



THE (IN)VISIBILITY OF FOUR BLACK WOMEN ARTISTS: ESTABLISHING A SUPPORT NETWORK, DEFINING OBSTACLES, AND LOCATING SELF THROUGH ART

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Abstract

In the early 1970s, the Feminist Art Movement in the United States began to promote primarily White women's art; and the 1970s Black Arts Movement promoted Black male artists. However, neither movement catered to the needs of Black women artists. As a Black feminist artist born in the United States and feeling isolated from Black women artist support networks, in this essay, I bring visibility to the Black Feminist Art Movement in the 1970s; and explore how to rebuild a supportive community for Black female artists in current times. I interviewed four Black women artists who ranged in age from 40 to 67 years. Their narratives convey their experiences and feelings of abandonment by mainstream galleries and museums and isolation as artists due to their race and gender. I argue that there is a need for greater visibility of contemporary Black women artist, which requires a support network to achieve exhibition in mainstream galleries and museums.

Keywords: Black women artists, feminist art movement, invisibility, narrative inquiry, Black Feminist Art Movement

(In)Visibility of Black Women Artists

During the early 1970s, the Feminist Art Movement formed for women artists to be recognized as artists and to exhibit their art at prominent galleries and museums that catered to Eurocentric male artists (Farrington, 2005, 2017). A few art collectives organized to support women artists such as the *Women Artists in Revolution* (1969-1971) and *The Ad Hoc Women's Artists Committee*¹ (1970). White women, who led the Feminist Art Movement, gave the perception of a shared female identity (Farrington, 2005). Black women, however, found racism within the Feminist Art Movement and felt that their interests were not being heard (Ringgold, 2005). Since the 1960s, Black art is recognized not only within Black communities but also on the national level (Patton, 1998). The Black Arts Movement began to promote Black artists, however, their patriarchal attitude featured mainly Black men. Consequently, Black female artists faced a triple challenge in that they were (a) excluded from male-dominated White art institutions, (b) ignored by the 1970s White Feminist Art Movement, and (c) rejected by Black male artist organized groups.

Valerie Smith's (2012) research found that most gallery owners in the 1970s did not believe Black women were legitimate artists. The influential gallery owners' dismissive attitude toward Black women led Black women artists to become their own activists, creating their own movement to develop a support network system—the Black Feminist Art Movement (BFAM) (Rabaka, 2011). The BFAM set out to have their voices heard and their artwork critiqued in mainstream galleries and museums, not only as women, but, also, as Black women. Organizations such as the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), *Where We At* (WWA), and *Women Students for Black Art Liberation* (WSABAL) provided a supportive community.

1. Members included Poppy Johnson, Brenda Miller, Faith Ringgold, and Lucy Lippard.

Feminist scholar Suryaia Nayak (2015) argues the case for Black women-only spaces by analyzing Audre Lorde's words, "Black feminism is not white feminism in blackface," in order to expose the differential social structure between White men, White women, and Black men (p. 51). In the 1970s, Faith Ringgold (b. 1930), starved for artistic exchanges in discussing her art as residing in Black women's experiences. She felt she needed to have a "meaningful dialogue with other artists" (Ringgold, 2005, p. 147). Ringgold, along with her daughter Black activist Michelle Wallace (b. 1952), along with Flo Kennedy, Margaret Sloan, and Doris Wright, founded, in May 1973, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO). Within NBFO's second year there were more than 2000 members and 10 chapters across the United States, which lasted until 1976 when the organization disbanded (Wada, 2007).

Spearheading the BFAM, Ringgold became a role model for many Black female artists in the 1970s. She demanded that their work be taken seriously. Yet, she was excluded as indicated by her asking; "When there is a group for blacks and a group for women, where do I go?" (as cited in Farrington, 2017, p. 281). In her own memoir, Ringgold (2005) describes rejection from a major art gallery in New York and her work to overcome discrimination, leading other Black feminists to come together in 1971 to create the first Black woman's art exhibition in New York City called *Where We At: Black Women Artist*, WWA² (Farrington, 2005, 2017; Patton, 1998; Ringgold, 2005; Smith, 2012). The WWA created traveling exhibitions, art workshops, gallery exhibitions, grants, and recognition in the art world. The WWA collective was active for two decades until 1997, leaving a legacy of Black women artist activism (Brown, 2011; Cotter, 2007).

