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Los Angeles / D. Francine Farr

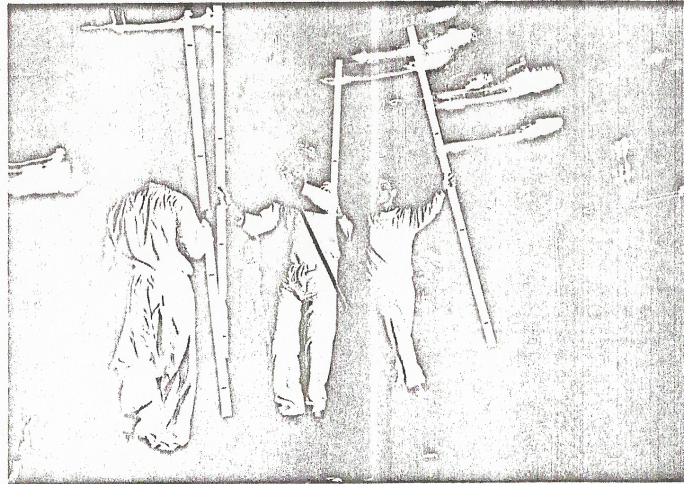
Time was of the essence in *Flying*, a performance collectively conceived and carried out by four Los Angeles artists — Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Senga Nengudi and Frank Parker.

The hour and date of the performance were auspicious in terms of both man's and nature's rhythm. The performance was given one day after an eclipse of the full moon. Astrologically, this marked the end of one cycle and the beginning of another. Related but more terrestrial, the performance commemorated the opening of an important traveling exhibition of contemporary art, *Afro-American Abstraction*, at the Municipal Art Gallery in Barnsdall Park. The exhibition could also be considered a turning point in the history of Afro-American art in the United States, and particularly in Los Angeles, as it was the fruit of past disappointments and successes of Afro-American artists and a bright harbinger of a better future.

Civilization and nature were first expressed as opposing forces through the use of the front grounds and the architecture near the entrance of the gallery. After a round of drumming on congas and a talking drum, Jenkins and Parker could be seen gliding ever so slowly behind the length of the balcony, miming the rowing of a canoe. As they moved from left to right, Hassinger and Nengudi flattened their white-shrouded bodies against the balcony wall below, creeping along the edge in jerky angular movement from right to left. This dimly lit scene represented the remote past of Egyptian culture and the historical voyages of Africans to the Americas.

The figures disappeared as silently as they had appeared, and long cool notes from a trumpet were heard. Hassinger

CIVILIZATION AND NATURE



Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Senga Nengudi and Frank Parker, "Flying," performance, at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Barnsdall Park. Photo: Adam Avila.

and Nengudi walked up the grassy slope with long strides, holding a white window-blind slat vertically in each hand and crossing them slowly back and forth as they looked up at the tips as if in adoration. (Similar slats were incorporated in Nengudi's static piece in the exhibition.) At the top of the knoll they and the trumpet stopped, and the drumming began again. The two artists looked to their left, where Jenkins and Parker were wheeling on top of a six-foot scaffold with a birdbath altar decorated by lit candles at its base. Pink and green sparklers flashed all around the video screen, which showed a changing image of an "all-seeing" eye. The only spoken words of the performance were blared out over a microphone by Jenkins, inviting the audience to approach the

altar with offerings.

This opening part of the performance emphasized the merits and pitfalls of civilization as well as the relativity of cultural formations. The juxtaposition of Nengudi and Hassinger's roles against Jenkins and Parker's thus conveyed the differences between art, architecture, dance and religion in disparate cultural contexts. The purity of religious worship in less developed cultures was expressed by Nengudi and Hassinger, as well as a simpler technology which begets a greater independence for the individual. Conversely, the video totem pole and altar satirized our own society's mindless worship of complex technology and wasteful ostentation.

To redress the imbalance of an over-civilized culture, the performance then turned completely toward nature, begin-

ning with a dance of renewal, in follow-the-leader fashion, around and about two large eucalyptus trees. At one point the dancers seemed to draw energy from one of the trees by circling it and using the slats as radii from its trunk to their bodies.

The denouement of the performance took place to the left of the trees, away from the "civilized" architecture where the performance began. Now unencumbered by even their simple multi-purpose slats, the four artists took flight. A film of seagulls was projected onto their white costumes. In diamond formation and in perfect unity, the artists mimed the beauty of birds in flight. They gracefully coordinated their movements, turning, swooping and gliding as a unit without losing their separate expressions of "birdness." The fluttering of their hands was much like real wing tips and not unlike the unraveled wire rope ends of the sculptures Hassinger included in the gallery exhibition.

Flying ended on this uplifting chord of freedom, nature and beauty. By imitating birds, Hassinger, Jenkins, Nengudi and Parker were symbolically resolving the conflict between civilization and nature. The slow, synchronized movements of the artists "flying" were probably intended to be in the same meter as that of the rowing scene which opened the piece. Linear time of past, present and future was suspended at the end, the artists having traveled in the performance from right to left through time and space. But now they moved on a vertical plane connecting heaven and earth, a plane more suggestive of eternal/cyclical time. To conclude the piece in this liminal zone was to celebrate the positive transitions taking place for many Afro-American artists. □