

‘INTERROGATE THE WORLD AS IT IS AND IMAGINE HOW IT COULD BE’:
FOUR TRAILBLAZING ARTISTS IN ‘SOUL OF A NATION’ DISCUSS THE SHOW
AND THEIR CAREERS

By Shirley Nwangwa, September 20, 2018



After stops at Tate Modern in London and the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas, the critically acclaimed, and hotly anticipated, exhibition “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power” has just opened at the Brooklyn Museum.

Collecting pieces from 1963 through 1983 by more than 60 artists, the show focuses on a period when black people were fighting for legitimacy in the eyes of the law and of their fellow men and women in every area of society. Presenting the work of artists in the Black Arts Movement as well as collectives like Kamoinge, AfriCOBRA, and the Spiral Group, the exhibition presents a diverse array of approaches, from figures who highlighted the plight of black people and advocated for radical visibility and equality to those who were less inclined to engage in active commentary but still made statements by asserting their visions in a world set to snuff them out. With historical material that remains under-known in the United States, “Soul of a Nation” asks nothing less than this: What can art do in the world?

In the lead-up to the opening, I spoke with four artists in “Soul of a Nation”—Ming Smith, Betye Saar, William T. Williams, and Senga Nengudi—about their work, the ambitious exhibition, and where we go from here.

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As a member Kamoinge, a collective of black photographers in New York in the 1960s, Ming Smith focused on black-and-white street photography, a format that means you have to “catch a moment that would never ever return again, and do it justice,” she said, when I met her at her Harlem apartment. We sat and talked in her balmy living room (the A/C was acting up on this day), surrounded by prints of various sizes, including some of Alice Coltrane, who’s the subject of a new project by Smith. Her assistant was sorting through digitized photographs (color as well as black-and-white), in preparation for an upcoming show. Ming, who was the first black woman to have her work enter the collection of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, said that she has always considered her photography the key to her vitality, a protective disguise to weather any uncomfortable situations, and a gateway into the multidimensionality that exists in people. Her works in “Soul of a Nation” include Hart-Leroy Bibbs, Circular Breathing (1980), When You See Me Comin’, Raise Your Window, High, New York City, in New York (1972), and Casablanca, Harlem, NY (1983).

ARTnews: Do you remember when you took the photos that are featured in the show? How was it that you found yourself in these locations?

Ming Smith: I was living in the Village and I would just photograph Harlem. I was introduced to photography as an art form through Kamoinge, and most of [its members] lived in Harlem. They were like pioneers in photography, and they started this group to have some control over their own image.

What made joining that collective particularly appealing to you? Was it the idea of being highlighted as a black artist?

Oh no, there was no highlighting. There were no platforms. There were no talks. If there were, no one knew about them. Maybe in the white world. As a photographer, as a woman photographer, there was nothing. Back then, there was nothing like that, no one who could book you here and there. Honestly, I was drawn to it because it was the first time I was introduced to photography as an art form. Lou Draper invited me. I had a two and a quarter; someone gave me their camera because I couldn’t afford a camera then.

When you were out there taking photos, did you have in mind any political angle that you wanted to take using your photography?

When I came to Harlem, what was missing for me a lot was the love in photographs of us—the dignity of the race, things like that. I didn’t see that in images. Sometimes, now, I still don’t see it, but the landscape has completely changed. But back then, many times I would just see people impoverished. I wanted to show the grace, the love, and—how do you say?—the surviving. You know, still surviving. Dignity. My sister—she passed a long time ago—she said, when I was still in college or right after that, she said to me, “You look for truth.”

“Soul of a Nation” is highlighting works from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s. To you, what does it mean for these works to be shown right now?

The main thing—celebrate our struggle. Throughout all the chaos, this is survival. These are the people who did the work—it was always for a higher purpose.