The Agenda in the Eighties: Socially Conscious Art

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For The Studio Museum in Harlem, THE DECADE SHOW is a curatorial endeavor to insert artists of color, especially African American artists, into the history of contemporary art in the United States. The institutional agendas were clear: first, to present in a national arena African American artists; and second, to affirm cultural pluralism within the theater of the art world. This exhibition is a response, albeit not unique nor the first, to the exclusion of many African American artists from the critical art literature, art history, and exhibitions on American art. Many of the represented artists have been denied, or have had limited access to “mainstream” modernist and postmodernist documentation in terms of professional recognition (other than peers) and legitimation. ¹

Catalogue essayists Lowery Sims and Judith Wilson rebuke the Western, Eurocentric foundation of art history and criticism, they debunk popular critical jargon such as cultural pluralism, globalization, marginalization, and “outsider” art in remarking on and analyzing the canon of American art and modernist art literature. Both authors conclude that African American artists are virtually excluded from the discourse on contemporary American art. Their conclusions form the premise for this essay.

But THE DECADE SHOW is more than an art historical redress; it is an exhibition about artists who were concerned about the condition of society and culture in the 1980s. Consequently, content and formalism were criteria for selecting works, and emerging artists are juxtaposed to mid-career artists.

In the 1980s, artists commented on society and culture in the United States with increasing candor. Visual annotation often included ironic or serious metaphor and symbol. Gender and class, race and representation, social taboos, the primal universe, a virulent ecology, cultural pluralism, and cultural co-optation were all popular topics

¹ Twenty-six African American artists were represented out of ninety-four artists in this exhibition. Because essayists Margo Machida and Jimmie Durham analyze the content of Asian American and Native American artists, respectively, their citation in this essay is virtually excluded, except for Margo Machida. Because she is an essayist she cannot write about herself.

The intent of THE DECADE SHOW is to ensure adequate representation of Asian American and Native American artists in order to prove the participation of different cultural voices in contemporary art.

among artists. These concerns were often manifest in art work completed in the past five years. Artistic presentation, too, was often conveyed as history, journalism, or fiction. In many instances, personal experiences gave an added dimension to a work’s meaning.

Those artists, mostly African American, nominated by The Studio Museum, show how dominant or “mainstream” white culture subverts their identity. Also, the artists analyze their own culture, cultural heritage, and ethnicity to invert the perceived tyranny of an imposed Eurocentric, male identity. These artists query Western images and myths, politics and policy, and hierarchical structure and social customs.

Within a narrative and nonnarrative format, artists in The Decade Show, examine, investigate, and question the use of histories (art, cultural, social), of media, and of spirituality in determining and forming identity. Paintings, sculpture, prints, photography, site-specific installations, and mixed-media works display imagery that is invented, derived, or appropriated. Artists strive to make their works intellectually accessible. Typically, the art engages the viewer in a discussion about how we are, how others define who we are, and how we define ourselves.

Conflict and Controversy
Political and social contestations about gender and class and race and representation occupied many African American artists’ visions during the 1980s. In the process of constructing the fictional, journalistic, and historical narrative of black life, African American artists revealed a power and self-assuredness about who they are that contradicts myths and misconceptions about race and ethnicity.

Artistically, visual rawness and the emotive power of a vibrant expressionism was often seen as “out-of-step” with then-current minimalist styles of the early to mid-1980s. Among artists, the figure predominated. Paintings with jagged brush strokes, broad swaths of color, spatial distortion, flatness of form (often appearing like unfinished works), and text-enhanced pictorial content were common. Examples include the works by Emma Ammos, Fred Brown, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Robert Colescott, Howardena Pindell, and Raymond Saunders. Sculptures—often using elements of discarded materials, textiles, and photographs—often appropriated from the print media and combined with written text strengthen the meaning of works by Beverly Buchanan, David Hammons, Adrian Piper, Faith Ringgold, Alison Saar, Coreen Simpson, Lorna Simpson, Pat Ward Williams, and Christian Walker.

