Oxford History of Art

African-American Art

Sharon F. Patton

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Towards a new abstraction

In the early 1960s during the rise and fall of pop art, the interest in Abstract Expressionism continued. Several African-American painters, including Bill Hutson, Oliver Jackson, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, and Vivian Browne, embraced this older form of Abstract Expressionism. Several new art-critical categories in painting emerged: colour-field, hard-edge, and monochromatic (Minimalism). The visual effect was aloof and elusive in comparison with the bombastic expressionism of the previous decade. African-American artists followed these styles, on their own initiative or as a result of their formal art education at universities and art school, where many proponents of the new art taught—especially in or near New York City, still the international art capital.

Are you black enough?

Black American artists who embraced the new abstraction were caught in debates about culture, race and community. The cultural underpinning of Black Nationalism/Black Power forced artists to be accountable. How are you going to be part of the revolution? What are you doing to ensure that artistic enterprise reflects who you are as a 'black' American? (This was construed as different from a 'Negro' American, which connoted someone who adhered to the old integrationist philosophies of the 1950s, or accepted their social place in society, as

102 Jeff Donaldson
JamPactJelliTite, 1988.

during the first half of the twentieth century.) The emphasis on 'black' did not allow for 'American' as a descendant of white European culture, at least not more than was due to African heritage.

In the minds of most Black Nationalist artists, abstraction was aligned with the mainstream (translate as 'white') art community. Abstraction was dismissed as 'art for art's sake' and unsuitable for the needs of black art, which needed to be accessible to all. Consequently, Sam Gilliam, William T. Williams, Alvin Loving, and Richard Hunt were not seen as 'black' except for the fact that they were African-Americans. Only abstract art which apparently emulated African design, or which was supported by a statement of intent referring to experiences in Africa or to the study of African art, was accepted under the rubric of 'black'. The works of Ben Jones or Jeff Donaldson, therefore, would be 'black art'. A dichotomy 'black' versus 'mainstream' art was established in the art-historical and critical literature, and especially in the art criticisms and editorials published in the *New York Times*. Elsa H. Fine's book, *The Afro-American Artists* (1973), provides a

Art styles

New abstraction: Two landmark exhibitions, 'Toward a New Abstraction', Jewish Museum (1963) and 'Post Painterly Abstraction', Los Angeles County Museum (1964) showed the continuing popularity of Abstract Expressionism, and represented attempts to uphold the dominance of painting over the growing popularity of mixed-media and representational art. The 'new' abstraction was a reaction against Abstract Expressionists' disregard for formal ordering and lack of technical restraint. The heroic spirit of Abstract Expressionism, the free flow of paint and gestural brushwork prevailed, but now controlled by a more objective and conceptual approach. The paintings of Helen Frankenthaler or Mark Rothko illustrate this more classical sense of restraint in technique and effect.

Colour-field painting: a painting style that flourished from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s in the US. Its proponents rejected illusionism of depth and gestural brushwork, applying colour in thin, translucent washes that often span the entire canvas as if depicting a detail of some larger field. The emphasis is on the flatness of painting.

The peak of colour-field painting came in the 1960s with the formation of the Washington Color School. This included Gene Davis (*c.* 1958) and Morris Louis, representatives of the second generation of Abstract Expressionists, who exploited the physical properties of oil and acrylic paints on canvas. They were professors at the American University (Washington, DC) and, along with Kenneth Noland (b. 1924), formed the core of this regional group identified by Clement Greenberg.

Hard-edge painting: a phenomenon of the late 1950s and the 1960s. It first appeared in 1958 in Los Angeles, and then in New York. Flat areas of colour are circumscribed within carefully delineated forms as part of a formal investigation of colour and design problems. Kenneth Noland and Frank Stella (b. 1936) made typically geometric, symmetrical paintings in a limited palette. These, with the early works of Ad Reinhardt, became the precursors of Minimalism. Some painters, for example Frank Stella, abandoned the traditional rectangle for a differently shaped canvas format.

