



Black Artists Make the Scene in Los Angeles

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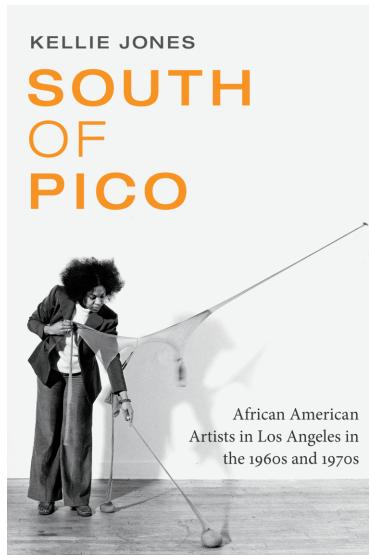
Kellie Jones. *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017. 416 pp., 32 color illus., 61 b/w. \$29.95 paper

In *South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s*, the scholar, curator, and MacArthur fellow Kellie Jones crafts a narrative of artistic determination, experimentation, and place making. Jones provides deeper comprehension of the individual talents, sacrifices, and hopes of black artists in Los Angeles in this twenty-year period. The story she tells connects with a familiar historical trajectory of African American struggles in the national context: the persistent search for a space of liberation, escape from racist constriction, and the possibility of creative freedom.

Jones presents exhaustive research and detailed information within a framework of migration and experimentation. She eloquently discusses the promises of migration as both real and ideal, physical and conceptual. “For African Americans, moving west represented a relocation toward the openness of possibilities, a place without the same sedimented authority. It was a move toward nonfixity and flexibility, the no-place of utopia. In this sense, the West became interchangeable with other locales that African Americans imagined offered prosperity and freedom from brutality and second-class citizenship. Was it a space in this country or a space in the world? Was it California, Africa, or Kansas?” (5). The desire for space to create and flourish was a search for safety, “whether actual sites in the world or positions in the global imagination” (7). Los Angeles was a place to explore the possibility for a California dream because “the West did not have the same histories of black enslavement as the South did, the African American westerner remained an ambivalent figure to a certain degree; she was not so much an individual as she was a representative of the masses, a notion that unleashed the white supremacist fear of a black planet” (8).

Jones points out that, as the saying goes, “south of Pico” is where black people live in Los Angeles. (The corollary to this phrase

is “north of Wilshire,” an area considered a white and wealthy constellation of neighborhoods). Although, as she admits, this colloquial phrase does not account for all blacks in Los Angeles, the phrase does account for a historical collection of “major black communities, from the core of Central Avenue to Watts and Compton south, to Leimert Park and Baldwin Hills to the west and north, areas where the more affluent were able to move



with the fall of restrictive covenants” (15).

The artists whose contributions she details “all sought to create sites of a metaphysical home, places of the dream, well-springs of the creative, even when the notion of homeplace, like the real space of housing, was a significant arena of contention” (12). Her analysis is driven by questions such as: How do artists translate their experiences into form? “How do they transform what they find into what they would like it to be? How did they respond as artists to the social and spatial world as they found it? If the rise of the civil rights and black power movements reflected the changing nature of social and political activism, how did this affect artistic expression, inflecting not only the artists’ intellectual peregrinations, but also the material conditions of the artwork itself?” (15).

For most of the thirteen artists Jones primarily features in her analysis—Houston Conwill, Alonzo Davis, Dale Brockman Davis, Mel Edwards, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Suzanne Jackson, Samella Lewis,

Senga Nengudi, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, and Charles White, this search began with cross-country migration to the West Coast, but continued throughout Los Angeles in homes, garages, studios, streets, galleries, and museums. It was further developed through the establishment of networks of people and resources in private and public places throughout the city. Through the institutions they established and supported, these artists explored their individual artistic visions, and many simultaneously created an infrastructure for social change through the arts. The Watts Towers Art Center and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), two institutions with next to nothing in common, are both players in this story. However, Jones reveals that the can-do sensibility of the black middle class of Los Angeles established a group of professionals and enthusiasts who worked as curators, collectors, organizers, and hosts of exhibitions outside traditional art world systems that were exclusively available to mainstream (white) artists. This network supported black visual artists and made space for collaborators across artistic boundaries.

