

Review 'Hard Edged' art at California African American Museum widens perception of black artists' work



Lisa Soto's mixed-media "NGC1003 & NGC1913," 2013. (California African American Museum)



By **Christopher Knight** · Contact Reporter

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The initial efflorescence of important African American art in postwar California, especially Los Angeles, is typically seen as emerging through assemblage techniques. Found objects were cobbled together into resonant talismans with social and spiritual heft.

That was a central focus of "Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980," the marvelous 2011 survey at the UCLA Hammer Museum. Now comes a sprawling show at the California African American Museum that seeks to slightly shift the frame of reference.

"Hard Edged: Geometrical Abstraction and Beyond" is more a sketch than a finished show, absent a catalog and a fully developed thesis. But it is provocative. And the abundance of compelling work, including a surprise or two, makes it well worth seeing.

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Near the entry, Daniel LaRue Johnson's 1964 painting "Big Red" starts things off with a sly challenge. When included in the Hammer show, it represented the assemblage strategy. It does here too, although now the emphasis is on its use of assemblage specifically as a foil for geometric abstract painting.

In the center of a large crimson square, one half solid and the other half almost imperceptibly striped, a black square is edged in screaming yellow and crisp white. Embedded in the viscous, tar-like pitch of the black square is a tangled cluster of chicken wire and egg cartons.

The roughly 5-foot composition recalls contemporaneous abstract paintings by artists such as Billy Al Bengston, in which a sign-like field of slick color was marked with a centralized emblem. Johnson began to affix ruined objects to his abstract paintings in the aftermath of the notorious 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in Birmingham, Ala., a crime so awful that it galvanized the nation. Finding ways to adapt abstraction to an aesthetic of dissent, he made a picture whose brash color alone shouts an alarm.

The CAAM show, organized by curator Mar Hollingsworth, includes paintings, sculptures, prints, photographs, video and installations by 46 artists. They range from well-established — Jacob Lawrence, Noah Purifoy, Melvin Edwards, David Hammons, etc. — to mid-career and younger artists, including Holly Tempo, June Edmonds, Rashid Johnson, Brenna Youngblood and Bre Gipson. Most works are from the last dozen years or so, although a good number span the prior half-century.

The earliest is a small, intense 1948 woodcut on rice paper by Elizabeth Catlett. It shows a head in three-quarter view, its sharply jagged features a seamless fusion of traditional African, German Expressionist and Cubist faceting of forms.

One askew eye stares straight out. The other is a blackened lozenge, either blinded or looking inward.

The little print's jagged black-and-white sharpness is the apparent "Hard Edged" feature heralded in the show's title, which refers to the geometric abstraction of the 1950s and 1960s known as "hard edge" painting. The subtle addition of the letter "d" to the end of the standard term denotes a certain brittle toughness. Hard edged underscores a social and political dimension to the exhibition, rather than purely an aesthetic one.

Geometry is considered quite loosely. Sometimes it is even a bit of a stretch — for instance, merely the rectilinear box inside of which an assemblage might be constructed. The show has numerous examples.

The finest is Hammons' devastating 1988 "Skillets in the Closet," an enigmatic, worn and weathered cupboard whose open door reveals 13 rusting cast-iron skillets hanging from twisted coat-hangers on a rack. The floor below is covered in a tattered piece of floral linoleum, its pattern evoking a field indoors.

The online Racial Slur Database says that skillet is derogatory slang that sometimes refers to blacks, sometimes to mixed races. In this context, the dangling skeletons in Hammons' sarcophagus-like closet are a disturbing allusion to lynching, tucked away out of sight if never fully out of mind. This bleak, hard-edged sculpture embodies our American family cupboard.

June Edmonds' "This in Common" is a mandala fragment, an abstract wheel of vivid, radiating color composed from thick, short, single strokes of oil paint, each one as direct and confidently applied as the next — round and round, disk after disk. The meditative pattern is part textile, part nod in the direction of a notable predecessor, painter Alma Thomas.

Textiles of a different sort — namely, quilts — are conjured by Lisa Soto in a pair of suspended planes of shimmery metallic color made from crocheted squares of wire. The squares, inelastic and visually fragile, are transparent, the wires in their open weave catching the light.

One large textile plane is suspended in front of the other, while both hang from invisible monofilament attached to a small motor hidden near the ceiling. The motor makes the layered, floating quilts slightly jostle and shimmy, their animation evoking a living spirit — the spirit of historical family legacies that quilts so often embody.

That's what the exhibition, which features many more intriguing works, also means to do to. It could benefit from a tighter, more explicit illumination of its abstract geometries (not to mention a catalog), but "Hard Edged," nonetheless, widens the social field in which postwar African American art should be considered.

'Hard Edged: Geometrical Abstraction and Beyond'

Where: California African American Museum, Exposition Park, 600 State Drive, Los Angeles

When: Through April 24; closed Mondays, Christmas Day and New Year's Day

Info: (213) 744-7432, www.caamuseum.org

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