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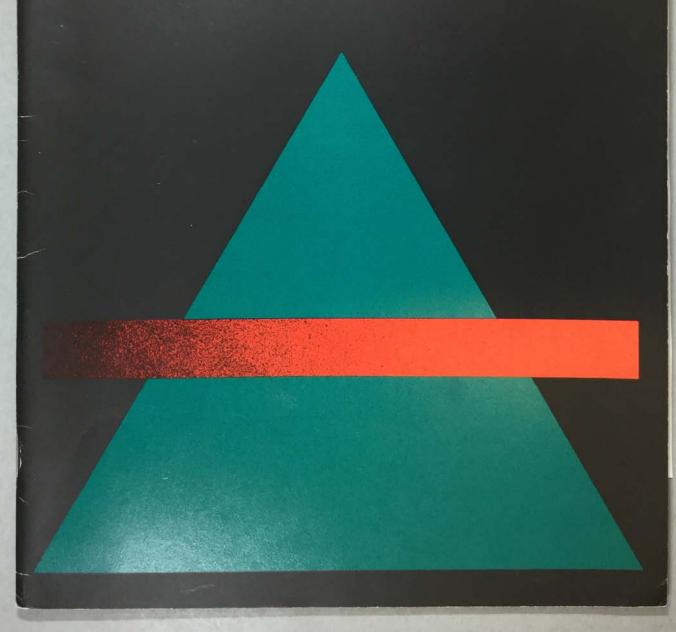
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Afro-American Abstraction

Ellsworth Ausby
Edward Clark
Houston Corwill
Melvin Edwards
Sam Gilliam
Maren Hassinger
Richard Hunt
Jamillah Jennings
James Little
Alvin Loving
Tyrone Mitchell
Senga Nengudi
Howardena Pindell
Martin Puryear
Charles Searles
George Smith
Jack Whitten
William T. Williams

An exhibition organized by April Kingsley as guest curator for The Art Museum Association. Circulation of the exhibition and publication of the catalog have been funded, in part, by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal agency.

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March 25 – May 6, 1984 Bellevue Art Museum Bellevue, Washington

June 1 – July 15, 1984 Laguna Gloria Art Museum Austin, Texas

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AFRO-AMERICAN ABSTRACTION

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	MoMA PS1	I.A.432

AFRO-AMERICAN ABSTRACTION

Afro-American Abstraction is the first important survey of its kind in New York since the spate of shows devoted to black artists around 1970. Thus it serves to update the work of some established Black artists, as well as to introduce many talented younger artists who have emerged since that time. It seems to me, that, despite the enormous diversity of their abstract styles, these 19 artists convey a common spirit. Since each is an American at work in the 1970s, the art naturally reflects the modernist tradition -- their direct heritage -- and demonstrates the wide range of esthetic options currently available -- from shaped canvas, patterning, and assemblage to welded-steel construction and installation art. However powerful their committments to mainstream modes, the work of these artists also evokes a subtle involvement with their African cultural heritage. A majority, in fact, have visited Africa, and certain characteristics of the great African artistic tradition are visible, whether intended or not. These include a bold physicality, rhythmical vitality, and textural richness, as well as a tendency to use linear, geometrical imagery, and high-energy color. The work is active, not withdrawn, robust not tentative. It would seem these artists are at last realizing the potential Alain Locke, great champion of the "New Negro Movement," prophesied more than 50 years ago when he said, "if African art was capable of producing the ferment in modern art that it has, surely this is not too much to expect of its influence upon the culturally awakened (Black) artist."

Two years ago when I was preparing a <u>Village Voice</u> article on the current situation of Black artists, I found that a number of them had been affected, directly or indirectly, by recent contacts with African culture. William T. Williams made the break-through into the brilliant kind of painting seen in this exhibition after a trip to Nigeria, and the light and colors of the African landscape poured into Edward Clark's paintings after his visit in 1973. Martin Puryear who spent two years teaching secondary school in Sierra Leone, must have picked up a great deal of the spirit of African wood carving there, since his work certainly seemed to capture its essence. Melvin Edwards was using much of what he learned about African

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vernacular architecture to make powerful post-formalist sculptures out of welded steel planes.

I also found that a number of younger artists -- many of whom showed at Linda Goode Bryant's <u>Just Above Midtown Gallery</u> -- were making explicit connections with African experience in their art without even having travelled to that continent. Houston Conwill likens the value of this heritage to the square root in mathematics (which is quite accurate considering the fact that African Art was a major source for modernism in the first place). It raises the work to a higher power, he says. Within the art community as a whole the ritualistic and mythic aspects of art and art making were beginning to replace "mere formalism," and thus this development among Black artists had far-reaching significance.

