

Necessary Abstractions, Or, How to Look at Art as a Black Feminist¹

Huey Copeland

I. In this essay, I consider the art-historical implications of a methodological centering of black women in the making of the modern world, particularly for our understanding of 20th-century painterly abstraction in the United States. Ultimately, I will turn to the “errant forms” of Howardena Pindell and curator Naomi Beckwith’s brilliant framing of works such as *Untitled #20 (Dutch Wives Circled and Squared)* of 1978 [Fig. 1], a sprawling canvas covered, like much of the elder African American artist’s output from that era, with thousands of tiny hole punches (Beckwith 2018: 90). However, in order to provide a historical and theoretical frame for approaching her art and those of her contemporaries now just receiving their critical and commercial dues, I first want to lay out, in some detail, both the proclivities and blindspots of the broader American artistic field and their implications for black women practitioners.



II. 1 Howardena Pindell, *Untitled #20 (Dutch Wives Circled and Squared)*, 1978. Mixed media on canvas, 86 x 110 inches (218,4 x 279,4 cm). Courtesy the artist and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York. Collection Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Gift of Albert A. Robin by exchange, 2014.15 Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago

¹ This essay is drawn from a Keynote Lecture delivered in March 2019 at Dakar’s Musée Théodore Monod d’Art Africain as part of the “Anthropology and Contemporary Visual Arts from the Black Atlantic” seminar series spearheaded by Christoph Singler. In revising the text for publication, I have benefitted from the commentary of audiences at the Musée, Harvard University, Michigan State University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Wesleyan University. For their invaluable insights on earlier drafts, I thank: T.J. Clark, with whom I first thought about Olitski, Elise Archias, Sampada Aranke, Janet Dees, Hannah Feldman, Amy Mooney, and Krista Thompson. Thanks also to Lauren Taylor and Darlene Jackson for their invaluable assistance in assembling and securing the image program.

To do so, it is useful to revisit a few of the key contentions that have guided my thinking about the vexed intersection of race and gender, Western “fine art” and black radical aesthetics today (Copeland 2019: 116-118). Over the last 20 years, those of us working in North America and Western Europe have witnessed an explosion of market, exhibitionary, and critical interest in the modes of black abstraction, such as Pindell’s, that emerged in the 1960s and ‘70s. Of course, folks in the black U.S. art world and its institutions have been advocating for abstract work by African Americans for decades, arguably none more so than the Studio Museum in Harlem, whose inaugural exhibition in 1968 featured the light sculptures of Tom Lloyd, and which has gone on to consistently mount solo exhibitions of major African American abstractionists, Pindell included. The inimitable art historian and curator Kellie Jones would revisit these legacies in her important 2006 show *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction, 1964-1980*, which, in its turn, looked back to April Kingsley’s pioneering 1980 exhibition *Afro-American Abstraction* at New York’s P.S.1. Yet crucial as these interventions have been in raising the profiles of black abstract artists, they have tended—as Jones’s title “Black Artists” and “Abstraction” suggests—to see black artistry and abstraction as terms in need of conjoining rather than of always already belonging together.

From one perspective, this makes a certain cultural sense: as literary critic Philip Brian Harper reminds us in his recent book *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*, within certain circles, the black U.S. tradition is one that, as poet June Jordan noted in 1985, “abhors all abstraction.”² For is not a form of abstraction key to those very processes of racialization and stereotyping—think Samboes, Mammies, and all their outrageous progeny—that have tended to render the visual what black feminist critic Michele Wallace (1990: 41) famously called “a negative scene of instruction”, in which black folks are ceaselessly caricatured within the visual field at the same time that their contributions to modern artistic practice are rendered effectively invisible? Such processes have also, I think, profoundly impacted the cultural fates of black women, as the opening gambit of theorist Hortense Spillers’s influential essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe” begins to make clear:

Let’s face it. I am a marked woman, but not everybody knows my name. “Peaches” and “Brown Sugar”, “Sapphire” and “Earth Mother”, “Aunty”, “Granny”, “God’s Holy Fool”, a “Miss Ebony First”, or “Black Woman at the Podium”: I describe a locus of confounded identities, a meeting ground of investments and privations in the national treasury of rhetorical wealth. My country needs me, and if I were not here, I would have to be invented (Spillers 1987: 65).

“The black woman”, in other words, is culturally imagined and violently produced as a kind of *necessary abstraction*, without, however, being attributed capacities for abstract thought and mark-making despite the overwhelming evidence provided by her very survival, thereby crystallizing the seeming misfit between the racial and the non-objective.

