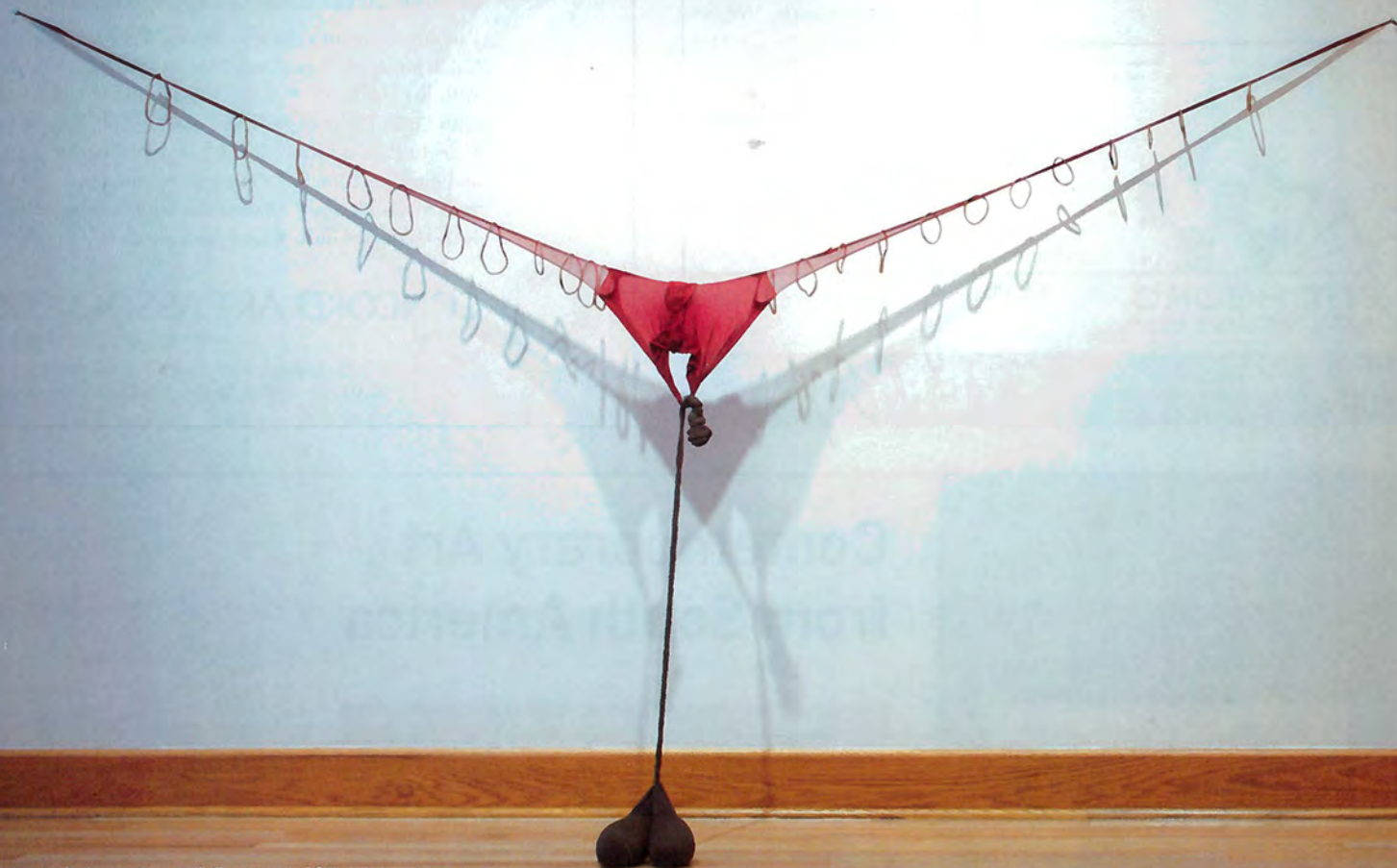


NOW DIG THIS!

ART AND BLACK LOS ANGELES 1960-1980



Installation view Left: Senga Nengudi, *Revery - A*, 2011, nylon and sand (Hudgins Family Collection, New York; Photo by Arthur Evans).

Right: David Hammons, *Afro Asian Eclipse or Black China*, 1979, mixed media (Hudgins Family Collection, New York; photo by Arthur Evans).



"NOW DIG THIS!" FRAMES THE CREATION OF BLACK IDENTITY-BASED ART IN RELATION TO THE AFTERMATH OF THE WATTS REBELLION OF 1965.