In a recent WBAI interview William T. Williams spoke about some of his main concerns being "the notion of myth and magic and the notion of a work of art having a spiritual function in society, and not being either a decorative object or an object that's engaged in purely formalist endeavors." Earlier in the '70s he'd been struggling to reconcile these ideas with the rigorous formal training he'd received at Yale that had brought him so much success at the outset of his career. In Africa, which Williams visited for Festac in 1977, the artist was (and still is) a necessary member of the community. According to Black scolars W.E.B.

DuBois and James H. Porter, "he often combined the functions of medicine man, chief and maker of magic figures," and "artistic expression was a vital part of the lives of everyone." This fact was probably as important to Williams in developing a new approach to painting after his return as any of the visual material he saw there, such as textile designs or architectural and sculptural decorative devices.

In the same WBAI program, Jack Whitten said that in addition to the fact that his main concern is with plastic content, "being Black at this time in America puts me into a rather unique position. It gives me a chance to offer something that has been lying dormant for a little over five or six hundred years. When we speak of that which is spiritual in my case it definitely goes back to Africa. If there is a certain thing that we are to believe in, Jung's theory of collective unconsciousness and so forth,

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I tend to agree with him. All my experimentations point to the fact that there is a certain sort of unconscious element, historically speaking, that's still alive... the spirit is still alive even though we were removed from Africa."

These words, and those of Edwards and Loving who were also on the program, reinforced my intuitions and confirmed my conviction that the Afro part of Afro-American is coming to have almost as much importance for the artists as the American part. Once the show was up and I was able to see the works collectively, formal links with the linear, geometric, colorful and textured aspects of African art were obvious. The symmetry of Tyrone Mitchell's and Charles Searles' sculptures and the rhythmical vitality of Jamillah Jennings'; the geometric, linear forms and energetic color of Ellsworth Ausby's heraldic wallworks; Alvin Loving's dyed canvas constructions; and David Hammons use of Negro hair, African symbols, and irregular patterning, all make direct connections with Africa. The ceremonial mask aspect of Barbara-Chase-Riboud's bronze and silk-cord sculpture; the textile derivations of James Little's surfaces, and Howardena Pindell's encrusted grids (this one dedicated to the Macumba goddess Iemanja); make oblique references. If one seeks out other more subtle correspondences, Senga Nengudi's hanging fabric piece has a coincidental physiognomic similarity to Bambaran antelope heads, Sam Gilliam's Phantasy and Dupont Circle suggest warrior's shields, and the clear geometric shapes of Bakota figures seem bound up somewhere inside Melvin Edwards' Homage to the poet Leon Gontran Damas.

In general one can say with certainty that there is in all the work a particular vitality, an attitude of aliveness, of vivid equilibrium, which an African would term "looking smart" (as African dancers are judged to look at their best), that sets the work apart in visual presence. This energy is shared.

April Kingsley March 1980

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AFRO-AMERICAN ABSTRACTION CURATED BY APRIL KINGSLEY

- 1. AUSBY, Ellsworth
 Space Odyssey, 1980
 Acrylic on canvas
 c. 6 x 17 feet overall
- 2. AUSBY, Ellsworth
 Space Odyssey, 1979
 Acrylic on paper
 36 x 60 inches
- 3. AUSBY, Ellsworth
 Space Odyssey, 1978
 Oil pastel on paper
 14½ x 22½ inches
 Collection, Budd Hopkins
- 4. AUSBY, Ellsworth
 Space Odyssey, 1978
 Oil pastel on paper
 144 x 224 inches
- CHASE-RIBOUD, Barbara
 All That Rises Must Converge, 1973
 Polished bronze and synthetic cords
 9'h x 3'w x 14"d
 On loan to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
- 6. CLARK,Edward
 Homage to the Sands of Ife, 1974
 Acrylic on canvas
 8'5" x 13'6"
- 7. CONWILL, Houston
 Passages: KA-2, 1979
 Wood, latex, earth, and herbs
 50h x 39w x 5½d inches
 Collection, Mariella and Carl Holman
- 8. CONWILL, Houston
 Passages: 6B, 1979
 Wood, latex, earth, and herbs
 48h x 30w x 3d inches
 Collection, Charlayne Hunter-Gault
- 9. EDWARDS, Melvin
 Homage to the Poet Leon Gontran Damas, 1978
 Steel
 c. 7h x 16L x 12d feet
- 10. EDWARDS, Melvin
 Nine Lynch Fragments, 1979-1980
 Steel
 c. 12" diameter each
- 11. GILLIAM, Sam

 Phantasy, 1979
 Acrylic on canvas
 80 inches square in two parts
 Collection, Drs. Catherine and Richard Flax

	Collection:	Series.Folder:
The Museum of Modern Art Archives, NY	MoMA PS1	I.A.432

.../2

AFRO-AMERICAN ABSTRACTION

- 12. GILLIAM, Sam

 Marsden Clock/Soft Leaning Sochii,1978

 Acrylic and paper on wire mesh and wood

 41 x 73 inches in two parts

 Courtesy of Middendorf/Lane Gallery, Washington D.C.
- 13. GILLIAM, Sam

 Dupont Circle, 1979

 Acrylic on canvas with steel beam

 8½ feet diameter with 10 foot steel beam

 Collection, Drs. Catherine and Richard Flax
- 14. GILLIAM, Sam

 <u>Untitled</u>, 1980

 Mixed media
 68h x 32w x 32d inches
 Courtesy of Hamilton Gallery, New York
- 15. HAMMONS, David