Art movements

Minimalism: characteristic of the late 1960s to the mid-1970s, primarily in the US. The term emerged in an article by the art critic Barbara Rose, 'ABC Art' (*Art in America*, October 1965), in which she referred to art pared down to the minimum. It denoted the process of reducing painting and sculpture to their essentials: surface, shape and a basic palette, often of only one colour. Representational imagery was abandoned. Painters Barnett Neuman, Ad Reinhardt, and sculptor David Smith are among the foremost representatives of this art movement pioneered in America and which gained international significance. Minimalism is more frequently associated with sculpture that does not show the artist's hand, is produced by industrial fabricators, and displays elemental geometric forms—'primary structures', known as such after an exhibition of the same title, organized by Kynaston McShine a black curator at the Jewish Museum, New York City. Most sculptures were installed in urban environments, most familiarly as public sculptures in front of corporate offices.

Neo-expressionism: an international art movement of the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. It was a reaction against conceptual art and modernist rejection of imagery. Typical of the style is gestural paint handling and allegory, using imagery from a variety of sources, including dreams, classical mythology and non-art sources, for instance, popular novels and newspaper ads. Works often have psychological or conceptual orientation.

Conceptual art: an international art movement of the mid-1960s and 1970s which was made popular by American artist Sol LeWitt in 1967. The idea rather than the object is paramount. Viewers see a document of an artist's thinking, usually a statement rather than a physical realization. The event itself is the art. It challenges our definition of art by insisting that only the leap of the imagination, not the execution, is art. Works are a by-product of the creative process and need only be documented in some way, usually by verbal, photographic or cinematic means.

Environmental art: sculpture that is less an object than a place viewers might enter in a gallery or natural landscape. This is an art that avoids the issues of sale and ownership by either being temporary or being represented by photographs and other documentation.

mirror of the times. Labels like 'mainstream' and 'black' were constantly thrown about in the print media. Black-produced art whose styles appeared no different from newer art styles of white American artists was considered 'mainstream'. Fine interjected another category, 'blackstream' art, which denoted 'those who derive their inspiration from the Black protest movement, the Black experience in America, or the motifs, symbols, and color of Africa yet work within an established tradition'. Fine made another distinction, which she called 'black art movement', to denote artists who aligned their aesthetic and intent with Black Nationalism and separatist politics. Those distinctions were not often shared by African-American art historians and critics; for them, 'blackstream' and 'black art movement' collapsed under the rubric 'black art'.

Recent critical reviews of the art of the 1960s and '70s have shown that elements of an African-American aesthetic can be found: in im-

provisational technique, or the African aesthetic in accumulation of materials, or use of textiles. Examining the following artists, we shall see them from the perspective of their times as 'mainstream' artists, but from more contemporary critical perspectives as 'black'. Alvin Loving, Sam Gilliam, and Barbara Chase-Riboud are now seen as straddling both aesthetic camps.