In response to the sexism and racism that prohibited Black women from entering the "Liberated" Venice Biennale exhibition, Ringgold and her daughter Wallace created an ad hoc group called Women Students and Artists for Black Art Liberation (WSABAL). WSABAL prepared press releases to voice their position against the exclusion from the White-male art show that included a few token

2. "Where We At" Black Women Artist, Inc. (WWA) co-founders Faith Ringgold, Dinda McCannon, Kay Brown, Jerri Crooks, Charlotte Ka (Richardson), and Vivian Browns formed in 1971, as an organization that provided a supportive environment for Black women artists. WWA created the first all Black women's professional artist group and is the first Black women's professional artist group in the United States (Brown, 2011).

Black male artists (Ringgold, 2005).

In spite of their activism, Black women faced steep obstacles (Cahan, 2016). Creating a supportive community was crucial. On the West coast of the U.S., Artist Betye Saar argued Black women were invisible to museums and the gallery scene and experienced racism with White feminist arts groups (Dallow, 2004; Farrington, 2017). The 1970s BFAM helped some Black female artists to achieve inclusion in the U.S. mainstream art world (Henderson, 2014). Yet, most Black female artists experienced discrimination in being able to exhibit their art in significant venues. After the 1970s, there was a decline in political and social protests and civil rights activism and movements despite the need for continuous support (Collins, 2006). Attending to the narratives of Black women artists, offers insights into the dynamics of the BFAM and the decline after the 1970s.

As a contemporary Black female artist and educator, I spent years exhibiting my artwork yet felt isolated from Black women artists. Even though I knew other Black female artists, I did not find supportive networks. In searching for a community of Black women artists, I sought Black female artists' support networks in the art world that assists with challenges of racism and sexism, locates the identity politics of Black women's art, and provides opportunities to exhibit in significant museums and galleries. This article is constructed from interviews with four Black women artists who shared their lived experiences of racism and sexism in pursuing professional art practice.

Narrative Inquiry

Despite a few Black female artists who received widespread recognition from the BFAM, such as Faith Ringgold, Elizabeth Catlett, Betye Saar, and Howardena Pindell, there still remained a lack of museum and gallery representation of Black women artists. My career as an artist gave me first-hand experience of the issues Black female artists face. This also afforded me the opportunity to hear the stories and concerns of Black women who exhibited their work alongside my work.

Narratives play an important role to voice the lives of the oppressed (Amoah, 2013; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry seeks to reveal

how individuals understand their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). In following Glesne's (2011) format in developing an understanding of the lived experience, I devised a series of questions to interrogate the narratives of four artists and their responses regarding the Black Feminist Art Movement:

1. Are there remnants of the Black Feminist Art Movement visible today?
2. What is your support network system that has enabled you to exhibit in mainstream museums and galleries?
3. Were there any obstacles you faced relating to sexism and racism within your art career?
4. How do you locate the meaning of your artwork as a Black woman?

I interviewed each artist by telephone about their experiences to further understand the intersectional challenges in entering the art world. I considered their age, geographical location, professional experience, marital status, and art training in analysis of the interviews to understand the significance of the BFAM to Black female artists after the 1970s. I chose women who are currently practicing artists and well-known in their local communities as established artists. The combined narratives of the four Black women artists explore their networks of support into galleries and museums, how they dealt with racism and sexism, and the impact of the intersections of racism and sexism on their work.

