

## From the Editor

# CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE #BLACKLIVESMATTER MOVEMENT

**O**n February 14, 2015 I visited Titus Kaphar's exhibition *Asphalt and Chalk* at Jack Shainman Gallery in Chelsea, New York and was struck by the power and simplicity of two small canvases near the entrance, a diptych titled *1968/2014* (2014). On one panel a raised clenched fist, realistically rendered, has been all but obliterated by what appear to be rapidly applied expressionist strokes of white paint; on the other an open palm has been given a similar whiteout treatment. Both hands are black, and written in white paint at the bottom-right of the respective canvases are the numbers "68" and "14." The exhibition features other larger paintings, such as *Another Fight for Remembrance* (2014), showing crowded scenes of black figures with hands raised and open against a dark night sky, their faces partially visible, obscured by the riot of glowing white paint. In all, these works give the impression of a struggle between an inchoate yet assertive whiteness bent on erasing the thoughtfully rendered, gesturing black bodies.

Although these paintings rehearse the painterly tactics we have come to associate with Kaphar's pictorial archaeology of Euro-American art history and racial experience, they speak more directly to recent events in the United States, specifically the fatal shooting by police of the unarmed black youth from Ferguson, Missouri, Michael Brown, on August 9, 2014. To be sure, Brown's death at the hands of the police marks only one of several such incidents that occur with alarming frequency; but it touched an already raw nerve and set off a mass demonstration—and the occasional riot—such as the streets of America have not seen since the Los Angeles riots of 1992, following the acquittal of policemen caught on tape beating another black man, Rodney King.

Kaphar's *1968/2014* and other paintings, commissioned by *Time* magazine in the wake of the

Ferguson riots, are however not simply visual meditations on the Ferguson incident; rather they memorialize the radical public testifying to the reality and history of brutalization, especially of the black male, by state security agents and a reawakening of mass resistance to systemic oppression of blacks in America, despite the supposed gains of the civil rights movement and the now wishful arrival—after the election of President Barack Obama in 2008—of a postracial dawn. The diptych, in other words, collectively imagines the 2014 rallies in Ferguson and elsewhere around the United States, along with the passive die-ins in streets and on college campuses and the allied social-media phenomenon #BlackLivesMatter, as a contemporary reincarnation not only of the passive resistance of the mainstream civil rights movement, but also of the radical politics of the Black Power movement. However, whereas the iconic symbol of the Black Power movement was the black clenched fist, ever ready to deploy the same coercive violence the state claims as its prerogative, the open palm of Ferguson signifies, perhaps, present-day recognition that the oppressed, utterly at the mercy of state power, can still mobilize the force of collective moral outrage to wrest whatever rights and concessions they can from an insensitive and unjust system. Thus the juxtaposition of the two iconic hand gestures suggests a historical, and perhaps even ideological, connection between the events with which both are associated. However, the underlying premise of this work, as I understand it—that the 1960s dream for a more just society in which the color of one's skin ceases to determine one's fate and opportunities remains a dream deferred—raises an important question to contemporary art and artists: why the resounding silence in the face of the turmoil outside?

Back in the 1960s, when the mainstream, white art world was navel-gazing, lost in the reverie of aesthetic autonomy, many artists of color and diverse aesthetic and political persuasion in the United States took notice of the civil rights movement and asked searching questions about art's relationship with social experience. Three distinct groups exemplified their different responses. First, the Spiral group, cofounded in 1963 by Romare Bearden in the wake of the March on Washington, convened in New York for two years with the goal of

articulating the position and role of art and artists within the civil rights movement. This group eventually could not reach consensus on a cohesive aesthetic response or mode of direct participation in the movement. It disbanded after its only group exhibition in 1965. The second group, led by Noah Purifoy, Judson Powell, and other artists associated with the Watts Tower Arts Center in Los Angeles, were compelled by the 1965 Watts riot to engage in socially conscious work while drawing on such modernist tactics as assemblage. In the catalogue of the *66 Signs of Neon* group exhibition (1966), featuring multimedia assemblages fashioned from the ruins of the riot, Purifoy and Powell reflect on the task of contemporary art: “Art of itself is of little or no value if in its relatedness it does not affect change. We do not mean change in the physical appearance of things, but change in the behavior of human beings.”<sup>1</sup> And the third was the Jeff Donaldson-led, Chicago-based AfriCOBRA group, which firmly aligned itself with the Black Arts movement and outlined a formal style and community-oriented practice that drew on such intellectual and artistic precedents as Negritude, Pan-Africanism, and the assertive black aesthetic championed by Amiri Baraka and others. The work of these three groups and that of other artists active during the 1960s, including Faith Ringgold and Betye Saar, shows the firm conviction of black artists in the United States that ambitious art can participate in—and has, historically, often lent its voice to—debates about life and the social experience, without compromising its aesthetic integrity. It reminds us that at critical moments in history serious art can successfully and meaningfully turn its attention to the world outside, offering to it a refractive lens and reflective mirror; and that is why the 1960s work, mostly by black artists, remains among the most eloquent visual testaments to what was then, as now, an unprecedented unfolding of events with the power to reshape America, along with our understanding of race and the body politic.

If, as Kaphar’s diptych suggests—and as recent commentators have noted—Ferguson and the movement it catalyzed announce a new civil rights era, we have to ask, with an eye to history: When will contemporary artists acknowledge through their work that something profound, once again,

is happening in our streets? Where indeed are the voices of the Donaldsons, Beardens, Purifoy, and Ringgolds of the #BlackLivesMatter movement?

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**Note**

1 Noah Purifoy, cited in “The Art of Communication as a Creative Act,” *Junk Art: 66 Signs of Neon* (Los Angeles: 66 Signs of Neon, 1966), n.p.

