‘We were always here’: Blockbuster ‘Soul of a Nation’ comes to de Young Museum

Charles Desmarais | November 7, 2019
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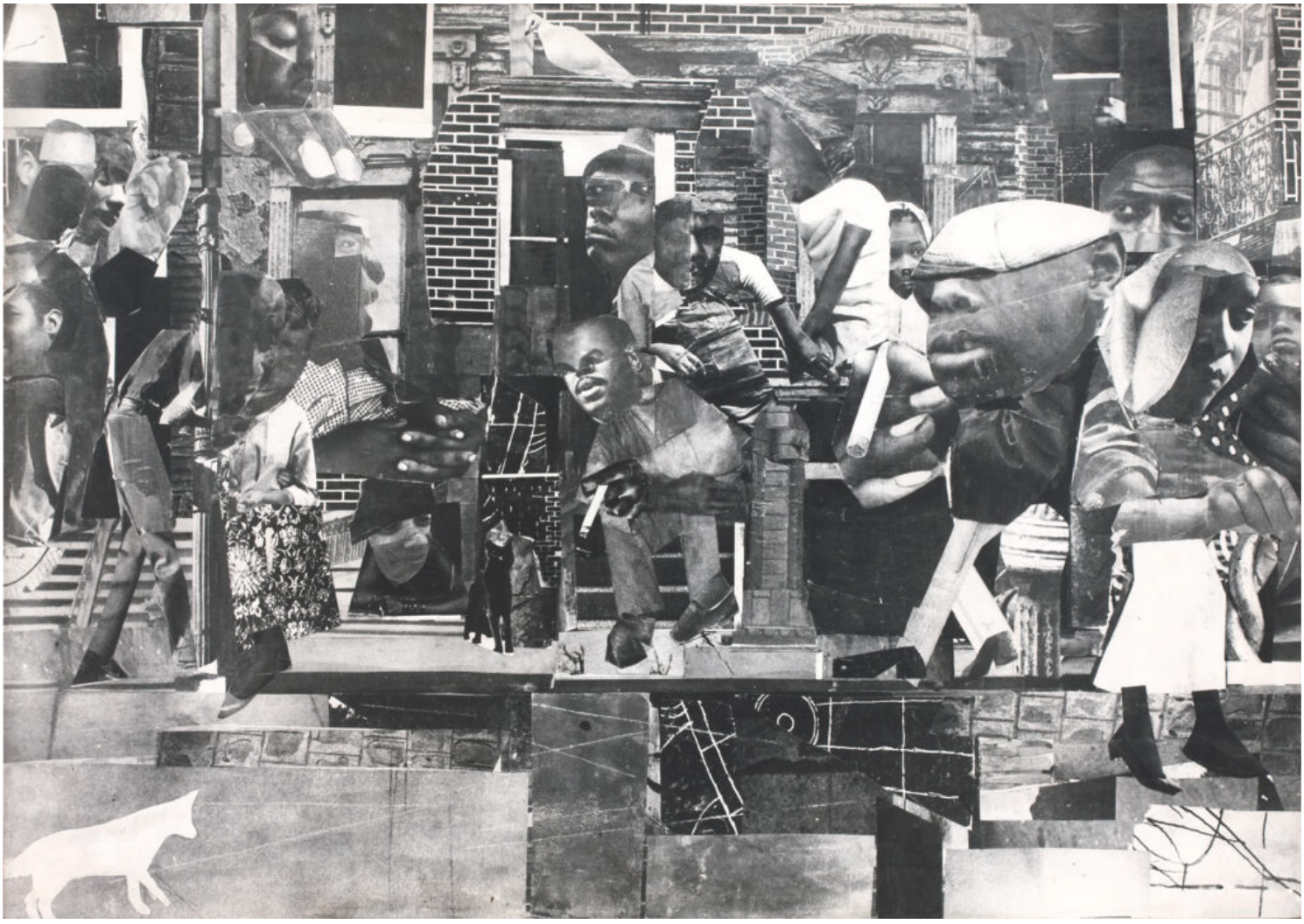
Barkley L. Hendricks, “What’s Goin’ On” (1974)
Photo: © Estate of Barkley L. Hendricks, Jack Shainman Gallery, New York

The latest edition of the catalog for “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power,” the **blockbuster exhibition** that opens Saturday, Nov. 9, at the de Young Museum, features an extraordinary cover image.

A reproduction of a now-famous painting by Barkley L. Hendricks dated 1974, it depicts five young African Americans striking casual, supremely confident poses. Set against a clear white background, four of the figures wear impeccably white suits and large hats, fashionable for the day. The fifth, a shapely woman, is nude.