 Victory Over Sin, 1980
 Acrylic, graphite, hair, cord, light fixture, and reed
 Room 20'2" x 18'
 Courtesy of Just Above Midtown Gallery, New York
- 16. HASSINGER, Maren
 Leaning, 1980
 Wire rope and wire
 16"h x 16'w x 16'd
 Materials donated by Paulsen Wire Rope Corporation, New York
- 17. HUNT, Richard
 Extended Form, 1975
 Welded Cor-ten steel
 23½h x 67½w x 34d inches
 Courtesy of Dorsky Gallery, New York
- 18. HUNT, Richard

 Untitled, 1979

 Copper resist drawing
 12 x 18 inches
 Courtesy of Dorsky Gallery, New York
- 19. HUNT, Richard

 Untitled, 1979

 Copper resist drawing
 12 x 18 inches
 Courtesy of Dorsky Gallery, New York
- 20. HUNT, Richard

 <u>Untitled</u>, 1979

 Copper resist drawing
 12 x 18 inches
 Courtesy of Dorsky Gallery, New York
- 21. HUNT, Richard

 <u>Untitled</u>, 1979

 <u>Copper resist drawing</u>
 12 x 18 inches

 Courtesy of Dorsky Gallery, New York
- 22. JENNINGS, Jamillah
 Snake Lady, 1979
 Steel
 31h x 10w x 10d inches
- 23. JENNINGS, Jamillah
 Female, 1980
 Steel
 40h x 14w x 14d inches

6

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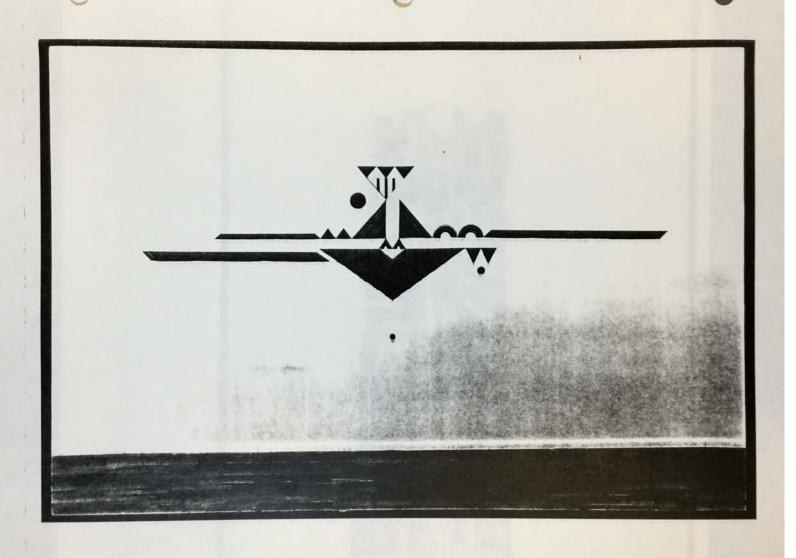
AFRO-AMERICAN ABSTRACTION

- 24. JENNINGS, Jamillah
 <u>Untitled</u>, 1980
 Steel
 36h x 14w x 14d inches
- 25. LITTLE, James
 Challenge of the Will, 1979
 Oil on linen
 54 x 67½ inches
- 26. LOVING, Alvin
 Shades of '73: Composition for 1980, 1980
 Dyed canvas
 c. 10 x 14 feet
- 27. MITCHELL, Tyrone
 Gift, February 1980
 Wood and plaster
 3½h x 14L x 8w feet
- 28. NENGUDI, Senga
 Maybe a Hamburger Will Soak Up the Tears, 1980
 Fabric, wood, and sand
 12kh x 4w x 4kd feet
 Courtesy of Just Above Midtown Gallery, New York
- 29. PINDELL, Howardena <u>December 31,1980: Brazil: Feast Day of Iemanjd</u>, 1980 Acrylic, punched painted and printed papers, dye, sequins, glitter, powder, and fragrance on canvas, sewn 94 x 96 inches Courtesy of Lerner/Heller Gallery, New York
- 30. PURYEAR, Martin
 Untitled, 1978
 Wood, Osage orange, yellow pine, ash
 67h x 14 diameter inches
 Courtesy of Protech-McIntosh Gallery, Washington D.C.
- 31. PURYEAR, Martin
 Own, 1979
 Polychromed basswood and maple
 48 inches in diameter
 Courtesy of Protech-McIntosh Gallery, Washington D.C.
- 32. PURYEAR, Martin
 Three Rings, 1979
 Hickory sapling and ebony
 41 inches in diameter Courtesy of Protech-McIntosh Gallery, Wash. D.C.
- 33. SEARLES, Charles
 Flight of My Fathers, 1980
 Acrylic on wood
 7'6"h x 6'w x 4'd
- 34. WHITTEN, Jack
 Barney's Legacy, 1980
 Acrylic on canvas
 78 x 108 inches
- 35. WHITTEN, Jack
 Red Cross for Naomi, 1979
 Acrylic on canvas
 42 x 42 inches
- 36. WHITTEN, Jack
 Yellow Cross for Naomi, 1979
 Acrylic on canvas
 42 x 42 inches
- 37. WILLIAMS, William T.

