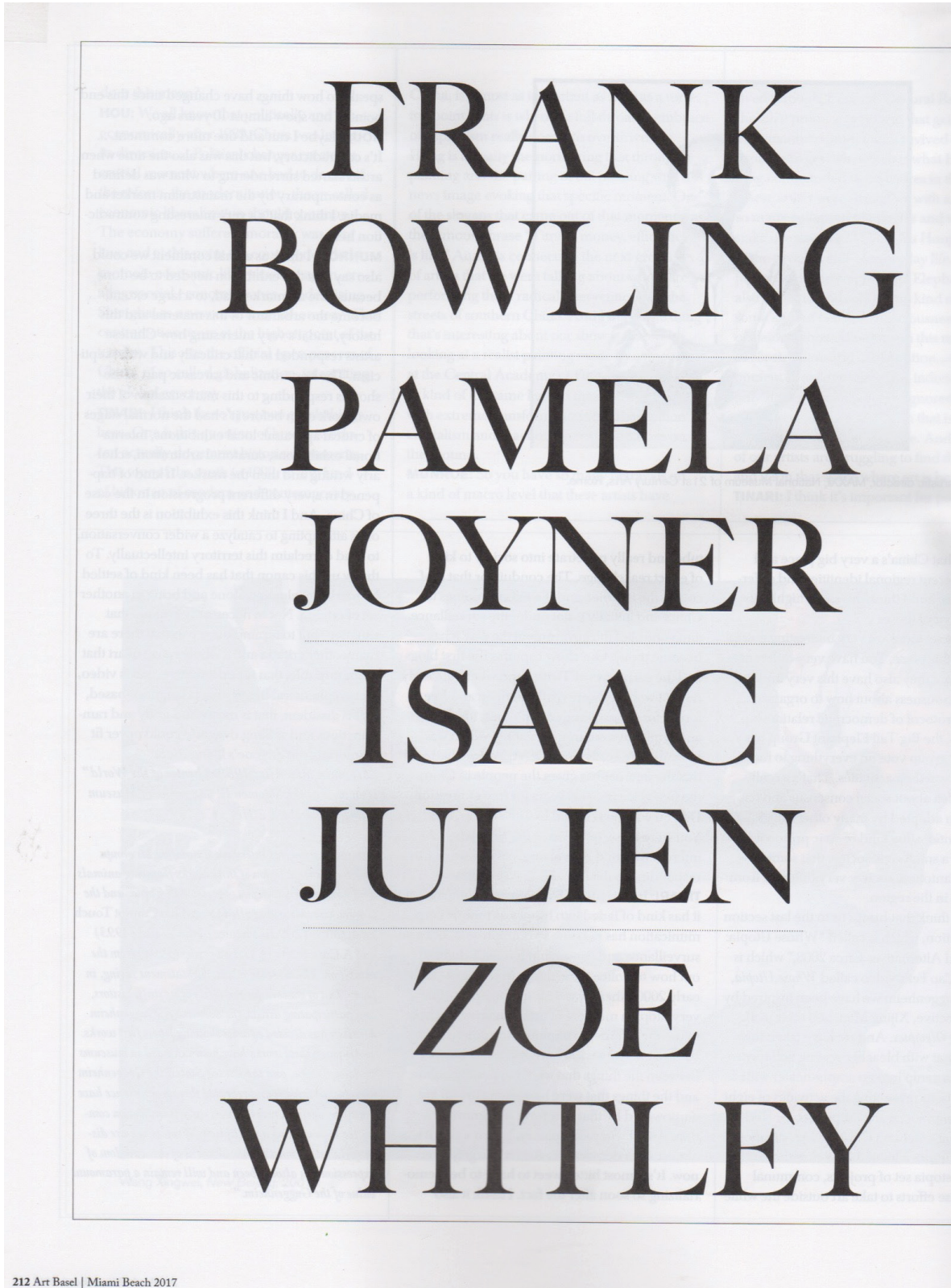
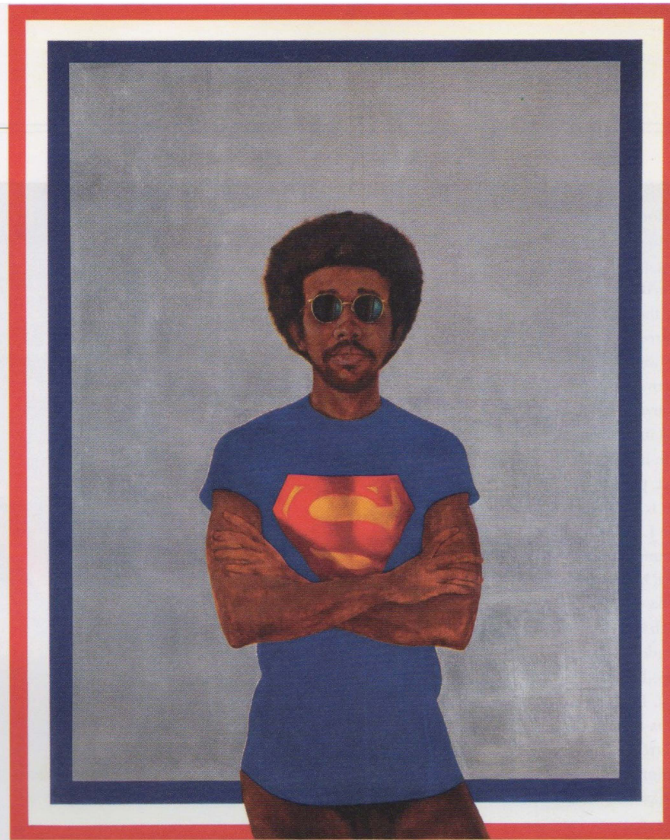