The presentation of race and collective cultural identity was paramount in the 1980s. In The Decade Show, several artists convey a feminist perspective. In their works is seen the desire for authority and economic and political power that challenges the insistent male interpretation and presentation of culture and world history. For example, Margo Machida presents her experiences as an Asian American woman within the format of spatially fragmented episodes. Machida reveals very personal psychological self-portraits. Since 1984, her journalistic works of segmented images denote cultural and gender duality (her emotional and psychological past and present) as in Self Portrait as Yukio Mishima, 1986 (Plate XLVIII), and Like a True Samurai, 1988.\(^2\) In Goodbye To All That, 1988-1989, Machida compiles feminine tokens about power, procreation, seduction, manipulation, matriarchy, class, and male behavior.

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2. Margo Machida recognizes herself in Mishima’s embrace and rejection of Western culture and Japanese nationalism. The source of St. Sebastian derives from renaissance painting and Mishima’s pose in Ordinal of Rome. Machida’s work is iconographically rich and complex denoting among other things feminine suppression, emotional anxieties on becoming an adult, her own physical pain, and Japanese illustrated popular tale books and traditional woodcuts.
Historical imagination is often used as a way of expressing concerns about race and cultural representation. Emma Ammos is concerned about black middle-class history and racial and sexual prejudice. A Reading at Bessie Smith's Grace, 1985 (Plate IV), is about black people as a part of American history and the exclusion of women in black history texts—omission, misconceptions, and misinterpretations predicated on race and gender. She brings her middle-class sensibilities to the portrayal of the Talented Tenth of the New Negro Movement. In the portrayal of Zora Neale Hurston, Ammos's concerns parallel those of African American women writers who respond to the black male writers who have "written black women out of black culture." Race and racism overlapping gender and class translate into the portrayal and spatial isolation of Jack Johnson and Bessie Smith (symbolized by the automobile crash) who both suffered because of ignominious acts.

Fred Brown and Beverly Buchanan use memory as a way of cultural validation. A more familiar social outcast—a folk icon of black culture—is the blues singer. Fred Brown takes a specific black blues myth and assigns it even more mythical proportions as in Stagger Lee, 1984 (Plate XIII).

Beverly Buchanan's memories about her southern rural youth living in a shack community inspired her to make (beginning in 1984) small-scale replicas and paintings of Georgian and Carolinian shacks as in St. Simons, 1989 (Plate XIV), and Rash McLean's Place, 1990. Written anecdotes about the owner, such as Rash McLean or Mary Lou Furcron, juxtapose most of Buchanan's works making them memorials.

Fig. 1.
BEVERLY BUCHANAN
LUCY MCLEAN'S HOUSE
1989
Acrylic on bass wood
25 1/2 x 14 x 20
Photo courtesy of Bernice Steinbaum Gallery, New York

about people’s lives. Buchanan not only documents the African derivation of these homely structures but also shows the shack as monuments of African American cultural history.

Robert Colescott uses memory and a personal viewpoint in fabricating history in a series of paintings, *Knowledge of the Past Is The Key to the Future*. Begun in the mid-1980s, Colescott’s creations are compact panoramas of events. In *Knowledge of the Past Is the Key to the Future*, Matthew Henson, 1986 (Plate XIX), Colescott uses visual shock by reversing traditional racial or sexual roles and creating new symbols, including a biracial Christ—part of his didactic narrative about genocide, miscegenation, cultural and racial exclusion, and foolish action caused by historical ignorance. These paintings are about the meaning of history rather than historical events. For Colescott’s concerns are ultimately about society being the loser, not a particular race.

Coreen Simpson’s and Alison Saar’s visual journalism immortalize people that the status quo considers social renegades. They are invisible people belonging to the urban streets.

Coreen Simpson’s photographs make famous a youthful black subculture: the “B-Boys,” the “hip-hoppers,” and the hero-protagonists such as Fab Five Freddy and Flavor Flav. Simpson documents a people few know (until the recent wave of rap videos on *Yo! MTV Raps* and *Video Music Box*) and which the dominant culture dismisses as socially marginal—but who are co-opted into “rap” high fashion of modish SoHo. *Helene*, 1983 (Plate LXXVI), *Vic*, 1987, and *Do Rag*, 1983, retain their own individualism while defiantly and proudly expressing their identity. Simpson’s people bond the viewer; their direct gaze, confident posture, and affirmative pride belie the vulnerability of youth and a precarious future.

