D'Souza, Aruna. "'Hard Art' Asks Hard Questions About Daring to Be Abstract," *The New York Times*, 11 November 2026.

The New York Times

'Hard Art' Asks Hard Questions About Daring to Be Abstract

MoMA PS1 brings together more than 40 Black artists in a search for their historical and artistic ties.



Maren Hassinger, "The Veil Between Us," 2007/2018. Twisted and knotted New York Times newspapers, twine, wire, rope and steel. (Shown at "The Spirit of Things at Art + Practice," Los Angeles, 2018.) Maren Hassinger, via Susan Inglett Gallery, New York; Photo by Joshua White



By Aruna D'Souza

Nov. 11, 2026

In the 1960s, abstract art, removed from the world of recognizable objects and people, was often held up as the highest form that art could aspire to.

But while no one seriously challenged Frank Stella, Donald Judd or Robert Ryman about their decision to make abstract painting and sculpture in the midst of the civil rights movement, Vietnam War protests or other roiling issues, things were not so simple for their Black peers.

These Black artists faced resistance on all sides — from the white art establishment, which seemed to expect that they must paint Black themes, and from their peers in the Black Arts Movement, who believed that Black artists should make representational work that would uplift their community. As the playwright Ed Bullins put it, abstraction was "white art in blackface."

"It was just a big wallop against you if you dared to be abstract," the painter Howardena Pindell said in a recent phone interview. Pindell, who initially trained as a figurative painter at Boston University, recalled, "I remember visiting the Studio Museum in Harlem and asking the then-director to look at my work. And he said, you know, you're abstract. Go downtown and play with the white boys."

With its new exhibition, "Hard Art," MoMA PS1 in Queens brings together more than 40 artists — well-known figures including Pindell, and those who should be better known. It asks the question: What are the threads, historical and artistic, that tie these artists together? And: What might abstraction be able to say about Blackness itself?

Connie Butler, the director of MoMA PS1, said her interest in developing the show came from thinking about "this unexamined history of Black artists engaged with abstraction" in the 1960s and '70s. She wondered "what would happen if you did it not as a kind of chronological survey, but rather as an intergenerational conversation."

She and Sheldon Gooch, a member of the curatorial team, drew from early exhibitions of abstract painting and sculpture organized by Black artists. They included "The De Luxe Show" by the artist Peter Bradley in Houston in 1971, one of the first integrated art shows in the United States; "5 + 1," mounted by Frank Bowling at the State University of New York at Stony Brook in 1969; and Linda Goode Bryant's exhibitions at Just Above Midtown Gallery, a hotbed of emerging Black conceptualism in the 1980s.

Many artists in "Hard Art" showed in these exhibitions, including Pindell, Ed Clark, Melvin Edwards, Suzanne Jackson, James Little, Martin Puryear and Senga Nengudi. Their work at PS1 hangs alongside that of Glenn Ligon, Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, Jennie C. Jones and others who in the 1990s and 2000s brought questions of abstraction to bear on how we think about art and Blackness. A recent, post-conceptual generation — among them Aria Dean, Carolyn Lazard, Eric N. Mack, Tiona Nekkia McClodden and Charisse Pearlina Weston — round out the exhibition. In some cases, there are direct influences: Mack's use of textiles to make spatial paintings can be traced to draped canvases by Sam Gilliam, Al Loving and Joe Overstreet. The textured surfaces of Mark Bradford's works echo those of Jack Whitten.

Elsewhere, the relationships are less obvious. "Rindon Johnson made a painting in 2018 that feels like a direct ode to Ed Clark, for example," Gooch said. Johnson talks about being interested in Clark's use of tools like janitors' brooms to create sweeping strokes of paint.

Steven Nelson, the executive director of the Sam Gilliam Foundation and a scholar of African American art, said that the show promises to remind audiences that "Black artistic production in

the 1960s and 1970s was far more varied than we remember — there was never one way to make art."

Martin Puryear: "Abstraction was hard won for me."

Martin Puryear received an invitation to be in the 1980 exhibition at PS1 called "Afro-American Abstraction," curated by the Village Voice art critic April Kingsley. It was one of the first shows in New York at a historically white art space to focus on Black nonrepresentational art.

At the time Puryear was making his mark as a sculptor of pared-down, minimalist forms rendered in wood and other materials. But his journey to abstraction was not easy. "I began as a realist painter," he said. "As a young person, I didn't understand or appreciate abstraction — it was hard won for me."

He was sometimes reluctant to take part in exhibitions composed exclusively of Black artists, though such shows were often the only opportunities. "Those shows often didn't have an idea behind them other than the fact that Black artists exist," he said.

