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CULTURE DESK

REDISCOVERING A REVOLUTIONARY GALLERY SHOW OF BLACK WOMEN'S ART

An exhibition at Ortuzar Projects pays homage to the "Sapphire Show," which opened on July 4, 1970.



By Andrea K. Scott
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Mysticism is the prevailing mood of the exhibition, in art that feels informed by tidal pulls and intuition. Photograph by Timothy Doyon

On the Fourth of July, in 1970, six American artists declared independence in an Echo Park loft, in Los Angeles. The occasion was the opening night of an exhibition devoted exclusively to the work of Black women—which is now considered by art historians to be the first of its kind in L.A., and probably in the U.S. The show was organized quickly, by the artists themselves, in response to another L.A. showcase of Black art, backed by a corporate sponsor (the Carnation Company) and overwhelmingly focussed on men. The women called their event the “Sapphire Show,” after a character in “Amos ’n Andy”—the shrewish know-it-all Sapphire Stevens—transforming a racist and sexist stereotype of women into an avatar of feminist revolution, just as one of the show’s best-known participants, the magnificent Betye Saar, would do two years later in her assemblages, when she began arming Aunt Jemima figurines with rifles.

Today, the “Sapphire Show” represents both a milestone and an unsolved mystery. It may be hard to imagine in the Instagram age, but no photographs of the exhibition exist, nor is there any written record of what was on view. The only known paper trail is housed in the Archives of American Art, at the Smithsonian: a copy of a flyer announcing the show. Its design is echt seventies, using more fonts than the exhibition had artists, and features photographs of the six artists, from grinning baby pictures to pensive head shots. The list of the artists—Eileen Abdurashid (now Eileen Nelson), Gloria Bohanon, Sue Irons (now Senga Nengudi), Suzanne Jackson, Yvonne Cole Meo, and Saar—misspells one name (“B. Sarr”), suggesting the haste with which things came together. The flyer also takes a lighthearted dig at corporate culture and its cynical exploitation of the women’s movement, borrowing the tagline of a cigarette advertisement: “You’ve come a long way, baby.”

The “Sapphire Show” was installed for six days at Gallery 32, thanks to a serendipitous gap in the gallery’s schedule; the experimental space was run by Jackson in her painting studio. Jackson, now based in Savannah, Georgia, was then a twenty-six-year-old student of the influential African American artist Charles White, at the Otis Art Institute. She had a parallel life as a dancer: professionally trained in pre-statehood Alaska, where she grew up, she had performed in South America, on a tour organized by the State Department, before arriving in L.A. (Jackson later also became an accomplished stage-set designer.) She wasn’t interested in a career as a gallerist, but sometimes artists need to make their own luck. Her guiding principle might be summed up by Shirley Chisholm’s famous line: “If they don’t give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair”—or, in this case, sign a lease.

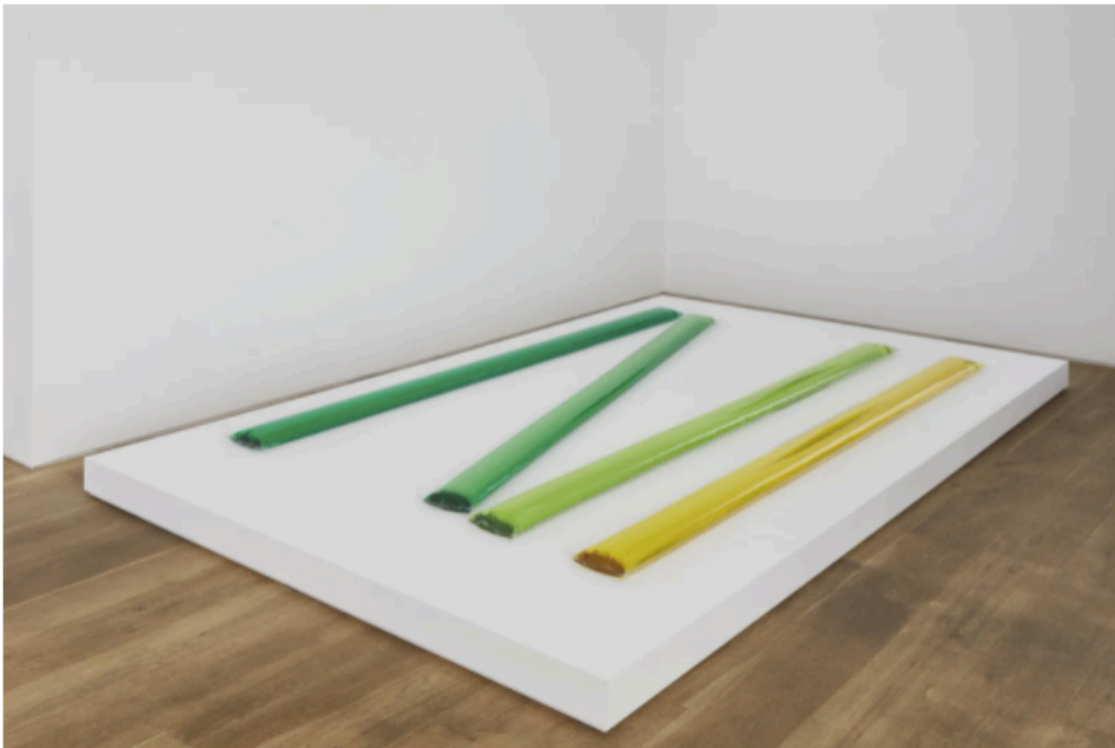
Jackson ran Gallery 32 for two galvanic years, from 1968 to 1970, showing works by both men and women—David Hammons exhibited his body prints there—and not every artist who showed there was Black. As Jackson observed in a recent interview, “We became involved in the Black Arts Council, which was trying to really let people know about African American artists, but I showed everybody, people of all different colors. It was just a matter of any good work that was not being exhibited elsewhere.” Jackson’s own paintings similarly resist pigeonholes, shifting over the decades from delicately lush canvases, made in the seventies, that feature extravagant birds and fairy-tale trees whose trunks have heart-shaped faces, to new, genre-defying abstractions, in which colorful acrylic paint is mixed with bits of cotton cloth and dried into massive, wobbly, translucent forms that are suspended in space and seem poised to engage in some alien ritual.