FRANK BOWLING

In conversation: Frank Bowling, Pamela Joyner, Isaac Julien, Zoe Whitley and Sarah Thornton, Art Basel Miami Beach, December 2017, p. 212 - 217



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*On the heels of several compelling exhibitions exploring an important and often forgotten period in art history—the African diaspora—sociologist and author Sarah Thornton sits down with four art-world luminaries to discuss the agony of racial struggle and shining a light on the artists who have depicted the battle for civil rights.*

&  
SARAH  
THORNTON

IN AN INCREASINGLY globalized art world, we gathered two artists, a curator and a collector—all of African descent—to discuss the politics of grouping, classifying and exhibiting work by artists with roots in Africa. Frank Bowling is an *éminence grise* of the art world, known for his abstract expressionist or lyrical abstract paintings; his work was included in Tate Modern's celebrated show "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power" (he also recently had a major solo exhibit in Munich at Haus der Kunst). A prolific writer, Bowling was a key voice in debates about art, politics and race in the 1970s. Pamela Joyner is a trustee of the Art Institute of Chicago, the J. Paul Getty Trust, and the Tate Americas Foundation. She and her husband, Fred Giuffrida, have assembled a collection of abstract works by African-American and other artists, which is now touring the country, starting at the Ogden Museum of Southern Art in New Orleans. Isaac Julien is an award-winning British artist. Best known for his films *Looking for Langston* (1989), *Ten Thousand Waves* (2010) and *Playtime* (2013), he explores issues of globalization, race and sexual identity. He currently has three film installations at the Fort Mason Center for Arts & Culture in San Francisco. Zoe Whitley co-curated (with Mark Godfrey) "Soul of a Nation" at Tate Modern, which in 2018 travels to Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art and the Brooklyn Museum. After 10 years of curating at London's Victoria & Albert Museum, in 2013 Whitley joined the Tate, where she is curator, international art.

**THORNTON:** Can you identify a cluster of artistic themes or materials that characterize art from the African diaspora? Is there still such a thing as a "black aesthetic"?

**BOWLING:** The term "African diaspora" is new to me. It suggests wandering around the world like the Jewish diaspora. I was born in British Guiana in 1934, a hundred years after the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Throughout the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries, you have this movement that's now being called diaspora, which is informed by brutality. I'm very confused and discombobulated by the fact that there is renewed disturbance, aggression and desperate behavior... this endless stiff competition between human beings.... With regard to art, my question right away is: Is a black aesthetic something only black people can do? It's a question I've been



Previous page: Barkley L. Hendricks, *Icon for My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People—Bobby Seale)*, 1969, shown as part of the exhibition "Soul of a Nation," formerly at Tate Modern and opening at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in February. Above: Frank Bowling, *Middle Passage*, 1970.

asking ever since I moved to New York and throughout my life in London.

