



**SOCIAL
STUDIES**

**TRUTH JUSTICE
AND
THE AFRO-AMERICAN WAY**

Truth, Justice, and the Afro-American Way

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While it is obvious that *Social Studies: Truth, Justice and the Afro-American Way* has been organized to coincide with Black History Month, it is hoped that such timeliness does not obscure a farther reaching message latent in the works of its artists: that the need to discover a common human status among peoples of all races supercedes the assertion of any particular racial orientation.

In a world where the concept of the global village is fast becoming a reality, and in a country where minority populations are becoming the majority, "Black Art" may be a category that has outlived its usefulness. While the artists in *Social Studies: Truth, Justice and the Afro-American Way* have found ways to comment on the oppression of their common race, their works must also be appreciated for their universal significance.

Beverly Buchanan, Dana Chandler, Robert Colescott, Joe Lewis, Bertrand Phillips, George Pitts, and Faith Ringgold create works that address prejudice, oppression and the role of minorities in American culture in ways that are at once more general and more subtle than those found in the revolutionary or protest art of the 60s and 70s. Their similarities stem from an ability to comment on a variety of common issues; their differences stem from the variety of means used in bringing such issues into the viewer's world.

Metaphor and narrative are the methods employed by the artists, and their results are either critical or affirmative. Robert Colescott's

paintings challenge all too readily accepted versions of European and American history, in which the presence and achievements of blacks and other minorities have been ignored, played down, or edited out entirely. His allusions to history are not documentary of the events themselves, but of attitudes which shape their eventual meaning. Colescott's cycle of large acrylic paintings, collectively titled "Knowledge of the Past is the Key to the Future" seeks to educate viewers to the necessary social, economic and sexual interdependencies between blacks and whites.

Faith Ringgold's series of painted quilts narrates a more personal and community oriented view of black life, celebrating its richness. Ringgold is responding to a strong oral tradition handed down by her mother, who was a fashion designer and a gifted storyteller. In combining the painted, dyed, quilted fabrics and handwritten texts, Ringgold creates a synthesis of autobiography, historical narrative and fiction. Her work commemorates the positive influence of African and African-American culture on our contemporary experience.

Like Ringgold's references to traditional crafts, the use of musical and dance motifs in Bertrand Phillips' paintings affirms the cultural wealth of African-Americans. While some of his works bear titles such as *Euphonic Reel* or *Variiegated Riff* and obviously refer to music and rhythm, others, like *Primal Boogie* or *Juba* seem to be derived from tribal practices. In effect, these works provide a bridge between African and modern

African-American experience by visually linking references to a strong tribal heritage together with images influenced by contemporary music.

The works of Beverly Buchanan also hinge on affirmation rather than criticism. Buchanan's generic shacks, which are presented both in paper sculptures and drawings, are a personal motif drawn from her native south. Seen for their more universal implications, Buchanan's shacks made clear the positive attitudes necessary in overcoming oppression — racial or economic. Though they describe a sort of poverty, their bright coloring and aggressive drawing impart a vitality of spirit to what might otherwise be considered a depressing subject.

Dana Chandler's paintings openly confront the stereotyping, fear and misunderstanding which account for much of the conflict between blacks and whites, and among members of the black community themselves. In small works that at first glance seem like decorative and playful still life paintings, the *Household Weaponry* series epitomizes Chandler's use of seemingly incongruous elements to arrive at timely statements about our society. He introduces images of bullets and knives into still life compositions, demonstrating the almost casual acceptance of violence in our society. That objects of sustenance and objects of violent defense are both necessary ingredients for survival makes perfect — though perfectly abhorrent — sense of his odd combinations.

In a similar use of metaphorical

image, Joe Lewis' *Snake Eyes* offers a pair of dice as a symbol for the continued lack of equality between races in our culture and for the chance mixture of races found in our society. If we are to take Lewis' image literally as a crap shoot, then the caucasian silhouettes (within the black dots on the dice) on the roll of double ones suggests that the oppressors are the real losers in life, while the minorities represented in the combinations of sevens — a winning roll in craps — have gained some advantage over the situation. Lewis' woven paper and charcoal drawings are complex in both a formal and a symbolic sense, translating simple imagery into salient statements.

George Pitts' drawings and watercolors confront racial and sexual stereotypes, and do so in a way that is at once direct and playful. *Baggage* literally sandwiches an interracial couple between images representing European and African standards of beauty, addressing the need for recognition of the histories latent within peoples of different races. By representing a white female wearing trousers for a dress and a black male wearing a skirt, Pitts presents us with the stereotyped symbols which must be appreciated and transcended whenever cultures, races or individuals come together.

