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ARTS 3700

December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2022

Exhibition Proposal *Black Abstraction: African American Abstraction Artists During the Civil Rights Era*

Museums are cultural institutions that house and showcase artifacts of cultural, historical, scientific, and artistic value. Art museums are important cultural centers for surrounding communities. People of all ages are welcomed which creates a diverse gathering of people from different cultures, religions, and racial backgrounds. Although museums are open to all people, recent years have shown a decrease in young adults aged 16 to 25 visiting museums<sup>1</sup>. During the global pandemic, the mindset of young adults was redirected with Gen Z experiencing one of the first major movements in their lifetime. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement was organized to fight racial discrimination in the black community in the United States. Several incidents of police brutality led to the breakout of protests and riots in the streets of major cities. The BLM movement is like the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s. African Americans experience racial discrimination and violence as they fought for lawful equal rights. The reappearance of discrimination and violence against minority groups has shifted Gen Z's mindset towards social change. In recent years, there has been an intense focus on social change to achieve equality for everyone. Social change starts with talking. By creating a comfortable space

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<sup>1</sup> Study conducted by the *American Academy of Arts and Science* showed a 17% decline in young American attendance from 1982 to 2012.

of gathering surrounded by cultural and historical artifacts, Gen Z and future generations can foster conversations about creating a better future.

The proposed exhibition *Black Abstraction: African American Abstraction Artists During the Civil Rights Era* showcases artwork created by African American abstractionists during the Civil Rights Movement within a comfortable gathering space. The Civil Rights Movement was African Americans' fight for lawful equal rights during the mid-20th century. Throughout the United States, people both in and outside the black community fought for equal rights across the board. During the movement, African American artists used their artwork as activism to fight racial discrimination. Visual artists would use their medium to illustrate racial images commonly faced in the black community that was unknown to those outside the community. While African American artists used a variety of art styles as a form of activism, African American abstractionist artists were often put down because they did not center their subject matter around images of the black figure. Abstractionist artists during the Civil Right Movement argued their art was "black art" because it was a black artist making it.

The exhibition showcases African American abstraction artists because artists of movement can closely relate to Generation Z<sup>2</sup>. The year 2020 was a memorable year for Gen Z because they experienced their first major movement during a global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down the world and forced people to turn to technology to connect with people. Although people turned to social media for fun, it was used to expose the truth of racial injustice in the United States. Outraged by the unfair treatment, Gen Z of all racial backgrounds took to the street to protest and fight for equality; however, the generation was not taken seriously

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<sup>2</sup> Generation Z (Gen Z) refers to people born between 1997 and 2012.

because people in power viewed them as young and unknowledgeable. Like the young generation, African American abstract artists were not considered serious artists because their art was not figurative. The exhibition is intended to draw connections between the two groups to foster conversations on racial injustice in the United States. To spark this conversation, the exhibition will partner with Opens Minds. Open Minds is a company that rents out prefabricated exhibition furniture. The furniture's intended purpose is to create comfortable gathering spaces within art museums. For the proposed exhibition, Open Minds will provide three types of fabricated units: portable walls, bean bag chairs, and coffee tables.

### **The Space**

*Black Abstraction* is proposed to be housed in the High Museum of Art in Atlanta in their special exhibition space. The High Museum is an ideal location for *Black Abstraction* because the museum is in the heart of a youthful population. The High Museum is located within a 30-minute drive of several college campuses such as Georgia Tech, Georgia State, Clark University, and Spelman College. In addition, Atlanta has a youthful working population with a lot of work, play, live areas. The combination of diverse college campuses and a young adult population makes for the ideal target audience for the exhibition. Located on the second floor of the building, the special exhibition gallery spans three interconnected rooms. The exhibition rooms are located right off the ramp which pulls viewers into the area. Once inside the room, viewers feel as if they are in a different building with floor-to-ceiling walls blocking views off to the rest of the museum. Placing the proposed exhibition in the special exhibition room will allow visitors the choice to enjoy a traditional museum viewing or partake in the redesigned museum experience. By integrating an Open Minds exhibition space into the traditional museum setting, visitors across age demographics will be encouraged to interact with the exhibition and each

other. The proposed exhibition's goal is to create comfortable gathering spaces surrounded by artistic artifacts to prompt much-needed conversation in communities.