In four chapters with titles that each begin with words of action, Jones guides the reader through diverse artistic missions that disrupt a time/space continuum with constant reimaginings of the past, in the present, for the future. In chapter 1, “Emerge: Putting Southern California on the Art World Map,” Jones pinpoints an advantage of being located near the entertainment industry in Los Angeles: the particularly notable role of black Hollywood in the patronage and exhibition of art by black artists. The inclusion of art by black artists in television and film productions, such as the recent *Empire* and *Luke Cage*, is not new. Charles White was mentioned by name in the film *For Love of Ivy* (dir. Daniel Mann, 1968), which featured several of his artworks. On and off screen, White’s work was supported by black Hollywood actors such as Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier, who recognized the value it signaled in style and substance. These stars had interest and influence in the burgeoning black arts network, which included physicians, athletes, and educators who helped to spread the word about White, and soon his work was sold in home exhibitions, churches, and through the Ankrum Gallery in Los Angeles. White’s art was promoted by members of

civil rights and local Jewish committees because of his investment in figuring black history—giving face and presence to heroes of the past. White was a talented artist and educator who trained a future generation of artists including Hammons, Jackson, and Kerry James Marshall through his positions at the Otis College of Art and Design and in the Tutor/Art Program sponsored by the Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company. Jones argues that in addition to White's work as an artist and educator, his insistence on knowing black history and valorizing the regular, everyday black person as a vital contributor toward black freedom and equality made him an activist.

Throughout *South of Pico*, Jones connects her roster of artists with nonblack artists who sometimes approach the same theme, or use a shared compositional element to different effect. For White, the combination of text with image was shared with contemporaries such as Sol LeWitt, Lawrence Weiner, Rupert Garcia, and Malaquias Montoya. Situating White's work within these other two styles of embedding text, as conceptual device on one hand, and political message within the Chicano print movement on the other, offers the potential for new perspectives on White's paintings (46). The words stenciled in compositions from the Wanted Poster series allow White to represent historical text on slave auction notices and to insert abstract areas that blur the distinction between the present moment and the past.

Betye Saar entered the 1960s art scene with a professional background in design and social work (as did Purifoy). She was featured in *Ebony* magazine in 1951 with her business partner, the artist Curtis Tann, for her jewelry and craft objects. Regional fairs and private exhibitions brought attention to their collaboration as part of the Los Angeles scene. Her two-dimensional etchings focused on female protagonists and cosmology. Inspired by communities in different neighborhoods from the beaches to the hills, Saar's experience of her environment supported her interest in spirituality. She won awards in Los Angeles city-wide competitions for this work before moving on to the three-dimensional assemblages for which she became recognized. These sculptures reveal both what Saar retrieved as a useful past in black Americana and the persistence of racist ideology into the current moment.

Saar confronted the grounded reality of anti-blackness with a contemporary spirit to combat and reinterpret that ideology.

The sculptor Melvin Edwards made inroads on a different path. He migrated from Texas in 1955 and immediately began formal training as an artist in Los Angeles, earning his MFA at the University of Southern California. Between 1960 and 1965, Edwards was included in multiple (non-ethnic-specific) group exhibitions at LACMA and the La Jolla Museum of Art, as well as a solo exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. Jones reminds us that Edwards began the first phase of his iconic *Lynch Fragment* series in Los Angeles in 1963. The series began as a response through abstraction to formal, cultural, and political concerns such as Abstract Expressionism, police brutality, and an inspiring visit by Malcolm X to Los Angeles in order to address ongoing terror by law enforcement. Edwards also benefited from the proximity to the Hollywood industry, as his work was featured in the television series *Bob Hope Presents the Chrysler Theatre* (63–64).