 The Taxi Dancers (Untitled, Tale for Shango, Ashanti Walk, and E-Flat Green)
 1978-1979

 Acrylic on canvas
 84 x 240 inches

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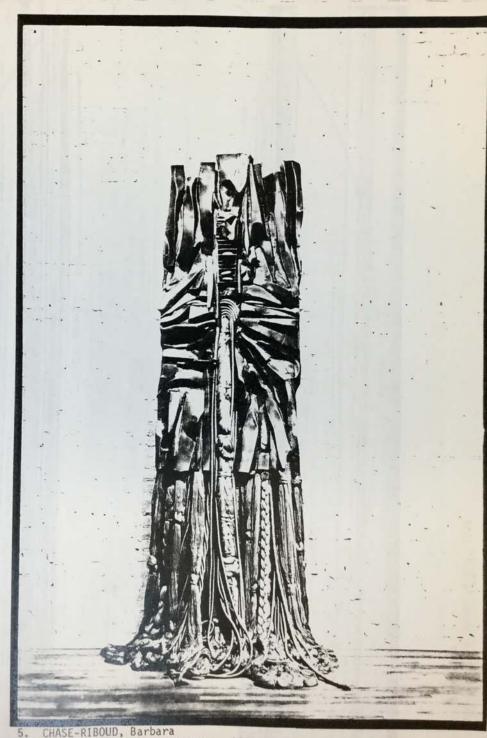


1. AUSBY, Ellsworth Space Odyssey, 1980



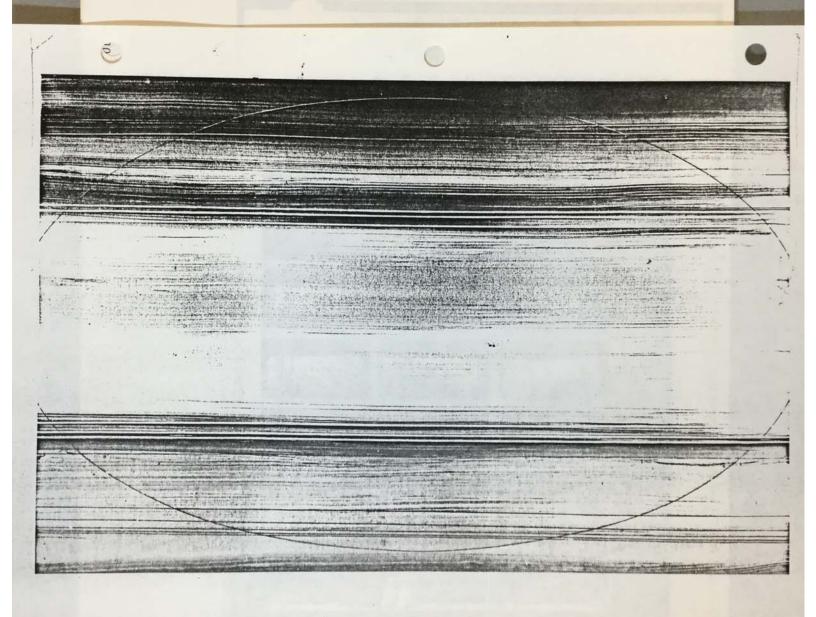
CHASE-RIBOUD, Barbara All That Rises Must Converge, 1973

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CHASE-RIBOUD, Barbara All That Rises Must Converge, 1973

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6. CLARK, Edward Homage to the Sands of Ife, 1974 10

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7. CONWILL, Houston Passages: KA-2, 1979

