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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

## Dark Matter at Pace Gallery

'Blackness in Abstraction' gathers works spanning seven decades and 29 artists



Curator Adrienne Edwards with Sol Lewitt's 'Wall Structure Black' at Pace Gallery *PHOTO: STEVE REMICH FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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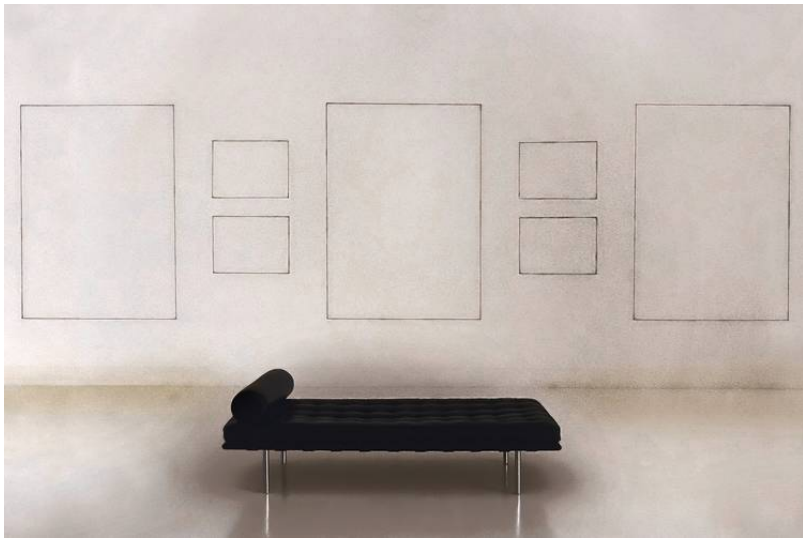
An ambitious group exhibit now on view at Pace Gallery in Chelsea offers answers to a probing question: What is blackness?

Does it indicate something (a form) or nothing (a void)? Is it a beginning or an end? How do the aesthetics of color in art intersect with social matters like race and identity?

For answers, “Blackness in Abstraction” gathered artworks spanning seven decades, by some 29 international artists. Their explorations, in mediums ranging from painting and photography to video and installation work, address the broad formal, expressive and symbolic possibilities of the ever-mysterious and evocative hue.

It varies in each artist’s hand, said Adrienne Edwards, curator of the show. “There is no such thing as a pure single blackness,” she said. “It is a multiplicity.”

Many artists in the exhibit are of African descent, but the show looks beyond race. Work by contemporary black artists such as photographer and painter Rashid Johnson and conceptual artist Fred Wilson shows beside postwar artists such as Robert Rauschenberg, Ad Reinhardt, Louise Nevelson and Sol LeWitt.



A new  
series  
of

Carrie Mae Weems's 'String Theory' (2016) PHOTO: CARRIE MAE WEEMS/JACK SHAINMAN GALLERY, NEW YORK

paintings by Ellen Gallagher opens the show with shiny black surfaces and abstract designs.

Their collective title, “Negroes Battling in a Cave,” alludes to a racially charged message recently found scrawled under a famous 1915 painting called “Black Square on White Ground” by the pioneering Russian abstractionist Kazimir Malevich.

Long considered one of the first wholly nonrepresentational canvases in Western art, it reduced pictorial elements to their essence: a simple shape, painted black and fit for contemplation. Last year, an X-ray analysis revealed the troubling words, alluding to a racist joke, that have complicated the painting’s legacy.

For her own paintings, Ms. Gallagher turned to shiny enamel and torn bits of printed matter—including advertisements from Ebony magazine—that seem to float on a surface of mysterious black.

The effect of her layered abstractions suggests something roiling beneath the surface, not unlike the Malevich painting that hid secret elements for some 100 years.

“You get a sense that the materials could fall apart at any moment,” Ms. Gallagher said, “and move away.”

Nearby is “Abstract Painting” by Ad Reinhardt, whose notorious black canvases from



Glenn Ligon's 'Untitled.' PHOTO: TOM POWELL/LUHRING AUGUSTINE, NEW YORK, REGEN PROJECTS, LOS ANGELES, AND THOMAS DANE GALLERY, LONDON

the '60s, on first glance, appear to be a single monochromatic shade. But after one's eyes adjust for subtlety and fine gradations of light, the canvases reveal abstract blocks rendered in quietly distinctive hues.

In its company: Robert Irwin's "Black Painting with Blue Edge," from 2008-09, a lacquered panel that appears to strobe between black and navy blue beneath an intensely reflective surface.

Rashid Johnson's "The Collapse" works as a mirror of a different kind, with black soap and wax slathered over black-mirrored tile that transforms images of viewers gazing into suggestive blurs.

The experience of being rendered in pitch black can be disorienting for viewers of all

different skin colors, Mr. Johnson said.

“We’ve become familiar with the routine of being able to recognize ourselves in a way that doesn’t feel odd,” the artist said. “But seeing yourself with a different tone and quality of reflection is an opportunity to think very differently about who and how you are.”

Conceptual artist Glenn Ligon offers a similar opportunity in his newly created series of prints with murky words from James Baldwin’s 1955 essay “Stranger in the Village,” a meditation on racism in small-town Europe.

Other artists in the show include Adam Pendleton, visual and performance artist Pope.L, Kevin Beasley, painter Oscar Murillo and Wangechi Mutu, among others.

Carrie Mae Weems, a 63-year-old artist known for questioning cultural identity, is represented here by a photo work titled “String Theory,” showing empty picture frames delineated by black string. The frames suggest the presence of Ms. Weems’s more-familiar photographs of people, but their empty shapes might also tweak the legacy of minimalism, a movement largely of the 1960s that emphasized extreme simplicity of form.

Asked how blackness figures in her work as a color or a matter of race, Ms. Weems said the answer isn’t so straightforward.

“The current generation of artists and curators are beginning to understand that, in order to really move forward, we have to crack and shift the way in which we have this discussion historically,” she said. “This show begins to unpack that.”