

MONA

MUSEUM OF NEBRASKA ART

2401 Central Avenue
Kearney, NE 68847
(308) 865-8559
mona.unk.edu

A GREATER SPECTRUM:

AFRICAN AMERICAN ARTISTS OF NEBRASKA 1912-2010

December 4, 2010 – April 3, 2011

Essays by three of the artists included in the exhibition: Ernie Chambers, Peggy Jones, and Neville Murray

Ernie Chambers

Senator, Nebraska State Legislature, 1970-2008

An unremarkable but indisputable premise underlies this essay: white and non-white people neither experience nor view life in America the same way; and there is an inevitable, dramatic divergence on matters of race. Often, where white eyes perceive “progress,” black eyes see only “change” – rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

My experience and study convince me that racism, like an unremitting social migraine, is so intractable a problem that it shall remain unsettled and unresolved as far into the future as eye of intellect and imagination can peer.

English poet William Blake poetized of being able “to see a world in a grain of sand... and eternity in an hour.” Little would be comprehended about the world from a description of a grain of sand and even less gleaned about timeless eternity from contemplation of something that measures only a teeny snippet of time.

Therefore, rather than get lost in specific “grains of sand” and individual “hours,” the best I can do in this limited space is provide a contextual framework of major currents within which my labors have taken place. My rhyme gives my view:

A German proverb I once read,
In my mind still rings –
“To change, and improve,” it said
“Are two quite different things.”

Sure, changes have occurred along the Racial Front. The election of a black president bespeaks a “change” but, of itself, not necessarily “improvement.” No white president’s American citizenship has been challenged, nor his faith maliciously and disingenuously

misrepresented, nor his wife compared to a canine. And what about the purported “new” racial polarization “created” by his election?

“The more things change, the more they remain the same,” says the axiom.

The stacks of any decent-sized library hold a plethora of titles on “race.” The tables of contents of a few randomly selected “early,” “middle,” and “late” volumes reveal how similar they are in content and recurrence and how little substantive “improvement” is evident, though myriad “changes” are chronicled.

The same “race problems” bedeviling Frederick Douglass, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Malcolm X are still in business. The same arguments and opposition are advanced by the same anti-racism organizations created many decades ago, such as the NAACP and the Urban League.

Although the right of black people to vote is guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution and buttressed by federal voting-rights enactments and court decisions, black people yet are burdened by racially inspired impediments to free exercise of the franchise – just as “in the old days.”

Despite President Harry S. Truman’s 1948 Executive Order desegregating the Armed Forces, racism and discrimination continue apace in promotions, retention, duty assignments, discharges, and more recently, proliferation of hangman’s nooses at military installations and some Service Academies.

Still unfulfilled is the hope-engendering promise of the U.S. Supreme Court’s famous 1954 landmark decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, outlawing segregation in public schools. Ironically, the decision has given impetus to judicial dismantling of segregation in public accommodations, housing, and employment, while segregation in public schools is more rigid than ever; and “minority” schools are beset by inferior education – just as “in the old days.”

For example, the Omaha Public Schools (largest district in Nebraska) has the nation’s fifth-worst black-white achievement gap and the nation’s worst (tied with New York) graduation rate for black students. Any “change” has been for the worse.

Many white people and “their” elected officials angrily and vociferously denounce brown, Spanish-speaking, so-called “illegals” for violating federal immigration laws while they, at the same time, fervently laud state laws and local ordinances that violate federal immigration law by illegally infringing on the federal government’s exclusive jurisdiction in the area of immigration. Regrettably, but not surprisingly, some Nebraska politicians are scrambling to put the state in the forefront of the lawless spectacle.

A citizens’ Initiative Petition amended the Nebraska Constitution to ban affirmative action in the public sector. This, in spite of the reality that the state is overwhelmingly white, and that black people who chronically experience double-digit unemployment, pose no threat of “taking jobs from white people” whose own low unemployment rate often leads the nation. Too, the ranks of upper management are as white as virgin snow (as are the Nebraska Supreme Court, Court of Appeals, University Board of Regents, and all statewide offices).

Since affirmative action can be shown never to have exerted any significant impact on anything in Nebraska, the amendment is viewed by many as more of an overt expression of racial animus than a bulwark against any discernable threat against the wellbeing of the white majority.

As far as race in Nebraska is concerned, I, as a black man, am my father’s father’s father.

A most fitting conclusion to this essay lies in the forceful challenge hurled by President John F. Kennedy at his white countrymen four decades and seven years ago – June 11, 1963 – in a nationally televised speech condemning racism in America. He spoke on the evening of the day he federalized the Alabama National Guard and directed its Commander to order Governor George Wallace to vacate the doorway of the University of Alabama Administration Building so that two black students could enter and register.

After enumerating racial injustices, the President said: “[I]f, in short, [a black man] cannot enjoy the full and free life all of us want – then who among us would be content to have the color of his skin changed and stand in his place? Who among us would be content with counsels of patience and delay? ... Now the time has come for this Nation to fulfill its promise.”

