

On the “A” w/Souleo: Global Politics and Art Converge in Johannesburg Conference

huffpost.com/entry/on-the-a-wsouleo-global-politics-and-art-converge_b_5833da78e4b0d28e552154ac

Peter "Souleo" Wright

November 22, 2016



ALCOHOLOTOPIA (A GEOPOLITICAL DREAM UNDER THE INFLUENCE), 2016, Daapo Reo. Cotton, polyester.

Courtesy of Goodman Gallery

Anniversaries are by definition meant to shine a light on the past, but during a three-day art conference in Johannesburg it was the present and future that became illuminated. “Black Portraiture[s] III: Reinventions: Strains of Histories and Cultures” was held from Nov. 17-19 amid the 20th anniversary of the signing of South Africa’s post-apartheid progressive constitution; the 40th anniversary of the anti-apartheid Soweto uprisings; and the 50th anniversary of a leading African art institution, Goodman Gallery.

“This is a central time for intergenerational and cross-cultural discussions because of so many anniversaries and happenings in the world,” said Dr. Deborah Willis, NYU professor and co-organizer of the conference. “For 'Black Portraits' to be here is important because it’s a central way to say we are here and not going anywhere.”

The seventh iteration of the series hosted a plethora of panels at Johannesburg’s Turbine Hall covering topics such as art, culture, style, music, LGBTQ rights, Afrofuturism, film, and more. Highlights included an engaging and appropriately funky presentation by co-founder of Black Music Month, Dyana Williams on James Brown’s connection to African cultural aesthetics; photographer and archivist, Marilyn Nance’s overview on the landmark event Festac 77, the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture held in Lagos, Nigeria in 1977; and two style panels moderated by artist and scholar, M. Liz Andrews musing on the political, cultural, and social undertones within the world of sartorial creative expression.

“Our mandate is to open, encourage, cherish, and inspire voices from places where they are not heard on conversations about gender, diaspora, and sexuality. These conversations can be had here in open dialogue,” added Cheryl Finley, conference co-organizer and director of visual studies at Cornell University.

Another issue touched on during several panels was the U.S. presidential election of Donald Trump, announced about a week before the conference began. For artists such as Ghada Amer this news added an even greater sense of urgency to the conference.



La Leçon de grammaire-RFGA, 2015, Ghada Amer. Acrylic, dried pastel, embroidery and gel medium on canvas.

Courtesy of Goodman Gallery

“Through my art I am fighting for women. Trump is symptomatic of everything I have been fighting against for a long time,” said the Egyptian born artist who now lives in the United States. “In the 2011 Egyptian uprising we had to fight and now Americans have to. But when you fight you have to be on a long run. It is not a sprint. I am afraid Americans don’t have this long-term fighting resistance.”

Amer was one of numerous artists on display in the “In Context” exhibition series presented by Goodman Gallery. The exhibition—co-curated by artist Hank Willis Thomas (son of Dr. Willis) and gallery director, Liza Essers—served as an extension of the conference with works exploring notions of racial, gender, sexual, and political identity. For Essers the conference and exhibition converged at the perfect time to encourage solidarity against oppressive forces.

“Despite how hopeless it might feel in terms of the structures in place, we do have the power to come together as a group of voices all over the world,” she said. “If we can find a way to extend this it can be quite disruptive to political agendas.”



The End, 2014, Brendan Fernandes.

Courtesy of Goodman Gallery

One of the ways Essers hopes to disrupt the status quo is through a yet to be determined “big” art world initiative that aims to redistribute power in the market by diversifying the collector base and supporting more emerging artists of color outside of the traditional pipeline.

Whatever the next step may be after the conference, “In Context” exhibiting artist, Sanford Biggers is grateful for the space to reflect on, question, and strategize the creative world’s next move(s) in today’s political climate.



A Small World, 1999-2001, Sanford Biggers and Jennifer Zackin. Single-channel projection (color, silent) DVD, carpet, sofa, wood panel walls.

Courtesy of Goodman Gallery

“Everything is polarized and it is a moment where we have to reassess what everything means,” he said. “What do political structures, systems and agency mean? Potentially there are things to unify and things to distract. It is wild right now. Everything is up for grabs and the world is watching, listening and speaking. So what do we have to say?”

The column, On the “A” w/Souleo, covers the intersection of the arts, culture entertainment and philanthropy in Harlem and beyond and is written by Souleo, founder and president of arts administration company, [Souleo Enterprises](#).

