and memento vivere, or better, a reminder of life within death.”

Bacon believed, he said, in Nothing; it is not that he had no belief, but that the thing he believed in was the vacuum, the emptiness. He provides a brilliant metaphor for this, depicting emotionally tormented, cannally transforming bodies trapped within claustrophobic interiors. Yet, the figures themselves are unfixed by the constraining vexation of the body, the comfort of the seamless unbroken body. If the materials that configure us in life are dissolved, isn’t that a kind of freedom from the prisons nature has contrived and society has built? Where does figurative painting go from here? I suspect that there will be an increased sense of instability in the way we depict our bodies. I don’t now what that looks like, but I think it will occur on the three-armed fronts proposed in Paint Made Flesh: Barrenness, empathy, and culture. First, how will the image of flesh mirror us in a future when aesthetic surgeons become more and more capable of altering our appearance? On the second front, will images of the body be able to generate empathy, the way Rembrandt, Soutine, Sade have done? And finally, if the image of the body is a cipher of culture, and our culture is marked by the dislocating force of diasporas, then what does the emblematic body look like? Flesh of my flesh, flesh of all flesh, or flesh of the prison?

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Greely Myatt and exactly Twenty Years

A survey of works by University of Memphis professor Greely Myatt at museums and galleries throughout Memphis.

Opening receptions on Friday, September 11: AMUM from 4:30 to 7 PM and Rhodes College’s Clough-Hanson Gallery from 6 to 8 PM
AMUM exhibition: September 12 - November 7 /// Rhodes College’s Clough-Hanson Gallery exhibition: September 11 - October 16

Free Public Lecture by the artist: Thursday, September 10, 7 PM Memphis Brooks Museum of Art