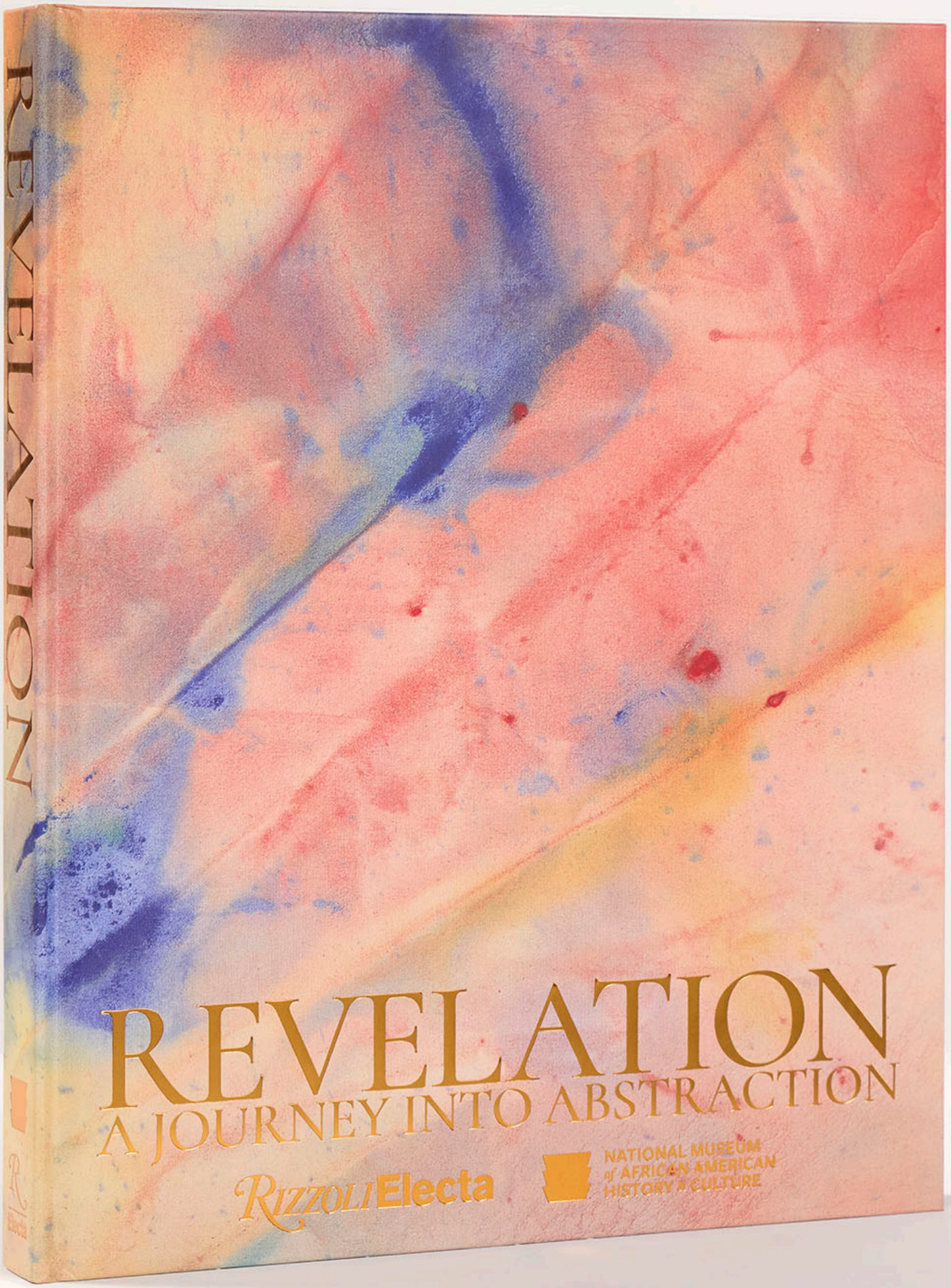
REVELATION
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A JOURNEY INTO ABSTRACTION
RIZZOLI Electa
NATIONAL MUSEUM of AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY & CULTURE

REVELATION: A JOURNEY INTO ABSTRACTION

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The Tension of Color and the Space In-Between: Building the Abstraction Collection

As an artist, formed culturally and environmentally in the traditions of western man, I am intensely interested in probing, exploring the problems of color, space, and form, which challenge all contemporary painters. However, as a Black American, who sincerely believes in the ideals upon which this country was founded, I cannot but be sensitive and responsive in my painting to the injustice, the indignity, and hypocrisy suffered by Black citizens.