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[On the "A" w/Souleo] Black Theater Wrestles with Representation

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January 8, 2016



Woodie King Jr., producing director of New Federal Theatre, was immediately concerned after Tonya Pinkins publicly challenged a Classic Stage Company production of *Mother Courage and Her Children* in which she was to play the title character. The Tony-winning actress cited issues with the production's representation of people of color.

"I hope and pray artistic directors of major theaters will really hear what is going on and not blame Tonya Pinkins, 'cause she was absolutely right to be concerned about the work she is doing," said King, who directed Pinkins in 2014 in *The Fabulous Miss Marie*. "I hope she is not blackballed. It is a concern, because White people see African Americans as just good or bad. There are no gray areas."

Pinkins surprised many in the theater community when she quit the production and released a [statement](#) where she wrote, "It was not relayed to me until the final tech rehearsal that the vision for this Mother Courage (the Black Mother Courage in an African war) was of a delusional woman trying to do the impossible. She would not be an icon of feminine tenacity and strength, nor of a Black female's fearless capabilities. Why must the Black Mother Courage be delusional?"

Pinkins's decision follows a similar episode in April 2015, when several cast members in Los Angeles departed the play *Ferguson*, about the shooting death of Michael Brown by a police officer. In an *L.A. Times* [article](#), those actors also expressed concerns about the script's depiction of a central Black character and intentions of the playwright.

Taylor Reynolds, actress and co-producing artistic leader of The Movement Theatre Company (TMTC), is grateful to see actors taking a stand and igniting a conversation about diversity and inclusion in the world of theater.

"It's a conversation that has been going on for awhile, and now it is more directly publicized as people are speaking out directly," she said. "I think where the conversation needs to go now is, looking at how do we integrate minorities in offstage roles to increase diversity in the conversation about representation."

For veteran theater professional Kim Weston-Moran, having more Black-owned theater companies will help ensure balanced representation on and offstage. In an email the actress, producer, director and teacher wrote the following:

“**We do not have a fraction** of theaters owned, operated and creatively helmed by people of color as we did in the past. Our theaters are gone because of lack of funding primarily. We have been absorbed into the multimillion dollar funded institutions, where young White directors just out of school are directing most of our stories. For most playwrights of color, that is the only way they will get produced and recognized in the national and international arena.”

“We need these White theaters with huge budgets to hire African-American directors,” added Woodie King Jr.

Reynolds and her fellow TMTC team members are not waiting for the mainstream theater community. Through various showcases, professional development and touring opportunities, the organization is working to amplify the voices of playwrights, directors and actors of color who are normally overlooked.

“Under our TMTC Harlem Nights program, we focus on giving young performers a non-competitive and non-threatening environment,” she said. “It is a way for performers and artists to do the work they are interested in and present themselves the way they want to be seen.”

And when it comes to being seen, one requires an audience. Therefore, Reynolds hopes that the public stance taken by Pinkins and other like-minded actors will force the theater industry to think more critically about how issues of representation also impact audiences—the ultimate make-or-break factor for any production.

“This is giving the theater community an opportunity to ask, ‘What are we doing with this large platform of giving people stories with messages? What are we really leaving an audience with?’ ”

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Day and the Power of Recognition

JANUARY 16, 2012 · 1 COMMENT

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Harlem Arts Alliance Presents: On the "A" with Souleo

As the first boy out of nine children, I've always considered my birthday to be a special occasion. Had I not been born my mother would have been stuck with 5 princesses but instead she gained a queen (a little self-deprecating humor, if you will). That's why I treat my birthday every year as if it's a national holiday, even though I didn't inspire the Civil Rights Act of 1964 or the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Those honors belong to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which is why the day he took his first breath out of the womb is a federal holiday.

I started my observance of Dr. King's legacy early with a viewing of the Broadway hit *The Mountaintop*, starring Samuel L. Jackson as Dr. King



and Angela Bassett as a hotel maid, or so you think. The physical non-resemblance between Jackson and Dr. King was a glaring distraction and I could not suspend disbelief, even though Jackson gave a solid performance full of integrity, wit and vulnerability. Still the production has several rousing moments where the power of Dr. King's social justice vision and spirit comes to life reminding us of why he is a treasured figure.

At the 2012 NEA Jazz Masters Awards I was in awe being surrounded by legends such as Jimmy Scott, Jon Hendricks, Annie Ross and the five inductees Jack DeJohnette; Von Freeman; Charlie Haden; Sheila Jordan; and Jimmy Owens. The event, which was held at Jazz at Lincoln Center, featured several high points including Jordan leading the audience in an impromptu sing-along; the announcement that Harlem Stage was one of the first-time recipients of the National Endowment for the Arts \$135,000 grant for jazz programming; and having a private moment with vocalese icon, Ross. She is the subject of a new documentary set to debut at the Glasgow Film Festival but she was more interested in reflecting on the meaning of the evening's award. "My most beautiful night is when I became a U.S. citizen and when I became a jazz master. I never thought I would attain it."