**JOYNER:** A not insignificant part of how I view these issues has to do with Frank's writings from the 1970s. Can Italian Baroque carving only be done by Italians? Can 18th-century French furniture only be made by French people? I don't buy this notion of an easily definable, all-encompassing black art. I believe that all art—minimalism, cubism or whatever—is rooted in a time and a place, and sometimes it's executed by a narrow group of people. If the genre stands the test of time, however, it's usually executed by a broader group of people. The process of creating enduring human culture is iterative and interactive and, ultimately, global. In our collection, for example, most of the makers (although not all) happen to be identified by the world as blacks, but most of the work would not be defined by the art world as having a black aesthetic.

**WHITLEY:** There once was something called,

literally, a "black aesthetic." In the 1960s, writers such as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal put forward the idea that a black aesthetic should give visual expression to the Black Power movement. To resist dominant Western versions of erudition, talent and beauty and to develop an aesthetic that unashamedly looked within was radically important. But did everyone sign up to it? No, because it replaced one set of cultural constraints with another. It didn't necessarily make room for everything or everyone. And Frank was one of the artists who fearlessly and vocally pushed back, arguing that there was a way to think about black artists' work that was formally rigorous, that involved a consideration of line and color, etc. Many black artists found themselves between a rock and a hard place. They weren't accepted or taken seriously by the white art-critical elite, and at the same time they faced criticism from a section of the black arts community.

**THORNTON:** So, the "black aesthetic" of the



Above: Isaac Julien, *Pas de Deux No.2 (Looking for Langston Vintage Series)*, 1989/2016.

'60s generally promoted art that was representational and overtly political. Hence the need for exhibitions of abstract art by African-American artists of the period, such as the touring Joyner/Giuffrida Collection.

**JOYNER:** What we're seeking to do with our collection is fill in the gap. Artists like Frank Bowling, Sam Gilliam and Jack Whitten were, for a whole host of reasons, underappreciated early in their careers, in part related to the debate around this issue. What we're arguing is that this work has a place in the full arc of the canon. This work is important, transformational, highest caliber, beautiful. It refers to its predecessors, black, white and other.

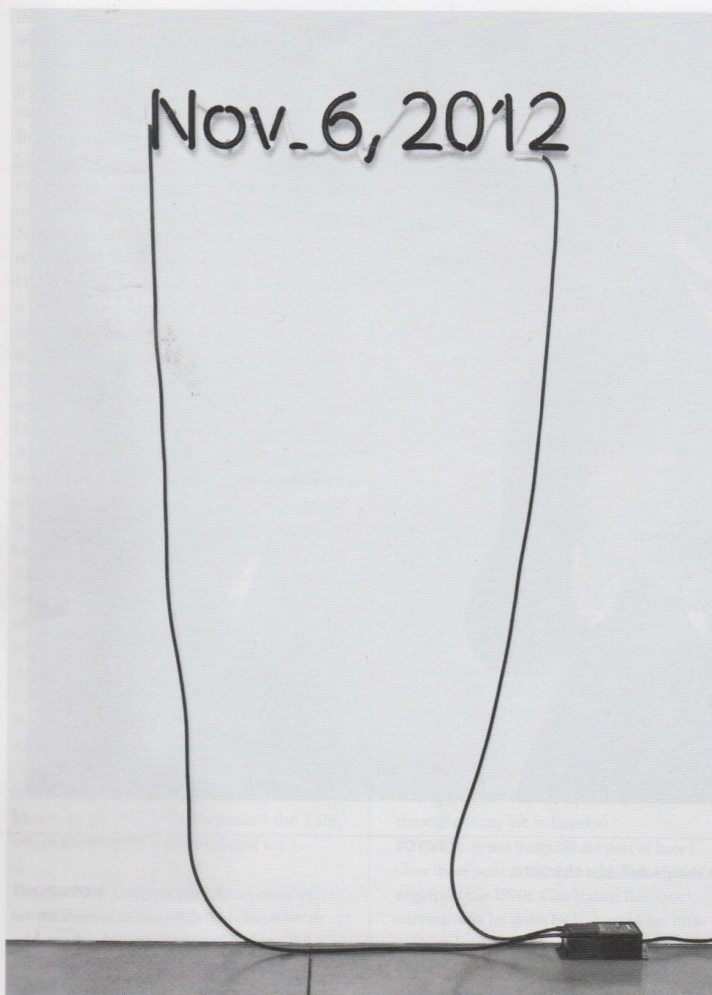
Frank and Isaac are interesting in this regard for us because neither of them are afraid of the beautiful.