—Charles H. Alston, 1968

It is not mere serendipity that the first artwork acquired by the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC) was *Walking* (1958; fig. 1) by modernist and abstract painter Charles H. Alston. Alston once called the impulse to concern oneself with the problems of one's own people the unique predicament of the Black artist in the United States today.[1] This crisis of conscience, a tension arising from wanting to completely immerse oneself in the ivory tower of art-making while experiencing the reality of being a Black artist in the United States, has been particularly fraught for African American abstract artists in American art history.

In creating an art collection within a history and culture museum, our goal was to introduce our audience to the broad range of American art styles, movements, and themes.[2] However, we also wanted to create a place where visitors would appreciate the deep connections between the artworks in the gallery and the stories, histories, and narratives woven throughout the rest of the Museum. As I collected around the field of abstraction, I reflected upon the unique challenges—discrimination, aesthetic expectations, and community obligations—that African American abstract artists have had to confront when seeking the freedom to create. I also discovered,

FIG. 1 Charles H. Alston, *Walking*, 1958

and the collection reveals, that for many Black artists, creating nonrepresentational art does not have to be a repudiation of racial identity and experiences. It can be a vehicle to express culture, to revel in the beauty of nature, to protest injustice, and to explore the purely abstract. Our collection seeks to represent the complex entirety of the abstract impulse and its various manifestations among Black artists.

The story of abstraction is interwoven with Black history and culture. Alston's *Walking*, for example, fits both an art historical and a historical narrative. Its flattened planes of color and West African–derived sculptural forms locate this work at the midpoint of social realism, European modernism, and abstraction, while he was inspired by the events of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, whose eventual success influenced the political protest of the 1960s, including the 1963 March on Washington.

FIG. 2 Merton Simpson, *Confrontation 28A* and *Confrontation 28AA*, 1966

The Civil Rights Movement profoundly influenced African American artists. In response to the era's social and political upheavals, a group of Black artists based in New York City, including Alston, Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Hale Woodruff, formed the collective Spiral. Active from 1963 to 1965, they met weekly to grapple with whether art should explicitly reflect and contribute to the struggle for racial justice or if African American artists should align themselves with broader formalist and Abstract Expressionist movements. These discussions often revealed significant ideological and stylistic differences within the group.

Given the complexity of these issues, I was interested in acquiring works by all the members of Spiral to illustrate the varied trajectories artists pursued in response to the era's pressing concerns. Of the fifteen members, the Museum holds works by ten: Alston, Emma Amos, Bearden, Ernest Crichlow, Felrath Hines, Alvin Hollingsworth, Lewis, Richard Mayhew, Merton Simpson, and Woodruff. These acquisitions underscore the group's wide-ranging aesthetic and political approaches. Two notable examples, Simpson's *Confrontation 28A* and *28AA* (1966; fig. 2) and Woodruff's *Untitled (Green Landscape)* (ca. 1969; p. 55), were created shortly after Spiral's dissolution in 1965. Although both works engage with abstraction to varying degrees, they also reflect the broader ideological divide between universal artistic principles and art as a vehicle for political engagement.