Confronted with this impasse, writers aiming to think black being and abstraction have often resorted to approaches that seek out African diasporic referents buried within abstract visual languages, compare abstract painting to jazz in order to license

2 June Jordan 1985: 129, quoted in Philip Brian Harper 2015: 69.

its unfurling, or throw their hands up altogether in relying on the identity of the maker to solve the problem. Recently, Whitney Museum curator Adrienne Edwards has done vital work to address this problem by exploring the relation between chromatic and racial blackness in twentieth-century abstraction by artists on all sides of the color line (Edwards 2016). But how do we develop a language, a critical framework, for thinking the multifariously hued abstract work of black artists, male and female, that honors, to paraphrase the art historian Rosalind Krauss, these practitioners' careful work on the signifier?³ How might we imagine the potentiality of abstraction as a site of political possibility for imagining the world otherwise, especially given that figurative work seems to more directly address the unfolding of black life?

II. Answering such questions is, in fact, the ostensible aim of critic Darby English's 1971: *A Year in the Life of Color*. His book, it must be said, owes much to a 2004 article by photographer Dawoud Bey that demonstrated how mainstream aesthetic discourse has come to appreciate black artists as signs of diversity, while suppressing the diversity of their practices, with particularly deleterious consequences for work and thought on abstraction. For Bey, these consequences were, in fact, emblemized by the case of Pindell, whose scathing performance video *Free, White, and 21* of 1980 was critically lauded yet whose earlier works like *Dutch Wives* were effectively forgotten for decades. English's critical project ends up being quite different, but nonetheless instructive as it trades in a vulgar formalism of the sort in which the Yale-educated Pindell was trained and which still shapes many approaches to abstract art.⁴ I thus want to spend a few moments laying out his argument before articulating my own, which both gives us other objects to see and, more fundamentally, I hope, furthers an understanding of what it might mean to look as a black feminist from a U.S. perspective.

In one sense, 1971 is a welcome and much-needed addition to the burgeoning art-historical literature on African American art of the 1960s and 70s, a discourse that has tended to focus on conceptual practice, performance, printmaking, and figurative painting, often with a political bent. Yet English's aim is not merely to recover color field painting; he holds out this art, perhaps above all, that of Peter Bradley and of his inspiration, the white artist Jules Olitski, as offering alternatives to the black nationalisms that, to English's mind, both saturated the cultural field and delimited imaginings of aesthetic and political possibility. As he put it, "by mobilizing modernism as a politics, these figures (and the experiments they factored into) illuminated the crisis of artistic freedom precipitated by the black liberation movement" (English 27). However, in order to critically advocate for the specialness of abstract art by black practitioners, English feels compelled not only to summarily dismiss his scholarly antecedents, from Jones to Ann Eden Gibson, who, by his lights, "appropriate abstract art to a racist cause", but also to cherry-pick words and phrases from black artists, theorists, and art historians that suit his argument despite his warning to avoid "selective quotation" when engaging contemporaneous white critics.⁵

Most illustrative in this regard is English's engagement with the legendary American modernist critic Clement Greenberg, who worked alongside Bradley and an interracial cast of abstract artists to produce the DeLuxe Show in Houston, the subject of English's

3 Rosalind Krauss quoted in Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Silvia Kolbowski, Miwon Kwon, and Benjamin Buchloh, 1993: 9.
4 English's critical approach to the narration of black abstraction in 1971 is presaged by his "Review: Kobena Mercer, ed., *Discrepant Abstraction*", *caa.reviews*, October 7, 2008, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/1171#.XfM1_C2ZPOQ. He makes clear his debt to Bey in "Darby English and David Breslin on 1971: *A Year in the Life of Color*", January 9, 2017, <https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/516?series=45>.
5 English, 2013: 7. See Ann Eden Gibson, 1991.

3rd chapter. While Greenberg never, to my knowledge, ever said a word in print about the work of an African American artist, he maintained friendly "relationships" with a number of black practitioners, including the Guyanese-British painter Frank Bowling. In fact, Greenberg's letters to Bowling were recently published by curator Okwui Enwezor and they vividly illustrate the complex logics of racialization at work in the critic's mind and in the culture at large, all of which English is at pains to suppress. Take this missive that Greenberg sent from Zimbabwe (then Rhodesia) on December 10, 1975:

That racist business. You too run over at the mouth.... Some people think I'm anti-Irish or anti-Anglo-Saxon or anti-Gentile or even anti-Jewish, not to mention being a male chauvinist. So I'm anti-black too. Well, I do delight in ethnic, racial, & sexual distinctions. Among them are the different smells: do you realize that Germans smell different from English, & Italians from French, & that they all smell different from Jews? And that Zulus smell different from blacks over here? It's not just respect to body odor but also breath. Also, domestic interiors smell different, as I'm sure you know, & it's always along ethnic or racial lines (1975: 232-233).