**BOWLING:** Types of people—race, color, religious disposition—fall into insignificance in the face of awesome beauty, like that found in Indian miniatures.

**THORNTON:** In contemporary art right now, are there waves of political correctness? Can we bring this debate up to date?

**JULIEN:** Not in the same way. I was in Cape Town for the opening of MOCAA [the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, which collects and exhibits 21st-century art from Africa and its diaspora]. I would say there is

a kind of cultural explosion taking place. It's connected to the longevity and recognition of many artists who've been working over the decades. You can see the debates around abstraction, politics and aesthetics, but there's a myriad of different forms. Frank's writings framed a set of artistic practices; there's a kind of rejoinder to that now. The debates are now so wide and so exhilarating. There's a kind of possibility, and impossibility, to frame things—in relationship to modernism and the belated recognition of black abstraction. The many letters exchanged between Clement Greenberg and Frank Bowling are a case in point. ▶



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— PAMELA JOYNER

Miami Beach 2017

**WHITLEY:** Clement Greenberg spent time with Frank. There was a meaningful connection, and Greenberg saw merit in Frank’s work.

**JULIEN:** But he didn’t really write about his work, did he?

**WHITLEY:** No, Greenberg didn’t really, which speaks directly to institutional structures of racism and exclusion—the fact that one can, in private, express support and even enthusiasm for an artist’s work but, even from a position of power, not extend that to a significant public endorsement.

**THORNTON:** That is a profound observation. Unfortunately, that is often the way the art world works.

**JULIEN:** This reminds me of the brutality that Frank evoked in relationship to questions of diaspora. I think there’s a lyrical riposte or meditative performance to that brutality in Frank’s paintings. There’s a remarkable Creolization of modernism—or rather, what I would call a diasporic modernism—in those works in line with Ishmael Reed’s fantastic novel *Mumbo, Jumbo* or Derek Walcott’s epic poems. The internal conversation produces a certain aesthetic charge in the work.

**THORNTON:** In 2017, what are the strengths and weaknesses of exhibitions focused on works by artists of African descent? Are they perceived differently in Europe and the U.S.?

**JOYNER:** In the 1960s, ’70s, and up until very recently, institutions struggled with how to treat artists of color. One inclination was to just group everybody together based on the color of their skin. Now, Frank’s work has nothing to do with David Hammons’s work. It took the institutional community a long time to treat this work the way they’ve treated art in the Western canon. I’m very sensitive to this because, in building our exhibition, it was important to me for it not to be just another black group show. Our strategy is to present monologues and dialogues by artists that have a bigger statement to make. We have built a room around Sam Gilliam, for instance, and another one in which the materiality of Shinique Smith’s work is in conversation with Kevin Beasley’s.

“Soul of a Nation,” Zoe and Mark Godfrey’s thematic group show at Tate Modern, is best practices. It situates itself in a point in time; it has a point of view; it exposes the viewer to an important history in a detailed and comprehensive way. What we need going forward are more shows that are either academic and

thematically focused or rigorously monographic. Not an unaffiliated amalgam of a show that binds artists together based on race. That's a lousy way to view art.

