

Recovering the Rubble: African American Assemblage Art in Los Angeles

by

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Los Angeles is the site of the Watts Towers, perhaps the most famous example of folk art in the world. Simon Rodia's constructed his majestic towers from steel pipes and rods, wrapped with wire mesh, and decorated with such found objects as bottles, scrap metal, sea shells, broken glass, pottery fragments, and bits of ceramic tile. Known to millions of Southern Californians and countless visitors, the Watts Towers are the quintessential example of recovering rubble and turning it into majestic works of art. But fewer people, including scholars and professional art historians, are fully aware of how Rodia's monumental achievement helped catalyze an artistic renaissance that has stunning implications for the African American creative community well into the 21st century.

Since the mid-1960s, African American artists in Los Angeles have been unusually imaginative in developing artistic products enabling them to achieve widespread critical recognition and respect. In the face of continuing barriers from mainstream institutions, including major museums and commercial galleries, many of these artists have used nontraditional materials and forms to create a growing legacy of visual art that has brought them national and international visibility. Several prominent African American artists used the Watts rebellion of 1965 as a key catalyst for their collective artistic vision. Even before the smoldering remains of Watts and surrounding black neighborhoods disappeared from national consciousness, artists Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, John Outterbridge, David Hammons, John Riddle, and others collected and transformed objects and materials into powerful artworks that often expressed trenchant anti-racist social and historical commentary.

“Debris” and “garbage” from the remains of burnt and destroyed buildings and streets became the raw material for an emerging tradition of African American art in the late 20th century and early 21st century. Long before the national recycling movement began, black Los Angeles area artists initiated their own program of creative visual production from the rubble of their own communities. In short, they “recovered the rubble” and in the process brought African American visual art to new heights of visual distinction.

Noah Purifoy (1917-2004) is often regarded as the key visual artist who initiated the African American focus on recovering trash to make art—the father of the African American assemblage art movement in the Los Angeles area. Throughout his career, Purifoy encouraged the use of art as a tool for social change—a premise that has long pervaded African American art history generally. Trained originally as a social worker, he turned to visual art later in life. His distinctive personal style involved the collection of discarded materials that he fashioned together into a creative whole. He taught many other black artists to use common objects to tell the stories of their people, emphasizing that these objects could actually be more effective than traditional artistic materials in communicating the struggles of people who came to America in bondage and who suffered centuries of brutal oppression.

His works made him a major participant in the historic “66 Signs of Neon” exhibition, based on artworks assembled from the debris of 1965 rebellion in Watts. The exhibition included Purifoy and six other artists, including whites, and created 66 separate artworks. Most found no permanent home and the materials returned to the junk heaps from which they originally came. That rebellion, one of many during those turbulent times, revealed the huge pent-up rage among African Americans, frustrated after generations of second class citizenship, poverty, unemployment, police brutality, and other egregious and more subtle manifestations of American racism. In a communication to the iconic African American art historian Samella Lewis, Purifoy revealed his perspective about his emerging artistic strategy:

While the debris was still smoldering, we ventured into the rubble like other junkers of the community, digging and searching, but unlike others, obsessed without quite knowing why. . . [W]e had collected three tons of charred wood and fire-molded debris. . . . [W]e gave much thought to the oddity of our found things. . . and what to do with the junk we had collected. (Lewis, *African American Art and Artists*, page 198).

This traveling show had a profound effect on black artists all over America. Purifoy’s “Sir Watts” (Figure 1), typified this new approach. In creating this “knight,” a symbolic black warrior, the artist used wood, metal, glass, safety pins, and other found objects and materials to offer a visual homage to the historic battles of his people. The work demonstrates the African American capacity to adopt whatever weapons and strategies are available in order to continue their drive for genuine freedom and dignity.

Purifoy also devoted his talent to institution building, establishing opportunities for other African American artists to develop their own creative talents. In 1987, he moved to the desert town of Joshua Tree, where he built large-scale artworks that further solidified his artistic reputation. His death in a fire in 2004 ended a brilliant career whose legacy continues as one of the most influential African American artists of the last half-century.