The Artists

I compiled a list of eight Black women artists and researched their art and biographies. From this survey, I selected four artists based on my criteria to include a range of ages, experiences, artistic techniques, and perspectives about Black feminism in relation to their work as artists. I described that I would ask questions about the (in)visibility of Black women artists, their support network, and their experience with racism and sexism in the art world. All four agreed to participate in the study.³ I audio-recorded narratives conveyed by phone between October and November 2015 from the following Black women artists:

Janet Taylor Pickett was born in 1948 in Ann Arbor, Michigan. She is

3. I received written approval from each artist to conduct the interview and received consent to use their names, artwork, and interview responses in publications.

retired, divorced, and the mother of one daughter. Pickett received a BFA and MFA from the University of Michigan School of Art and Design. Shortly after graduating in 1973, Pickett married and moved to Newark, New Jersey, where she supervised the Junior Museum at the Newark Museum. In 1974, she began teaching art history and studio art at Essex County College in Newark. After teaching art for 35 years, Pickett retired to Pasadena, California, to continue her art career full-time. She currently exhibits in museums and galleries throughout the country.

Bisa Washington (b. 1951) was 64-year-old at the time of this study and was born in Albany, New York. She received a BA in Studio Art from the New Jersey City University. She is divorced with two daughters and teaches art at a private high school. She maintains a studio practice in Newark, New Jersey, and has exhibited internationally.

Karen Seneferu (b. 1960) was a 55-year-old self-taught artist from Oakland, California, at the time of this study. She received a BA in English from the University of California and is an English professor at Berkeley City College in Berkeley, California. Seneferu has one son, and is married to an artist Malik Seneferu. She exhibits throughout California.

Bisa Butler was born in 1975, in Orange, New Jersey, and is a married mother of two daughters. She is a high school art teacher in Maplewood, New Jersey. Butler majored in Studio Art at Howard University and received a master's degree in Art Education from Montclair State University in New Jersey. Butler exhibits her artwork nationally.

Black Women Artists Interviewed About the Black Feminist Art Movement

I asked each of the four artists selected for this study the same questions to better understand the BFAM through their personal narratives of their experiences entering the art world. During analysis, additional questions arose that I asked for clarity.

The BFAM in the 1970s is credited for providing supportive networks for many Black women artists by giving them leadership and guidance in promoting

their artwork (Rabaka, 2011). Despite the support networks for Black women artists in the 1970s, several decades later, there is still a struggle for contemporary Black women artists to promote their artwork. This has led to the question: *Are remnants of the Black Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s visible today?*

Janet Taylor Pickett was an art student in the 1970s, even though she did not consider herself a feminist at that time, she did participate in art organizations for Black women artists. She acknowledges the importance of the BFAM and explains the Black Power Movement was just as important for Black women. The pressure to choose which movement to support was a major conflict for many Black women (Farrington, 2005).

As for remnants of the BFAM for contemporary artists, Pickett (personal communication, October 29, 2015) states, “If there is, I see it more in literature than I see in the arts.” Bisa Washington (personal communication, November 9, 2015), also an artist during the 1970s, claims she does not know if a BFAM exists anymore. Her concern is the lack of interest from younger Black women artists who do not make the connection between the achievements made by the BFAM in promoting visibility of Black women artist in the art world today. From a West Coast perspective, Karen Seneferu is not sure either, but feels this is a good question for Black women artists. She doesn’t see a BFAM today, even though, she is aware of the issues Black women address about equality and social justice issues in the community. Unlike the other artists, Bisa Butler was born in the 1970s and has heard stories from her mother and other Black women in her community of their involvement in the Black social movements for equity. For Butler, there is a strong presence of a BFAM through social media. “I feel a Black Art Feminist Movement, I would say, it is stronger than it was before. I don’t know what it was before, but it is a lot more visible, I would say” (B. Butler, personal communication, November 2, 2015).

Despite the overall recognition of Black women artists, the responses from the participants show an uncertainty about any remnants of the BFAM visible today. However, the age disparities and the experience with and about the BFAM influence their perceptions. For younger artist, Butler, feminism and activism are seen more through social media such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and

websites such as the Black Feminist Manifesto,⁴ which offers a different space to engage and promote Black women artists. While Washington associates the BFAM with marches and protests, it is important to note, not all the women in this study defined themselves as feminists, even though issues of Black women artists are important and their artwork displays a feminist theme. For example, Seneferu considered herself an Africanist who recognized the importance of African aesthetics foremost.