Walking into the space, visitors are greeted with a solid red wall with the title of the exhibition, *Black Abstraction: African American Abstraction Artists During the Civil Rights Era* along with the background and purpose of the exhibition as explained earlier in the essay. To the right of the words, Alma Thomas's artwork, *Light Blue Nursey*, is hung at eye level. I decided to use Thomas's work as the introductory piece for personal reasons. Thomas was the first African American abstract artist I discovered that launched my interest in abstract art. Using Thomas's work functions as both a personal connection with the exhibition as well as a quick introduction to African American abstraction. Before the visitors can fully enter a space, a warning sign will be placed at the entrance. The sign reads:

*You are now entering an Open Minds space. Please note that seating furniture can and is encouraged to be moved around. Seating can be configured to create spaces for a group gathering or semi-private areas for self-reflection. The choice is yours. Please note, seating is not to be placed in the yellow walking zones. We pride ourselves on creating inclusive areas so walkways must be clear for those who need them. Thank you and enjoy your time in the Open Minds space.*

A yellow walkway with footsteps is available as a guided path for visitors. The path is marked yellow to clearly communicate where furniture should not be placed. Since furniture is encouraged to be moved around, it is important to create an unobstructed walkway for those who wish to use it.

### **The Spiral Group: a movement within the Movement**

Stepping into the first room, visitors are greeted with large font phrases and questions scattered and collaged on the wall. Questions on the wall include “What is art?”, “Is black experienced rooted in struggles faced or obstacles overcome?” and “Does the depiction of the black figure in art progress or hinder the stereotype of African Americans?” to name a few. Amid the word collage, the question “Is African American Art classified by the illustration of black struggle in the United States; or is it simply the act of African Americans making art?” stands out with the largest font. The wall of words and phrases acts as a tour guide for visitors as they walk through the room by invoking them to think critically. Artworks from the Spiral Group is placed in traditional gallery style as they line the long walls. The Spiral Group was a New York-based African American artist group between the years 1963 and 1965. The group was composed of 15 artists who worked in a variety of art forms and styles; however, the artist had a unique interest in modern abstraction and its purpose in the black experience<sup>3</sup>. The group was known for sparking controversial conversations in the United States with the point of an artist using the practice of radial abstract as a form of “black art.” While the group only lasted two years, it made an impact in the case of “What is African American Art? Is it only the depiction of black struggle in the United States; or is it the act of African Americans making art?”

From the left to the right, the artwork is ordered to show the progression from subjective figurative art to traditional abstract artwork. Works such as *Seated Figure and Nude* and *Godzilla* by Emma Amos use the depiction of the black figure to show the black experience. While the pieces use subjective figures, they retain their own form of abstraction in background elements which showcases the group’s intense interest in abstraction. As visitors walk along the directed path, artworks by Romare Bearden from the *Conjur Woman* series show

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<sup>3</sup> Information from *Spiral: Perspective on an African American Art-Collective* exhibition

the progression into abstraction with the technique of collage. The last piece viewers see before leaving the first room is the piece *Bonfire* by Norman Lewis to show the progression into complete abstraction. Lewis is chosen as the last artist to be shown because it leads into the second room focused on Lewis as an artist, educator, and leader.