Kinglsey, by contrast, took pains to find traces of the artists' African origins, ascribing, for example, Puryear's large rings of carefully carved and painted wood to West African adornments. Two pieces from that series are in "Hard Art."

"'Afro-American Abstraction' was not a sociological display," Puryear said. "April actually had a legitimate curatorial theme."

Maren Hassinger: "It sounds strange to me."

Maren Hassinger was also in "Afro-American Abstraction." In "Hard Art," she is showing "The Veil Between Us" (2007/2018), made of wire, rope and twisted and knotted New York Times newspapers hanging from a steel support in dense masses — a reflection, perhaps, on the way history leaves a trace even when it becomes illegible.

She questions whether Black abstraction is a legitimate idea at all, however. "The idea that there's a Black abstraction which is different from all other abstractions, I don't know if I can accept something like that," she said. "It sounds strange to me."

Jennie C. Jones: "I'm a conceptual artist who uses paint as material."

When the sound and visual artist Jennie C. Jones was a student at the Art Institute of Chicago in the late 1980s and early 1990s, she was urged "to produce works that fed into the requirement to see ourselves in museums," which meant figurative work, she said.

But abstraction, a cornerstone of modern American and European art, came to those traditions through African sculpture, she said. "It's just always been frustrating that it's been considered a

problem for a Black artist to claim abstraction, rather than being considered a return to a deeper historical language and place of freedom."

"Hard Art" includes two of Jones's canvases that use intensely red acrylic paint along with architectural felt and acoustic panels. They try to find "alternative ways to illustrate sonic experiences," she has written.

She feels an affinity for the Black abstract artists of the early 1970s. "I'm a conceptual artist who uses paint as a material," she said. "The core for me is the artists back then who were pointing their elbows out and trying to make space and find freedom, but through conceptual thinking."

Aria Dean: Blackness as abstraction.

Abstraction? "I have an ambivalent relationship to the word," Aria Dean said. Her two works in the show — "FIGURE A, Friesian Mare" (2023) and "Twisted and Collapsed Psyche II" (2024) — both use digital modeling software to subject forms, in these cases 3-D scans of historical statues, to violent force.

The resulting battered form is fabricated by technicians. Her hands never touch the work. She sees it as "the purest gesture of sculpture — matter and time and that's kind of all it is."

She used a similar technique to create a piece for the 2022 Whitney Biennial, which was painted chroma key green — the color of green screens. "People said, oh, it's about the way people project ideas onto the Black body," she said. "But that wasn't the statement I was making."

Dean, who studied at Oberlin College, said that when she graduated in 2015, she was thrown into "this age-old question of what is politically more useful, abstraction or figuration."

"If there are only two lanes," she said, "I certainly choose abstraction. I'm using abstraction to deal with the question of Blackness in the world."

Rodney McMillian: A lot of different possibilities.

Like Dean, Rodney McMillian, who lives in Los Angeles and works in sculpture, painting, video and installation, is not convinced there are only two lanes. A recent MacArthur awardee, he said, "There are a lot of different voices possible."

"Besides, figuration is just abstraction anyway — representing another individual is an incredibly abstract thing to do."

McMillian's piece in the show, "Succulent" (2010), is a large hand-sewn black vinyl and thread work that hovers between painting and sculpture. "It uses a material that kind of suggests domestic space, but then also S&M," he said. "It's a petroleum product. Its form looks like a flower or an anus, it's a painting as well as a sculpture."

“The closest I’ve ever come to the idea of Black abstraction as a conceptual project is just in the freedom it allows me in terms of expression,” he said.

His work is installed in a room that includes a sculpture by Richard Hunt, a prolific creator of public art and the first African American artist to have a retrospective at MoMA, in 1971, and works by Puryear. McMillian said he regards both with awe. “I study them like a fifth-grade student,” he said. “They came through ranks that were far more challenging than the ones I did — and my path was not easy.”

Suzanne Jackson: “We’re always asked about the political.”

The painter Suzanne Jackson, who lived in Alaska, California and New York before moving to Savannah, Ga., said her shift toward abstraction was prompted in part by her research into African American history and music once she arrived in the South, and by the development of new acrylic paints and glazes. “Listening to music every day on the radio, the blues and so-called jazz — really, it’s African American classical music — that beautiful music that has its roots in Africa, makes the paint flow differently,” she said.

Jackson’s work in “Hard Art” uses acrylic embedded with scraps of fabric and other found materials to create free-hanging paint “skins” suspended from the ceiling — canvas is nowhere to be seen. “The paint itself becomes an abstraction,” she said.

“Quite often Black artists are not asked about paint and techniques,” Jackson added. “We’re always asked about the political. And we can’t avoid it as part of our lives and our history and our survival in the United States.

“But I think we really want to be considered artists in the studio first, as other people are,” she said.