Black women artists are still struggling with the challenges of entering the art world, thus, I asked: Is there a need for a BFAM today? Pickett, Seneferu, and Butler agreed there is a need for a BFAM today. Pickett’s experience as an artist, since the 1970s, offers insight into the importance of BFAM. She believes there continues to be a need for the BFAM. Seneferu considers that the worst thing for a woman is to think that she creates her struggle. She recognizes the need to create spaces of healing that art can provide. Similarly, Butler believes there is a need for a BFAM to ensure women are represented by galleries. Butler emphasized that art by Black women artists helps to break through stereotypic images of them. She states:

I am tired of seeing the super voluptuous, overly sexual, attractive females represented in Black art, and I am not saying that we don’t have that, but, it becomes an exotic or object of sexual pleasure and maybe sometimes we don’t want to be represented in that way. (B. Butler, personal communication, November 2, 2015)

Washington offers a different perspective on the necessity of a contemporary BFAM. She acknowledges there may be artists out there who want to be in the company of other artists, however, she is very clear, this is not something she is seeking for herself.

Whether or not the four Black women artists in this study identify or label themselves feminists there is a unified consensus that a BFAM for Black women artists is needed. However, I noticed a generation difference. Older artists, who had the BFAM experience in the 1970s, expressed that they did not need a BFAM today. However, younger Black women artists want gallery representation and a

4. The Black Feminist Manifesto is an online artist collective supporting feminists of color through online exhibitions to provide a creative space to express their voice. <http://blackfeminist-manifesto.tumblr.com/about>

group or organization to provide mentorship. This opened the conversation on the role of Black women as teachers, mothers, and caretakers and the support networks necessary to achieve exhibitions into mainstream galleries and museums.

Support Networks

Throughout my career as an artist, I found myself traversing alone in trying to exhibit in mainstream museums and galleries. This is not to be confused with working alone. I like to paint in solitude and I prefer to have solo exhibitions as most artists do, but I lacked mentorship. I often wondered how other Black women artists entered into the mainstream museums and galleries. The four women interviewed, generously express their support network system. I asked the four artists in this study: *What is your support network system that has enabled you to exhibit in mainstream museums and galleries?* Pickett's training in graduate school gave her a space to exhibit her artwork and prepared her to locate art venues. Even with all her preparation to enter the art world from graduate school, racism was a major problem. "It is certainly not easy, especially for an African American female back then in the 1970s. I remember trekking around the city with slides back in the day and going into galleries cold. I remember dropping off ... slides, and looking back as the gallery owner dropped my slides in the garbage" (J. T. Pickett, personal communication, October 29, 2015).

When Pickett moved to New Jersey in the early 1970s, she was married with a young daughter and joined *Black Women in Visual Perspectives*, formed by artist Gladys Grauer⁵ (b. 1924) in Newark, New Jersey. This allowed her to travel, compete in competitions, apply for grants, and meet other African American artists. People began to know her name locally and they begin to invite her to exhibit her work, which led to gallery representation by Kathy Imlay, the director of Imlay Fine Art, a private gallery in Montclair, New Jersey.

Now retired, Pickett feels she stills has to create her own network but desires a different type of support network than when she was younger. Fortunately, she moved into a neighborhood where there are other artists.

5. Gladys Barker Grauer, artist and art teacher, opened the first African American art gallery in Newark, New Jersey in 1972. She is considered the "Mother" of Newark's African American art community (1978 Maplewood Art Center, 2017.; Campbell, 2016).

However, Pickett does not limit her support network to the artists in her neighborhood; social media and the Internet open channels of communicate with other artists throughout the United States and world to discuss her work and become inspired.