### **Rewriting of Social Injustice in the United States**

The second room is based on Norman Lewis, an African American Artist, and his dedication to his art and teaching during the 20th century. Lewis dedicated much of his life to learning about art and art history and later educating the youth of the Harlem community. Three years after graduating high school, Lewis mentored under Augusta Savage, a well-known African American sculptor, in her studio based out of Harlem, New York. Working with Savage provided Lewis with connections in the art world which led to him joining the 306 Group, a salon of artists and writers, and later the Harlem Artist Guild; however, in 1936, Lewis shifted his focus to teaching where he taught at public schools and the Harlem Community Arts Center. Alongside teaching in the 1930s, Lewis created art that depicted the hardships and reality African Americans faced with the use of the black figure. Lewis continued to use the black figure until he began experimenting with abstraction in the 1940s. While Lewis continued to pursue his dream of being an artist, he continued to teach the youth of the Harlem resistance<sup>4</sup>. The second room uses Lewis's transformation into abstraction as a looking glass into the events happening around the era. The paintings, framed in black, are surrounded by posters and magazines from the 1950s and 60s. Although the Civil Rights Movement officially began in the 1960s, the fight for equality has been on the incline since the 1950s. While African Americans

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<sup>4</sup> Information gathered from article "Norman Lewis" from *Encyclopedia Britannica*

faced constant injustice and racial discrimination, white American media continued with normal life. The purpose of this exhibition room is to show the struggle of African Americans being swept under the rug.

Walking into the adjacent room, visitors are greeted with a replicate of Savage's work *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, to pay homage to Lewis's mentor. As visitors continue into the room, artwork by Norman Lewis is hung in the traditional gallery style surrounded by magazines and posters. The first painting visitors see in the room is Lewis's work *Harlem Turns White* from 1955. Around the painting, a poster from the opening of Disneyland along with a black and white image of Elvis Presley. Below the painting label, the infamous black and white image of a brutally beaten Emmet Till is hung. While people were celebrating the opening of Disneyland and the rise of Rock and roll, Black Americans feared for their children's life. The second room is intended to bring visitors' attention to the media's redirection away from social injustice.

### **Conversation Pits**

The final room of the special exhibition space is dedicated to creating small conversational pits within the larger room. Portable Walls are placed around the room creating smaller gathering sections. Each section will house a single piece of artwork along with reflection phrases or questions about the artwork or exhibition. Artworks in the room will be from African American abstract artists from the 20th century. Although the Civil Rights Movement dates to the 1960s, racial discrimination dates to the early 1700s. African American artists have used racial struggles as a subject matter in their art throughout history, so it is important to showcase this in the exhibition. While all sections will house a piece of artwork, the contents of the room will vary. Some rooms will only have the artwork while other rooms will house beanbag chairs and a small coffee table. The varying sections allow visitors to decide how they want to experience their

museum visit. The final room intends to provoke critical thinking and conversation among visitors in judgment-free spaces. The addition of portable walls slices the large room into a semi-private section for the comfort of visitors.

Entering the final room, visitors see a maze-like arrangement of semi-solid walls. Upon closer inspection, visitors see openings between the walls that reveal small spaces occupied by artwork, chairs, and tables. Straying from the walking path visitors can walk into one of the many rooms. Walking into the first section, the painting *Freedom Now* by Reginald Gammon stands by itself in the section. Under the painting, a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. reads

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly<sup>5</sup>.”

Gammon depicts a peaceful protest which was common during the Civil Rights movement. Black and White Americans united to protest the unfair, injustice treatment of African Americans. Pairing the painting with the quote by Dr. King draws a connection between the civil rights movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement. People from varying backgrounds joined forces to fight police brutality against minority groups. Across the walking path, another room houses the work *Top of the Line (Steel)* by Thornton Dial Sr. along with two bean bag chairs and a coffee table. The artwork is hung slightly above eye level with two photography pictures hung under it. Between the images lies two words: “Race Riots”. This section sparks conversation about the occurrence of race riots in America due to police brutality against black males. Dial’s artwork visually depicts the chaos and violence in the streets of Los Angeles. The Los Angeles race riots of 1992 happened after police brutality beat up an unarmed

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted from Dr. Martin Luther King letter from the Birmingham Jail, 1963



black motorist, Rodney King<sup>6</sup>. Almost two decades later, riots broke out in the streets of Minneapolis after George Floyd was murdered by two police officers<sup>7</sup>. Drawing comparisons between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Lives Matter Movement bridges the gap between generations. The purpose of the final room is to provoke critical thinking and conversation that can be taken out into the world.