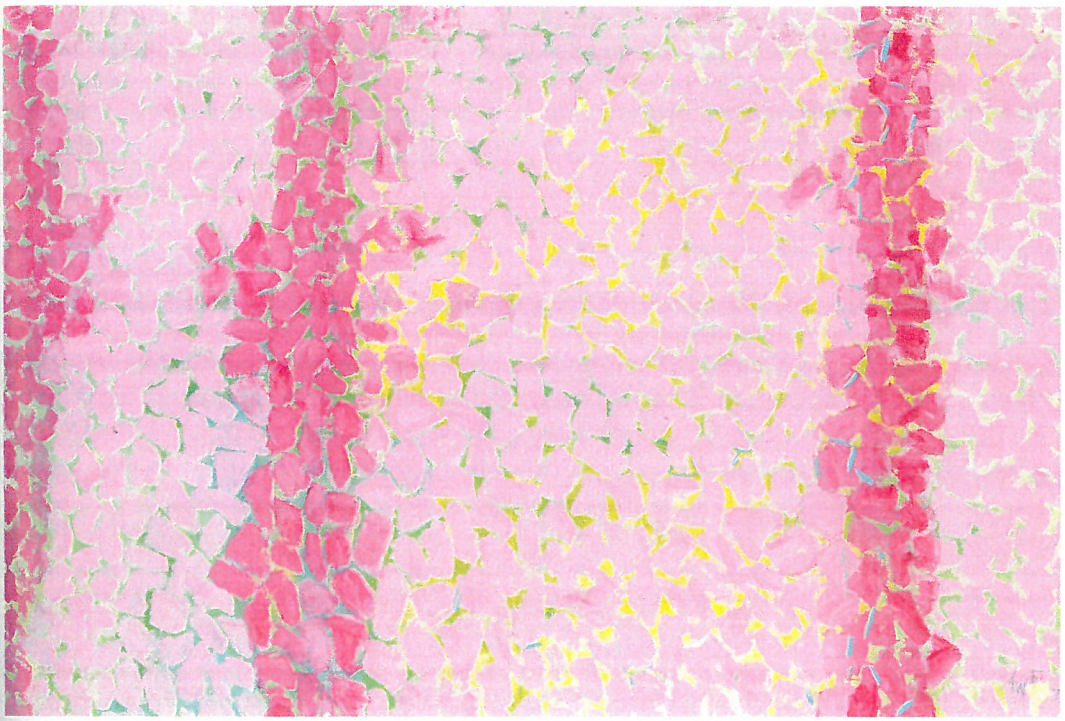
Painting

> Creative art is for all time and is therefore independent of time. It is of all ages, of every land, and if by this we mean the creative spirit in man which produces a picture or a statue is common to the whole civilized world, independent of age, race and nationality, the statement may stand unchallenged. (Alma Thomas, 1970)

Alma Thomas (1891–1978) attained recognition as a professional artist in 1960, after she retired from teaching art in the Washington, DC, public schools. Shortly before then she enrolled at American University, where Jacob Kainen and Joe Summerford were teaching art that emphasized colour-field painting and colour theory. Initially a representational artist, Thomas quickly became an abstract painter interested in colour and compositional structure. Within twelve years she too was creating colour-field paintings similar to those of the New York School—painters identified with Abstract Expressionism and its offshoots, like colour-field painting. In 1972 she was the first African-American woman to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art. Another solo show took place at the Corcoran Gallery of Art (Washington, DC). She was assured a place in American art.

Thomas had her first retrospective exhibition in 1966 at the invitation of art historian James Porter, director of the Gallery of Art at Howard University. This resulted in a series called *Earth Paintings*, of which *Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto* [**103**] is one. Her interest in nature, plants and flowers and landscapes provides the basis for this study of colour and light, one of the most Minimalist colour-field paintings ever produced by an African-American artist. African-American artist and friend, Delilah Pierce (1904–92), recalled that she and Alma often took long drives in the country, and Thomas would show a keen interest in the different effects of light and atmosphere. Nature is here reduced to staccato strokes of one to four colours. The spacing and repetition of colours create a visual rhythm: the formalized progressions of symphonies rather than the syncopation of jazz sensed in her slightly later paintings.

The effect is of a myopic view of a screen of flowers against a formalized garden landscape. And indeed the *Earth Paintings* series, a long-running project, with later works becoming more geometric, almost mosaic-like in effect, was inspired by wind and flowers. Seeing



103 Alma Thomas
Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto, 1973.
Thomas was attracted to the writings of Johannes Itten, a Swiss artist, whose dictum 'colour is life' is sensed in this painting with its optical tensions and movement, created by modulating the pink colours and spacing them over the green-yellow background. In its atmospheric and luminous effects *Wind and Crepe Myrtle Concerto* is like her paintings of the mid-1960s.

this painting, one is reminded of novelist Alice Walker's book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1977): 'guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength in search of my Mother's garden I found my own'.

Sam Gilliam (b. 1933), after studying art at the University of Louisville (Kentucky), moved to Washington, DC, where he quickly changed from a figurative painting style to hard-edge and colour-field abstractions. In 1966, he first poured translucent paints on unprimed canvas, making stained paintings like those of Morris Louis and Kenneth Noland, two central artists of the Washington Color School. A year later, Gilliam began to fold his paintings, experimenting with the paint's viscosity. At the age of 35 he dramatically altered the installation format for painting. He discarded stretchers for mounting the canvas and instead hung it free-form, from the wall or ceiling. Popularly referred to as 'drape' paintings, they represented one method of making paintings project from the wall, an interest shared by several painters in the late 1960s and the 1970s. Gilliam's 'drape' paintings catapulted him into the American art mainstream.

For the next four years, Gilliam continued to experiment with the ways in which painting can make the spatial transition from wall to floor and/or ceiling, and during this time he continued to use stretched canvasses as well. His first full-scale exhibition was as part of 'Gilliam-Krebs-McGowen' (1969) at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, which at that

time was the museum for contemporary art in Washington, DC. Eight of his massive drape paintings were suspended in two galleries and the central atrium of the museum. The effect was dramatic and monumental, as can be imagined looking at *Carousel Form II* [**104**]. Each installation, in this exhibit and in others, is site-specific, simultaneously transforming architectural space and changing the perception of mass and surface of the work. As an example, *Carousel Form II* creates a tension between structure and order versus improvisation and disorder.