Washington was also a member of *Black Women in Visual Perspectives* with Grauer in New Jersey. She also belonged to the *Coast to Coast Women of Color Project*.⁶ Today, Washington's networks are artists, writers, and poets, in her age group, who are still creating artwork. Washington's story is similar to Pickett's narrative. She noted that at some point, as an artist, it is necessary to exhibit your artwork with or without support.

If no one gave us a venue, we pulled our money together, we made a venue, we rented a venue, and we stole a venue so that we could show our art; and our art was about being Black women, married, unmarried, gay, straight, you know, bisexual, whatever, transgendered. We wanted ... our art to stand up against any man—Black, White or Green—out there, and to have the same opportunities. And, if nobody was going to give it to us we were going to give it to ourselves, because we owed ourselves that, we deserved it and we did it. (B. Washington, personal communication, November 9, 2015)

Washington is grateful that she had a support network from Faith Ringgold at the Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, who advised her how to survive as a Black woman artist with two children, and how to be a businesswoman.

Pickett and Washington both found a support network early in their careers in the 1970s. They were able to experience working with Black art activists Faith Ringgold and Gladys Barker Grauer, who saw the need to create a network for Black women artists to exhibit their work. The BFAM was a reality for them, unlike Seneferu and Butler, whose husbands are their support network.

For Seneferu, her husband is an artist and helped her enter art galleries. However, she had not anticipated that the *Black Woman is God*⁷ exhibition that she initiated in 2013 and co-curated as a traveling exhibition of art by Black women on the West Coast would ultimately become her support network. Butler

6. *Coast to Coast: Women of Color National Artists' Book Project*, founded in 1987 by artists Faith Ringgold and Clarissa Sligh.

7. *Black Woman is God* a collective of Black women artist in a traveling exhibition in California curated by Karen Seneferu and Melorra Green representing emerging and established artists from Southern and Northern California. <http://karenseneferu.format.com/black-woman-is-god>

is in a community art group, the Valley Arts District, in Orange, New Jersey, which is comprised of artists in the areas—Black and White, male and female. She admits, the Valley Arts District has helped her, but she would like to be a part of an organization that specially targets Black women artists, which will provide a platform for more exhibits, more voice, and more visibility.

Acceptance in the Art World

Each of the four women that I interviewed are practicing artists, all at different levels in their career. Washington and Pickett have exhibited nationally and internationally since the 1970s, while Butler has exhibited nationally in U.S. community-based galleries since 2003, and Seneferu has focused her attention to exhibiting in the West Coast of the United States since 2005. Whether exhibiting internationally or locally I asked: *Were there any obstacles you faced relating to sexism and racism within your art career?*

Pickett strongly stated that she had faced obstacles due to intersections of sexism and racism throughout her art career. As an art professor for more than 35 years, she knew she was not getting paid at the same scale as her male counterparts, who probably had less experience than her. Pickett even was questioned whether she was an artist. “If a male says that he is an artist, it is not a hobby; but when a woman says she’s an artist, she is either a lesbian, a whore, or something other than what she is supposed to be, an artist” (J. T. Pickett, personal communication, October 29, 2015).

Washington described her experience of sexism when she went to France and took her nine-year-old daughter with her. She was the only woman artist in the group exhibition and the only artist who sold an artwork in the Art Junction International exhibition at Art Expo International in Nice, France. Despite her success in selling her art, Washington was not invited to the after-party in Nice or to the trip to Paris for the artists in the group exhibition because she had her daughter with her.

Seneferu describes how patrons at her own art show will have a conversation with her husband and not acknowledge her is the artist. “They see me as Malik Seneferu’s wife, even though I have gotten into more museums and

university institutions [than my husband]. They act like I haven’t done anything” (K. Seneferu, personal communication, November 8, 2015).

Butler’s experience is similar to Seneferu’s experience, of being ignored in her own art show. These experiences left Butler frustrated for not be taken seriously and men acting interested in her artwork when they really were trying to *sleep with her*. Butler’s husband attends art shows with her, but if he cannot be there, her husband sends his best friend as the *stand-in* husband. She claims this is the only way people will talk to her as an artist.