Alison Saar’s sculptural figures are twenty-first century visionaries. There is the homeless “street” person-shaman in the *Vulcanized Man*, 1988, and *LeRoi “Phoenix” leFeu*, 1986, a black man emerging in all his glory like an arisen Christ from a sewer carrying his “ghetto blaster.” Saar considers her street people the decade’s living repositories of culture.

Jean-Michel Basquiat and Raymond Saunders fictionalize urban culture and black people with snippets of journalistic record and memory. Appropriated images, city refuse, icons of pop culture (both artists use Mickey Mouse), and scrawled, graffiti lines and text penetrate painted images and shapes to make disjointed compositions. Saunders’s child-like imagery, collage, and brilliant colors often obscure his serious messages about war, media as a means of cultural exploitation, and racism, as in *In Celeste Invited Me Too Tea*, 1986 (Plate LXXII). Basquiat’s more linear paintings are condensations of black culture, his life, and the persona of contemporary humankind. Known for his skillful use of visual and written puns and alliterations, Basquiat explores the various associations of a word or phrase, as in *Fly Paper*, 1983 (Plate VIII). Jean-Michel Basquiat, art society’s maverick, personified the 1980s artist—rebelling against traditional art practices while becoming a postmodernist commodity. Basquiat bestowed upon the art world a rich array of cryptic paintings; their wit and sardonic style confound modernist critics. Both Basquiat and Saunders’s paintings are tableaux of world cultures.

Whereas some artists use comics or Hollywood movies, Faith Ringgold uses narrative fiction to tell her story of race and gender. She writes about and illustrates African American life and history. In *Street Story Quilt, Part I, II, and III*, 1985 (Plate LXIV), written narratives contextualize scenes of black urban genre. Her experiences, biographies of others, fiction by authors, such as Alice Walker or herself, bring a feminist voice to the works. Ringgold’s quilts are like ancient tablets—image and
text interspersed, recording the deeds of ordinary folk.

Important issues of the past decade will undoubtedly continue into the future. One is the use of mass media—photography, video, television, radio, and newspapers—in the presentation of race and gender. In the 1980s, women artists, particularly, examined mass media because of its increasing accessibility and control by white males. These women assessed the use of mass media as a means of manipulating perceptions about themselves and other people. Adrian Piper, Pat Ward Williams, and other artists in THE DECADE SHOW recognized the power of mass media in promoting the cultural values of a Eurocentric society.

Pat Ward Williams, Lorna Simpson, and Adrian Piper examine and analyze the way media exploit racism and reinforce racial-ethnic stereotypes. Their target is the xenophobic viewer. Williams and Piper take images from the popular media, such as magazines, and juxtapose succinct, powerfully written statements. Simpson photographs women as black female archetypes. In her works she directs her gaze elsewhere, blindfolded or back to the viewer. All three artists use written text or statements to make the viewer reexamine assumed values and meanings assigned to an image.

Pat Ward Williams’s recent work, Accused/Blowtorch/Padlock, 1986 (Plate LXXXVIII), and Day of the Dead, Little Angels, 1989, are visual diaries about racism in the United States. In Accused, written questions and annotations by Williams surround several photographs from Life magazine taken of a mutilated, lynched, black man chained to a tree. Her inquiries about the photograph push us unwillingly to a point at which we must confront the ethical dilemma presented by this image. Williams’s thoughts refer to this. “There’s something going on here. He didn’t look lynched. Can you be Black and look at this without fear? Could Hitler show pics of the Holocaust to keep the Jews in line?” More poignantly, Williams asks, “How can this photograph exist?”

Adrian Piper used mass media imagery to examine Western hegemony. Piper has been superimposing text over print images since the early 1980s. Autobiographies are now commentaries about racism, gender, class, and economic exploitation as in the three photo-text series Vanilla Nightmares, 1986, Why Guess, 1989, and Ur-Mutter, 1989. In Ur-Mutter, Piper uses the ancient maternal religious symbol of the mother and child, universal and familiar. In Ur-Mutter #5 (Plate LIX), we are intellectually and emotionally confronted with cultural and racial opposites denoting economic exploitation, consumerism, and cultural indifference. Piper brings polemic about international political policy to the art museum. Her work is “defined as completely as possible by the viewer’s reaction and interpretation. Ideally the work has no meaning or independent existence outside of its function as a medium of change.” Piper obligates the viewer to resolve the moral propositions of these works.