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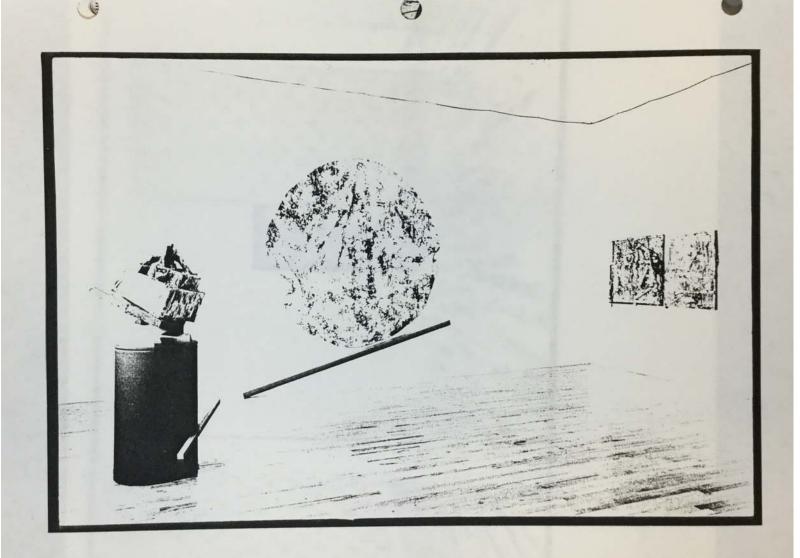
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10. EDWARDS, Melvin Nine Lynch Fragments,1979-1980

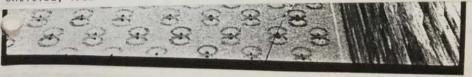
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14. GILLIAM, Sam Untitled, 1980 13. GILLIAM, Sam Dupont Circle, 1979 GILLIAM, Sam Marsden Clock/Soft Leaning Sochii,1978

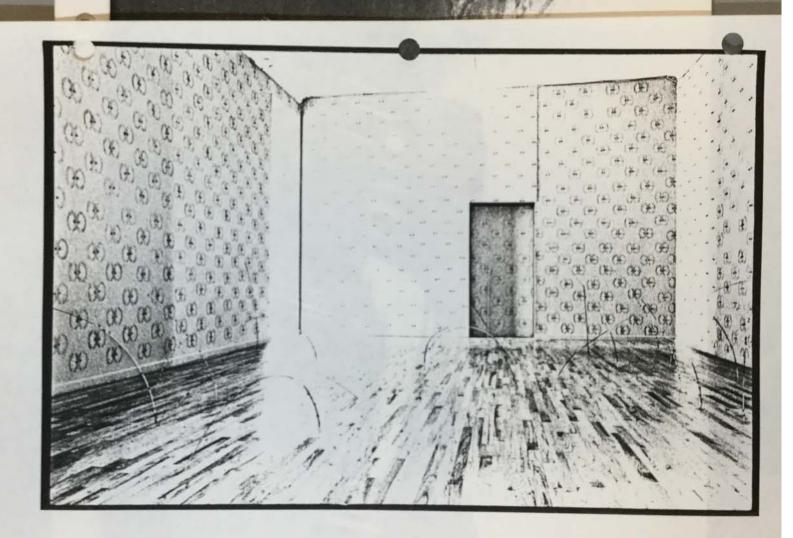


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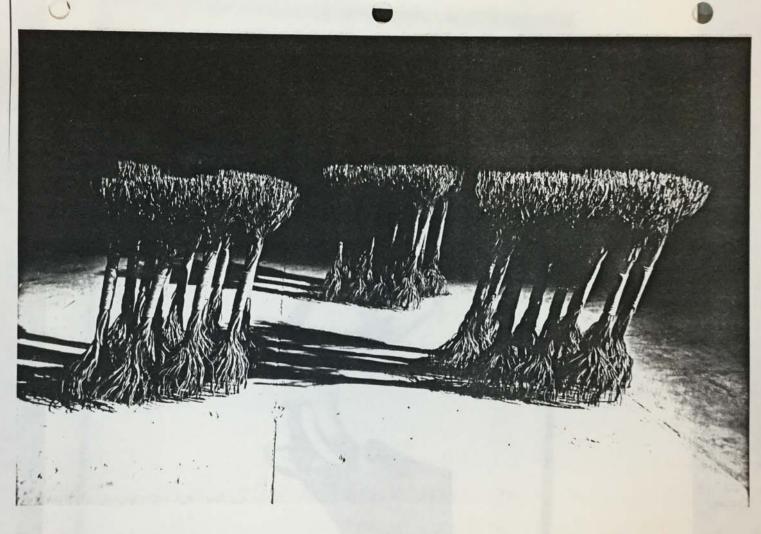
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15. HAMMONS, David Victory Over Sin, 1980

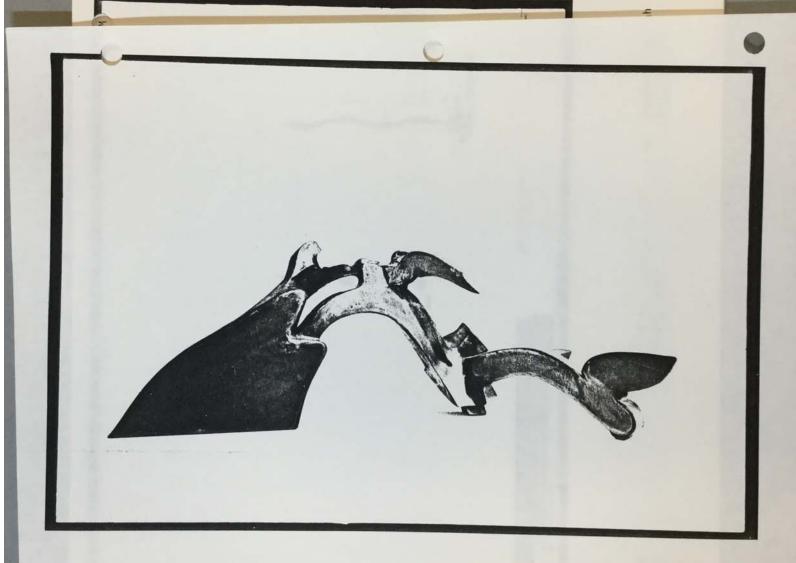
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16. HASSINGER, Maren Leaning, 1980