This is an incredibly strange text that is obviously worthy of further analysis; here, I want to call your attention to Greenberg's complex olfactory schema, which has all the trappings of a racist taxonomy of aesthetic discrimination. But smell, for Greenberg, is less "an index of character" than of cultural positioning within the socioeconomic field that then opens onto various subjective horizons of possibility as well as onto questions about the relation between the various senses in any act of aesthetic appraisal despite his public privileging of the optical above all in engaging works of art.⁶

Our eventual turn to Pindell will occasion an undoing of such racio-aesthetic schemas. Here, I simply want to note how English keeps his distance from such productive complications, especially those stemming from the dynamics of gender, to say nothing of modeling an intersectional approach to the manifestation of those dynamics in the aesthetic and cultural fields.⁷ Thus, unsurprisingly, his narrative does not consider the ways that African diasporic women's cultural practices may inform, intersect with, or intervene within what he construes as the modernist tradition: while Alma Thomas is spared a few lines, English barely engages the work of black women abstract artists such as Pindell and Barbara Chase-Riboud. It must be said, however, that English is not alone in this regard; indeed, his oversight is itself symptomatic: in the historical recovery of black abstract artists, it is men and their formal innovations—Jack Whitten was painting with a squeegee years before Gerhard Richter, Artforum reminds us!—that have garnered the lion's share of interest both from critics and the market, since their practices can often be more easily mobilized to justify rather than challenge the modernist canon (Michelle Kuo 2012).

Now, thankfully, further work is being done to unearth, celebrate, and reframe the work of black women abstract artists. One exhibition mounted in 2018 is particularly worthy of note: *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*, curated by Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina for the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art in Kansas City, a revelatory showing of work by twenty-one black women abstractionists, many of whom were being shown within a museum context for the very first time despite having active careers since the 1960s. These artists included

⁶ See *Clement Greenberg*, 1960, in *Clement Greenberg* 1986: 85-94.

⁷ On intersectionality, a critical approach developed by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s that centers black women given their structural positionality, see: Leslie McCall, 2013: 785-510.

figures such as Mildred Thompson, whose white-on-white relief constructions of found wood beg to be considered both in their own right and in relation to the white monochromes of the late Robert Ryman as well as to the black-on-black sculptural assemblages of the white artist Louise Nevelson (Dziedzic and Messina 2017).

This and other intergenerational exhibitions are welcome interventions, to be sure: they not only continue Gibson's work of righting the historical record in her 1997 book *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*, but also expand what might be found at the intersection of blackness, the feminine, and the aesthetic (Gibson 1997). As such, the catalog accompanying *Magnetic Fields* tends to focus on historical overviews and biographical accountings, as is perhaps befitting a discourse still in various minds about itself: as Brent Hayes Edwards argued about the black anthologies of the 1930s that crisscrossed the Atlantic, such initiatives serve not so much to confirm as to found the traditions they ostensibly document, with all the risks of exclusion and simplification such a process entails (Edwards 2009: 44). Consider curator Valerie Cassel Oliver's essay in the *Magnetic Fields* catalogue, entitled "Kindred: Materializing Representation in the Abstract", which argues that black women abstract artists "have eschewed figuration to construct new visual languages around corporeal representation [aimed at] reconstitut[ing] the whole of blackness" (Cassel Oliver 2017: 50). These lines are wonderfully suggestive, and we shall return to them as well in order to explore how Cassel Oliver's conceptual framework might be further operationalized as black feminist praxis.

III. With this mapping of the discursive terrain in view, we have now arrived at the heart of the matter: what would it mean to develop a black feminist materialist approach to late-twentieth-century American abstraction—regardless of the identity of its maker—that pays heed to, indeed, takes its stance *from* an understanding of the political, ontological, and visual predication of African diasporic women in the modern world? Can we develop criteria of aesthetic evaluation based not on the achievements of an inherently racist, sexist, homophobic and patriarchal canon, but instead stemming from the assumption that—given the necessary imbrication of the formal and the social, the artwork and the world—the historical positionality of black women is uniquely situated to open onto the most radical of political and aesthetic commitments, whatever form that they might take? In cobbling together my own framework of analysis, which I am calling, for lack of a better phrase, black feminist materialist, I have found it useful to revise my own previous engagements with certain theoretical, artistic, and discursive touchstones, particularly those held out by African diasporic women's various forms of cultural practice. As perhaps goes without saying, within the history of the modern world, roughly from the 15th century to the present, no figure or site has been so constitutively and consistently excluded from the scope of the human and the universal than the black woman, whose unassimilability as an intellecting subject within the Western socius has rendered her, to repurpose a phrase from Slavoj Žižek, "*a universal singularity*", that one who is always already consigned to the out-outside.⁸