In chapter 2, "Claim: Assemblage and Self-Possession," Jones details the style of assemblage, also known as "junk art," that attracted attention to the avant-garde approach to art in Los Angeles. Jones does not make the case that assemblage was invented in Los Angeles, or that the artists she features in the chapter were the only ones working in the form. Instead she demonstrates how Saar, Outerbridge, and Purifoy were primary to a way of using the form that simultaneously testified to formal considerations and social content. She contextualizes junk as material uniquely relevant to a tradition of black life: "African Americans suffered *de jure* and then *de facto* servitude; they built the United States but then were given the leftovers, the shoddy, for themselves, along with the partial remains of representation. African American life in the United States has been an ongoing battle for the fulfillment of the contract of citizenship: to be full, not partial, human beings; to be given full, not partial, access to justice, education, housing, and income. And black artists in the last three centuries have strived for the same rights when it comes to the ability to represent themselves" (69). Literally and metaphorically, African Americans have made do with what remains (72, 103). We see this

in the now-legendary group exhibition *66 Signs of Neon*, which was pivotal to the career of Purifoy. Along with the artist Judson Powell, Purifoy walked the streets after the Watts Riots and collected burnt remains as materials to create art. Jones explains the attraction to junk for Purifoy, "In his eyes, such junk was democratic; it didn't discriminate against those with fewer advantages (or access to art materials) because it was free. Assemblage also had a relationship to narratives of poverty; it reflected communities ravaged by a social system that cared little for them. The rebellion and its remnants could be turned into not only something of beauty but also something of African American life—art created by the people themselves who were not only the drivers of American aesthetics but makers too" (78). Jones provides excerpts from Purifoy's poetry and manifesto-like declarations about art, creativity, and assemblage that reveal his dedication to the power of community and collaboration in the creative process (70–71). The evidence of Purifoy's commitment to art making is matched by his accomplishments in art administrative positions, from founding director of the Watts Towers Art Center to founding member of the California Arts Council.

Visiting junkyards was a regular practice for Saar, whose work became increasingly personal, political, and spiritual with the use of found objects such as bottles, gloves, cages, and mirrors. This was also true for Hammons, who was inspired by and careful about the pasts of the objects he collected and repurposed. In his *Containment Series* (1967–69) and *Ragman Series* (1970–78), Outerbridge used junk to try new techniques for representing migration, characters from his upbringing in Greenville, North Carolina, and black southern vernacular forms. Jones defines Outerbridge's work from this period as "classical still lives of an urban variety," as he used discarded objects to share experiences of the social (98).

Jones instructs readers on the difference between assemblage in the hands of her selected artists and the approach taken by others such as Bruce Conner, Ed Kienholz, and Robert Rauschenberg. Both Conner and Kienholz traveled away from their neighbor-

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hoods to black neighborhoods such as the Central Avenue neighborhood in South Los Angeles to collect junk for their art. They used other people's junk, black people's junk, to source material. Likewise, Rauschenberg's later combines did not connect to personal or cultural archives, nor enable a narrative function as did the art of Outerbridge, Saar, and Purifoy. For these latter artists who were interested in history and storytelling, "the assemblage format kept these notions from alighting on one frame or message and kept the ideas in a swirl of movement that led to activation, not a settling in" (137).

