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African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present

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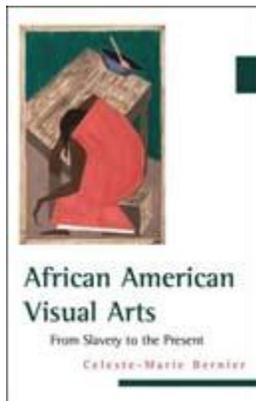
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Celeste-Marie Bernier. *African American Visual Arts: From Slavery to the Present*. Chapel Hill University of North Carolina Press, 2009. 296 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3256-1; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5933-9.

Reviewed for H-AfrArts by Monique Fowler-Paul Kerman

Searching for the Ever-Elusive Black Aesthetic

In her introduction to *African American Visual Arts*, Celeste-Marie Bernier claims that too much African American art criticism focuses on sociological, biographical, and historical issues to the detriment of formal analysis. Her aim is thus to present case studies of twenty artists from the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries who do just that. Each case study examines the artist's "thematic concerns and aesthetic issues," with the interpretive focus on his/her personal statements and "individual histories" (p. 3). Overall, Bernier hopes to suggest the development of an African American visual arts tradition through the analysis of work by artists who have been influential in that development.

Citing the challenges of a racist white mainstream, Bernier discusses both the problems of the lack of exposure to African American art and the concurrent dearth of art historical scholarship concerning these artists. She explains that many contemporary and emerging artists have recently become even more disillusioned than their predecessors. While the collection, display, sale, and study of African American art is unquestionably hampered by the historical marginalization and exclusion of African American artists in American society and culture, it is surprising that Bernier insists that conditions are as dire as ever. The selection of Fred Wilson to represent the United States in the 2003 Venice Biennale, and the 2007 retrospective of Kara Walker, then just thirty-nine years old, at the Whitney Museum of American Art are just two events that would seem to mitigate Bernier's statement to a substantial degree. In her introduction, Bernier describes a world of art racism from which it is difficult to

emerge as an individual, and yet she herself tends toward art historical analysis predicated on race.

Bernier addresses criticisms of categorizing artists into such classifications as "black" or "African American" by accepting their validity in terms of the tendencies toward the subsequent segregation or "ghettoization" of these artists and their work. She explains that these "terms do run the risk of over-essentializing and artificially setting works apart according to racialized lines, particularly given that many artists are heavily influenced by and, in turn, had their own impact upon, mainstream white American and European art movements" (p. 10). In the next paragraph, however, she asserts that "a case can be made for focusing solely on African American artists on the grounds that black artists not only had a profound influence on one another but also that their works betray a shared commitment to the search for a new visual language within which to represent personal and public narratives and histories related to African American life" (ibid.). Regrettably, this view robs the artists featured in the case studies of any context other than that of being racially linked to all the other artists being analyzed in the following chapters. This is not to deny that African American artists over the last two centuries have expressed concerns about and sympathies with experiences of racism or a distinctive African American culture and values in their work, only to stress that emphasizing these in order to construct a "black aesthetic" that overrides all other creative influences and thematic concerns is fundamentally limited.

After the introduction, six chapters follow that focus on three to five case studies each. Bernier seems to have selected the artists for their resonance with the overarching theme of the chapter. The artists are grouped according to era and these in turn are presented in chronological order. Thus, she begins with artists working under the conditions of slavery or living and working in the United States before 1900, namely, a potter known only as "Dave," James P. Ball, Harriet Powers, Edmonia Lewis, and Henry O. Tanner. The second chapter concerns artists associated with the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 30s: Aaron Douglas, Archibald J. Motley Jr., and Charles Alston. The third chapter focuses on the "abstract-figurative style[s]" of William Edmondson, Horace Pippin, and Jacob Lawrence, particularly during the 1940s (p. 89). The fourth chapter features the documentary and politically charged work of Charles White, Elizabeth Catlett, and Gordon Parks, ranging from 1940 to 1972. The fifth chapter investigates how the work of Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, and Betye Saar from the 1950s on emphasized formal aesthetics over social documentary or political statements. The sixth chapter discusses contemporary artists David Hammons, Howardina Pindell, and Walker as challenging

audience's expectations of black art from 1970 to the present. Bernier selects a few works of each artist on which she focuses her analysis. It is a diverse and exciting body of work, which is lamentably underrepresented in illustrations; appendix B supplies a list of publications of these works, either in print or online.