Shortly afterwards, Gilliam began using poles and thongs to extend the canvas or polypropylene, at times reaching a length of 30 feet (9 m). These drape paintings of the 1970s engage with space as environmental sculpture, yet, because of the medium, remain paintings. The weightiness of the canvas was immediately hailed as masterful. Some time during the 1970s, he also made small-scale paintings (8 feet/2.4 m), called 'cowls', which were hung vertically along the wall.

In 1971, Gilliam had his first outdoor painting installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In *Seahorse*, two canvasses (60 × 90 feet/18 × 27 m) were hung along the building's exterior. With exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art (1969), the Museum of Modern Art (1971), the 36th Venice Biennale (1973) and the Corcoran's '34th Biennial of Contemporary American Painting', (1975), Gilliam exemplified the mainstream artist.

Gilliam's success and type of art concerned many 'black art' proponents. In a period of political fervour about race and racism, Black Nationalism and black art, his paintings had no identifiable black aesthetic. That these reductive colour-field paintings were widely acclaimed by mainstream critics and curators placed Gilliam at the centre

104 Sam Gilliam
Carousel Form II, 1969.

of heated discussion about black art and mainstream art, and at the same time further problematized the issue about what constitutes black art.

Recently art critics have revised or corrected previous perceptions of Gilliam's drape paintings as being non-representational and lacking any indication of black culture. For instance, John Beardsley, who earlier saw the 'cowl' paintings as devoid of subject, later saw them as allusions to floral or figural forms. African-American art critic and artist Keith Morrison discovered (1980s) a subtler aesthetic of blackness in all of Gillam's drape paintings:

> I feel that aspects of Gilliam's work relate to Africanness in ways that have been overlooked. I refer especially to those draped pieces that are evocative of the spectres of garments, of the dramatic gesture that fabric assumes as it becomes more characteristic of movement and personality than any form, human or otherwise, that might be contained beneath it.

Morrison approached these works from a pan-African perspective and by doing so placed them within the culture of the African diaspora:

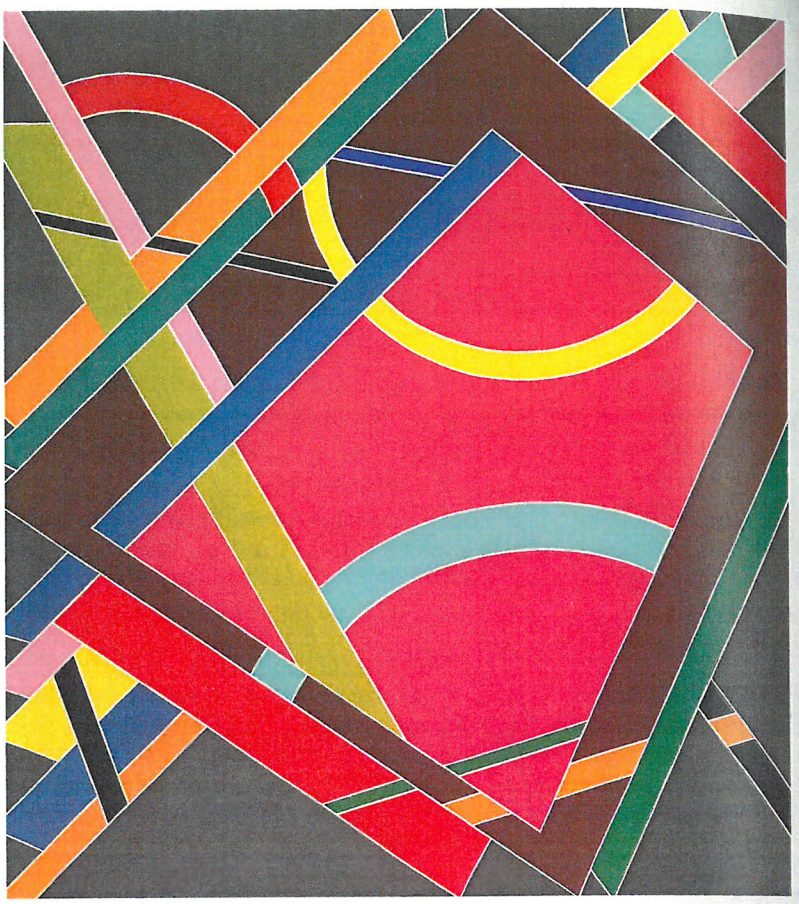
> When I first saw Gilliam's drapes, I was reminded of childhood in the most African parts of the West Indies ... [in a masquerade there was a] cloak with its glittering colors which seemed to dance on air, Gilliam's color, with its brilliance and many-faceted hues inescapably reminds one of the bright colors of African and Afro-American clothes and designs.[10]