In conclusion, *Black Abstraction* provokes conversation amongst visitors by pairing open-ended questions with visual aids. Even though artist did not use the black figure as their main subject, African American abstract artist focused their work on the black experience. The first two rooms are focused on artists' illustration of the black experience. Abstract artists argue the notion of African American art is not solely based around the depiction of the black figure but rather the experience artist have as African Americans. Lastly, the final room is designed to spark conversions about exhibition and its prevalence today. Breaking the room into smaller sections makes for comfortable conversation pits where visitors can talk judgement free. Using the artwork to visually portray racial injustice drawings connections for cross-generational conversations which is the start for true social change.

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<sup>6</sup> Found on Smithsonian American Art Museum online gallery of the *African American Art: Harlem Renaissance, Civil Rights Era, and Beyond* exhibition.

<sup>7</sup> Found in New York Times Magazine article "How George Floyd Was Killed in Police Custody"

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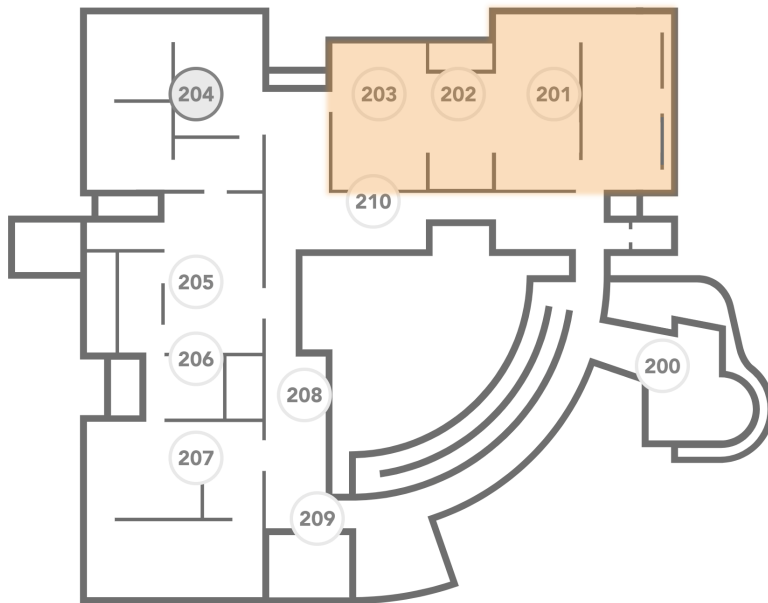
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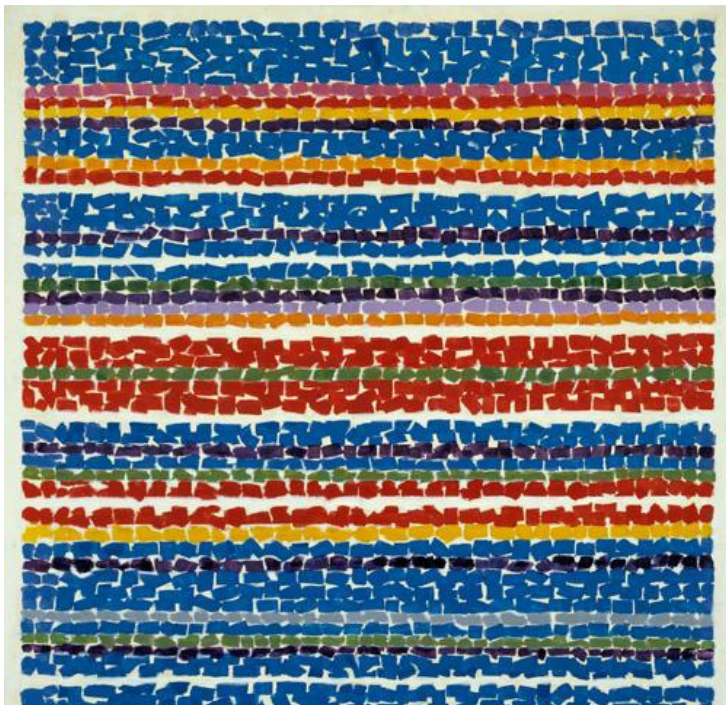
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## The Space



