AfriCOBRA Manifestos by Jeff Donaldson and Cherilyn C. Wright

Extracted on Apr-14-2020 12:48:32

The Smithsonian Institution thanks all digital volunteers that transcribed and reviewed this material. Your work enriches Smithsonian collections, making them available to anyone with an interest in using them.

The Smithsonian Institution (the “Smithsonian”) provides the content on this website (transcription.si.edu), other Smithsonian websites, and third-party sites on which it maintains a presence (“SI Websites”) in support of its mission for the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.” The Smithsonian invites visitors to use its online content for personal, educational and other non-commercial purposes. By using this website, you accept and agree to abide by the following terms.

- If sharing the material in personal and educational contexts, please cite the Archives of American Art as source of the content and the project title as provided at the top of the document. Include the accession number or collection name; when possible, link to the Archives of American Art website.
- If you wish to use this material in a for-profit publication, exhibition, or online project, please contact Archives of American Art or transcribe@si.edu

For more information on this project and related material, contact the Archives of American Art. See this project and other collections in the Smithsonian Transcription Center.
The whole thing started slow, real slow...suffering through an outdoor art fair in a wealthier Chicago suburb one hot July day in 1962, I asked Wadsworth Jarrell if he thought it would be possible to start a “negro” art movement based on a common aesthetic creed. And having little else to do - the wealthy anglos were not buying that day - we rapped about the hip aesthetic things that a “negro” group could do. When the sun went down, we packed up our jive, drove home to Chicago and the lake breeze cooled the idea from our minds. But that was cool, it was only a daydream balloon ethered by ennui and the hot sun - we let it float. They were buoyant times. The “negro” sky was pregnant with optimistic fantasy bubbles in those days. Education. Integration. Accommodation. Assimilation. Overcomation. Mainstreamation. THE PROMISE OF AMERICA. We would be freed.

But this was before the Washington picnic, its eloquent dream and its dynamite reality at the church in Birmingham. This was before the very real physical end of Malcolm. And the end of the “negro” in many of us. And it was before James Chaney, Afro-American. Before Lumumba. Before Jimmie Lee Jackson. Before Selma. Black. Before the Meredith March. Black Power. Before Luthuli. Sammy Young, Jr. and the others. Before Watts and Detroit, Chicago, Harlem, and Newark. Black Nationalism. More Balloons. Separation. Self-determination. We would be free.

And the atmosphere of America became more electrically charged, the balloons jarringly shaken, many destroyed by the thunder and by the lightning of the real America. And we (Jarrell, Barbara Jones, Carolyn Lawrence, me and other artists) destined ourselves, formed the OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture) artists workshop and following Bill Walker’s lead, painted the Wall of Respect in Chicago. Black History. And thinking that we had done a revolutionary thing we rested and nodded anew, among the few remaining balloons.
And then the dreamer's dreamer had his balloon busted on a Memphis motel balcony. And that was the last balloon. And it was Chicago again and Harlem again, and San Francisco and D.C. and Cleveland and everywhere. And COBRA was born.* And Law and Order. And off the pig. And we angrily realized that sleepers can die that way. Like Fred and Mark and very legally. And COBRA coiled angrily. Our coats were pulled. And the anger is gone. And yes, Imamu, it's Nation Time.

We are a family - COBRA, the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists, is now AFRICOBRA - African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.** It's NATION TIME and we are searching. Our guidelines are our people - the whole family of African People, the African family tree. And in this spirit of familyhood, we have carefully examined our roots and searched our branches for those visual qualities that are most expressive of our people/art. Our people are our standard for excellence. We strive for images inspired by African people/experience and images which African people can relate to directly without formal art training and/or experience. Art for people and not for critics whose peoplelessness is questionable. We try to create images that appeal to the senses - not to the intellect. The images you see here may be placed in three categories:

1. definition - images that deal with the past
2. identification - images that relate to the present
3. direction - images that look into the future

- - - look for us there, because that's where we're at.

This is "poster art" - images which deal with concepts that offer positive and feasible solutions to our individual, local, national, international, and cosmic problems. The images are designed with the idea of mass production. An image that is valuable because it is not an original or unique is not art - it is economics, and we are not economists.*** We want everybody to have some.
Among our roots and branches we have selected these qualities to emphasize in our image-making--

(a) the expressive awesomeness that one experiences in African Art and life in the U. S. A. like the Holiness church (which is about as close to home as we are in this country) and the daemon that is the blues, Alcindor’s dunk and Sayer’s cut, the Hip walk and the Together talk.