Several of Purifoy's key contemporaries remain extremely active, including Saar, Outterbridge, and Hammons. All have achieved international acclaim for their outstanding artistic accomplishments. Their assemblage works and others efforts have elevated African American art to unprecedented levels of visibility, with increasing recognition in museum and gallery exhibitions, newspaper and scholarly journal reviews, and colleges and university courses.



“Sir Watts” by Noah Purifoy (Figure 2)

Equally important, Saar, Outterbridge, and Hammons have influenced many of their mostly younger contemporaries to augment the growing body of assemblage art. This is especially apparent in the Los Angeles area where several visual artists have made stellar contributions to three-dimensional art, continuing the tradition of “recovering the rubble” as an imaginative approach to artistic creativity. A brief review of some highlights of this contemporary focus reinforces the view that Los Angeles has played a central role in the African American artistic renaissance in the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

A key figure in Southern California African American art has been Charles Dickson, whose sculptural works in bronze, hardwood, ivory, lucite, and plastic have been staples in local and national exhibitions for more than 40 years. Born in 1947, Dickson grew up in South Central Los Angeles and decided to pursue an artistic career at the age of twelve. His memories of the Watts rebellion pervade his consciousness and his works reflect a powerful commitment to visual social commentary and criticism. On his own initiative, he discovered the magnificent but neglected tradition of African American sculpture, especially the work of Richmond Barthe. This encouraged him to use his work to honor and respect people of African descent, a key theme in African American art generally, especially since the era of the Harlem Renaissance in the early 20th century.

Throughout his career, Dickson has always recycled remnants from his own work, including sawdust from various pieces done in ebony and other hard woods, integrating that dust into new artworks he produces. His mixed media assemblages likewise use recycled materials, extending the work of his distinguished predecessors and contemporaries. One dramatic example from 2000 is “Backfire” (Figure 2), a mask-like assemblage that Dickson constructed from concrete and terrazzo with lucite, which included a gun barrel, bullets casing, bob wire, hair, and chain—all found objects that represent the essence of African American assemblage art since the mid 1960s. The gun barrel mouth is especially disconcerting, a reminder of the deadly violence that afflicts America in general and African American communities in particular. The shells constituting the figure’s eyes reveal an eerie vision reminiscent of a corpse, another signifier of the inevitable destruction of the nation’s obsession with firearms. As usual, Dickson employs his artwork effectively in offering a provocative critique of his society.



“Backfire” by Charles Dickson (Figure 2).

Dale Brockman Davis is another veteran of the African American artistic community in Los Angeles. Born in 1945, he has been a lifetime resident of Los Angeles. Known widely as a mentor and co-founder of the legendary Brockman Gallery in 1967 with his brother Alonzo Davis, Dale Davis taught art for many years in the Los Angeles Unified School District. At Brockman, he was instrumental in assisting many African American artists, including some of the major luminaries in the entire tradition, in gaining a serious exhibition venue when exhibition spaces were largely unavailable to artists of African descent in Los Angeles and throughout the nation. The Davis brothers' efforts were a huge factor in validating African American art generally and also provided Dale Davis with an opportunity to exhibit his own imaginative artworks to appreciative audiences of all backgrounds. His ceramics, sculpture, and jewelry set the stage for his subsequent assemblage works that link him so profoundly to this tradition.

Davis's assemblages often address the spectacular musical heritage of African Americans, especially jazz. His works draw upon the Baka people of West Africa—another example of an African American artist looking to Africa for creative inspiration. His Jazz Series highlight skiffle instruments, which are instrumental instruments like jugs, jars, washboards, thimbles, tin cans, galvanized buckets, conch shells, and other “home-made” instruments. This visual approach takes “recovering the rubble” to new levels of creative excellence. His mixed media efforts are exclusively visual, encouraging viewers themselves to imagine the sounds that might emerge from Davis's assembled instruments. He constructs and arranges them from cardboard, copper foil, wooden chair parts, palm frond branches, and other materials. “Exuberance” (Figure 3) is an exemplary example from this series. Its superb composition contains, among other elements, a real saxophone, flute, and a reconstructed washboard on a blue plyboard background. These are outstanding tributes to the black musical heritage that has deeply enriched American cultural life. The washboard is especially significant. Beyond its profound musical impact, it has long signified the toil of millions of anonymous black women in America. “Exuberance” therefore adds Dale Davis to the impressive list of African American artists paying tribute to women's insufficiently acknowledged contributions to African American life and history.