Extended |

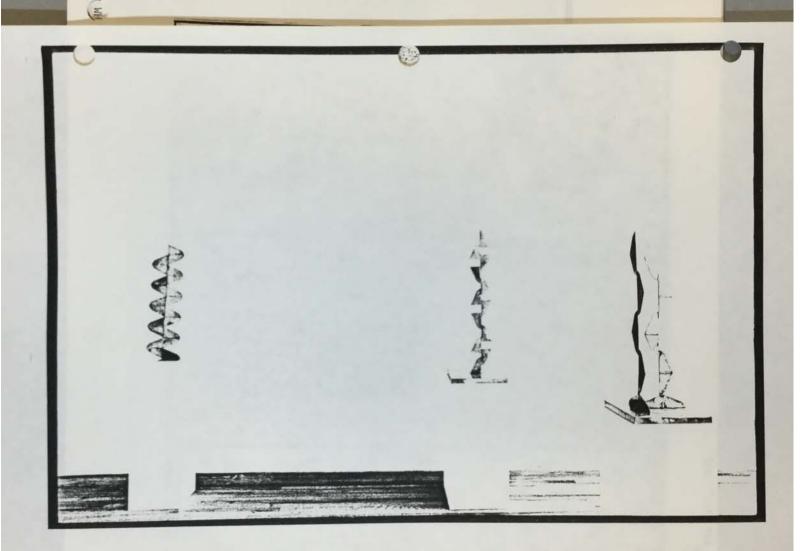
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17. HUNT, Richard Extended Form, 1975

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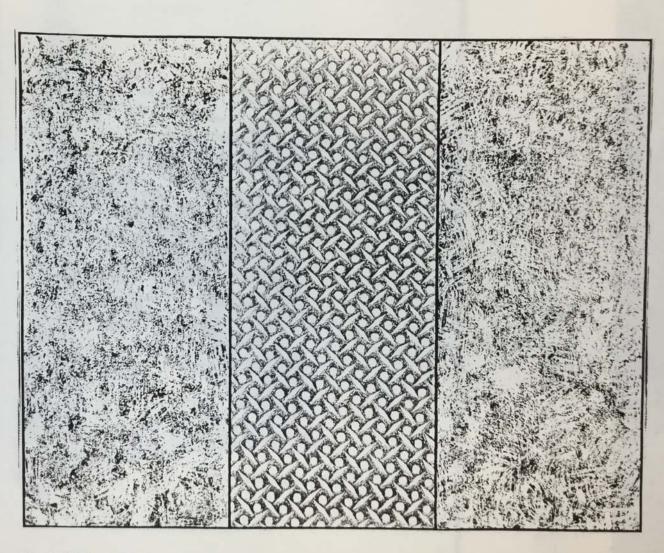


22. JENNINGS, Jamillah Snake Lady, 1979

23. JENNINGS, Jamillah Female, 1980

24. JENNINGS, Jamillah Untitled, 1980

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25. LITTLE, James Challenge of the Will, 1979

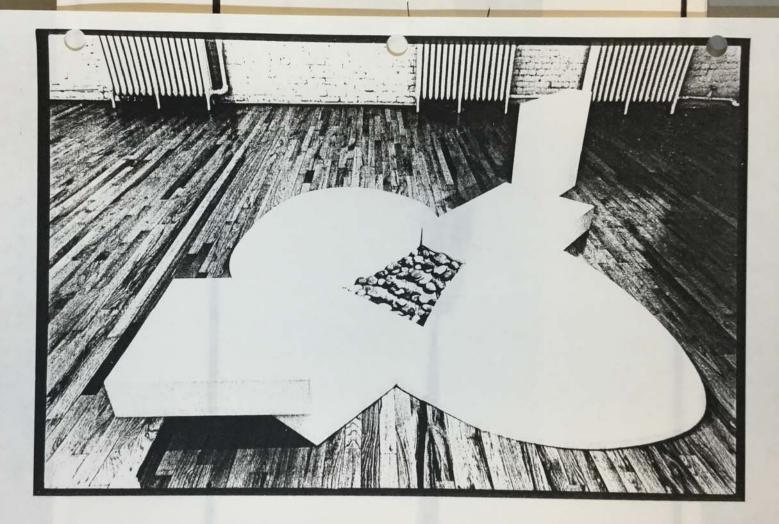
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26. LOVING, Alvin
Shades of '73: Composition for 1980, 1980