What is clearly outstanding about the efforts of these seven artists is their ability to couch instructive social statements in a variety of images that are challenging in an aesthetic sense. These are not one-dimensional manifestos bearing only critical or didactic messages. The artist's soul, universal and a-racial, is the potent force behind the wedding of image and idea.



installation view:
(l. to r.) Joe Lewis,
Robert Colescott,
Beverly Buchanan

Beverly Buchanan

from a telephone interview with the artist, 1989

When I started the shacks I didn't think of them as aspiring to any specific idea. As an artist, my interest is primarily in the structures as sculpture. I don't think you can say I am only interested in the formal aspects of my drawings and sculptures. Eventually you begin to think about why you are doing what you do. I began to assign names to the shacks, and began to wonder why I was doing them . . .

My interest in architecture came from several places. I grew up on the campus of a small black college, where a landscape architect was a friend of my family's. In school, it was an architect who taught me to draw. When an architect designed a yard for my father, I was intrigued by the look of the sticks and strings he used. I built my own landscape design, and when his was removed for the construction, mine was left there . . .

Blacks and whites respond to the shack series very positively and thoughtfully. The shacks incorporate more than just the physical properties of the structures; they hold the personalities of the people who lived there. People lived in shacks like these, blacks and whites, and were very poor. But their sense of themselves is not reflected only in what the buildings looked like.

There is something about the shacks that makes you feel good. After seeing them, people tend to look at old structures very differently, in terms of their own histories. They talk about them in terms of people and activities they remember.

Beverly Buchanan,
Red Sky Shack, 1988



Beverly Buchanan,
The Williams' House,
1988



Dana Chandler

from *Chandler Retrospective* catalogue, interview with Edward Strickland, 1987

Much of what I do as an artist is directed toward finding out ways to help create an educative process . . . something that talks to black people about what's going on in the world, what kind of mechanisms they can use to protect themselves in a world (and I'm talking specifically about America) that's set up to destroy them.

Technically speaking, when we start talking about my design elements, it all comes from going to Africa in 1970, even though I had some painting experience beforehand, and had seen African images prior to that. . . . To me, Africans don't paint in a strictly and coldly intellectual way. They also paint and create emotionally and spiritually, based on a brilliance in their skills, in terms of putting design elements together. For me, also, it's a naturalistic, emotional and spiritual involvement, so that when I'm in my studio it's as though I'm calling on the spirits to help me create.

Perhaps people will never forget Schwerner, Chaney and Goodwin because of some little pieces that I've done; that's what I'm hoping for. . . . I'm trying to lock it into people's memory cycle, so it's not forgotten, because we are an instant people. And very often we don't remember the things that have happened to us as a people, we don't remember our history, five years down the road.

But all of my goals are directed towards the lifting up of my people. Not lifting up to measure up to the standards of the European. My goals have to do with making this the best possible space and place I possibly can for my people and my family. . . . Like thousands of others of us, that is my job.

Dana Chandler, *Urban
Weaponry Series*,
1986-87



Robert Colescott

from press release for *Knowledge of the Past* . . .
exhibition, 1987

The paintings in this series approach the *meaning* of history over historical fact. Sometimes it's only the *feel* of history. The absurdity of oddball juxtapositions and gross exaggerations emphasizes the irony of vital lessons unlearned, and a future that defies scholarship to unravel its past.

One of the great unlearned lessons of history, standing out in ten-foot high neon letters, is the historical chain of interrelationships and interdependencies between Black and White. This interrelationship has been and is social, economic and sexual, and it winds back into dim prehistory touching familiar signposts along the way — the dark skinned Europeans who live closer to Africa; the white-appearing slaves who worked for and were owned by their fathers; King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba; the Nubian Kings and Queens of Egypt; and our common African ancestor 'Eve.' Knowledge of the past could change the present and the future. Part of civilization's past is noble, heroic and righteous. Knowledge of it could give insight and ultimately the power that could break chains, rescue a lost people, and save the world from self-genocide. However, even the most powerful seem unable and unwilling to put the meaning of history to work for themselves and for us. The helpless are confused, the past is dim, the future bleak.