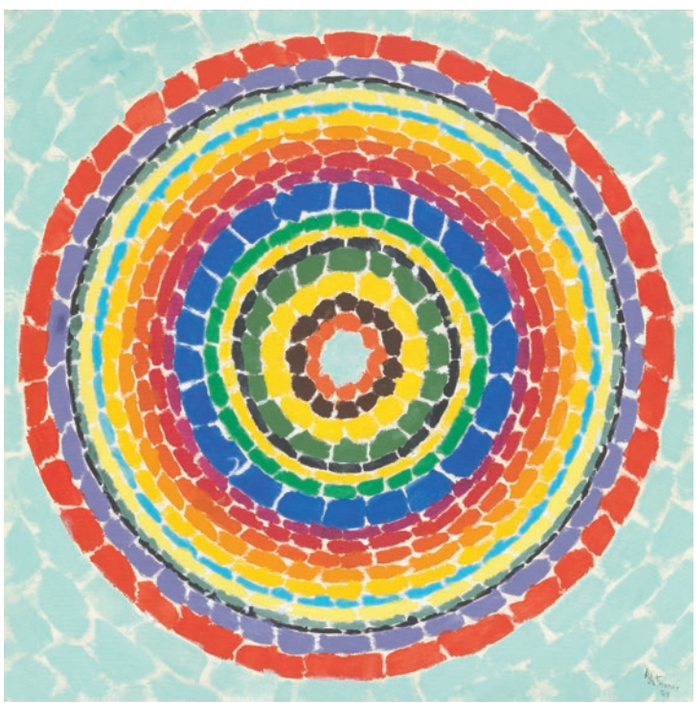
Simpson's *Confrontation* series illustrates the sometimes violent tension between Black and white people at that time. It was important to collect this work as not only was Simpson underappreciated in the broader art world, but he produced work that reflected the aesthetic sensibilities of Abstract Expressionism while addressing difficult social issues. "I'm painting what I think I see: ugly people fighting ugly people," Simpson said. "I see wrongness on either side. I just think that it's an ugly thing. I want to paint it as that. And I think if people can see it, and frown upon it enough, it might make them think, 'Am I really a part of this? Then I should want to do something about it.'"[3]

The acquisition of Woodruff's *Untitled (Green Landscape)* was a deliberate effort to highlight his abstract works, which have often been overshadowed by his representational and historical paintings that document and celebrate the social conditions and achievements of African American life and history. By 1955, Woodruff had shifted predominantly toward abstraction yet remained deeply informed by the formal qualities of West African art. While he experimented with a range of styles—many explicitly rooted in Black subject matter—Woodruff, like Alston, firmly believed that all artists should have the freedom to engage with any artistic movement or aesthetic tradition, stating, "It can be as local as all get-out, but it has to have this transcendental quality in order for it to be universal. . . . And this is the important thing."[4]

African American women were also creating significant abstract work with a wide range of influences. I was particularly committed to acquiring their works, recognizing that their contribution had been marginalized within the movement due to pervasive sexism and racism in the art world. By chance, while reviewing a selection of artworks slated for auction, I encountered *Recarte* (ca. 1968; p. 110) by Mavis Pusey, in which the dynamic interplay of color and form conveys a sense of lyrical movement. Further research revealed that Pusey synthesized a range of artistic influences—including Cubism, Constructivism, Futurism, and geometric abstraction—into a distinctive visual language, as she described it:

> My work consists of geometrical forms in a variety of geometrical configurations. . . . These forms are based on buildings around the Manhattan area. I am inspired by the energy and the beat of the construction and demolition of these buildings—the tempo and movement mold into a synthesis and, for me, become another aesthetic of abstraction.[5]

Alma Thomas also developed her aesthetic style during the 1960s. As a DC-based museum, we thought it especially



TOP: FIG. 3 Sam Gilliam, *Yet Do I Marvel (Countee Cullen)*, 2016, installation view in Heritage Hall, NMAAHC

BOTTOM: FIG. 4 Alma Thomas, *Spring—Delightful Flower Bed*, 1967

important to collect the work of local Washington Color School painters, such as Thomas and Sam Gilliam. Known for their distinctive approach, Color Field paintings emphasize large, flat areas of luminous color, minimal brushwork, and a focus on spatial relationships and perception. The artists utilized staining and soaking techniques while embracing geometric abstraction, ultimately shaping a unique visual language centered on color and space.