The title of the work, “What’s Goin’ On,” is an obvious reference to Marvin Gaye’s popular protest song and subsequent album, released three years earlier. Significantly, though, it has little to do pictorially with the song’s images of war and brutality, love and hate. If the song title implies a question, the picture is the opposite. It is, manifestly, a statement, in the plainest of terms, that black is not only beautiful but it is real, of such substance that it effortlessly pierces the feeble white atmosphere from which it emerges.

The metaphor of black power is impossible to miss.



Romare Bearden, “The Dove” (1964)

There are other striking images in the show, but none so soundly delivers the implicit argument of “Soul of a Nation”: that African American art has, and always had, a significance apart from any meaning the so-called mainstream white culture might have designed for it.

Organized by London's Tate, the show comes to San Francisco as part of an extended tour that started in 2017 and will, when it ends, have traveled to six major museums. It has been hailed as a signal of the museum establishment's long-awaited acceptance of black artists into the canon of American art history.

Wadsworth Jarrell, “Black Prince” (1971)
Photo: © Wadsworth Jarrell, Lusenhop Fine Art

But if we learn anything from the exhibition, it is that African American art thrived though the turbulent decades of the ’60s and ’70s not only apart from the establishment, but largely indifferent to it. There were artist collaboratives, exhibition spaces, movements and theories. Some of these passed into (and then, too often, out of) broader awareness; some, like the Studio Museum in Harlem, became essential art world fixtures.

But regardless of the interest or the ignorance of others, as the artist Hank Willis Thomas **told me this year**, “We were always here; we were always making the work.”

The de Young presentation of “Soul of a Nation” does suffer from a serious flaw. It is so overcrowded at places that one might question the museum’s respect for the art it contains, if we didn’t know how assiduously museum staff worked to add San Francisco as a venue at the last minute (along with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), after some quick-footed schedule shuffling.

You will need to bring a pair of mental blinders to focus on individual works amid the cacophony. It will be well worth the effort.

Norman Lewis, “America the Beautiful” (1960)
Photo: © Estate of Norman Lewis, Michael Rosenfeld Gallery

The exhibition opens with a terrific room filled with works of the Spiral Group, a collection of 15 New York artists who studied, worked and showed together in the early 1960s. Many of them determined to make works using only black and white tones, and the works’ graphic energy is invigorating.

Montages by Romare Bearden are justly famous for their orchestrated dissonance in describing black experience. They are a kind of visual bebop he composed by enlarging collaged image fragments cut from magazines.

Norman Lewis, known primarily as an abstract artist, painted “America the Beautiful” in 1960. One might almost mistake it for a poetic Abstract Expressionist work, were it not for forms that emerge suggesting flame, crosses and robed personages topped by peaked hoods with rough-cut eye holes.

Roy DeCarava, “Mississippi Freedom Marcher, Washington, DC” (1963)
Photo: © Estate of Roy DeCarava

A room of photographs highlights the work of Roy DeCarava and what was called the Kamoinge Workshop, which he led. One hallmark of his style, adopted by others, was a dark print that favored the tones of black skin and forced the viewer to look deeply into the image.

Two works by Ming Smith, the first black female photographer to have work enter the Museum of Modern Art collection, command both sides of the central gallery wall.

Important works by artists like David Hammons, Alma Thomas, Martin Puryear, Jack Whitten, Faith Ringgold and many others whose art has by now set record prices abound in the exhibition. What we have not always had, however, is the context provided by “Soul of a Nation.”

Faith Ringgold, “American People Series #18, The Flag Is Bleeding” (1967)
Photo: © 2019 Faith Ringgold / Artists Rights Society, ACA Galleries, New York

The Los Angeles doyen Betye Saar could sustain her own major exhibition, as could Melvin Edwards, sculptor of vaguely threatening steel abstractions that suggest masks, or shackles, depending on your point of view. Near a room devoted to art produced from the ashes of the Watts Rebellion of 1965, however, their works acquire new resonance with recent history.

The fame of Sam Gilliam derives in part from his signature move of draping unstretched, stained and painted canvases from several points. They become grand and colorful parodies of the drapes and folds of fabric so lovingly detailed in myriad Old Master paintings.