Unlike Pickett and Washington, Butler has not had much success with gallery representation. After contacting mainstream galleries, museums and other places where art is exhibited, she does not receive a reply back. Even after submitting slides and talking to different gallery directors they do not response. Black art galleries treated Butler the same way. She feels the only *in* is through other people’s recommendations.

All four women expressed that they do not have easy access to influential art critics in order to secure exhibitions of their artwork. Groups like WWA, NBFO, and WSABAL in the 1970s were advocates for Black women artists. Regardless of their status, as Washington stated, Black women artists came together in the 1970s to create a venue if they were not given one. The BFAM created opportunities for Black women artists. However, the collective momentum of the BFAM experienced in the 1970s has dissipated.

Locating Self as Black Women through Art

Given the four artists interviewed each identified obstacles of sexism and racism as they sought to have their art exhibited, I asked: *How do you locate the meaning of your artwork as a Black woman?* Pickett responded that she is a woman from a particular ancestry rooted in U.S. slavery of African people, a history that continues to have discriminatory residue. In locating the meaning of her artwork, Pickett believes, at this point in her life, her work is channeled through her life experiences. In *A Still Life No. 1* (Figure 1), Pickett compares her life to a Black woman domestic worker’s life who is trapped and forced to work in oppressive conditions toward her own self-actualization. “Sometimes I call myself

a domestic worker because I work at home. I am a mother, I am a divorced woman who raised a daughter and who worked sometimes three jobs. ... [I] couldn't depend on anybody else for that income but me and so sometime that artistic life had to be stilled, to be stopped in order to take care of the main responsibility in my life, which was my daughter" (J. T. Pickett, personal communication, October, 27, 2015). *A Still Life No.1* is more than a collection of fruit and vegetables. The use of vintage photographs, the Black woman standing in the kitchen as a domestic servant represents the symbolic layers of discrimination and oppression that Black women endure.

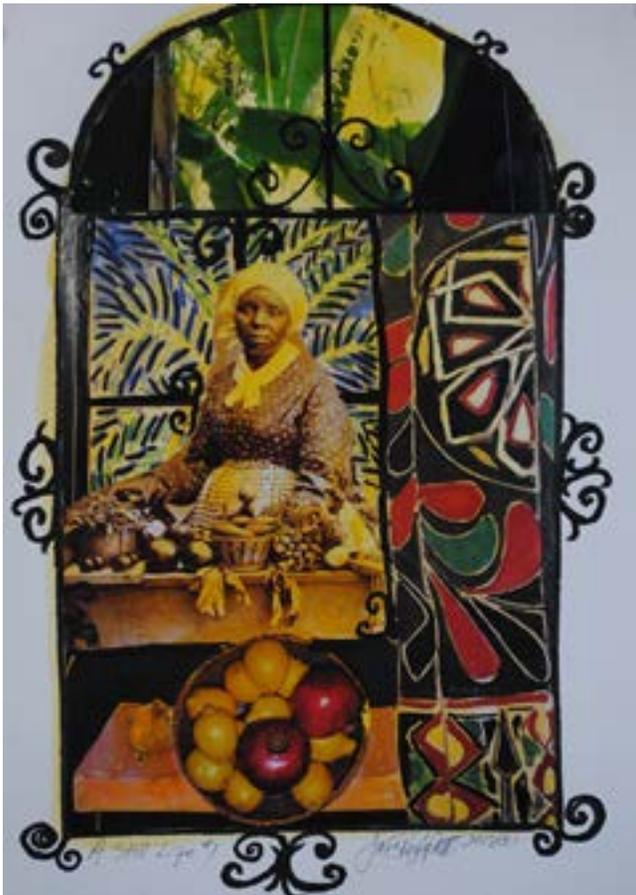


Figure 1. © Janet Taylor Pickett, *A Still Life #1*, 2013, mixed media & collage on paper, 15"X11"