Stirring words, indeed! But that “promise,” unkept then, remains unkept to this day – as seems likely to be true throughout the remaining existence of this nation.

It is against this constantly changing, but not significantly improving, background that I have lived, labored, and had by being.

Written: 2010

Peggy Jones

Assistant Professor, University of Nebraska at Omaha

Free Within Ourselves: From “The New Negro” to “The Black Aesthetic”

How do you see yourself? What serves as your mirror? W.E.B. Du Bois theorized that Black people in America had a double consciousness: they saw themselves and they saw how others saw them, which was often as a “problem.” He made these assertions in 1903, in the midst of what historians call the “nadir of American race relations.” The promises of freedom made to Black people via the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the United States Constitution were subsequently abrogated, often by the very people charged with the implementation of those guarantees. Nicholas Lemann writes in *The Promised Land*, “[B]lack people in the South were denied social equality from Emancipation onward, and, beginning in the 1890s, they were denied the ordinary legal rights of American citizens as well.” To be clear, these rights were deprived from not only the four and a half million formerly enslaved, but also from many Blacks who had never known this dehumanizing condition. At the same time, their basic rights as American citizens are not being upheld, African Americans are expected to maintain the delusion of White supremacy and Black inferiority. They are supposed to obey the racial etiquette of the day, including but not limited to stepping off sidewalks when Whites approached, not making eye contact with Whites, and most definitely not complaining or even making notice of these indignities. The penalty for violating the racist status quo could range from physical and sexual assault to death by lynching. The crime of being “uppity,” of daring to see oneself as equal to anyone, could not go unpunished. Assaults and murder were not limited to the South, however. For example, there was the grotesquely violent lynching of Will Brown in Omaha, Nebraska, in the Red Summer of 1919.

Just two decades after the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois, young Black artists are shockingly and miraculously asserting their rightful claims to freedom. These “New Negro” aesthetic demands are often in defiance to earlier generational calls for “art as propaganda,” which Du Bois made in his speech, “Criteria of Negro Art.” These courageous folk wanted to collaboratively create a new and modern art era. Aaron Douglas, the first Black

graduate of the University of Nebraska, Lincoln's art department, wrote to his friend and fellow artist Langston Hughes about what they must do. He delineated a different problem than Du Bois had, telling Hughes in a letter from December, 1925, that "your problem, Langston, my problem, no, our problem, is to conceive an art era. *Not white art painted black* (emphasis added)." In 1926, Hughes would write "The Negro and the Racial Mountain," and, in keeping with the exhortations of Douglas, refuse to present a sterile, Eurocentric, and whitewashed version of being Black. He unapologetically concludes his essay with the following:

"We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are glad. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves."

Hughes makes a compelling argument that Blacks from all walks of life and experience see themselves not through a mirror darkly, but as free to express the range of what it has been and continues to be African descended in America.

Artists of the Harlem Renaissance also confronted issues of gender (personally and aesthetically) during this movement. Intersectionality is an analysis claiming that systems of identity (race, social class, gender, sexuality, et.al.) form mutually constructing (and often oppressive) features of social organization. As Black women, artists Lois Maillou Jones and Augusta Savage struggled with issues of visibility for their work and themselves. According to her official website, Jones gave up a nearly lifelong desire to be a textile and fashion designer after callously and ignorantly being denied authorship of one of her creations. "How could you have designed that? You're a colored girl." In this racist and sexist environment, Jones still persevered, aided by her family's support and her own vision of who she was and of what she was capable. She taught for almost forty years as an art professor at Howard University while maintaining an exhibition record and illustrating in Carter G. Woodson's *Journal of Negro History*, as well as for other texts. Savage was an acclaimed sculptor who opened an art school with noted alumni Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and Gwendolyn Knight. Her figurative sculpture, *Gamin*, is thought by many to be the iconic representation of the Harlem Renaissance. The piece is an embodiment of Négritude, the self-affirmation of black peoples, or the affirmation of the values of civilization of something defined as "the black world" as an answer to the question "what are we in this white world?" (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy) To put it another way, how were they to be seen?

In the 1960s and '70s, Black artists reasserted that right to be free within themselves, to affirm their values, and to be seen as the subjects, not merely the objects, of American life. The Black Arts Movement was the aesthetic and cultural equivalent to the Black Power Movement. Literary and visual artists sought to express in a creative fashion the demands for equality and humanity made in written form by Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton in the seminal text, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. Visual artists of the Black Arts Movement included those in AFRI-COBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists), founded in 1969 by Jeff Donaldson and Wadsworth Jarrell. According to Richard Powell, they employed "a humanist orientation, design sensibilities that used African prototypes as reference, (and) agendas that fostered liberation and solidarity throughout the African Diaspora..." As in previous generations, Black artists looked to create an aesthetic that would clearly demonstrate an African identity filtered through the American experience. Also, as in the past, while these artists were conscious of the political ramifications of their work, they did not see their works as means to an end (the

attainment of freedom for Black peoples of the world), but rather an end in itself. They saw in themselves beautifully complex human Black people, and shared that vision with the world.