*Highlighted in Orange* the Special Exhibition Rooms in the High Museum of Art



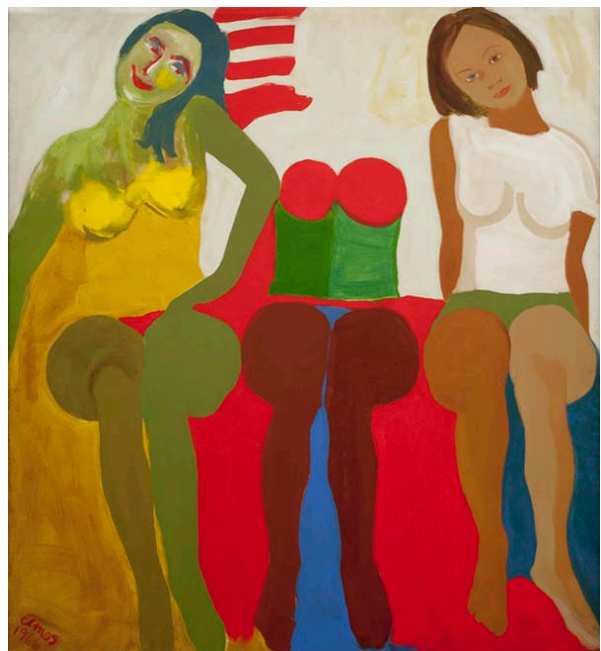
Alma Thomas, *Light Blue Nursey*, 1968, acrylic on canvas

## The Spiral Group: a movement within the Movement

The Spiral Group was a New York based African American artist group between the years 1963 and 1965. The group was composed of 15 artists who worked in a variety of art forms and styles; however, the artist had a unique interest with modern abstraction and its purpose in the black experience. The group was known for sparking controversial conversation in the United States with the point of artist using the practice of radial abstract as a form of “black art.” While the group only lasted two years, it made an impact in the case of “What is African American Art? Is it only the depiction of black struggle in the United States; or it the act of African Americans making art?”



Emma Amos, *Seated Figure and Nude*, 1966, oil on canvas



Emma Amos, *Godzilla*, 1966, oil on canvas



Romare Bearden, *Conjur Woman*, 1964, Cut-and-pasted printed paper and gouache on board

Romare Bearden is known for his collage series centered around the folklore of the Conjure Women. In African American culture, the conjure woman seen as a healer who worked across forms of healing and spiritual practices. Bearden took the folklore as influence for his series. Bearden collage a variety if mediums ranging from magazines to colored paper to make a variety of figures.



Norman Lewis, *Bonfire*, 1962, oil on canvas

Norman Lewis is known for his open-ended abstract paintings depicting scenes of racial America. In his painting *Bonfire*, Lewis paints a colorful scene of people gathering around the bonfire. While the lively colors could represent a people celebrating around a fire, it could also mean the meeting of Klux Ku Klan.



## Rewriting of Social Injustice in the United States

Although the Civil Rights Movement officially began in the 1960s, the fight for equality has been on the incline since the 1950s. While African Americans faced constant injustice and racial discrimination, white American media continued with normal life. Mainstream media platforms would report the positives of American life. While white Americans were celebrating Hollywood and the advancements of American life, black Americans lived in constant fear. This room intends to show the rewriting of social injustice in the United States by displaying artwork from the Civil Rights eras versus media reported on mainstream platforms.