Of course, this presumption was already articulated in the Combahee River Collective's well-known "Black Feminist Statement" back in 1977:

[W]e are not just trying to fight on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege

8 Here I follow James Bliss, 2015: 89; the quoted phrase derives from Slavoj Žižek, 2008: 17.

to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any of these types of privilege may have..... We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our oppression would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.⁹

This freedom, of course, must be arrived at materially and discursively both in the art world and beyond given that the black female body has long functioned as the locus of what Spillers calls "a signifying property plus" within Western culture since the advent of transatlantic slavery (1987: 65). Her flesh everywhere riven, the fruits of her womb stolen, and her being reduced to a species of property, the female slave has been produced historically as a talking commodity whose shrieks of pain articulate the bases of modern capital, yet whose speech is rarely countenanced or heard.¹⁰

What's more, as literary scholar Tracy Sharpley-Whiting argues, "the black woman" remains subjected to optical regimes that would empty her of particularity and imprison her within an image conjured up by someone else and imposed from without (1999:10). It is no wonder, then, that black women cultural practitioners have time and again aimed both to expand our conceptualization of the visual and to play off other senses of it—the haptic, the sonic, and yes, even the olfactory, Clem!—in order to carve out spaces for some provisional autonomy given that the whole of the material world is potentially posed against them.¹¹ Such an understanding is central to Beckwith's essay "Body Optics: Howardena Pindell's Ways of Seeing", printed in the magisterial retrospective catalog she co-edited with Cassel Oliver and published in 2018:

Visuality is obscured or deprivileged in Pindell's practice in order to foreground a somatic, or bodily, register for a work of art... [W]e are challenged to think about a racial arena whose first terms are not about *seeing* the black body, but rather about *feeling it out*. If from the late 1960s (when Pindell started her professional career) through to the present, a scopic mode of social and political engagement set the terms for thinking about bodies, then we should take a retrospective look at Pindell's oeuvre to see how her work, which deprivileges the very system of seeing, disrupts our models of how seeing, knowledge, and power operate (Beckwith 2018: 90).

Inimitably put. But Beckwith's approach has a much a longer history whose implications for our looking at modern and contemporary art we will further consider.

Just think back, as I have often done, to the ruse invented by an enslaved Harriet Jacobs and detailed in her astonishing narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: while hiding in her grandmother's attic for seven years*, just a stone's throw away from her erstwhile master's house, Jacobs nonetheless was able to send out letters, in her own hand, that were then ferried to locations across the eastern seaboard and mailed back to her grandmother where she knew her old master would intercept them. In so doing, she produced an illusion of herself elsewhere as a mobile free agent in order to preserve her bodily autonomy even though constrained in a space hardly larger than a coffin, a paradigmatic example of using a visual conceit to hold onto the actual self. Produced as a readymade, fantasized as a part-object, and forced

9 The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977), in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith 1982: 18.

10 This line is culled from Huey Copeland, 2012: 210; its approach to the speech of the commodity is informed by Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream" 2003: 1-24.

11 For further elaboration on this score, see Huey Copeland, 2010: 480-497.

to bodily enact her own “social death”, Jacobs faced, and developed means of resistance, conditions whose structures anticipate much of what we take for granted as modernist aesthetic innovation.¹² Viewed in this light, the most vaunted achievements of the twentieth-century Euro-American avant-garde, from Marcel Duchamp’s 1917 *Fountain* to Robert Morris’s 1961 *Box for Standing*, cannot help but read as aestheticized rehashings of Jacobs’s survival tactics, now enacted with uncanny objects in the gallery rather than upon fleshly things on the plantation (Jacobs 1987).

With Jacobs in mind and as model, we can begin putting these precepts into practice in relation to specific works emerging from the U.S. in the ‘60s and ‘70s that aimed to turn vision against itself, to disrupt the kinds of despotic scopopic energies directed at black female bodies. The New York art world of that moment was witnessing what, to many, seemed to be the last gasps of late modernist abstraction, emblemized by the work of Olitski, Helen Frankenthaler, Frank Stella, and Kenneth Noland [Fig. 2]. Their work was advanced by Greenberg and his acolyte Michael Fried as a mode of Kantian immanent critique that saw the development of each medium, whether painting or poetry, as dependent upon its practitioners’ ability to entrench themselves ever deeper in their area of competence and to excise all features not ontologically central to their chosen form. Thus, as we all know too well, painting needed to be flat, non-illusionistic, purely optical, its fullness and extent everywhere present, almost as if graspable within a single instant of perception.¹³ Few artists better exemplify this mode of painting than Noland whose work the critic Leo Steinberg saw as possessing a “one-shot” efficiency aimed at a maximum speed of visual communication that he aligned with design technology (1975: 79).