(c) symmetry that is free, repetition with change, based on African music and African movement. The rhythm that is easy syncopation and very very human. Uncontracted. the rhythm the rhythm the rhythm rhythm

(f) images that mark the spot where the real and the overreal, the plus and the minus, the abstract and the concrete--the reet and the replete meet. Mimesis.

(g) organic looking, feeling forms. Machines are made for each other like we are made for each other. We want to work to look like the creator made it through us.

(B) This is a big one...Shine -- a major quality, a major quality. We want the things to shine, to have the right lustre of a just-washed “fro, of spit-shined shoes, of de-ashedened elbows and knees and noses. The Shine who escaped the Titanic, the "i’ll light of mine”, patent leather. Dixie Peach. Bar BQ. fried fish, cars, ad shineum!

(z) color color Color Color that shines, color that is free of rules and regulation, color that shines, color that is expressively awesome, color that defines, identifies and directs. Superreal color for Superreal images. The superreality that is our every day all day thang, color as bright and as real as the color dealing on the streets of Watts and the Southside and 4th street and in Roxbury and in Harlem, in Abidijan, in Port au Prince, Bahia and Ibadan, in Dakar and Johannesburg and everywhere we are. Coolade colors for
coolade images for the superreal people. Superreal images for SUPERREAL people. Words can do more with the laws - the form and content of our images. We are a family. Check the unity. All the rest must be sensed directly. Check out the image. The words are an attempt to posit where we are coming from and to introduce how we are going where we are going. Check out the image. Words do not define/describe themselves. dig on the image. We are a family of image-makers and each member of the family is free to relate to and to express our laws in her/his individual way. dig the diversity in unity. We can be ourselves and be together, too. Check.

We hope you can dig it, it's about you and like Marvin Gaye says, "You're what's happening in the world today, baby."

Jeff Donaldson
NEW YORK, June 21--

Have you seen/ been there?

Studio Museum.
2033 Fifth Avenue.
Harlem...New York.

They sho nuff got something for you--

African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.
Come from South Side, Chicago.
Moving toward Our Nation.

AFRICOBRA...

getting into sound/color
tone/texture
family/nation/us.

...they even writin on they pictures...like
"WE BETTER THAN THOSE MF AND THEY KNOW IT"...like
"WE WILL BUILD HERE ARE NOBODY WILL"...like
"BY HONORING MALCOLM WE HONOR THE BEST IN OURSELVES."
OO-oo-oo!

One of Gerald Williams' pieces declares, "I am Somebody," while
Barbara Jones got a sister coolin it on the beach--in the background--
miss anne, rubbing tracks in her body with sun-tan-low-tion...Sister say,
"I am BETTER!" Yeah.

And Nelson Stevens (he a Taurus brother from Brooklyn) got a piece
called "A Rite Soulful Brother" in bright/survive/stay alive acrylics.
Mosaic. "Brother" come poppin out at you like he a galaxy in the
nightsky...pah.pah/pah/POW! Brother Stevens did another one he call
"JIHAD"...
...My father ask when he see, "What's a JIHAD?"

...I say "It's a HOLY WAR." ...Daddy say "Right on!"...
...and he over fifty.

Wadsworth Jarrell: "If you can get to be bop you can get to me." Now y'all get to this--his piece called "Boss Couple." Portrait of him and his beautiful manchild. Po-si-tive! Righteous thinkin'!...He know a dynamic duo when he see one. And then there's his "Homage to a Giant." It's Malcolm...Malcolm. In brilliant tableaus peepin' at/checkin' us out...and in humble service, honoring his gentle visage --two young man/warriors/heroes of a new generation.

But we gotta get hip to elders. Next time you crack on an older brother (over fifty like my father) -- check yourself--or better, check Carolyn Lawrence's "Pops," or Jeff Donaldson's "Amos 'n' Andy 1972." Them brothers been through a whole lot to get us here. They don' be jivin. You see mo life in they aging eyes then you find on the baddest night at hugh hefner's. Yeah. They's the brothers what be sayin stuff like: "If I can't cut the mustard I mo lick the jar!" Deal with that.