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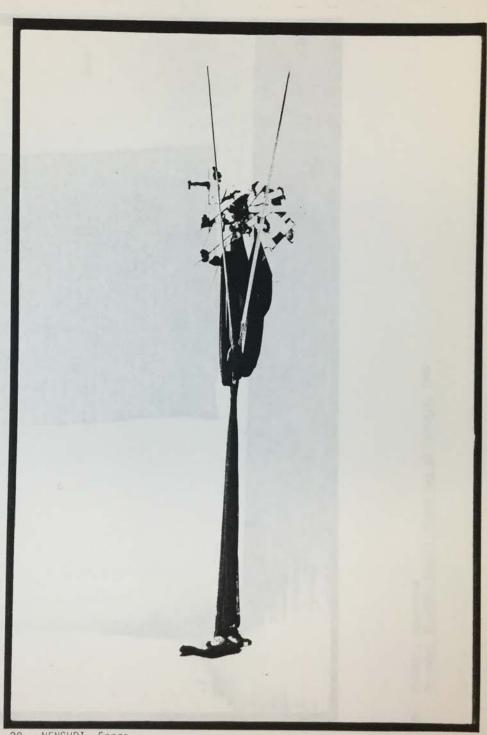




27. MITCHELL, Tyrone Gift, February 1980

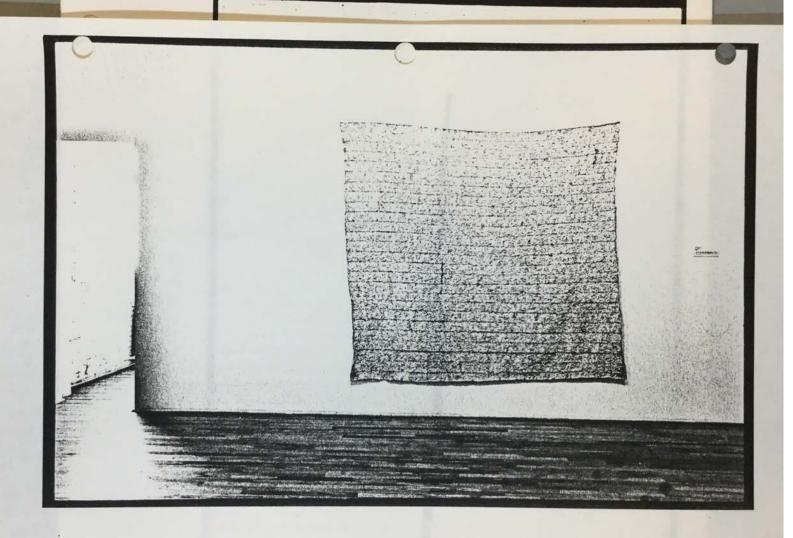
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28. NENGUDI, Senga Maybe a Hamburger Will Soak Up the Tears, 1980

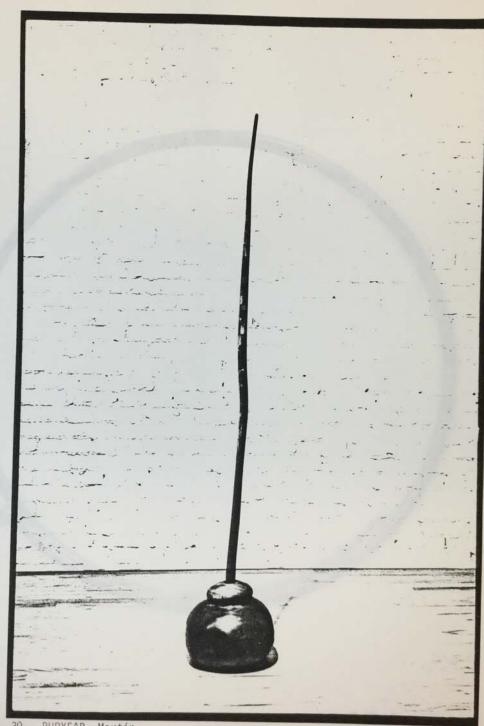
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	MoMA PS1	I.A.432