Fig. 2 Kenneth Noland, *Shoot*, 1964, Acrylic on canvas, 103 3/4 x 126 3/4 in. (263.5 x 321.9 cm). Smithsonian American Art Museum/Washington, DC/U.S.A. Purchase from the Vincent Melzac Collection through the Smithsonian Institution Collections Acquisition Program (1980.5.8). Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC / Art Resource, NY © VAGA at ARS, NY

12 Harriet A. Jacobs, 1987; I borrow the notion of social death from Patterson, 1982.

13 Greenberg, “Modernist Painting”; Michael Fried, 1968: 116-47.

The mode of looking initially solicited by Noland's work, I want to say, is that produced and abetted by capital—advertising, logos, branding—but rooted, perhaps, in the viewing of black bodies as commodities trapped in the carapace of an invented racial blackness, an abstraction that prevented them from being seen as human, if at all. Taken together, what the rather idiosyncratic pairing of Sharpley-Whiting and Steinberg helps us to understand, is that the modes of looking that reduce a particular subject to a “black woman” and that allow for the apprehension of Noland's painting are undergirded by the same perceptual episteme and the same habits of looking. Vision is never neutral: it is necessarily overdetermined by the logics of race and gender; and it is a sort of implicitly biased “quick-seeing”, I would argue, that a black feminist materialist optics often aims to travesty, since every work of art is a proposition—not only about what it is to see and be seen, but also about *how* we should look at that which appears before us both within and beyond the frame.

IV. With all of *this* said, let's now differently look at Pindell, Olitski and their contemporaries. Like English in at least this respect, in thinking the senior white artist's achievement I find myself indebted to the early work of Krauss, before *October*, the poststructuralist turn, and her necessary repudiation of Greenberg. In her catalogue essay for a 1968 Jules Olitski retrospective, she declared that his art questions the frontality of Western painting and as such must be seen obliquely, requiring the viewer to navigate it temporally and spatially [Fig. 3]. In a painting like *High A Yellow* (1973), for instance, the edges of the canvas declare themselves emphatically in order to delineate drawing from painting and to construct separate registers of seeing, the one immediate and cognitive, the other occurring only with focussed looking. In another picture, *Magic Number* (1969), the clear-cut margins induct us into the center of the painting by bringing our eyes and our bodies to its sides so that we can look across the surface and begin to understand its confounding logic: what appears to be a solid yellow field when viewed frontally is seen to be impregnated with green at an angle, as if the color were casting a shadow of itself (Krauss 1968).



Fig. 3 Jules Olitski, *High A Yellow*, 1967. Acrylic and vinyl paint on canvas. Overall: 89 1/2x 150 in. (227,3 x 381cm). Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. Purchase with funds from the Friends of the Whitney Museum of American Art. Inv.N.: 68.3

What Krauss gives us to see in Olitski, in other words, is no less than a painting both deeply corporeal and cunningly anamorphic. By these lights, his work's demand for oblique and bodily response, rather than mere optical/frontal attention, offers a compelling visual experience that for a moment might allow us to step outside our world of instant communication, racial, gendered or otherwise. In fact, the critical tide that would eventually damn Olitski to obscurity for decades was at least on one occasion openly articulated in ethnicizing and feminizing terms of taste. Here is one of the conservative critic Hilton Kramer's 1973 dismissals of the artist:

The paintings to be sure, abound in pretty colors—the colors of sherbet and Indian saris and romantic sunsets—and thus have at times a certain decorative appeal. But it is the appeal of something superficial, something merely pretty. Beyond the prettiness of the color, one feels only the cold decisions and the mechanical calculations of an artist working to fulfill a narrow historical formula (Kramer, 1973: 25).

Olitski thus risked his work being seen as only decorative because it was at odds with the presumptions of the tradition that he was seen to extend; or, as Kramer's criticism implies, in following Greenberg's avant-gardist prescriptions so closely, Olitski had ended up, ironically, falling into an aesthetic of kitsch.¹⁴

Black artists working at the same moment, however, would explicitly draw upon other histories, encounters, and experiences that would enable them to disrupt quick-seeing in forwarding black feminist materialist practices variously trafficked in mainstream modernisms; the exigencies of life lived black in the United States; and, most important for my argument, African American women's traditions. In particular, I have in mind the stunning quilts, some still surviving from the 1920s, made by the community of women artists working for generations in Gee's Bend, Alabama, such as those of Martha Jane Pettway, whose daughter Joanna, also a quilter, describes the interleaving of life and work from which these world-making objects emerged [Fig. 4]:

We were kind of a big family—seven sisters and five brothers. Back then we cut dresses to make quilts. Go to the field, pick cotton. Go to the gin, wrap it up, put the padding on the quilt. We just enjoyed it. This time of year, the cotton opens up. We pick cotton and go to quilting, after you finish with the cotton, you go back to quilting. All the time, something to do all the time. It isn't like it used to be. Used to have fun taking quilts from one house to the other one. Get out quilts down here, go up there, then go up that one. Quilt so many in a day. We're just sitting down thinking back about old times—how they do and what they do. And looking for days to come (Pettway 2022).

¹⁴ On the presumed foundational antagonism between the two terms, see Greenberg, 1961; for their vital recasting, see Clark, 1982.



Fig. 4 Martha Jane Pettway, *Center medallion strips with multiple borders and cornerstone*, n.d. © 2022 Estate of Martha Jane Pettway / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Cast in this light, the quilts come to us as vital modes of individuals' creative autonomy and as material evidence of how black women collectively aimed to disrupt the imposition of what political theorist Michael Hanchard defines as "racial time", in order to tend-toward-blackness, in the senses of both leaning into and caring for black beings.¹⁵

Most saliently, we might also see these quilts as ambitious modernist articulations, not only because they are made from scraps reconfigured into new patterns, but also because the very form of sociality that produced them represents a critical response, a haptic bulwark of safety, both against the cold nights and the terrors of modernity, which have time and again taken black flesh as its prime targets. These works are *necessary abstractions*, indeed, even if not "proper" ones: their hard-won aesthetic and material intelligence confound the West's production of the black woman and so enable a radical re-

¹⁵ "Racial time is defined as the inequalities of temporality that result from power relations between racially dominant and subordinate groups." See Michael Hanchard, 1999: 220; Huey Copeland, 2016: 141-44.

consideration of artistic modernism as such. A proposition, then: if, as the social historian of art T.J. Clark argues, modernism goes with socialism, because the latter "occupies the real ground on which modernity could be described and opposed", then it is black women's resistive struggles that might be placed at the heart of the modernist enterprise since they, as the sisters of Combahee remind us, have had to oppose the constitution of the world *tout court* without even a proper politics to call their own (Clark, 1999: 7).

Indeed, the exigencies of this battle echo both formally and materially in subsequent artists' engagements with quilting and its structures. Doubtless, the most well-known example in this genealogy is Faith Ringgold's *Slave Rape* quilt series [Fig. 5], a group of figurative works begun in 1973 and sewn on fabric quilted by the artist's mother, fashion designer Willi Posey. If we pursue the more straightforwardly abstract, we could also look to a trio of male artists working around the same time. William T. Williams offers us a surface engagement that takes up the patterns of quilting and transforms them into a kind of hard-edged abstraction quite legible to a Fried and his fans [Fig. 6]. Sam Gilliam's flirtation with quilting is also relevant if not so immediately apparent, leading him to twist and bend canvas as fabric, producing part-paintings/part-sculptures that, like the works of Eva Hesse, demand a slowed down corporeal time. Of African American male artists, Al Loving's engagement with quilting is perhaps deepest: he started his public career with hard-edged efforts, but, directly influenced by textile traditions, shifted to making works literally woven from the shreds of his own previous canvases, as if to eviscerate the very mode that brought him fame and to align himself with a black feminist material ethos [Fig. 7].



Fig. 5 Faith Ringgold, *Help*, *Slave Rape* series #15, 1973. © 2022 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York



Fig. 6 William T. Williams, *Trane*, 1969. Acrylic on canvas, 108 x 84 in. The Studio Museum in Harlem; gift of Charles Cowles, New York 1981, 2.2



Fig. 7 Al Loving, *Square*, 1973-74. Mixed media on canvas, 93 x 93 inch (236,2 x 236,2 cm). Courtesy the Estate of Al Loving and Garth Greenan Gallery, New York.

Just as these male practitioners give us much to see and feel, I think the operative coordinates of black women's feminist materialism are productively charted by Fred Moten in his *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Building on the work of Spillers and Hartman, he roots that tradition in the experiences of enslaved women, so key to racial slavery and the "advances" that it made possible. For Moten, these women not only literally embody Marx's counterfactual notion in *Capital* of "if the commodity could speak..." but their resistance to becoming objects also shapes every form of black radical practice. In particular, he lights upon Adrian Piper's *Untitled Performance at Max's Kansas City*, in which the artist—with eyes blindfolded, hands covered, mouth closed, and nostrils pinched—aimed to produce herself as an object in an unwitting echo of the female slave's ontological status. What Piper's performance demands, for Moten, is precisely *not* the presumptions of formalist modernist criticism that posit the object as an autonomous form open to quick-seeing, but rather that emphasize the "holosensual, invaginatively ensemblic internal differentiation of the object" (Moten 2003: 235).