Washington locates the meaning of her artwork through her African-based spirituality. She has learned that her Eguns⁸ have given her a gift as an artist and feels blessed by their guidance. "It all about them, all about knowing my roots and reaching back and bringing it into the contemporary form, but when you look at it, you see Egun, you see Africa and it is nothing other than that, you see Africa and that is what I am about" (B. Washington, personal communication, November 9, 2015). *Eshu Dancing at the Crossroads of Santiago de Cuba* (Figure 2) is about Washington's life dealing with Eshu Laroye at the crossroads.⁹ Washington feels it is important to give honor first to Eshu Elegba before she starts any body of work.

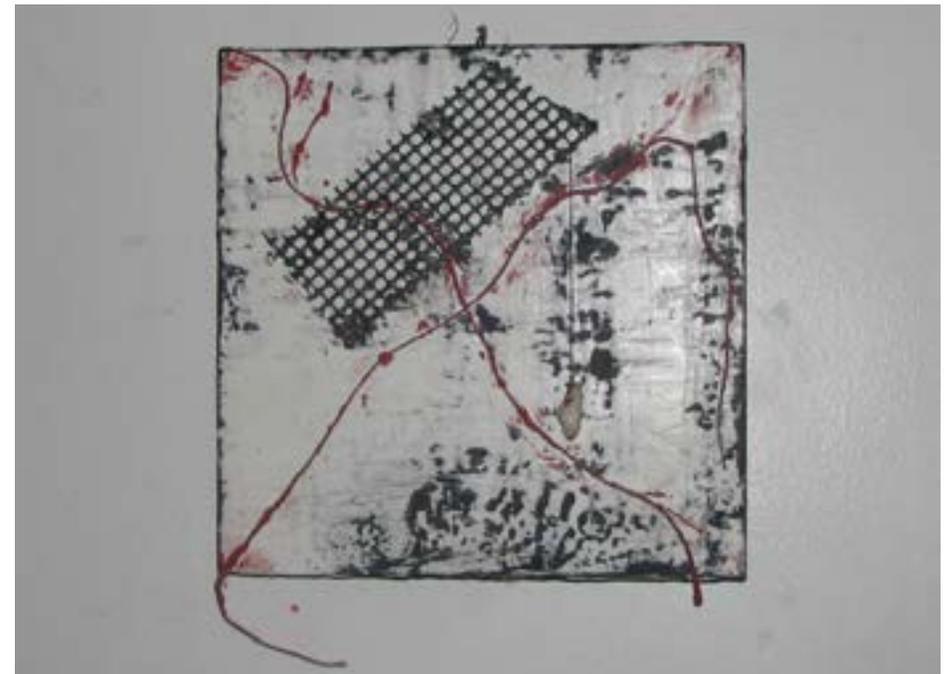


Figure 2. © Bisa Washington, *Eshu Dancing at the Crossroads*, 2012, Encaustic wax on wood 10'X10'

8. Eguns are the spirits of deceased ancestors related by blood or religious lineage in the Yoruba Orisa tradition. Eguns exist at another level and provide spiritual work in the spirit world. Remembering their names, deeds, and honoring them is significant to the Yoruba religious society (Teish, 1985).

9. Eshu is an Orisha Yoruba Religion based from Nigeria in West Africa. Another name Eshu is known as is Elegba, the owner of the crossroads who does not make decisions for you, but represents choices (Edwards & Mason, 1985). Eshu Laroye is one of several roads represented by Eshu and is widely worshipped. Eshu Laroye is the communicator, warrior, and protector; and lives at the entrance of the house (Canizares, 2000).