Sam Gilliam's "Carousel Change" (1970) is a huge canvas, nearly 24 feet in width, draped from the ceiling in the de Young installation.
Photo: Gary Sexton, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

With its six head-sized knots, hung on cords from a gallery ceiling, however, in close proximity to Edwards' monumental "Curtain …" (1969) of barbed wire and chain, a more sinister reference in Gilliam's "Carousel Change" (1970) is impossible to ignore.

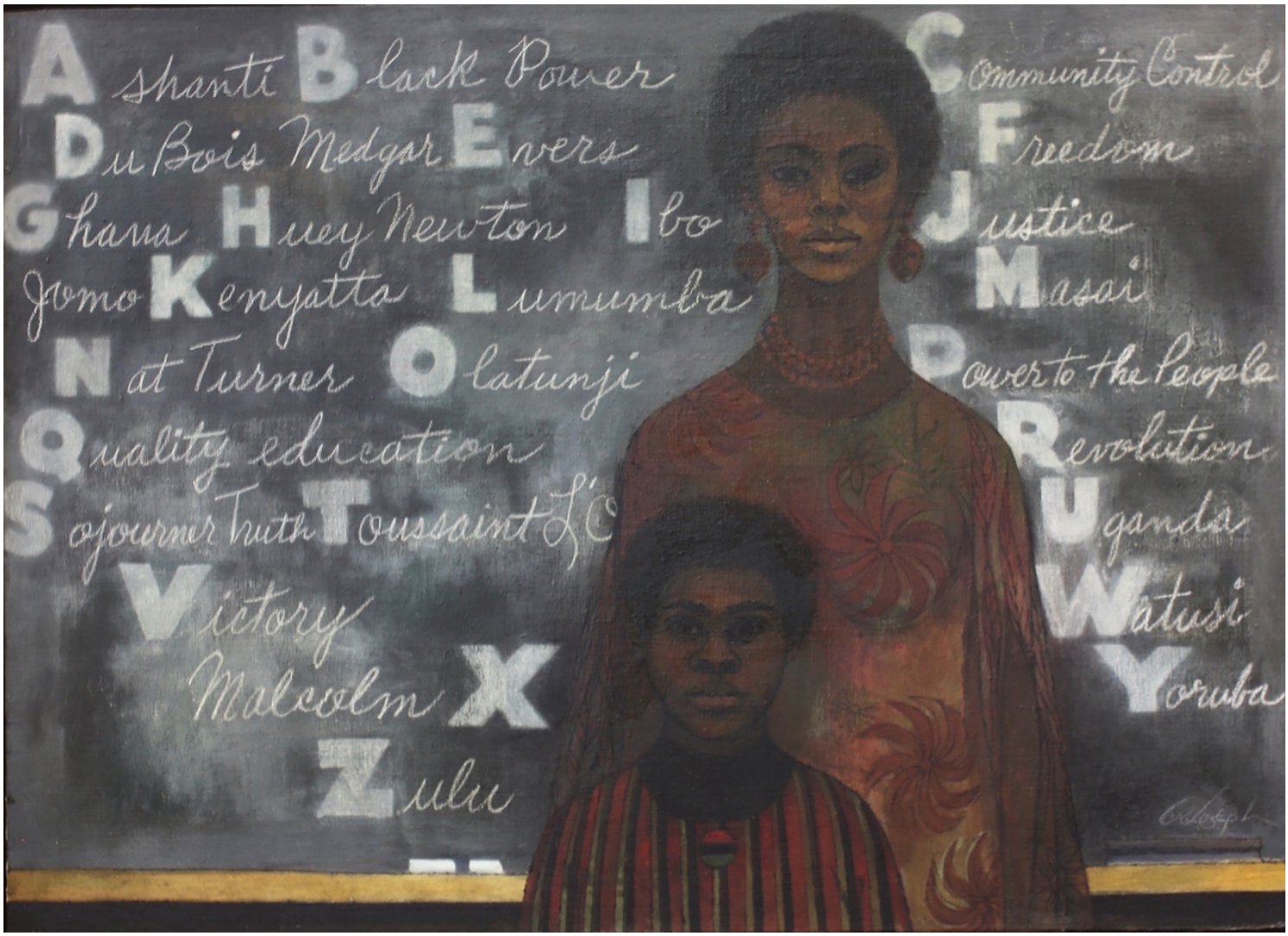
"Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Saturday, Nov. 9-March 15. $10-$25. Tickets for free admission on four Saturdays, including an opening-day "block party," can be reserved at **https://deyoung.famsf.org/free-reduced-admission**. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. 415-750-3600. **http://deyoung.famsf.org**

Phillip Lindsay Mason, “The Hero” (circa 1979)