The larger global wrap-around and context of that era include the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, Youth Culture, Flower Power, Feminism and quite a few violent uprisings across the United States and Europe. The era was radical and everywhere informed by the non-conformity of the Beat Generation and the influence of media.

L.A. was a segregated city in 1960. In "Now Dig This! Art in Black Los Angeles 1960-1980," curator Kellie Jones

documents the works of Black artists who, despite – and because of – the rubble and devastation of the 1965 upheaval, persevered to amplify identity issues in their artwork. There is a raw energy in the work that comes across to audiences today and speaks of the raised consciousness of a minority population within the larger context of the freedoms associated with West Coast life.

Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) is the final destination

in a three-stop tour for "Now Dig This!," which Jones curated for the Getty Museum-funded Pacific Standard Time Initiative (PST Shows). It debuted at The Hammer Museum in L.A. before proceeding to MoMA's incubator, PSI in Long Island City, where an abbreviated version of the exhibit was shown. The journey concludes with in-depth analysis in the think-tank atmosphere of Williams College, whose alumni are influential in institutional contemporary art culture. The show at WCMA has nearly the

full complement of 130 out of 140 artworks from the original roster in their airy but intimate galleries.

The way Jones has curated this show illustrates a kind of porosity about segregation from 1960-1980, the edges crumbling due to educational opportunities that arose with Affirmative Action. There was also cross-pollination in collaborative relationships between artists and commercial outreach by black-run galleries selling art to high-profile

**72 DEGREES: LA
ART FROM THE
COLLECTION**

**WILLIAMS
COLLEGE
MUSEUM OF ART
15 LAWRENCE
HILL DRIVE
WILLIAMSTOWN,
MASSACHUSETTS
THROUGH
DECEMBER 1**



"stardust" drawing 2008, japanese archival ink on handmade paper, 32 x 16"

manuel pardo

1952-2012

"stardust"

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clients such as Harry Belafonte. These sales opened doors to a broader gallery dynamic that existed in L.A. during the show's chronology. Some artists like David Hammons branched into performance, and his presence in West Coast culture may seem surprising to some because he is so strongly identified with the New York art scene.

A number of the 33 artists included in the show attended or taught at West Coast art schools, while others made art adjunct to their careers as designers in various media. There was a fluidity that brought white artists into the black dynamic in creative collaboration. Jones mentions that Mark di Suvero offered the use of his power tools to John Outterbridge when he saw John working metal by hand. Chicano and Asian artists showed in Watts galleries during this time; the scene also reflected strong feminist ideals wrapped up in the concept of emerging equality.

IT'S A THOUGHT-PROVOKING "MUST-SEE" EXHIBITION ON MANY LEVELS.

Pantyhose came into popular use during this era, and it's provocative to see them in "Now Dig This!" stretched into site-specific sculptures by Senga Nengudi – meant as props for her performances and used in performances by others, including Maren Hassinger, whose work is in both "Now Dig This!" and "72 Degrees: LA Art from the Collection," a related exhibition put together by Williams' Curator of Collections Kathryn Price that further contextualizes contemporary California art.

Since the cultural violence of the current economic recession has social stress factors, it's particularly interesting and timely to reflect on the resourcefulness of these black artists as they propelled themselves into new aesthetic directions. It's a thought-provoking "must-see" exhibition on many levels. A number of Boston-area museums have lately focused on shows and retrospectives pertaining to African American Art after 1945 – including Barry McGee at ICA/Boston and "Conversation: Modern African American Art" at the Peabody Essex Museum – and "Now Dig This!" surfaces as an important benchmark that clearly informs the rest.

The exhibition features works-on-paper, paintings, sculptures, ceramics, collaborative works and performance. Assemblage is prominent in this exhibit as many artists felt a need to create from debris after the Watts Rebellion. Examples include "Ghetto Merchant" by John T. Riddle Jr. and wall sculptures by Melvin Edwards. Fred Eversley's cast polyester resin sculptures convey an elegant light and color sensibility that's quintessentially L.A. and represents a style called "Finish Fetish." Collaborative performance between artists is emphasized, and audiences will also see solo performance films by Ulysses Jenkins playing across three screens.

Voted best Thematic Exhibition Nationwide of 2012 by the International Association of Art Critics, "Now Dig This!" is more than a time capsule. It is an inspiring look at transformation that highlights an under-recognized area of contemporary art. "72 Degrees," its corresponding exhibit at Williams, suggests the range of the college's collection in the area of Contemporary West Coast Art.

| Suzanne Volmer