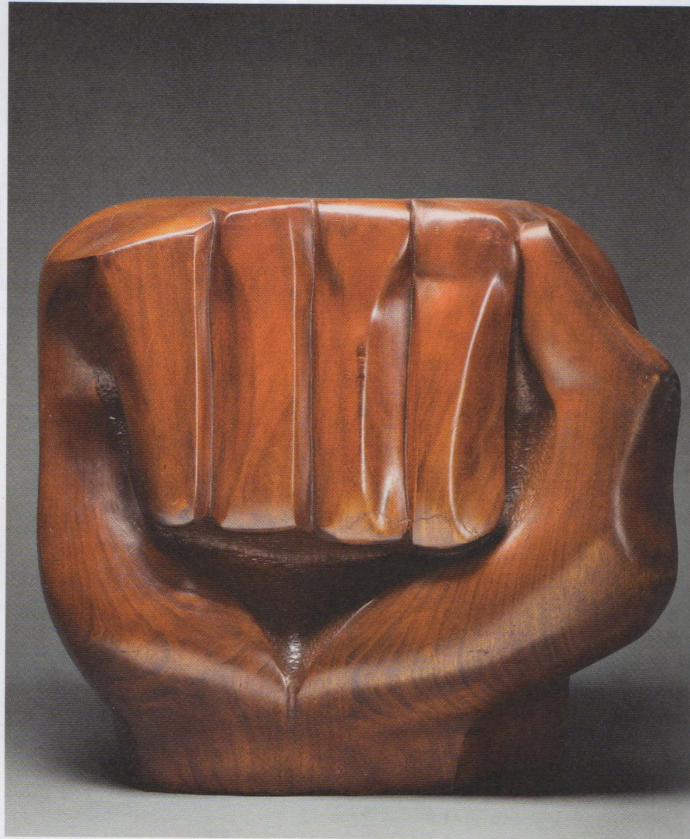
**WHITLEY:** I'm a real proponent of the group exhibition and the potential for a chorus of voices. That's really what "Soul of a Nation" is. For me, the only weakness comes when institutions view the group exhibition as a one-and-done endeavor. For example, "The Color Line" at Musée du Quai Branly in Paris looked at a similar moment in American history, but through the lens of segregation. At their closing colloquium, the curators said that they'd made the exhibition with the intention that it would never have to be done again. They were preempting the criticism that black artists are not given their due individuality. But I'm still a proponent of these types of group shows, as long as they aren't in a vacuum. The Brooklyn Museum just closed a phenomenal exhibition called "We Wanted a Revolution," but they've still agreed to take "Soul of a Nation." If we were in the 1980s or even the '90s, many institutions would say, "Well, we've done that, so we won't revisit it."

The Tate has one permanent collection that doesn't subdivide into collections of African art or North American art, even though we curators often have our respective regional specializations. In one part of the museum, you can see focused individual displays of Carrie Mae Weems and Lorna Simpson. In another called "The Disappearing Figure," which looks at postwar abstraction, you have Jackson Pollock, Germaine Richier, Norman Lewis and Ernest Mancoba, a preeminent South African modernist.

**JOYNER:** Every time I go to Tate Modern, I visit the "Disappearing Figure" room. That Norman Lewis painting [*Cathedral*, 1950] along with one by Jacob Lawrence were the first artworks by African-American artists ever installed in the U.S. Pavilion at the Venice Biennale. In 1956, they were hung alongside works by Pollock and de Kooning. At Tate, it now sits, as it should, with other prominent modernists working in the genre. Norman Lewis has been dead since 1979, and finally his work is positioned as it always should have been.

**THORNTON:** A good example of integration. Does it make any sense to talk about "segregated" and "integrated" exhibition practices?

**WHITLEY:** I don't think of museums like the



Above: Elizabeth Catlett, *Black Unity*, 1968, from the exhibition "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power." Opposite page: Glenn Ligon, *One Black Day*, 2012, from the Joyner/Giuffrida Collection.

Studio Museum in Harlem as "segregated." I prefer a term like the one that Susan Cahan uses in her book *Mounting Frustration*, where she talks about "culturally grounded" museums. They have a focus and a mission. Historically, most of the museums in the United States have had a white male mission.

**THORNTON:** So true! It's interesting that the Studio Museum is called the Studio Museum and not the Museum of Art from the African Diaspora or some such.

**JULIEN:** The Studio Museum has a laboratory aspect, and in the last several years it's really

expanded beyond the African American into the diaspora. In fact, 2017 was the year when there seems to have been a concerted effort by individuals and museums to wrestle with the globality of race and art. It's belated, but it is still astonishing. The debate has broken out into a certain international framework, where the whole notion of a black aesthetic becomes impossible, due to the great diversity of interventions. It's really breaking the mold in the way that we view art made by artists who are black today. It feels like a paradigm shift.

**JOYNER:** The shift, to me, is seismic. •