Morrison also applied certain principles of the AfriCobra definition of 'black art' to Sam Gilliam's drape paintings:

> Many African cultures relied especially heavily upon color to reveal aspects of spiritualness. There remains in Black people the capacity to find spiritualness in sheer bright color, as though they were fascinated with the potential of irrationality. Gilliam uses color in this way very well, because he understands color principles and he sees color not only as hue, but as substance, as material. Gilliam puts colors together not only according to their visual potential but also because of their physical structure. He has therefore expanded his vision of color to become at once a sensation and a material.

When William T. Williams (b. 1942) organized an exhibition of the works of Sam Gilliam, Melvin Edwards, Steve Kelsey and himself for the Studio Museum in Harlem ('X to the Fourth Power', 1969), he dared to represent black art as mainstream avant-garde and to break the mould of 'black art shows' by including one white American artist, Steve Kelsey. Williams believed the artist has to be outside of the community; the artist's 'function is to bring *to* the community the highest level of ideals and ideas'. He disagreed with those who felt that black artists should reflect upon the socio-economic plight of black Americans and try somehow with their art to provide solutions or

105 William T. Williams
Elbert Jackson L. A. M. F. Part II, 1969.
Tension is created as each strip competes visually with others; yet each is loosely joined with the others in a whole. Individuality and collectivity may be under consideration. Williams was interested in pure formalism, i.e. reducing form to the most elemental shapes, geometric in nature and reminiscent of architecture. The science of colour also interested him.



socio-political comment. However, he felt that art in the community was laudable; consequently he started the artist-in-residence programme at the Studio Museum in Harlem and, for a brief period (1968–70), organized the Smokehouse painters (including Melvin Edwards) to paint abstract hard-edge murals on building exteriors in Harlem.

Williams became a major practitioner of hard-edge painting for about six years. *Elbert Jackson L. A. M. F. Part II* [**105**] is devoid of emotional content, exhibiting a cool reductive formalism, what David C. Driskell called a 'highly reasoned art, a symbol of the urban architectural scene'. It has a formal purity that emphasizes colour and the variations of pigments and surfaces under different lights. The sense of borders framing the central image or design is discarded. Instead, the alignment of shapes, repetitious use of pattern and diagonal lines convey the sense of looking at a portion of a larger schema of colour and line. Visual tension results.

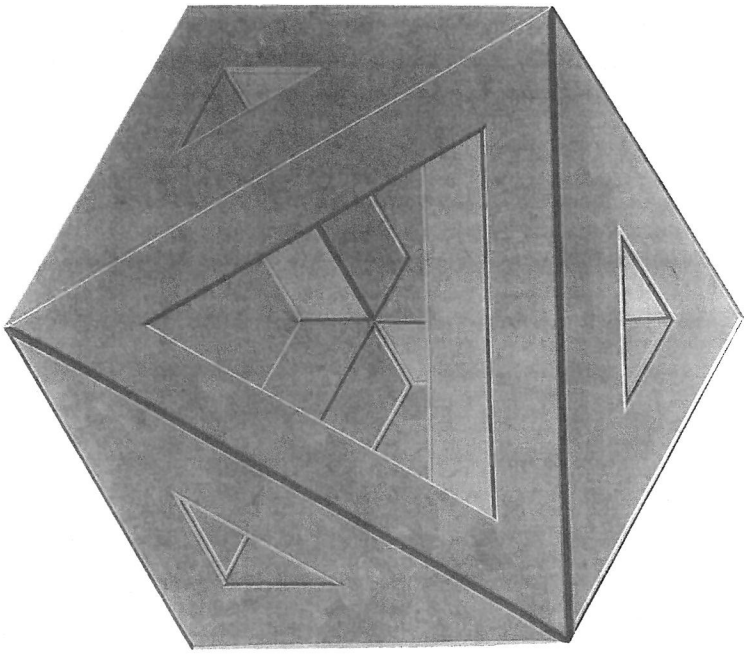
Alvin D. Loving Jr (b. 1935) also embraced hard-edge painting. His early works were geometrically shaped canvasses, single or grouped:

cube, parallelogram, hexagon, or—in the work illustrated here—*Septehedron* [**106**]. In these works the experience of painting was complete in itself and not (as in Williams's paintings) the representation of a segment of visual reality. Loving remarked that 'You didn't need subject matter—the paint itself was the subject matter.'

Soon after coming to New York City in 1968, Loving succeeded in having a solo show at the Whitney Museum (1969), which he credits to effective agitation on the part of artists' groups.

He was prolific, completing 120 works within two months, and caught the approval of mainstream art critics and collectors. But he became increasingly dissatisfied with his Minimalist hard-edge paintings; they lacked, he felt, an expressive quality. In this state of disenchantment and on the way to Detroit for a commission, Loving stopped by the Whitney Museum and saw the exhibition 'Abstract Design in American Quilts' (1971). It irrevocably changed him, stirring up memories of his childhood and family, particularly his grandmother, a quilter: 'All of a sudden I understood these quilts and the people who made them.'

At once he began to cut up 60 paintings into diamond shapes and strips, learned how to use a sewing machine, stitched them together and hung the work from the ceiling or wall. Painted fabric became hand-dyed fabric pieces and, sewn together, looked like garments made of African-American quilts. *Self-Portrait No. 23* [**107**] presents an unexpected visual rhythm, reminiscent of bebop, jazz. The swathe of hanging, hand-dyed cloth strips, with stitches that criss-cross the sur-

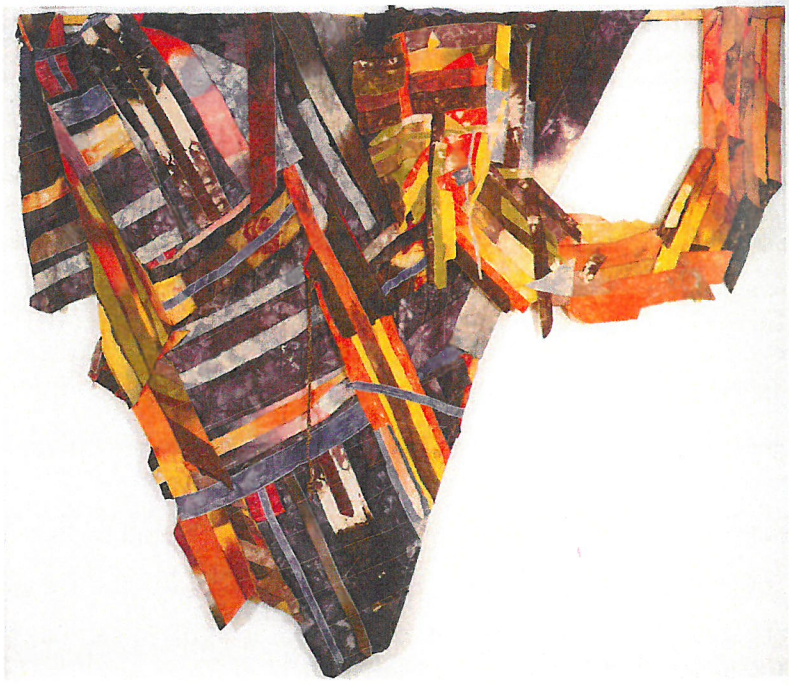


106 Alvin D. Loving, Jr
Septehedron, 1970.

faces, and with space included as a part of the composition, represents a dramatic move away from the conventions of painting. Shocked, Loving's gallery cancelled his contract.

Robert L. Thompson (1937–66) experimented with bohemian life in Louisville, Kentucky, and then left for Provincetown, Massachusetts in the summer of 1958. He joined the 'new figuralist' painters, Jan Müller (1922–58), Lester Johnson (b. 1919), and Red Grooms, who are credited with introducing figures to abstraction to produce 'figurative expressionism'.