“Exuberance” by Dale Davis (Figure 3)

Representing the same generation, LaMonte Westmoreland has had a remarkable artistic career that places him squarely within the tradition of African American assemblage art. Born in 1941, he has resided in the Los Angeles area since 1968. He has shown his works extensively over the years, including in venues that his fellow African American artists established in the 1960s to provide exhibition opportunities for themselves and their colleagues. He is also a longtime fine arts teacher, having served in various area colleges and universities, including for a decade at Los Angeles City College until his recent retirement. Westmoreland’s art combines both a personal and political vision, reflecting his approach to the African American experience. Viewers of his works are familiar with his use of pop icons that illustrate racist stereotypes that have pervaded and despoiled American history for generations.

As he pointedly notes, his mixed media works “are not for the timid.” Like many prominent African American artists, he is not reluctant to confront American racism directly and unambiguously. Among many others, his assemblage work entitled “The Thinker” (Figure 4), from his Red Series in 1996, is a frontal assault on how popular culture has both reflected and reinforced white supremacy in the United States.

The central figure is the wide-eyed, dark skinned black male with a top hat who adorned “Darkie Toothpaste” for many years—the quintessential example of commerce promoting an egregious racial slur. Significantly, this product continues to be marketed throughout Asia under the scarcely different label “Darlie Toothpaste.” To the right is yet another, even more absurd black caricature. Westmoreland underscores the contemporary relevance of his anti-racist work with other elements in “The Thinker.” The computer motherboard and a clock at the lower right of the assemblage signify that racist popular culture persists, even if not as overtly as in the past. On the top are the three monkeys, representing the proverbial maxim of ‘see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.’ This striking addition is a pointed artistic reminder that denial of racism only exacerbates its pernicious impact and further widens the gap between American ideals and American realities.



“The Thinker” by LaMonte Westmoreland (Figure 4)



Timothy Washington
Several Faces, One Race, 2009
Mixed media, cotton, glue, pigment on wire
coat hanger armature
84 1/2 x 12 x 6 1/2 inches

“Several Faces, One Race” by Timothy Washington (Figure 5),

Timothy Washington is another outstanding assemblage artist of that generation. Born in Los Angeles in 1946 and raised in Watts, he observed Simon Rodia constructing his famous towers. As a child, he was deeply influenced by his grandfather’s carpentry and his grandmother’s quilting. He also wandered throughout his neighborhood, gathering objects to transform into art—an early example of recovering the rubble. Later, Timothy Washington received a scholarship to the Chouinard Art Institute in Los Angeles, where he received his B.F.A. in 1969. Since then, his prolific and outstanding career has earned him a stellar reputation among both peers and critics. His work has been included in several major exhibitions, including at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the California African American Museum as well as several prominent commercial galleries.

Washington's method is highly elaborate, reflecting the highest level of artistic craftsmanship. His recent assemblage works involve cotton, glue, several pigments, trinkets, stones, and various found objects, all joined in remarkable final sculptural products. In "Several Faces, One Race" (Figure 5), a 2009 effort he exhibited at the Tilton Gallery in New York, Washington created a large effort that emphasized the universality of the human family. This work is typical of his vibrant use of multiple materials, all joined together into a coherent, compelling whole. A crucial detail of this engaging artwork is a mirror, placed directly below the face at the top of the work. The mirror encourages viewers to look at themselves and therefore join the collection of several faces. Audiences become active participants in the process, adding their own images, even temporarily, to the vision of human solidarity. The ultimate message of "Several Faces, One Race" is profoundly spiritual, a reminder that all human beings share some genuinely basic characteristics despite their differences of race, nationality, geography, age, gender, and social class.

