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THE ARTISTS

For decades, the art world ignored artists of color — an institutional neglect it’s now trying to correct. But in the 1960s and ’70s, in Los Angeles and New York, three galleries led the way in showing the work of black artists, many of whom are now among the most influential of our time.

In New York City, from left: the JAM founder LINDA GOODE BRYANT, GREGORY EDWARDS, the Gallery 32 founder SUZANNE JACKSON, the author and former JAM employee GREG TATE, LORRAINE O’GRADY, FRED WILSON, HOWARDENA PINDELL, ADGER COWANS, MAREN HASSINGER, DAWOUD BEY and MING SMITH. Photographed at Pier 59 Studios on Nov. 19, 2019. Wayne Lawrence

IN THE PAST few years, cultural institutions have been trying to create a more inclusive narrative of contemporary art history, one that contains more women and people of color — people who were denied successful careers a half-century ago simply because they weren’t white men. Today, it’s not uncommon to see

black artists with solo shows at museums and galleries that just five years ago might have ignored them entirely.

Despite this correction, black-owned commercial galleries remain rarities in America. For a brief period in the 1960s and ’70s, however, there was an alternative art world — first in Los Angeles, then in New York — that offered a view of contemporary art that was vibrant and welcoming. Five decades later, it’s even more influential than it was then.

The first major gallery run by and for black artists was Brockman Gallery, founded in 1967 by two artist brothers, Alonzo Davis and Dale Brockman Davis, in Los Angeles’s Leimert Park neighborhood. As the historian Kellie Jones notes in her 2017 study, “South of Pico: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s,” storefront space was easy to come by in the wake of the Watts rebellion, a series of riots that took place in August 1965 in predominantly black Los Angeles communities. The Davis brothers overcame difficult odds to run their own business, having grown up in the Jim Crow South, where being an artist, not to mention a black artist, was unheard-of. Over the next 23 years, Brockman — which was named for the brothers’ maternal grandmother — helped cultivate a roster of young, mostly unknown artists who are now familiar names, among them Dan Concholar, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Ulysses Jenkins, Senga Nengudi, John Outterbridge and Noah Purifoy.

The same year the Davises opened their gallery, a young painter and ballet dancer named Suzanne Jackson arrived in Los Angeles from San Francisco. In 1968, she began taking figure-drawing classes at the Otis Art Institute with Charles White, the best-known black artist of the ’40s and ’50s, who became a mentor to many of the city’s younger talents. The art community was so small that Jackson encountered Alonzo Davis at an artist’s house in Echo Park not long after moving to the city, and later met Hammons in one of White’s classes. At the time, she was searching for a new studio and found one not far from the school, just west of downtown. To sign the lease, she told her landlord she was going to open a gallery, thinking the landlord wouldn’t understand the concept of an artist’s studio. “I was just going to use the space to paint,” she said, but Hammons — “being kind of nosy, he was always around,” Jackson said of him — encouraged her to actually use the building as she promised her landlord she would. Named after its address, Gallery 32 opened in March 1969 and created an energized community of artists who had previously been relegated to showing their work at community centers or in people’s backyards.

Hammons was just one unifying thread of this community, though there were others. Brockman and Gallery 32 usually coordinated their openings to fall on the same weekends, and they shared collectors and artists as well, including Betye Saar, Timothy Washington and Nengudi. After a year and a half of losing money on postage and printing invitations, Jackson closed her space in 1970 but later worked for Brockman Gallery.

THEN, IN THE 1970S, Hammons moved to New York and became a major reason a young single mother named Linda Goode Bryant opened her own gallery, Just Above Midtown (known as JAM): In 1973, Bryant was working as the director of education at the Studio Museum in Harlem, another important touchstone for black artists of the era. She was familiar with Hammons's work and asked if he'd ever show in a New York gallery. He told Bryant, "I don't show in white galleries." Her response: "Well, I guess I have to start a gallery." She was the only black gallery owner in a building on 57th Street full of exhibition spaces. (Bryant recalls that whenever she ran into Allan Frumkin, a dealer of mostly realist paintings, he'd tell her, "You don't belong here.")

Many of the artists who first worked with Brockman and Gallery 32 went on to show with JAM, which was, for a time, the only place in New York that would give them an arena. Each of these places was as important a gallery as the most storied exhibition spaces of the '60s and '70s: Los Angeles's Ferus Gallery, where many West Coast artists (Ed Ruscha, Robert Irwin, Larry Bell) debuted, and Leo Castelli's townhouse on East 77th Street, which introduced New York to Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol. There remains a consensus that these galleries were legendary, though both largely overlooked artists of color. (According to the critic Miranda Sawyer, Castelli, who ran his space from 1957 until his death in 1999, even rejected Jean-Michel Basquiat, who in the 1980s became the most famous black artist to show in white galleries, as "too troublesome.") Castelli became shorthand for the rapidly growing commercial market of contemporary art, but not 20 blocks away was an entirely different world, one that was largely ignored by the traditional power brokers; The Times, for instance, did not review any JAM gallery shows. The artists who got their starts here — Bryant would also give Dawoud Bey, Lorraine O'Grady, Howardena Pindell and Fred Wilson their first shows before closing her space in 1986 — are now canonical.

As a result, anecdotes from this era take on an almost mythological quality. In 1975, Bryant was preparing a show of Hammons's body prints, works on paper that the artist made by covering his body in margarine or grease. He'd press himself against the paper, and then dust the impression with ground pigment, producing a ghostlike image that was somewhere between a self-portrait and a Rorschach test. Hammons had been showing these works in Los Angeles, and they had become popular with collectors, so to cover postage for her announcement cards and to pay her printer, Bryant got people to commit to buying new body-print works in advance, before Hammons arrived to install the show. When she called Hammons to discuss logistics, she asked him how many body prints he was bringing.

"I ain't doing that anymore," Hammons told her.

"Oh," Bryant replied, trying to mask her anxiety. "What are you doing?"

“Brown paper bags, barbecue bones, grease and hair,” he said. He was making sculptures out of these materials, gathering hair from the floors of Harlem barbershops.

“Oh really?” Bryant said into the phone, and then covered the mouthpiece to shout an expletive.

There had been a longstanding division between black artists who made figurative work and black artists who worked in abstraction, and people from both camps came to the opening of the show, which was called, appropriately, “Greasy Bags and Barbecue Bones.” “The place was packed,” Bryant said. All of them felt a little betrayed. The figurative artists were upset that Hammons had turned his back on the form, and the abstract artists felt he was debasing their work by using such blatantly discarded materials. Tensions were high, so Bryant hushed the group and suggested everyone “sit down and just talk.” They did, while Hammons stood on the sidelines, not speaking, only listening, and at the end of the night, “the artists that worked figuratively and the artists that worked abstractly shook hands and walked out the door,” Bryant said. The rift between the two sides was resolved. “That was the end of that debate.” In the end, she wasn’t able to pay her printer.