Throughout her career as both a painter and an arts educator, Thomas evolved significantly from working in traditional figuration to abstraction. Notably, it was not until 1964 that she developed the celebrated, abstracted mosaic style for which she became widely known. I first encountered *Spring—Delightful Flower Bed* (1967; fig. 4) at the home of Bill and Brenda Galloway, who eventually donated the artwork, and was immediately captured by its radiant concentric bands of color. The work exemplifies her transition from a realist approach to a method focused purely on the abstract interpretation of both the natural world and the cosmos, conveyed through a mosaic of color. She referred to works like this one as "Earth Paintings," inspired by the beauty of nature—in this instance, the circular flower beds at the National Arboretum in Washington, DC.

Thomas explained her decision not to engage with politics in her art: "I've never bothered painting the ugly things in life. People struggling, having difficulty. You meet that when you go out, and then you have to come back and see the same thing hanging on the wall. No. I wanted something beautiful that you could sit down and look at."[6] This statement underscores her commitment to creating art that offered an escape from societal strife, choosing instead to present beauty and serenity for contemplation.

Thomas's contemporary Sam Gilliam similarly once remarked, "Ugly art isn't going to save the world. Politics is politics. I prefer to paint."[7] The prominent Washington Color School artist is renowned for his innovative artistic techniques, particularly his groundbreaking use of color-soaked, draped canvases, as well as his contributions to hard-edge painting and geometric abstraction. The Museum owns multiple works by Gilliam, including *April 4* (1972; p. 152), a heavily impastoed painting using thick layers of paint to commemorate the 1968 assassination of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

In 2015, I commissioned Gilliam to create a monumental five-panel painting for the Museum's Heritage Hall titled *Yet Do I Marvel (Countee Cullen)* (2016; fig. 3). The painting features Gilliam's signature use of color and hard-edge forms. His title references Countee Cullen's 1925 poem that reflects upon the paradoxes of life and divine justice. By virtue of this title, Gilliam implicates himself in the meaning of the poem, as an artist who embraced the contradiction of being compelled by God to be an artist and express the erstwhile beauty of the world while simultaneously facing oppression.

The tension between abstract art and the Black experience continued to be a source of profound internal conflict for other artists as well. One notable example is Al Loving, whose investigations into the geometry of the square, through the manipulation of light, color, and form, garnered immediate acclaim. In 1969, he made history by becoming the first African American artist to have a solo exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. However, the fame and recognition Loving received for his work were not without personal conflict. Reflecting on this period, he expressed a sense of dissonance: "I felt stuck inside that box . . . I mean, this was 1968—the Democratic convention, this was the war—and I'm doing these pictures. The contradiction between my life at the time and these pictures."[8] This internal struggle

FIG. 5 Alvin D. Loving, *Maputo #5*, 1993

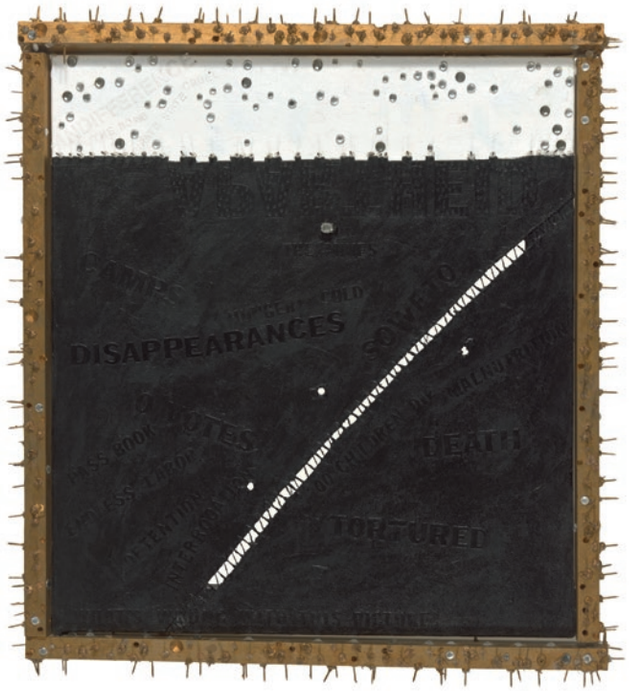


FIG. 6 Howardena Pindell, *Separate But Equal: Apartheid*, 1987

prompted Loving to abandon his use of the square in the early 1970s, turning instead to dyed fabric paintings and, later, to paper collages that incorporated spirals—forms he associated with African concepts of geometry, life, and ongoing growth.