Dominique Moody is a visual griot, an artistic storyteller whose imaginative use of found objects and rubble from the streets of Los Angeles and elsewhere has propelled her into the front ranks of contemporary African American artists in the early years of the 21st century. Triply marginalized as a black woman with a major visual disability making her legally blind, Moody has nevertheless transformed trash into treasure by assembling the remains from architecture, tree branches, bottles, discarded shoes, and other everyday items into some of the most engaging artworks in the contemporary era. Her three-dimensional pieces explore her personal and family history that reflects her nomadic history from her birth in Germany in a military family through her odyssey of living at more than 40 addresses in various locations throughout her 54 years. Her works are simultaneously individual and social and make her the heir of some of the most influential African American artists of recent times.



"Sweat Equity" by Dominique Moody (Figure 6)

One of her assemblages, with deeply personal significance, is “Sweat Equity” (Figure 6), a term that represents a buyer’s contribution to a property sale (often the down payment) through physical labor rather than capital. It refers specifically to Moody’s family journey of home building and she pictures the actual houses that she lived in and worked on earlier in her life. Constructed in Houston during her stay at Project Row Houses, this artwork communicates the story of how her family worked assiduously to reconstruct houses in lieu of a down payment in order to find satisfactory living quarters. But the program of sweat equity never succeeded for the Moodys. Twice, despite their hard sweat of their labor, they were unable to keep the houses, in effect losing the sweat equity they expended as an entire family. She positions several bottles of various sizes and shapes filled with water around the house that sits atop a moving structure. The water represents the sweat itself, an unnerving signifier of the continuing struggles of millions of Americans to find decent housing at equitable costs. Viewers of “Sweat Equity” can ponder the broader implications of this remarkable assemblage in light of the massive wave of foreclosures and related housing problems during the Great Recession of 2008 to the present.

Yrneh Gabon Brown, a native of Kingston, Jamaica, has lived in Europe and has settled in Los Angeles for many years. As a child, he found inspiration in the very earth of his Jamaican homeland, intuitively recognizing that he was destined to live a life of creative accomplishment. A multi-talented artist, he has worked in film, music, poetry, and performance as well as visual art. These activities have taken him throughout the world, providing him with an artistic range exceedingly rare in a highly specialized, fragmented society. More recently, he has focused extensively on his multimedia assemblages, obtaining additional training at the University of Southern California School of Fine Arts and exhibiting his works in several galleries and museums in Los Angeles and elsewhere.

Many of Brown’s assemblages focus on the African origins of black history and culture throughout the Diaspora. In “Dear Mama” (Figure 7), a mixed media assemblage on fiberglass crusted with crystals, he uses photographic remnants to underscore the point that all black people share a common heritage. By making this artwork in the shape of the African continent, Brown underscores the centrality of Africa as the motherland that gives rise to all features of black creative achievement. Reinforced by the work’s Pan-African title, this message is especially significant in the United States, where knowledge of Africa remains sparse and where slavery and its legacy deliberately sought to separate millions of human beings from their ancestral roots. The photographic remnants add a powerful element to this provocative artwork. The figures represent people of all shades of color, reflecting the accurate state of black demography in the New World. Like Haile Gerima’s magnificent film “Sankofa” (on which Yrneh Brown also worked), “Dear Mama” offers a message of pride and unity to all people of African origin, a message that should resonate with everyone, regardless of racial or ethnic background.



“Dear Mama” by Yrneh Gabon Brown (Figure 7).

These African American assemblage artists constitute an astonishingly vibrant contemporary community. Many even younger artists are currently emerging at the start of the century’s second decade, following in the large footsteps of those who dared to recover the rubble of their communities, establishing a new standard of visual imagination and excellence. Many more are studying in art departments of Los Angeles area colleges and universities. Even more young African American artists are studying in high schools, although state and local budget cuts have curtailed both art instruction and production. When Noah Purifoy created “Sir Watts” in 1966, he had no idea that the African American assemblage movement would be among his most durable legacies. The art world and society in general are the better for it.

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