Written: 2010

Neville Murray

Executive Director, Loves Jazz & Arts Center

The following essay is based on my personal experiences over the past two decades.

The past two decades have been both a period of great achievement and continued struggles for African American artists in Nebraska. My experiences here are expressed both as an artist and arts administrator and curator, and have tailored my opinions in this essay.

During most of the 1990s, I was employed by the Nebraska Arts Council (NAC), where I served as the Multicultural Arts Coordinator for that state agency. During my tenure there, my charge was to assist communities of color with services offered by the arts council, and tailor those services so that these communities would have equitable access to NAC services and programs.

A people of color arts advisory committee (POOAC) consisting of representatives from the primary minority groups, including African American, Asian, Hispanic, and Native American populations. POOCAC was established to voice the concerns and lobby for these communities, with regards to equitable access to funding and support.

The move by the Nebraska Arts Council to address the needs of these communities was based on a lawsuit that was brought to address perceived and real concerns with regard to equitable access to NAC resources, and address the cultural needs of these communities.

I include this background information because there was the perception that the NAC ignored the artistic expression of people of color. When I was hired, I held one of just five such positions nationally.

Many of the problems faced by African American artists are due in part to the western European context from which western art originated, where curators curate from their education and background where all too often African American artists and curators do not reside. The African American experience is often neglected and marginalized, not necessarily by design but by the experience of those making curatorial decisions.

Despite such moves to address inequalities both real and perceived, African American artists in the past two decades have experienced great struggles in Nebraska. Being an artist is inherently a difficult undertaking, and that journey is historically doubly so for African American artists. Inequalities extended beyond funding institutions to galleries and museums.

There have been exceptions however and the 1990s saw the first steps to address this reality. We saw the first hiring of African American art faculty at major universities in Nebraska including the hiring of sculptor Littleton Alston and painter Peggy Jones at Creighton University and Peru State College respectively.

Despite these gains, we also lost many of our most promising African American artists to other states because they had to in order to sustain themselves as artists, including Warrior

Richardson, Biko, and Reece Crawford. There were also areas of great promise and development including the opening of the Black Rainbow Gallery on South 13th Street in Omaha.

Established by local entrepreneur and artist Oran Belgrave, the Black Rainbow was the first major gallery created to primarily serve the needs of African American artists, and important Black artists such as A.C. Lofton, and then-state senator Ernie Chambers, and many others were able to showcase and sell their art. This was a first for many of these artists, many of whom had been excluded from mainstream art galleries and museums. There was a movement developing, and great local publicity in newspapers and other media given to these artists for the first time.

The Nebraska Arts Council also helped to establish innovative new initiatives for African American artists, including the arts online project, where artists were introduced to the business of art and taught how to establish their own websites and how to market and promote themselves, as well as other digital divide initiatives. This was a very successful initiative funded by the Benton Foundation. Many of the artist websites established through this initiative are still in existence today.

Once again however these positive gains were tempered by losses as the African American community saw the decline of our preeminent cultural and arts institution in Nebraska that had been displaying African American art since the 1970s. The Great Plains Black Museum's founder and director Bertha Calloway fell into ill health and no one was there to carry on her legacy.

The first decade of the 21st century was also one of progress and losses where we witnessed the passing of important African American artists with little or no fanfare, including A.C. Lofton. We have also witnessed some of our more senior artists truly blossom, including the esteemed artist Oscar Pullman. The 21st century has also seen the rise of wonderful Nebraskan African American female artists, such as Wanda Ewing as well as another promising artist of note, Patti Talbert.

Established in 2005, the Loves Jazz & Arts Center (LJAC) continues the work pioneered by the Great Plains Black Museum and the Black Rainbow Gallery to feature African American artistic expression. For the past three years, LJAC has had annual exhibitions where artists of African American descent have a major venue in the heart of Omaha's African community to showcase and sell their art. LJAC has also been a venue for national and international artists of African descent to show their art, including Faith Ringgold, Frederick Brown, Albert Chong, Rudy Smith, and Bernard Hoyes.

Also on a positive note, African American artists are seeking alternative modes of distribution to showcase their art worldwide. Now artists can bypass the curator and the museum to display art to a worldwide audience. Virtual communities are being created to hitherto unseen outlets. Technology has been a boom for our artists. No longer are we limited by the concept of "local" community for access. Because of the internet and social networking, access to a global market is limited only by our imagination.

Nebraska has also attracted internationally acclaimed African American artists including Littleton Alston and Therman Statom, who find Nebraska ideal for family and creativity so, despite the struggle, there is much to be thankful for and a movement towards a better tomorrow is possible.

African American art is uniquely American as is Jazz, Blues, and Rock and Roll; it is a product of our experiences and history and speaks to our humanity and struggle.

Written: 2010

This exhibition was supported by:
Humanities Nebraska
Nebraska Arts Council
Nebraska Cultural Endowment