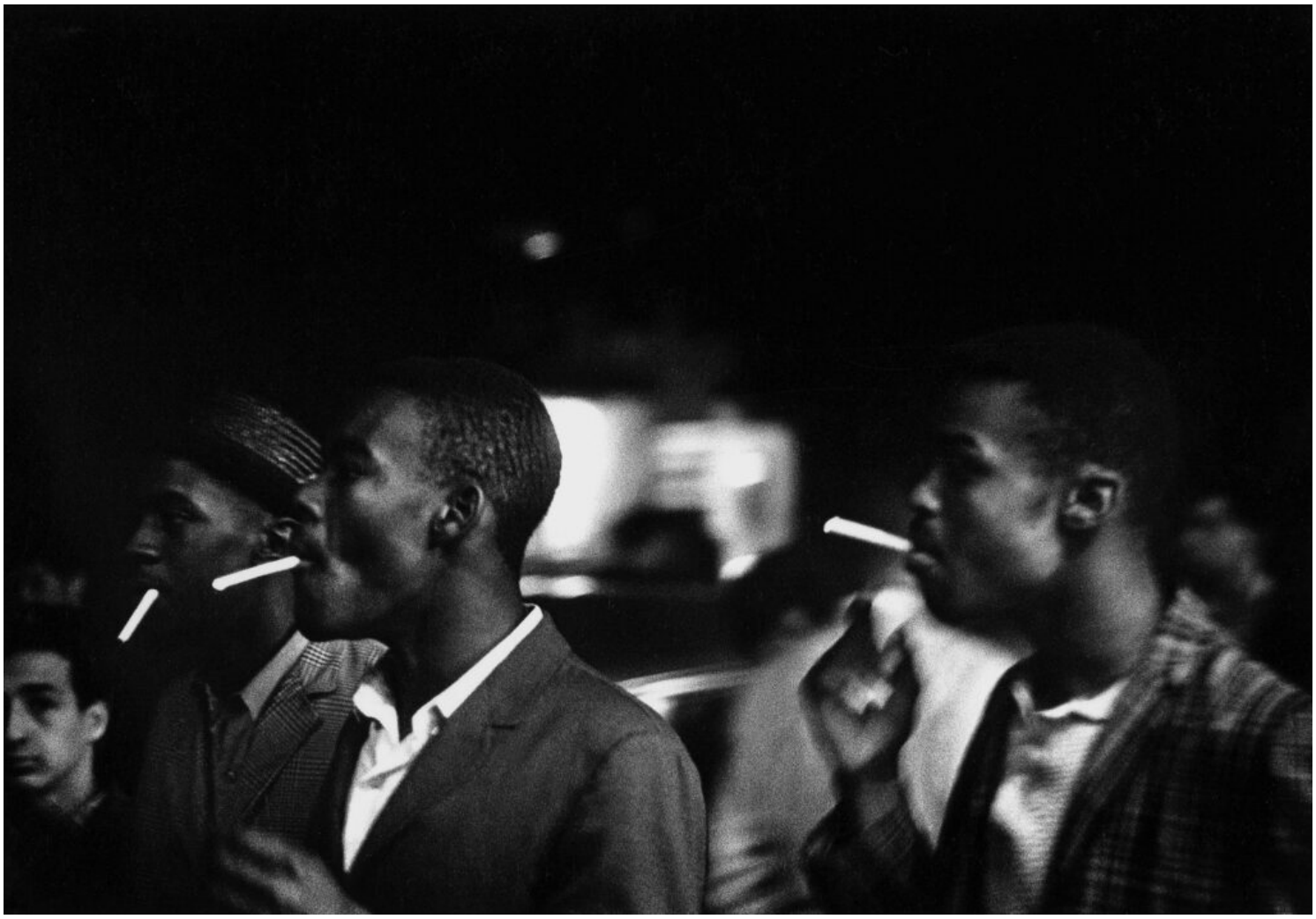
Photo: Randy Dodson, Mills College Art Museum

Archibald Motley, “The First One Hundred Years: He Amongst You Who Is Without Sin Shall Cast the First Stone …” (circa 1963-1972)
Photo: © Valerie Gerrard Browne, Chicago History Museum / Bridgeman Images

Herb Robinson, “Brother and Sister” (1973)
Photo: © Herb Robinson



Cliff Joseph, "Blackboard" (1969)
Photo: Aaron Galleries, Glenview, IL



Al Fennar, “Rhythmic Cigarettes, Greenwich Village, New York” (1964)
Photo: © Estate of Albert R. Fennar