Jones discusses the efforts to find space to exhibit the work of these artists in chapter 3, "Organize: Building an Exhibitionary Complex." Many figures in this chapter stand out as particularly visionary and successful in making African American artists visible in galleries and museums. For example, in 1967 the artists and curators Dale and Alonzo Davis opened Brockman Gallery in Leimert Park. The brothers organized group and solo exhibitions of artists discussed throughout South of Pico and created a hub for artistic discourse. The artist, dancer, and curator Suzanne Jackson opened Gallery 32 in the MacArthur Park neighborhood, where she showed a variety of young artists ranging from Emory Douglas, Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party in 1969, to a group of black women artists including Saar in the 1970 *The Sapphire Show*. At LACMA, Cecil Fergerson, an assistant curator of modern and contemporary art, and Samella Lewis, artist and coordinator of education, pressured the museum to recognize and support African American artists. Lewis resigned from LACMA in 1968, and in the following twelve years she founded several art galleries and the Museum of African American Art in Baldwin Hills, created two multimedia publishing companies, published multiple books on black artists, launched the magazine *Black Art: An International Quarterly* (now the *International Review of African American Art*), and taught as a professor of art history and humanities at Scripps College. Jones chronicles the work of several other important figures central to the efforts to change the art world for black visibility. She explains, "The key was not only for galleries and eventually African American museums to support black artists but to develop in individuals the desire and ability to collect art" (180). It took innovation from

people in multiple positions to create an infrastructure of support.

In chapter 4, "In Motion: The Performative Impulse," Jones discusses the shift away from didactic approaches in art to greater interest in abstraction and performance. Nengudi, Hassinger, Conwill, and Hammons figure prominently in experimental performances in public spaces. These artists claimed alternative, nontraditional places to explore ancestral heritage and connect it to contemporary struggles. Jones's analysis foregrounds the significance of black nationalist longings for African connections and reverence for the Middle Passage as influential in much of this work. At the same time, formally these artists played with unconventional materials such as leather (Hammons), pantyhose (Nengudi), wire cable (Hassinger), and latex sheets (Conwill) as organic and inorganic surrogates for living forms. With this set of younger artists, the focus on collaboration and community played an important role in providing a conceptual continuum to Purifoy and Outerbridge. Jones's analysis in this chapter highlights the similarities and differences with white artists working at the time who were becoming less concerned with the material product and more concerned with process. For example, she offers insights on violence as a theme in performance, best-known in works by Chris Burden such as *Shoot* (1971) and *Dead Man* (1972). Hammons made violence the subject of his 1972 *Murder Mystery*, as did the avant-garde Chicano art collective Asco in its 1974 performance *Decoy GangVictim*. All of these Los Angeles-based performances have different executions and affects. However, a notable difference between Hammons's and Burden's performances arise from their different positions in relationship to street violence. Jones explains, "For Hammons, to be shot was indeed unremarkable and imminently possible, while it pushed Burden into a new realm of experience" (235). The connections Jones makes between the black artists in this chapter and other artists working on the edge of artistic disciplines demonstrate how artistic experimentation by black artists challenged the limited category of legible "black art."

Most of the artists featured in South of Pico migrated to New York by the 1980s. For them, Los Angeles served as a laboratory in the early stages of their careers in which to

figure out what might be possible and what practices could be formed as a foundation for the development of their careers. Jones ends her volume with a discussion of contemporary black artists with roots or practices based in Los Angeles. She focuses on Sanford Biggers, who grew up south of Pico, as the heir to the migratory routes, aesthetic searches, transdisciplinary exploration, and parallel commitments to memory, ancestry, and visions for black liberation shared by the artists of earlier generations discussed in the book. Jones offers a migratory route to and within a city that held real and imagined potential for discovery. The depth of her research and look across disciplinary boundaries will make this book a touchstone for future scholars and readers with current investments in how narratives of black artists and the history of American art are written.

Bridget R. Cooks is an associate professor of art history and the chair of African American Studies at the University of California, Irvine. Her scholarship addresses African Americans in visual culture, African American artists, and museum criticism. She is the author of *Exhibiting Blackness: African Americans and the American Art Museum* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2011) and is currently completing *A Dream Deferred: Art of the Civil Rights Movement and the Limits of Liberalism*. Recent curatorial projects include *Grafton Tyler Brown: Exploring California*.