Ironically, artists, such as Adrian Piper, Edgar Heap-of-Birds, Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, and others use the same technology of mass media—Times Square spectrastar color board, billboards, and posters—to oppose mainstream media’s propagation of ideas.4


5. The Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous group of female artists, organized in 1985, confront their audiences by engaging in guerrilla action in public, wearing gorilla masks. Public action includes placing posters in public places in Manhattan that note the exclusion/inclusion of women artists in the documentation and marketing of art. Their humorous appearance belies their intent. With “public service messages from Guerrilla Girls, conscience of the art world,” they raise the art community’s awareness about female artists, as in Jester Holme, The Art World Is Your Kind of Place. Another anonymous group, PEST, no longer in existence, focused on the exclusion of artists of color.
Social Taboos
Christian Walker’s images are about race, representation, and gender in a photographic trilogy, *Miscegenation*, 1985-1988, and *Performance Counts*, 1985-1988. They pertain to racial stereotypes and the, former, criminal offense of miscegenation. Using paints and ink, Walker manipulates the silver gelatin prints to emphasize unguarded facial expressions and body posture that show inculcated prejudice and suspicions of one racial group toward another in the *Performance Counts* series. The *Miscegenation* series projects soft tones and abstracted images and shapes of the human body, evoking intimacy and sensuality. Walker is subversive, he camouflages the issue of race and sexuality with romantic seduction and visually luxuriant imagery.

Howardena Pindell has a political and cultural worldview. Western public and economic policy—a form of neocolonialism in Third World cultures, and an instrument for genocide—are apparent in two paintings, *Separate But Equal*, 1989, and *Autobiography: AIR/CS, 560*, 1988 (Plate LVIII). Within the context of economic exploitation, Pindell presents a tableau of family history as racial genealogy in *Autobiography: Water/Ancestor/Middle Passage/Family Ghosts*, 1988. Her queries are seen as words, letters, fragmented images, and silhouetted figures, usually herself. Pindell’s *Autobiography* paintings and her most recent works, *Separate But Equal*, which concern genocide, apartheid, and AIDS, are collective memories of people, including herself, who have suffered the indignities of being a person of color and/or a woman.

Joseph Lewis III is among a small number of African American artists who are concerned about biogenetic experimentation and anomalies of the human immune system. In mixed-media installations such as *DNA, Sickle Cell*, or *H.I.V.*, all 1989, Lewis explores relationship between science, medicine, and public policy; and race and cultural extinction. In *H.I.V., Or What You Don’t Know Can Kill You*, 1989 (Plate XLIV), when one walks behind the lighted see-saw structure, casting a shadow on the photo-mural of the artist, the artist and the viewer become potential victims. By making the viewer the subject of the work, Lewis prevents the viewer from being independent of the image and maintaining his/her objectivity—from separating art and reality.

Cultural Pluralism and Co-optation
The artistic voice of cultural pluralism strengthened in the 1980s. For some artists, multicultural genealogies became the emotional and intellectual source for addressing the issue of a pluralistic society. Existing in two or more cultures—requiring a dual personality and social allegiances, or denying one culture—often culminates in conflicts and confusion about individual identity. For several artists, Africa is the thread that weaves through the various ethnic and racial diversities of an African American heritage. Betye Saar, Houston Conwill, Albert Chong, Tyrone Mitchell, and Melvin Edwards, all, in varying degrees, preserve their culture, and, hence, a collective identity. Through memory, artists review and reconstruct the past. A revisionist history accommodates cultural and racial diversity (as also in the works by Colescott, Saunders, Armos). The spiritual realm becomes the environment for ritual and the recollection of personal and collective histories.