The phrase bears repeating: "holosensual, invaginatively ensemblic internal differentiation of the object". Which is to say, I think, that the work of art, not unlike the human body, is imagined to recruit all of the senses, to be a conjoining of disparate parts that fold in on themselves to produce a richly differentiated internal structure that demands a *feeling out*, to recall Beckwith, beyond the surface, the threshold at which a mere seeing of "the black woman" would stop and from which close looking can truly begin. Moten's phrase speaks beautifully, I think, to a whole range of works, including Pindell's, but perhaps most directly to the relief sculptures of Chase-Riboud, particularly her now 20-piece series, begun in 1968, in homage to Malcolm X [Fig. 8]. These works suggest a logic of invagination, of a woven and worked object folding into itself, but now activated to provide testament to the internal complexities of the great black nationalist leader, often imagined as an icon of black masculinity, but whom, as we know now, was more than a little queer and much more complex in his vexed positions than he is often given credit for.



Fig. 8 Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Malcolm X #3*, 1969. Polished cast bronze with spun artificial silk and mercerized Egyptian cotton, 8 feet 6 ½ inches x 3 feet 1 inches x 2 feet 8 inches (260,4 x 94 x 81,3 cm). © Barbara Chase-Riboud. Collection of Philadelphia Museum of Art

While Pindell's work of the 1980s would later explicitly turn to African and diasporic modes of production, her early work also manifests, I think, a black feminist materialist approach in its very facture and production. Her paintings are made up of quilted squares, each covered with those tiny hole punches that are meticulously glued to canvas, creating a multiplicity of views that cannot be held all at once. What's more Pindell occasionally sprinkled her canvases with glitter and sprayed them with perfume, creating a richly olfactory experience that not only crosswired the senses to expand what it means to look, but that also brought the base world of smells into the elevated realm of painting, which becomes a surrogate and emblem for the being of blackness in the social world however unseen or unfelt.

Pindell's choice to use those hole punches, however, is perhaps the most telling: she settled on the circular form while working as a curator in the Prints and Drawings department at New York's Museum of Modern Art between 1977 and 1980 as the requisite office supplies were easily available. This material choice was actually inspired by the artist's memories of traveling with her family in the segregated South: glasses to be used by black people were marked on their bottoms with red circles so that they would never touch white lips. Pindell thus takes a basic form that has been coded as racist, materially rediscovers it in her alienating workplace, and then makes it over into a building block for a mode of abstraction that both refutes the kind of seeing required of segregationist logic and that provides a means of reinvestment in her own life and practice.

Pindell's work, in other words, like each of the "late modernist" practices we've considered, differentially aims to *détourne* vision, to direct us back to the past of modern art and civil conflict, and to bring the black woman into the picture without her having to be there yet again as a site of surveillance and extraction. For is not any evocation of "the black woman" a necessary abstraction that can only asymptotically address the complexities of African diasporic women's lived experiences? Taken together, these works, following Cassel Oliver, point us to the whole of blackness without, however, hoping to contain them all. In embracing fragments, and often quite literally weaving them together, such works differently teach us how to look at "the black woman", "modern art", and maybe even ourselves.

Works Cited

- Beckwith, Naomi "Body Optics, or Howardena Pindell's Ways of Seeing", in Naomi Beckwith and Valerie Cassel Oliver, (eds.), *Howardena Pindell: What Remains to Be Seen*, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2018: 87–108.
- Bey Dawoud, "Ironies of Diversity, or The Disappearing Black Artist", *artnet.com* 2004: <http://www.artnet.com/magazine/features/bey/bey4-8-04.asp> (last accessed May 29, 2022).
- Bliss, James, "Hope Against Hope: Queer Negativity, Black Feminist Theorizing, and Reproduction without Futurity", *Mosaic* 48.1 (March 2015): 89
- Cassel Oliver, Valerie, "Kindred: Materializing Representation in the Abstract", in Dziedzik, Erin and Melissa Messina (eds.), *Magnetic Fields: Expanding Abstraction, 1960s to Today*. St. Louis: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017.