Seneferu learned that Black women are hungry for images of themselves through art as a form of expression to reflect their importance in what they do in the world. Seneferu recognizes the importance of African aesthetics as a vehicle for creating self-actualization in locating the meaning in her artwork as a Black woman. Similar to Washington, African spirituality influences Seneferu's artwork with the Nkisi.¹⁰ Producing *Techno Kisi 5* (Figure 3) is combination of merging technology and ancient spirituality to create contemporary artwork. Seneferu observed a little girl who walked up to *Techno Kisi 5* and plugged into the earphones and watched the video about the importance of perceiving God as a Black woman. She believes mythmaking is important for a community to be alive as she observed in stating: "As a Black female artist, I have the ability to create work, [which] reveals that our culture is not dead" (Seneferu, personal communication, November 8, 2015).



Figure 3. ©Karen Seneferu, *Techno Kisi 5*, 2011, mixed-media

10. Nkisi Nkondi is a spirit that inhabits a variety of objects from the Congo Basin in Central Africa that contain spiritual power and a means to communicate with ancestors (Cole, 2016).

Butler believes the U.S. society pushes Black women to forget who there are and what they do the best. In feeling her ancestors may have been weavers on a plantation, locating the meaning of her artwork is the process of reclaiming their art. Butler looks at the historical aspect of the origin of humankind through a Black woman lens in her creation of *Australopithecus* (Figure 4), named Lucy, the first human bones that were found to be Homo Sapiens from the continent of Africa. Butler is visually asking the age-old question of who are we and where do we come from? *Australopithecus* is Butler's expressing of how she sees the first human arising out the primal waters, looking at the background galaxy, and an unformed Earth is a Black woman.



Figure 4. © Bisa Butler, *Australopithecus*, 2005 silk, linen & cotton, 60\"X44\"

For all four of the women in this study, ancestral and spirituality from Africa is a major influence for locating the meaning of their artwork. Each piece of artwork tells a story about the plight of Black women, whether it is historical or personal. Artwork created by Black women typically has a message about history, such as from Harriet Powers' slave quilts to Kara Walker's silhouettes.

Reflections on Black Women Artists

This study questioned the (in)visibility of an organization or community that supported contemporary Black women artists, which led to an examination and the purpose of the BFAM in the 1970s and its residues today. Black women sought inclusion in the art world and desired the same opportunities as White female artists and Black male artists that the Feminist Art Movement and Black Arts Movement did not fully provide for them. The BFAM, organized by Black women artists, slowly open opportunities for them to exhibit in mainstream galleries and museums. In the 1970s, they maintained a supportive network despite the challenges of racism and sexism. In looking at this historical bond, this left a question of how contemporary Black women artists understood or acknowledged the Black feminist role in art. I found the participants' experiences as artists, mothers, and educators; and their perceptions about feminism, racism, and sexism, provided perspectives that are often not visible in art history texts.

The Black women interviewed for this study provided valuable insight about whether a BFAM exists today. They voiced their personal experiences and treatment, support networks, acceptance into the art world, and how they located the meaning of their artwork. Their interviews revealed a lack of a supportive community for Black women artists today. The supportive network for Black women artists that Pickett and Washington once experience does not exist for younger artists, Seneferu and Butler. As social media is creating a major impact on how feminism is perceived and how groups and collectives mobilize, there still is a need for in-person group assembly for Black women artists.

The introduction of BFAM influenced each artist's discussion. For example, Washington, participated in the 1970s BFAM and is no longer interested in marches and protests. While Butler, who was born in the 1970s, has listened to the stories about feminisms through her mother. Even though they are born

decades apart, Washington and Butler have both faced racism and sexism in trying to enter the mainstream art world.

The interviewing process went beyond my own personal experience as an artist to represent a broader representation of stereotypes and challenges of Black women entering the mainstream art world. I contend, as Black female artists continue to see acceptance in the art world they still endure the obstacles relating to sexism and racism within their art career. Although there are more Black women artists visible today in mainstream galleries and museums than in the 1970s, there still lacks a collective support network for Black women artists. Through my interviews, I did not find explanations for why there is no visible BFAM today, yet I found the generation gap between Black women artists and BFAM is problematic because a strong desire for collective mobilization was not evident in the interviews. The interviews of these four women provided a narrative to continue the discussion of the absence of a BFAM for contemporary Black women artists.

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