29. PINDELL, Howardena
December 31,1980: Brazil: Feast Day of Iemanja, 1980

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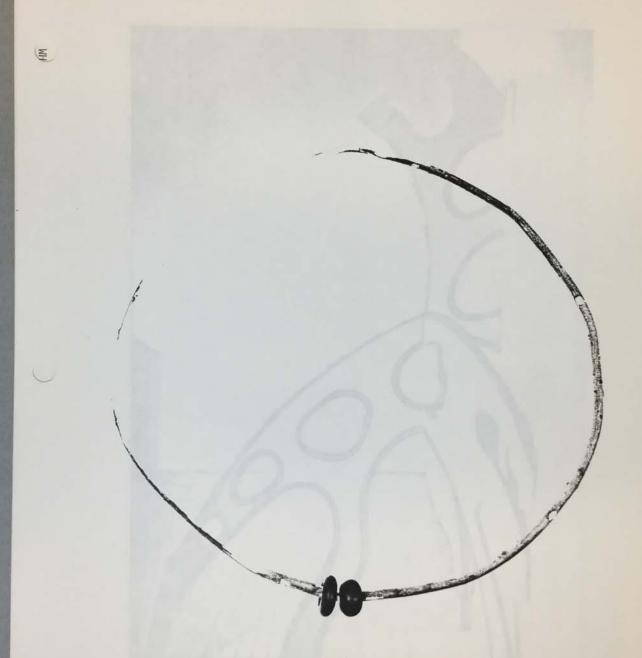
30. PURYEAR, Martin Untitled, 1978

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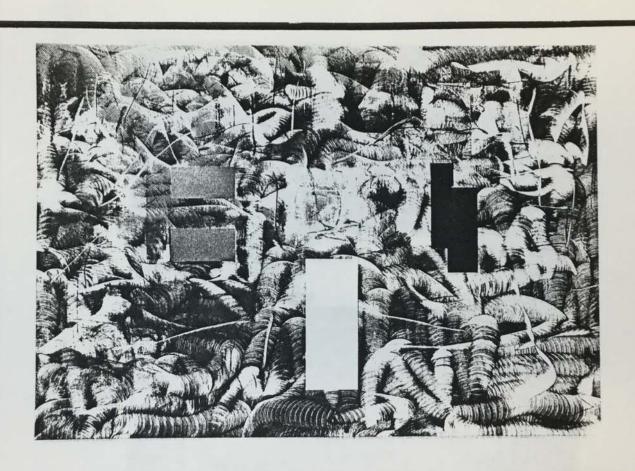
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33. SEARLES, Charles Flight of My Fathers, 1980

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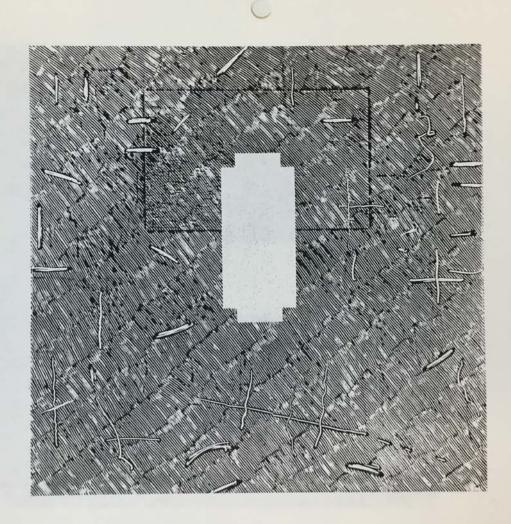
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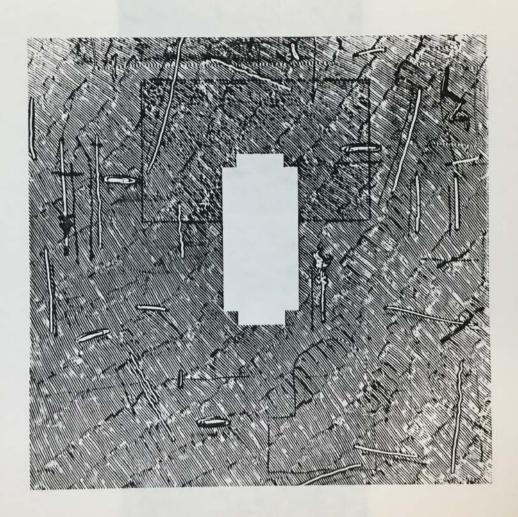


35. WHITTEN, Jack Red Cross for Naomi, 1979

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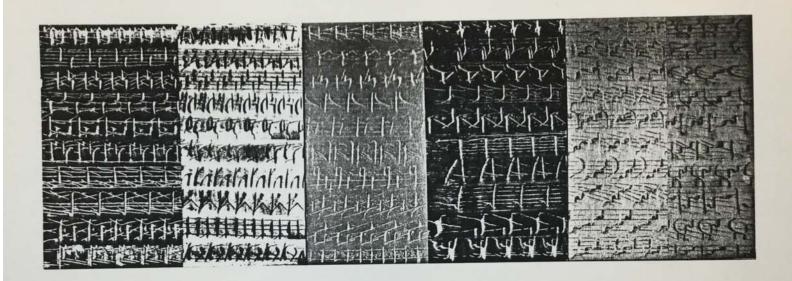




36. WHITTEN, Jack Yellow Cross for Naomi, 1979



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37. WILLIAMS, William T. The Taxi Dancers (Untitled, Tale for Shango, Ashanti Walk, and E-Flat Green)