This statue replicates Augusta Savage's work *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, which pays homage to Lewis's mentor. Lewis mentored under Savage in her Harlem Studio from 1933 until 1935.

Augusta Savage, *Lift Every Voice, and Sing*, 1939, Bonded Bronze



In the painting, Lewis paints a field of white over a golden brown. The peak-a-boo of the color along with the name hints two possible meanings: Harlem, New York a snowfall in the winter; or the racial fear black Americans faced in Harlem before the Civil Rights Movement.

Norman Lewis, *Harlem Turns White*, 1955, oil on canvas



Poster for the opening of Disneyland in Anaheim, California in 1955

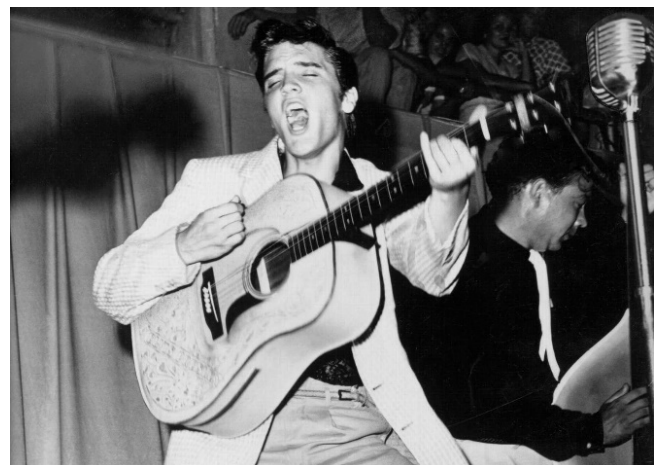


Image of Elvis Presley whose fame on the incline with rock n roll in 1955

## Conversational Pits

Before exiting the exhibition, investigate one of the many rooms. Each room houses a piece of artwork and a reflection question. While all sections will house a piece of artwork, the contents of the room will vary. Some rooms will only have the artwork while other rooms will house bean bag chairs and a small coffee table. Take a moment to think about the question and either self-reflect or talk with others. This final room intends to provoke critical thinking and conversation in a judgment free space. The portable walls slice large room into smaller semi-private sections.



Reginald Gammon, *Freedom Now*, 1963, acrylic on board



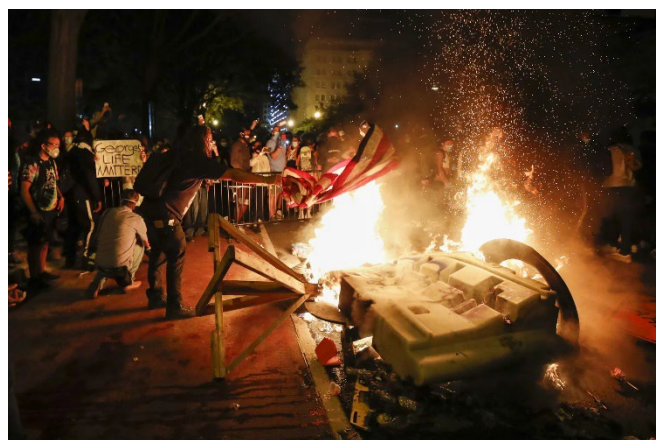


In the painting, *Top of the Line (Steel)*, artist, Thornton Dial Sr. artwork visually depicts the chaos and violence in the streets of Los Angeles. The Los Angeles race riots of 1992 happened after police brutality beat up an unarmed black motorist, Rodney King. Almost two decades later, riot broke out in the streets of Minneapolis after George Floyd was murdered by two police officers

Thornton Dial, Sr., *Top of the Line (Steel)*, 1992, mixed media: enamel, unbraided canvas roping and metal on plywood



*Demonstrators protest the verdict in the Rodney King beating case in front of the Los Angeles Police Department headquarters, 1992*



*Demonstrators start a fire on Sunday near the White House as they protest the death of George Floyd, 2020*