- Clark, T.J., "Clement Greenberg's Theory of Art", *Critical Inquiry* 9.1 (Sept. 1982): 139-156.
- Clark, T.J., "Introduction", in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*. Yale University Press, 1999.
- Copeland, Huey, "Feasting on Scraps", *Small Axe* 38 (July 2012): 198-212.
- Copeland, Huey, "Flow and Arrest", *Small Axe* 48, November 2015): 19-48.
- Copeland, Huey, "Tending-toward-Blackness", *October* 156 (Spring 2016): 141-44.
- Copeland, Huey "One-Dimensional Abstraction: Darby English, 1971: A Year in the Life of Color (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016)", *Art Journal* 78. 2 (Summer 2019): 116-118.
- Copeland, Huey, "In the Wake of the Negress", in Cornelia Butler and Alexandra Schwartz (eds.), *Modern Women: Women Artists at the Museum of Modern Art*. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2010, 480-497.
- Dziedzic Erin, Melissa Messina (eds.), *Magnetic Fields: Expanding Abstraction, 1960s to Today*. St. Louis: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017.
- Edwards, Adrienne, *Blackness in Abstraction*. New York: Pace Gallery, 2016.
- Edwards, Brent Hayes, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- English Darby, *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.
- English, Darby, "Review: Kobena Mercer, ed., *Discrepant Abstraction*", *caa.reviews*, October 7, 2008, http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/1171#.XFm1_C2ZPOQ.
- English Darby and David Breslin on *1971: A Year in the Life of Color*, January 9, 2017, <https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/516?series=45>.
- Foster, Hal; Rosalind Krauss; Silvia Kolbowski; Miwon Kwon; Benjamin Buchloh, "The Politics of the Signifier: A Conversation on the Whitney Biennial", *October* 66 (Fall 1993): 9.
- Fried Michael, "Art and Objecthood" (1967), in Gregory Battcock (ed.), *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*. New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1968: 116-47.
- Gibson, Ann Eden, *Abstract Expressionism: Other Politics*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Gibson, Ann Eden, *The Search for Freedom: African American Abstract Painting, 1945-1975*. New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1991.
- Greenberg, Clement, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in *Greenberg, Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1961: 3-22.
- Greenberg, Clement, "Letter from Clement Greenberg to Frank Bowling, December 10, 1975", in Okwui Enwezor (ed.), *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*. Munich: Haus der Kunst and Prestel Verlag, 2017: 232-233.
- Greenberg, Clement, "Modernist Painting" (1960), in John O'Brian (ed.), *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957-1969*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986: 85-94.
- Hanchard Michael, "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora", *Public Culture* 11.1 (January 1999): 220.
- Harper, Philip Brian, *Abstractionist Aesthetics: Artistic Form and Social Critique in African American Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.

- Hull, Gloria T., Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, "A Black Feminist Statement" (1977), in *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies*. New York: Feminist Press, 1982.
- Jacobs, Harriet A., *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), ed. Jean Fagan Yellin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987.
- Jordan, June, "Nobody Mean More to Me than You and the Future Life of Willie Jordan", in *On Call: Political Essays* (Boston: South End, 1985): 129, Quoted in
- Kramer Hilton, "Jules Olitski: A Sectarian Scenario" *The New York Times* (September 16, 1973), 25: <https://www.nytimes.com/1973/09/16/archives/jules-olitski-a-sectarian-scenario.html> (last accessed May 29, 2022).
- Krauss Rosalind, *Jules Olitski: Recent Paintings*. Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 1968, n.p.
- Kuo, Michelle, "Artist's Portfolio: Jack Whitten", *Artforum*, February 2012: <https://www.artforum.com/print/201202/artist-s-portfolio-jack-whitten-30076> (last accessed 29 May 2022).
- Marable, Manning, *Malcolm X: A Life of Reinvention*. New York: Penguin, 2011.
- McCall, Leslie, "Toward a Field of Intersectionality Studies: Theory, Application, and Praxis", *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 38.4 (2013): 785-510.
- Moten Fred, "Resistance of the Object: Adrian Piper's Theatricality", in *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003.
- Moten, Fred "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream" see *In the Break*.
- Patterson, Orlando, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- Pettway, Joanna, <https://www.soulsgrowndeep.org/artist/joanna-pettway> (last accessed June 8, 2022).
- Pindell, Howardena, "The Aesthetics of Texture in African Adornment", in *The Heart of the Question: The Writings and Paintings of Howardena Pindell*. New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1997: 84-86.
- Sharpley-Whiting, T. Denean, *Black Venus: Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears, and Primitive Narratives in French*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Spillers, Hortense J., "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", *Diacritics*, vol. 17, n° 2 (Summer 1987): 65.
- Steinberg, Leo, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975.
- Wallace, Michele, "Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture", in Russell Ferguson et. al. eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990.
- Žižek, Slavoj, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, New York: Verso, 2008.