The Museum's collection includes two significant works by Loving: *Janice* (1970; p. 93) and *Maputo #5* (1993; fig. 5), both of which represent critical junctures in his artistic trajectory. Created in the year following his groundbreaking solo exhibition, *Janice* stands as a quintessential example of Loving's hard-edge geometric abstraction. In contrast, *Maputo #5*, produced after his tenure as a visiting artist at the 1992 Ujamaa Workshop in Maputo, Mozambique, reflects a shift in his aesthetic approach, highlighting the transformative impact of his African experiences on his artistic practice.

Like Loving, Howardena Pindell experienced a pivotal shift in her artistic practice following a significant event; for her, it was after a serious car accident in 1979. Prior to this moment, she had worked primarily in the formal aesthetics of abstraction. However, in the wake of the accident and a series of racially charged incidents, her work increasingly became socially and politically engaged. Her abstractions evolved to incorporate, to varying degrees, figural elements, representational imagery, and text—an addition she deemed essential for ensuring clarity of message. Reflecting on this dual approach, Pindell stated, "I continue to use text in my current work, but my practice has two heads: my abstract works are about beauty and finding a peaceful place to put my thinking; my more figurative pieces address political issues."[9]

Pindell's *Separate But Equal: Apartheid* (1987; fig. 6) confronts the systematic erasure of Black South Africans' human rights under apartheid, a rigid racial caste system

FIG. 7 Hank Willis Thomas, *Spiral*, 2022

imposed by the country's white ruling class. The work specifically critiques the unequal impact of the diamond and gold mining industries on Black and white citizens. Pindell organizes the composition into three distinct sections: the upper portion contains words such as Barbaric, Parasitic, and Profit; the central section features terms like Endless Labor, Pass Book, and 0 Votes; and the lower black segment—visibly torn from and tenuously reattached to the rest of the canvas—bears the words Malnutrition, Death, and Torture. The integration of rhinestones, nails, and a painted gold frame intensifies the work's commentary on the exploitation and violence of this era. Although markedly different from her earlier abstract works, I selected this piece not only for its engagement with the Anti-Apartheid Movement but also for its historical resonance with American segregation, a system that directly influenced apartheid.

For a younger generation of Black artists, the reconciliation of abstract artistic practice with political agency is no longer a matter of existential deliberation but rather an integrated and intentional mode of creative expression. For example, Torkwase Dyson's work is informed by geometry, architecture, and abstraction and explores how bodies of color have and continue to negotiate spatial order in history and in the present. Her work *I Can't Breathe (Water Table)* (2018; p. 145) refers to the death of Eric Garner by police violence, and it was featured in her 2018 solo exhibition that paid homage to an enslaved man who escaped to freedom by concealing himself in a large box and having himself shipped to Philadelphia. She embraces abstraction as a spectrum of expression that inherently engages with sociopolitical issues, stating, "There's political abstraction, there's social abstraction, environmental abstraction—all these umbrellas under abstraction. . . . I think in geometric abstraction, it has to play in that register of politics for me, so that we understand how systems work."[10]

The historical continuum between slavery and the modern prison-industrial complex serves as the central theme of Hank Willis Thomas's *Spiral* (2022; fig. 7). In this work, Thomas intertwines fabric from the US flag with cloth from decommissioned prison uniforms, visually merging the Stars and Stripes with the bars of prison cells and the black-and-white stripes of chain-gang uniforms. This powerful juxtaposition critiques the nation's professed commitment to liberty, highlighting the persistent contradictions between American ideals and the lived experiences of marginalized communities. Reflecting on this connection, Thomas explains, "The thing about America: liberty, justice, equality are all terms that come to mind but, for millions of Americans throughout its entire history as a nation, that has never really been true. . . . Looking at prison uniforms and recognizing that the stripes in the uniforms have the same size stripe as many American flags, I couldn't help but make that correlation between the stars and bars and the bars that people live in all around the country."[11]