With each case study, Bernier addresses previous art criticism and compares it with her own findings based on formal analysis and previously unpublished artists' interviews and writings. While some of these studies reveal compelling new data and energetically refute previous assumptions about these artists and their work, others do not hold up as well to scrutiny. Chapter 1 is the strongest in terms of its art history. Bernier investigates the ways in which the artists featured establish their subjectivity in the face of racist objectification. She specifically sets out to counter assumptions that African Americans made no art before 1900, using new archaeological evidence from sites like the African Burial Ground in New York City unearthed in 1991 to bolster her argument. She links both formal and symbolic aspects of the artists' work to their shared African cultural roots, and discusses how the enigmatic poetry of Dave the Potter and imagery of Powers, as well as the "alternative iconography" of Ball, represent forms of resistance to racist oppression (p. 31). Although critics dubbed the racial features of sculptor Edmonia Lewis's figures "assimilationist," Bernier describes Lewis's subject matter as pushing acceptable social and racial boundaries to depict heroic men alongside, rather than indifferent or superior to, long suffering black women (pp. 45-46). Tanner, criticized for avoiding black social issues, does address these in works like *The Thankful Poor* (1894). However, Bernier asserts that first and foremost, Tanner was interested in form and technique, not statements of racial hardship or solidarity. This brings up the question that continually nags the reader of *African American Visual Arts*: should African American artists be obligated to make "black art," or work that somehow foregrounds or emphasizes African American experience, either formally or in terms of subject? It is not difficult to imagine that, for many artists, the answer is an emphatic "no!" However, Bernier's stance on this issue seems contradictory, or at least ambiguous.

In chapter 2, Bernier contends that the fractured and abstract forms of Douglas and Alston were uniquely suited to the aims of the Harlem Renaissance, the "'new racial idiom'" and "'school of Negro art'" espoused by art historian Alain Locke (p. 58).[1] She describes Douglas's abstract and symbolic forms in *Aspects of Negro Life* (1934) as "celebrat[ing] black survival," noting that "Douglas's insistence that he was forced to portray 'everything not in a realistic' but in an 'abstract way,' even to begin to approach the inner realities of black life, establishes a key feature of African American art. His design patterns and

abstract stylizations exposed the limitations of realist or documentary modes ever to represent the distorted, marginalized, and elided facets of black culture" (p. 62). This statement is difficult to reconcile with Bernier's assessment of Tanner in the previous chapter, or of White, Catlett, or Parks in chapter 4, wherein she praises their realism for graphically depicting the difficult lives of black people in white-dominated society. As for Alston, Bernier introduces the artist as not a black artist but, in his own words, "'an artist who happens to be black'" (p. 79). She adds, "He was convinced it was futile to adopt 'a separate set of rules and qualities for Black art'" (ibid.). Alston's resistance to expectations of "black art" speaks directly to the problematic nature of such a concept. When the audience and critics insist that one's racial heritage requires one to produce a certain kind of art, then creativity is limited, stifled, or sequestered into an artistic ghetto. Unfortunately, Bernier's analysis marginalizes any influences on or contexts of the work of African American artists other than racial ones in order to find overarching formal characteristics that she can expand into a "black aesthetic."

It certainly seems significant, for example, that some of the artists in the case studies lived in poverty, while others had access to art education, professional support, and relatively wealthy patrons. In the conclusion for chapter 2, there is an intriguing discussion of Douglas's disdain for and Alston's admiration of contemporaneous artists Edmondson and Lawrence, respectively. Bernier quotes Douglas dismissing Edmondson as "a person with very little education and none at all from an art viewpoint," while she credits Alston for "discovering" Lawrence (p. 87). She writes that Alston's "ability to see an African American master in a 'kid' who attended his after-school art class for impoverished black children sets the stage for recovering the lives of self-taught folk artists" (ibid.). She goes on to examine Palmer Hayden's *Janitor Who Paints* (c. 1939-40) as an "unflinching portrayal of African American working-class poverty," noting that Hayden was himself a janitor cum painter (p. 88). Contrasting the self-taught Edmondson, folk-influenced Lawrence, and working-class Hayden with the middle-class, art-educated Douglas and Alston demonstrates a sizable gulf between their experiences, which is then reflected not only in the artists' works, but also in the ways in which those works were received by critics and the public. Regrettably, Bernier does not address similar issues of class in other chapters.

Bernier concludes with an epilogue in which she discusses how themes of slavery and the Middle Passage continue to inspire contemporary black artists, including Jefferson Pinder, Kerry James Marshall, Michael Ray Charles, Laylah Ali, and Renée Cox. She sees these "hidden histories" not only as the subject of much African American art but also as an "aesthetic approach" (p. 222). She

describes these artists as "preoccupied as their forebears with unearthing buried stories to communicate an 'essence of black imagery'" (ibid., quoting Pinder). It is difficult to reconcile this statement with the paragraph that follows it, in which Bernier highlights the frustration of, among others, abstract sculptor Melvin Edwards "at white art world attempts to dictate the forms and subject matter in his works" (ibid.). She then asserts that "the African American artist's fight for aesthetic freedom is still ongoing" (ibid.). Bernier continues by explaining how the work of Charles subverts the expectations of black communities. She quotes Charles as explaining that "'most blacks have a perception about art by black people. That art by an African-American artist should look a certain way'" (p. 223). Thus African American artists are continually striving for freedom from the expectations of both the white mainstream and black audiences. Yet Bernier's search for aesthetic and stylistic commonalities in *African American Visual Arts* seems like an impediment to that freedom. Despite these issues, Bernier's book presents some compelling art work by a range of modern and contemporary African American artists spanning more than a century. She includes previously unpublished testimony and commentary from the artists themselves to elucidate their creative practices, and in the process introduces some intriguing questions that suggest further research.

Note

[1]. The source that Bernier provides for Locke's statement is cited as "Locke 1927: 266," but she does not list a 1927 publication by Locke in the bibliography.

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