Houston Conwill’s *The New Cakewalk*, 1989 (Plate XX), condenses centuries of African American history into a ritual cosmogram that locates auspicious sites and spiritual presence. African American culture and history merge with traditional African culture and symbols. In a series of controlled movement, symbols, and text.
The New Cakewalk engages the viewer in a learning process about black history and folklore from slavery time to the present. The crossroads of African cosmology and African American folklore, the four historically important cities for African Americans—Louisville, Atlanta, Memphis, New Orleans—the cryptic codes and symbolic language, concentric circle of ritual circumnavigation, and a wall embedded with "light books," engraved with quotations about laughter and black humor, all present an elaborate conceptualization about ceremony and life. The New Cakewalk, named for a nineteenth-century black American dance that mimics white American dancing, is an installation that has evolved since its inception nine years ago. Conwill has transformed a term denoting parody into one denoting cultural authenticity.

Betye Saar's assemblages restore the spiritual connection between our past and present in Other Houses, Other Lives, 1982 (Plate LXIX). The significance of these constructions lies within a black folk consciousness. Sometimes they are mnemonic—constructed containers of Saar's personal memories.

Albert Chong allows his Caribbean cultural diversity to inform his imagery. Chong, as Betye Saar, focuses, especially in his later works, on power objects, altars, and spiritual presence. In Iterence, 1982 (Plate XVI), ritual captures the ethereal residue of spiritual presence and spiritual transcendence. Through media manipulation, Chong gives another dimension to reality; through Santeria and spiritual syncretism, he restructures reality. By such processes, Chong retrieves the histories of family and ancestral spirits.

Alison Saar has an interest in cultural syncretism also, a reality in which magic and shamanism are a part of everyday life. Loce Potion Series fuses African American, African, and Haitian beliefs. Loce Potion #9, 1988 (Plate LXVIII), is a rigidly transfixed female figure who reveals her "captured" heart.

Tyrone Mitchell, in Self Portrait as an Ex-Southern Archetype, 1988 (Plate LI), and Timeplace for Nelson, 1988; and Melvin Edwards in Gate of Ogun, 1984 (Plate XXIV), and Lynch Fragments, 1963-1989 (Fig. 3)—two artists influenced by studies of wood carvers and blacksmiths in Africa—consider acts of making art a traditional African ritual of spiritual renewal. Contemporary formalism merges with a trans-Atlantic sensibility. In Gate of Ogun, Ogun, the Yoruba and Fon peoples' deity for iron and war,

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**Fig. 3.**

MELVIN EDWARDS
LYNCH FRAGMENT SERIES. HIS
1963
Steel
12 x 6½ x 6½"
and chains, a symbol of slavery, are merged to create a symbol of a threshold between two worlds, two cultures. Edwards creates a trans-Atlantic monument for the African Diaspora.

Urban detritus are essential materials in Melvin Edwards’s *Lynch Fragments*. Machine parts fuse into compact, tectonic, aggressive sculptures imbued with an ancestral presence. Begun in the 1960s, they are cultural artifacts, symbols of an oral history (Edwards heard stories from relatives about lynchings during his youth).

Several artists excerpt artistic icons, technological refuse, and print images from Western society and culture, ascribing a new, unorthodox meaning to them. Adrian Piper, David Hammons, and Robert Colescott appropriate symbols of Western fine art and notions about institutional practices and social behavior to make subversive works of art. Adrian Piper takes popular images from print media, especially journalism-documentation or advertising copy; David Hammons takes detritus of an affluent consumer society during the age of discards; and Robert Colescott takes the paradigms of fine art from the masterpiece list of Western art history.

By using memory and artifacts of urban streets, David Hammons expands our perceptions about African American people and contemporary society. His use of materials evidence a black presence—discarded wine bottles, hair, or the music of John Coltrane—and black values and beliefs—the spiritual presence of used objects. Urban refuse creates extraordinary environments that are recontextualized into a black cultural context. Humor, especially visual puns mixed with metaphor, belie Hammons’s commentary on cultural exploitation and survival. For example, a wheel made of Night Train Express wine bottles and a pile of coal (part of a 1989 untitled installation) become symbols referring to jazz and the elixir of black males living in economically and racially segregated ghettos. As if a twenty-third century archeologist, Hammons approaches the detritus of society as cultural artifact, reconstructing and reinterpretting culture.