Robert Colescott, *The Other Washingtons*,
1986



Robert Colescott,
*Matthew Henson and
the Quest for the
North Pole*, 1986

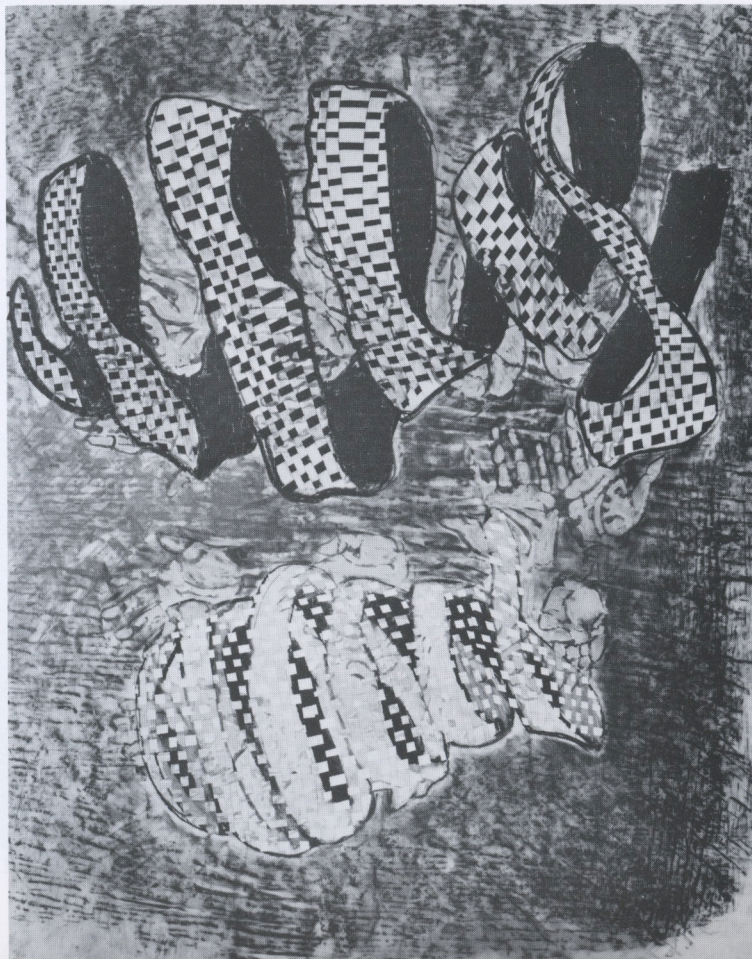


Joe Lewis

from artist's statement, 1989

Usually, my work is about bringing different kinds of people together who wouldn't normally come together under any other circumstances, in the hopes that their interaction might change the way they see themselves in relation to others.

It is unusual for me to show drawings. Even when I want the work to be non-political, it has a way of politicizing itself. I guess that showing drawings is another way of bringing people together. I prefer dealing with flesh and bones rather than paper, but I feel these drawings are successful.



Joe Lewis, *Black Queen, White Pawn*, 1988

George Pitts

from artist's statement, 1989

In America, the term "Black Art" is confining for any black American artist whose work does not specifically address his race. Such work may be too intimate to be attributed to the more general issues of race, or so profoundly significant that it speaks beyond the concerns of one race. My concerns are basically poetic and metaphysical, but are at times informed by the codes of social construction. Androgyny, the "other," as well as the "otherness" of culture are themes which reoccur in my work in different guises.

Subtlety, as characterized in Western Art, is thought to be of more enduring and qualitative value than the more direct and intensely realized forms of the African sensibility which distills layers of meaning and emotion into compact erotic forms. The African sensibility perceives the inherent eroticism in all forms. This juiciness of perception/sensation carries over into music, sports, politics — in short, all aspects of culture. The African view appears to be exaggerated and even vulgar to the European sensibility, which puts tastefulness and its own inverted notion of coolness above all else. This tension within the black artist, between the African and European, is the site of potentially important art.



George Pitts, *Dog People*, 1982

Faith Ringgold

from *Being My Own Woman*, Faith Ringgold's unpublished autobiography

People called my paintings protest art, political art, and some even referred to them as history painting or social realism. . . . I felt called upon to create my vision of the black experience we were witnessing. I read everything that James Baldwin had written about the relationship between black and white in America. Baldwin understood, I felt, the dichotomy between black and white people as well as anyone. But, I had something to add; the picture, the visual perception of the way we are and look, the face color and forms of those involved.

from Bernice Steinbaum Gallery exhibition catalogue, 1987:

I am not really a quiltmaker . . . but I love the oldness of the medium. Quiltmaking fits in with women's history, women's lifestyle and culture. What I am trying to do with my story quilts is to bridge the gap between painting and quiltmaking.