Nelson, Jeff, Carolyn, Wadsworth and Gerald paint. Jae Jarrell is a sister who designs clothes...and she got some sho nuff rags for you. Like a suit for sisters with bullets draped cross the jacket in mild attention--ready. She married to the Daddy of "Boss Couple." They Know.

More handicraft/art. Remember ironwork patch work lye soap? Napoleon Henderson does tapestries. OO-oo-oo! Yeah. He got colors/energy/textures goin--every fiber a conducting vessel to be reckoned with. Touch 'em. let 'em blow your mind.

The hippest thing about these works is that you and I can have them. They gon' be posters. Prices inexpensive. Produced and directed by Love For Ourselves, Unlimited. For office, crib, wherever... (we gotta get into re-customizing our own environments). Coming soon.

Barbara Jones works specifically towards this end. She deals in silk screen, a hip process where originals can be mass produced cheaply... so all black folks can enjoy our art/self. Barbara got another piece so full 'o' rhythm. you can hear it when it say, "rise and take control." (You hip to "For My People," I know.) It moves over time and space... rise (underlined) and take control... rise and take control (underlined)... rise (y'all) and take (underlined) control.

You ever see (underlined) the sounds made by Cris Gaddy, ThruMan Barker, Joe Jarman and Charles Clark? Jeff Donaldson checked it/captured it for us. Approach with caution/a clear head/make yo mind reel, sho nuff. Then there's Wadsworth Jarrell's musician--within' 'n' bobbin' a bad mf. You kin hear the whee-bo-bom-bah-blah-blah-who! They don' be jivin.

Carolyn Lawrence, though, her picture dance. Like the one she call "Manhood." It shoots straight flies right then dips for the kill.
Sherman Beck BLOWS MINDS. Be a Libra. He don' write on his pieces. He don' even name 'em. Don' need to. His Locus; the black/people/mind. Images come exploding out at you past a thousand infinities. It's deep. Yeah. He sayin exceed your possibilities, people!


Oshun, Oba, and Yansan..."Wives of Shango" by Jeff Donaldson. Three sisters in proud affirmation of their womb-manness. Wives of Shango consorts to the god of thunder armed and ready to move toward family/people/nation. Black/woman our Queen/self exquisitely honored by Jeff Donaldson...who loves us.

The ten bad relevant artists usher in a rich phenomenon--COOLADE COLORS. You hip to our flavor/hues? Orange, grape, lemon-lime cherry black-cherry. Can't nobody do in/with/to them what we were born knowing where/when/how to do. Click. (On my way out the gallery I saw a Sunday sister in a tunic -- 1/2 orange, 1/2 lemon-lime, and 1/2 size too small.) Aw right! They Know: COOLADE COLORS for days! And they jus don' be puttin reds and yellows and purples and greens together to be singin'no rainbows. see Dells. they make 'em jump out/beat out your heartthrob.
-5-

make you understand the past and attend to the business of the
imminent future--nation building.

And of essences--a rare panoply of contrasting values/Positive vs.
negative space time/
see what it can do to your mind/
Diamonds and bullets/
exploding cosmic incompatibilities/

BLACKNESS?

THE SUPERREALITY.

ON PAGES, shining temples, trembling in proud anticipation rubbed lips
singing
Allah/Shango praises for today/

BLOOD AND MUSIC

OUR DESTINY.

It's real/truth. An it's all to give re-rise to the greatest
FAMILY/PEOPLE/NATION EVER... we nod.

Have you seen/been there? Ten in Search of a Nation. Fifty-two

You should.

For nation sake.

Cherilyn C. Wright
The mission of the Smithsonian is the increase and diffusion of knowledge - shaping the future by preserving our heritage, discovering new knowledge, and sharing our resources with the world. Founded in 1846, the Smithsonian is the world's largest museum and research complex, consisting of 19 museums and galleries, the National Zoological Park, and nine research facilities. Become an active part of our mission through the Transcription Center. Together, we are discovering secrets hidden deep inside our collections that illuminate our history and our world.

Join us!
The Transcription Center: https://transcription.si.edu
On Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/SmithsonianTranscriptionCenter
On Twitter: @TranscribeSI

Connect with the Smithsonian
Smithsonian Institution: www.si.edu
On Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/Smithsonian
On Twitter: @smithsonian