Another work by Hammons, *On Loan*, 1989, is a site-specific installation created especially for this exhibition. Facing a blank wall, the viewer, standing in front of a theater stanchion, hears a tape recording of Nat King Cole singing “Mona Lisa” and sees a placard beneath a picture-hook that reads “on loan.” By imaginatively appropriating a paradigm of fine art in Western culture, Hammons involves us in philosophical assessment about museum practices and the idea of “high” art.

In the early 1980s, Robert Colescott replicated the compositions of renowned “high art” paintings. By doing so, he took possession of the image and diminished the worth of originality in art. Furthermore, he intercepts assumed meaning and significance of a work of art as defined in the canon of art history and transforms the image into a personal iconological painting. Through irony and visual parody, Colescott critiques race and cultural stereotyping. Colescott subtly alters the composition so that it becomes inimitably his own, as in *Les Demoiselles d’Alabama, Des Nudas*, 1984, in which black and white women are shown in a Gauguinesque landscape without African mask faces (itself a critique of “primitivism” in modern art). No one can look at Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon* without thinking of Colescott’s painting.

6. Pok-Chi Lau has been documenting Chinese tenements in San Francisco and elsewhere for over ten years. The work in *The Decade Show* document the new Asian immigrant, the Chinese Vietnamese. Lau continues to document different generations of Chinese. Pok-Chi Lau describes these recent photographs as “reflecting the mentality of an old Chinese culture co-existing with the new Western one: Figures of Christ and Mary versus Buddha and the Goddess of Mercy; Christmas lights and semi-nude Western beauties versus Chinese calendar pictures and family portraits. The process of assimilation continues for the new and old immigrants.” (Private communication, February 19, 1990) These images document Chinese syncretism.
Primal Universe

Some artists move beyond the specificity of race, ethnicity, and culture to express a concern for the primal universe. These artists perceive an interconnection between humankind, animals, environment, and the universe. The environment may be natural or manmade. Maren Hassinger, Emilio Cruz, Kayllinn Sullivan Two Trees, and Martha Jackson-Jarvis extrapolate from the natural and spiritual environment paradigms of human behavior and thought. The realm of the sacred impinges upon the realm of reality. Art manifests, usually in a more abstract manner, the primal world. Ultimately one's identity connects to the earth, the universe.

Maren Hassinger, inspired by nature, employs industrial materials, including wire ropes and concrete, to shape an environment of the twenty-first century. Metal botanical forms often juxtapose real plants. Art, technology, and nature blend. Hassinger's worlds, as in Field, 1989 (Plate XXXIII), portend a dessicated future world in which technology is used to recreate memories of a natural habitat.

Emilio Cruz focuses on concepts about reality and nature and the abstraction of it, as in Mechanization of Spirit, 1989. Many of Cruz's recent canvasses are conceptual notations about art and nature: they explore the exploitation and destruction of earth caused essentially by a disconnected point of view held by human societies, especially in the West.

Often Cruz's voice is accusatory. He indicted Western society's obliviousness to ecology and disregard for history. Also he comments upon Western culture's insistence on separating art from nature. "Based on a misunderstanding of Aristotle's discourse on physics, we perceive nature and culture as separate entities and consequently debase Aristotle's meaning while threatening all of life qualified as a living part of the biosphere. For nature is the essence of the boundary of all existence, and no thing that we have knowledge of exists outside of it; for in the universe there exist no vacuums, no voids, only dynamic behaviour made manifest."77

Miriam Beerman and Emilio Cruz use memory for historical recollection. Both artists use coloristically lush paintings to convey the tragic histories of human behavior. In Cruz's Staff Meeting at the Holocaust, 1989 (Plate XXII), an array of symbols and figures denote ethical behavior gone awry. In Staff Meeting and Decapitation of Culture Kings, 1988, the specter of destruction and obliteration are made apparent. Beerman also perceives the pathos and destructive nature of the world; easily comprehending the primal universe. Ancient pogroms continue into an ominous future in The Furnace, 1987 (Plate IX). In Pink Skull (Self-Portrait with Muse), 1989, Beerman's neo-expressionistic style reveals unheroic figures, demonic creatures that presage a chthonic environment. Fueled by medieval and modern, especially German texts, Beerman not only expresses humankind's proclivity for destruction but also her alter ego in a nonnarrative, fictional mode.