from the text of *The Bitter Nest: Part II*, © 1988

After dinner, Cee Cee put on a show of sorts that topped off the evening and put the conversation of such frequent visitors as Alaine Locke, Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes and Aaron Douglass at a standstill. Dressed in her oddly pieced and quilted costumes, masks and headresses of her making, she moved among the illustrious guests to music only she could hear. Strange as it seemed, they looked forward to Cee Cee's unusual presentations and thought of her as an eccentric undiscovered original. The times pressed the artists of the Harlem Renaissance into a regimen of social and political propaganda for the elevation of Race People. But what was Cee Cee doing? Was this art? No one dared ask that question knowing full well the interrogator would only look like a fool and the one who answered would be one.

Faith Ringgold, *Bitter Nest Part I: Love in the Schoolyard*, 1988



C a t a l o g u e o f t h e E x h i b i t i o n

Beverly Buchanan

North Georgia Shack I, 1988
acrylic on archival paper
18 x 8 x 13.5 inches
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

North Georgia Shack II, 1988
acrylic on archival paper
19 x 8.5 x 15 inches
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

Blues Shack, 1988
acrylic on archival paper
19.75 x 9.75 x 11.25
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Kevin
Smyley, New York

Red Sky Shack, 1988
oil pastel on paper
38.5 x 50.5 inches
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Kevin
Smyley, New York

Spring, 1988
oil pastel on paper
38.5 x 50.5
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

Dana Chandler

Dr. Je-Kill and Mr. Hide 1980-87
acrylic on masonite
five panels, each 48 x 12 inches

*Faces in My Neighborhood (Afri-Face
Series)*, 1978
acrylic on masonite
four panels, each 12 x 12 inches

Afri-Faces in My Community, 1976
acrylic on masonite
four panels, each 14 x 16 inches

Urban Weaponry Series, 1986-87
acrylic on masonite
five panels, each 12 x 12 inches

*Amerikkkan Penal System;
Koncentration Kamps and Death
Houses for Black People (Genocide
Series)*, 1970
acrylic on canvas
16 x 20 inches

*Haitian Surprise — Welcome to
Amerikkkal*, 1987
acrylic on plywood with wire mesh
14 x 16 inches

all works lent by the artist

Robert Colescott

Heroes, 1986
acrylic on canvas
84 x 72 inches
Phyllis Kind Gallery

The Other Washingtons, 1986
acrylic on canvas
90 x 114 inches
Phyllis Kind Gallery

*Matthew Henson and the Quest for
the North Pole*, 1986
acrylic on canvas
90 x 114 inches
Phyllis Kind Gallery

Joe Lewis

Black Queen, White Pawn, 1988
50 x 38 inches
mixed media on paper

Snake Eyes, 1988
38 x 50 inches
mixed media on paper

Lot's Wife, 1988
50 x 38 inches
mixed media on paper

all works lent by the artist

Bertrand Phillips

Primal Boogie, 1988
acrylic on canvas
54 x 42 inches

Too Big Reg, 1987
acrylic on canvas
54 x 42 inches

Affirmation, 1988
acrylic on canvas
54 x 42 inches

Divine Panorama, 1988
acrylic on canvas
42 x 48 inches

Juba, 1988
acrylic on canvas
54 x 42 inches

all works lent by the artist

George Pitts

Baggage, 1988
watercolor on paper
30 x 40 inches

Untitled, 1988
watercolor on paper
25 x 30 inches

Untitled, 1988
watercolor on paper
25 x 30 inches

Dog People, 1982
charcoal on paper
102 x 42 inches

all works lent by the artist

Faith Ringgold

*Bitter Nest Part I: Love in the
Schoolyard*, 1988
acrylic on canvas, dyed and
pieced fabrics
75.5 x 92.5 inches
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

*Bitter Nest Part II: Harlem
Renaissance Party*, 1988
acrylic on canvas, dyed and
pieced fabrics
94 x 82 inches
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

Bitter Nest Part III: Lovers in Paris,
1988
acrylic on canvas, dyed and
pieced fabrics
96 x 83 inches
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

Bitter Nest Part IV: The Letter, 1988
acrylic on canvas, dyed and
pieced fabrics
94.5 x 84.5 inches
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery

Bitter Nest Part V: Homecoming, 1988
acrylic on canvas, dyed and
pieced fabrics
76 x 96 inches
Bernice Steinbaum Gallery