Gloria Bohanon's "Rio on My Mind (Corcovado, Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars)" is a bossa nova for the eyes. Art work courtesy Estate of Gloria Bohanon / Ortuzar Projects

Examples of both bodies of Jackson's work are on view in New York through the end of July, in the beautiful and imaginative exhibition "You've Come a Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show," at Ortuzar Projects. The gallery represents the septuagenarian artist, who is enjoying a well-deserved renaissance. The curator, Kari Rittenbach, wisely avoids the impossible task of re-creating the original project. Instead, she encapsulates the career of each artist in a few works made across decades. Of course, the flyer is here, in an ephemera-packed vitrine at the entrance. And Saar's radical Aunt Jemima is present, in the coruscating 1973 assemblage "Auntie & Watermelon," as is the one work that art historians agree was on view at Gallery 32 the first time around, an astrologically themed 1967 intaglio-and-watercolor by Saar, titled "Taurus." Mysticism is the prevailing mood, in art that feels informed by tidal pulls and intuition, a world away from the rigid, industrial ethos of Minimalism, whose artists were being hailed as masters (could that term use a rethink?) in 1970, at the same time that the women of "Sapphire" were largely ignored.

The show's most eye-catching piece, created by Nengudi in 1969–70 and remade in 2018, is a quartet of very long, clear, soft vinyl tubes, filled with blue, turquoise, green, and yellow water; it's tempting to see the work's askew geometry and liquid allure as playing a teasing game with the rigidity of a Donald Judd stack. But "Water Composition V" wasn't conceived as a static installation—it was meant to be handled, and is a precursor to the artist's best-known works, in which she incorporates her body into weblike, womblike sculptures and installations made of elastic. A striking photograph on one wall at Ortuzar documents Nengudi performing in her Colorado back yard in 2020, during the pandemic; her body, draped in purple cloth, becomes just another found object in a Delphic assemblage that also involves a circular grid of wire, which may have once belonged to a grill.



"Water Composition V," by Senga Nengudi, is a precursor to the artist's best-known works. Art work by Senga Nengudi / Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects

In 1995, Nengudi wrote, "An artist's supposed greatest desire is the making of objects that will last lifetimes for posterity after all. This has never been a priority for me. My purpose is to create an experience that will vibrate with the connecting thread." Posterity has other ideas: Nengudi is currently the subject of a major retrospective at the Philadelphia Museum (until July 25th)—which also travelled to Munich and São Paulo.

The great revelation in Ortuzar’s tribute to the “Sapphire Show” is the reintroduction of the exhibition’s lesser-known artists. A penumbral painting on paper from circa 1970, by Bohanon (who died in 2008), titled “Rio on My Mind (Corcovado, Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars),” is a bossa nova for the eyes, centered on a mysterious orb that is at once a moon, an eye, a breast, and the bell of a trumpet. The most transporting piece here is “Wood City,” which Nelson, who is Nengudi’s cousin, made sometime in the seventies. Inspecting the talismanic construction—which is just twenty-two inches tall—is like being let in on a secret, discovering little hideaways and spying alchemical vials of soil. “Generations,” a sky-and-earth-toned collagraph print from 1993 by the art historian and artist Yvonne Cole Meo, who died in 2016, portrays what appears to be an Asante Akua’ba (female fertility figure) as the powerful matriarch of an extended family—the ancestral spirits of the six artists here.