The past is now present, and the tension between abstraction and racial identity, long debated within the African American artistic community, underscores broader historical and cultural dynamics that have shaped the trajectory of art by Black Americans. By collecting and showcasing works that span from the mid-twentieth century to the present, I have sought to highlight the ways African American artists have navigated the intersections of aesthetics, politics, and personal expression through abstraction.

The artists included in *Revelation* illustrate that abstraction is not merely a stylistic choice but a dynamic mode of engagement with history, identity, and social justice. Whether through the formal innovations of the Washington Color School, the ideological debates of the Spiral collective, or contemporary responses to discrimination, these artists challenge the notion that art by Americans of African descent must be didactic or figurative to be relevant. By contextualizing these artists within the broader scope of African American history and culture, the Museum affirms that abstraction is not an isolated artistic impulse but an integral part of Black cultural expression. Abstract painter William T. Williams once stated, "On the one hand, you have this big umbrella, African Americans that are making abstractions. Well that's a nice umbrella, but the reality is that once you get under that umbrella and you see that each one has a different sensibility then we have to investigate those sensibilities and consider how they have contributed to larger ideas about signs and symbols."[12] As the Museum continues to expand its collection, it remains committed to ensuring that the full breadth of African American artistic innovation is preserved, celebrated, and understood as an essential part of American art history.

Notes

Epigraph: Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson, *A History of African-American Artists: From 1792 to the Present* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 269–70.

1 Ibid., 271.

2 It is important to note the critical role and contribution of former chief curator Dr. Jacquelyn Serwer. Her extraordinary vision and insight were key components in our successful endeavor to build an art collection that would represent a broad swath of African American art production.

3 "Oral History Interview with Merton D. Simpson," November 1968, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

4 *Hale Woodruff: 50 Years of His Art*, exh cat. (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 1979), 85.

5 News Desk, "Mavis Pusey (1928–2019)," *Artforum*, April 30, 2019, https://www.artforum.com/news/mavis-pusey-1928-2019-243209/.

6 Quoted in Eleanor Munro, "The Late Springtime of Alma Thomas: Conversations with the Washington Colorist, from an Absorbing New Book," *Washington Post Magazine*, April 15, 1979.

7 Quoted in Paul Richard, "Soul Survivor: Sam Gilliam, The Last of the Color Painters, Toughs It Out in D.C.," *Washington Post*, February 27, 1993, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1993/02/28/soul-survivor/57df4440-ab46-43eb-834c-ad77e16c764d/.

8 Quoted in John Yau, "Out of the Box: Al Loving's Great Achievement," *Hyperallergic*, December 16, 2012, https://hyperallergic.com/62126/al-loving-torn-canvas/.

9 Quoted in Osei Bonsu, "50 Years of Art and Activism: An Interview with Howardena Pindell," *Frieze Masters, Interviews*, September 25, 2019, https://www.frieze.com/article/50-years-art-and-activism-interview-howardena-pindell.

10 Quoted in Monique Long, "Torkwase Dyson Tells the History of Black Liberation through Cartographic Art," *Document Journal*, September 27, 2019, https://www.documentjournal.com/2019/09/torkwase-dyson-tells-the-history-of-black-liberation-through-cartographic-art/.

11 Quoted in Dream Mc Clinton, "Hank Willis Thomas: 'The Slave Era Is Not Something That Is in the Past,'" *The Guardian*, December 1, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/dec/01/hank-willis-thomas-another-justice-divided-we-stand-the-slave-era-is-not-something-that-is-in-the-past.

12 Quoted in Kellie Jones et al., *Energy/Experimentation: Black Artists and Abstraction 1964–1980*, exh. cat. (New York: Studio Museum in Harlem, 2006), 117.