Almost a year later he arrived in New York City, where he had his first solo show. His interest in figurative expressionism was already apparent, with his schematic compositions including human figures set in brilliantly and intensely coloured landscapes. Thompson developed his personal symbols of sexuality and death from contemporary literature, music, and historical art masterpieces. He absorbed the visionary expressionist style of Jan Müller's works, German Expressionism, Paul Gauguin, and Abstract Expressionism. He wove figurative forms within flat, schematic and repetitious abstract designs, reducing each form to its simplest shape, and appropriated compositional elements and iconic motifs from masterpieces of Western art, some of which he observed during his trips to Europe (1961–3, 1966). *Blue Madonna* (1961) is based on early Sienese School Madonna altarpieces by Duccio, *Blue Caledonia Flight* (1963) upon Francisco Goya's *Los Caprichos* (1799). *Expulsion and Nativity* [**108**] incorporates figural



107 Alvin D. Loving, Jr
Self-Portrait No. 23, 1973.
An alternative to unstretched canvas, Alvin D. Loving's fabric construction speaks of artisanship, 'women's art', African-American culture and personal history. The model for the quilts which had inspired Loving was West African narrow-strip weaving, and the compositions it creates.

108 Robert L. Thompson
Expulson and Nativity, 1964.
This composition incorporates images from Piero della Francesca's panel painting of the *Nativity* (*c.*1470) and Masaccio's fresco of the *Expulsion from the Garden* (*c.*1427).

compositions from two Italian Renaissance painters. Religious symbolism becomes ominous allegory. Anxious moral and theological speculations on the nature and purpose of existence are strongly suggested in this and other paintings. Thompson's works can also be seen as tormented emotional portraits, revealing the demons of his own psyche. Yet such interpretations stress the elusive quality. Thompson is an enigmatic painter, who defies categorization.

Cultural critic Stanley Crouch has written of him:

> The black identity in Thompson's world is part of a boiling gumbo. Heroes and demons, angels and villains, come from everywhere, and the victim reverses his role—usually in intimate situations—to become the monster or join the gargoyles. Adoration intertwines with cannibalism; love, narcissism, and dependency descend to a revolting and devouring gluttony. ...Thompson improvised the world he knew onto his canvases, creating a mulatto art rich with rowdy, seditious humor.[11]

In 1967 Raymond Saunders (b. 1934) considered his work was *not* 'black art'. Ensuing discussions about aesthetics and politics motivated him to publish a pamphlet titled *Black is a Color* (1967), in which he stressed individual expression:

> some angry artists are using their arts as political tools, instead of vehicles of free expression, ...an artist who is always harping upon resistance, discrimination, opposition, besides being a drag, eventually plays right into the hands of the politicians he claims to despise—and is held there, unwittingly (and witlessly) reviving slavery in another form. For the artist this is aesthetic atrophy.
>
> Certainly the american black artist is in a unique position to express certain aspects of the current american scene, both negative and positive, but if he restricts himself to these alone, he may risk becoming a mere cypher, a walking

protest, a politically prescribed stereotype, negating his own mystery, and allowing himself to be shuffled off into an arid overall mystique.

Racial hang-ups are extraneous to art. no artist can afford to let them obscure what runs through all art—the living root and the ever-growing aesthetic record of human spiritual and intellectual experience. can't we get clear of these degrading limitations, and recognize the wider reality of art, where color is the means and not the end?

Saunders established his professional career in the San Francisco Bay Area, California. Using his knowledge and love for visual illusionism, nineteenth-century landscapes and still-lifes, and Abstract Expressionism, he took a variety of images and textures from popular

109 Raymond Saunders
Marie's Bill, 1970.

culture and reassembled them as if anticipating that they would be re-examined, layer by layer, by an archaeologist. Mixed-media paintings like *Marie's Bill* [**109**] are accumulations of fragmentary impressions, often tinged with whimsy or satire. Consequently Saunders's paintings function as a repository of memory; according to the artist, his 'objective is to convey what could be anybody's history, anybody's landscape or idea of consciousness'. The meaning of his paintings is deliberately elusive: fragments of images tease the viewer; threads of meaning keep his art from being dated. Saunders, by recreating graffiti on urban walls, disregards traditional ideas about 'good' or 'quality' art. The art of the city is an art of the street, and because his paintings appear like city walls, they represent the disasters of contemporary society: entrenched cultural, racial and political ghettoes.