Spiritual transcendence of nature informs Martin Puryear's and Martha Jackson-Jarvis's aesthetic visions. Both artists show in sculpture or site-specific installations an interest in space, form, and materials. Puryear, in the process of manipulating and exploring the tensile capabilities of materials, such as wood, iron, and leather, refers to the styles and techniques of various world cultures, thereby summarizing in three-dimensional form cultural diversity in the 1980s.

Martha Jackson-Jarvis's early installations, which portray organic, extraterrestrial environments of fictional worlds, have become increasingly spiritual within the past

five years. Jackson-Jarvis has used memory and family artifacts, such as potsherds and Eastern philosophy, to create ecological worlds that incorporate evidences of family history and a collective African American identity. Assemblages of clay, wood, and copper in The Snake Doctor, 1989-1990 (Plate XXXV), create a surreal environment of emblems of Jackson-Jarvis’s southern, matriarchal family. Snake Doctor is a poetic vision of black folk culture. It is about the “continuing and cumulative image of the ancestral presence. It explores the legacy of healing, communication, and continuation of forces which link ancient and contemporary.”

**Expanded Visions**

**The Decade Show** is a simplified microcosm of the concerns and intellectual engagements of artists of the past five years, primarily. However, topics such as collective cultural identity, social alienation or “marginalization,” gender, cultural domination, and the nature of art have a history that encompasses more than the past ten years. Artists continue to cast aside the narcissism of contemporary art. The 1980s showed a maturation of form merged with content of significant importance.

Generally, artists expanded their parochial perspectives to include national and international matters. Artists showed an increasing interest in international political agendas: ecology, chemical warfare, cultural co-optation, exploitation of people and the environment, and racial-ethnic genocide and exclusion.

In the examination of social values, customs, mores, and ethical behavior—and their impact on ecology and the survival of cultures—artists engaged in a discussion about a cross-cultural, global identity. Societal interdependence and responsibility are expressed in works by Howardena Pindell, Adrian Piper, Robert Colescott, Emilio Cruz, Pat Ward Williams, and Joseph Lewis III. Piper, Christian Walker, and Beverly Buchanan comment on cultural assumptions that develop into ethnic-racial stereotypes that impede our understanding of and respect for each other.

At the same time, many African American artists were attentive to the presentation of African American and African Diaspora culture and history. They insisted on preserving their heritage and declaring a consciousness about self.

Several artists used certain materials, compositional formats, motifs, and processes that enhanced the African American aesthetics in their work. The strip panel construction of Emma Ammos’s work recalls African American narrative quilts and West African narrow-strip weavings. Her more frequent use of African textiles as decorative borders, as in **Into The Dangerous World I Leapt**, 1988, enhance the African American aesthetic of Ammos’s works. Faith Ringgold continues the heritage of quilt-making in her family. By doing so, she ensures the continued legacy of African American quilts and quilt-making as a bona fide art form. David Hammons and Betye Saar embrace the belief that familiar objects retain traces of the original owner’s essence, accruing with cultural presence. Wine bottles, which have been touched by a black man’s lips, and other “found” objects are reconstructed elements of spirit-power assemblages, reminding us of traditional African fetishes, reliquaries, or talismans. Also, spiritual conceptualism is expressed in the work of Albert Chong, Tyrone Mitchell, Melvin Edwards, and Houston Conwill. The making of art is ritual, and every gesture reiterates the African Diaspora.

As contemporary artists, African Americans engage in the same intellectual debate and aesthetic exploration as all modernist artists. They, too, appropriate images and materials, use technology as a medium, collaborate with other artists.

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(Hammons, the late Charles Abramson, and Jorge Rodrigues; Jean-Michel Basquiat and Fred Braithwaite; or Joseph Lewis III and Ivan della Tana, create site-specific installations (increasingly popular among female artists), and juxtapose written text and photography.

Artists, African American, Asian American, Native American, zeroed in on the most retrogressive behavior characterizing the 1980s—phobia about difference. Their agendas, as expressed through their works, is quite clear and deliberate: to vigilantly maintain and insist upon cultural diversity in American society and the world.

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