I didn't think I would make it to the 4th Annual Harlem Arts Alliance Member Celebration held at the Dwyer Culture Center after my late jazz night, but I did. The event's host, Michelle Caldron began by introducing the Boys & Girls Choir of Harlem Alumni Ensemble and their renditions of classic soul songs had the crowd dancing with

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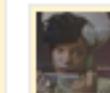
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This article is courtesy of our partner The Harlem Arts Alliance

The Harlem Arts Alliance is a nonprofit arts service organization celebrating 10 years of service to a prestigious list of members such as the Apollo Theater, the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, Columbia University, Harlem Stage (Aaron Davis Hall) and over 850 more cultural/arts institutions and individuals. The weekly column, Harlem Arts Alliance Presents: On the "A" w/Souleo, covers the intersection of the arts, culture and entertainment in Harlem and the greater NYC area.

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Diary of an Ex-Soul Train Dancer: Q&A with Former Soul Train Dancer Patricia Davis

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On the “A” w/Souleo: Black designers absent from NYFW but present in other ways

 amsterdamnews.com/news/2015/09/25/wsouleo-black-designers-absent-nyfw-present-other/

By Souleo -

September 25, 2015



As diversity becomes the buzzword across all industries, New York Fashion Week (NYFW) is no exception. This year the annual extravaganza has made gains in its representation of Asian designers. According to NBC News, Asian or Asian-American designers are presenting nearly a quarter of the official NYFW shows. Yet the numbers shift drastically for black fashion designers. With the exception of Maxwell Osborne, co-designer of Public School, there are virtually no major black designers showcasing at NYFW.

But that doesn't mean that there are no black designers cutting and stitching their way to sartorial glory. This past Thursday, Harlem's Fashion Row (HFR), a company that gives a platform to budding designers of color, hosted its annual style awards and spring 2016 runway show at Pier 59. Designers included The Fashion Deli, M-Sew and Fe Noel. For

designer and media veteran Harriette Cole, the expensive cost of showing at NYFW (starting around \$200,000) means that many black designers are forced to find alternatives that better serve their business models and creative interests.

“It’s great that there are so many Asians showing at NYFW. It should be celebrated as a minority group having a surge,” she said. “But I don’t think they are taking the place of African-Americans. It is far more affordable to choose venues not part of the official environment because you can be broken before getting started just paying for a fashion show. So I am less worried black designers are going away. I think they have to be sought out more.”

The night’s attendees demonstrated that there is a lot of support for black designers wherever they choose to showcase. Guests included Mary J. Blige, and honorees such as actress Tracee Ellis Ross, designer Azede Jean-Pierre, stylists Rachel Johnson, Misa Hylton and Groovey Lew, on-air personality Bevy Smith, InStyle editor Kahlana Barfield and Macy’s.

For HFR founder, Brandice Henderson the past few years has seen black designers reach increased visibility and success whether they show at NYFW or not. “Since I started HFR eight years ago designers are more focused on the business side. Sometimes they don’t show to focus on sales. I can see growth and acceptance and change happening. I feel like we are in a better place than we’ve been in a very long time.”

Essence Street Style Block Party showcases rising black designers

If the lesson to be learned from this year’s NYFW is to seek out black designers, then Essence magazine made it pretty easy to do so at their block party. The second annual event held in DUMBO, Brooklyn on Sunday afternoon included Chevy’s On-the-Rise Designers Ashley Ryles, designer and CEO of ARRYLES Clothing and Charlene Dunbar, designer and owner of suakoke betty. The 2016 Chevrolet Cruze served as muse for the capsule collections created by the two up-and-coming talents. Ron Bass, a Chevy Chic alumnus and mentor helped Ryles and Dunbar realize their concepts which debuted on-stage at the block party affair.

Dunbar’s line, launched in 2007, modernizes West African wax and resist-dye prints into dresses and separates. She is also staying current with her marketing techniques. Like numerous other designers she is focusing on more direct-to-consumer opportunities in the vein of the block party and social media as opposed to official NYFW shows.

“I think where fashion is going is organic and driven by social media,” she said. “Black designers have to work with audiences and do things that give us a presence. Venues like this are grassroots and organic and give us a chance to connect with customers.”

The awards portion of the event honored actress Gabrielle Union, singer Ciara, celebrity stylist Jason Rembert and designer Charles Elliott Harbison.

Beverly Johnson celebrates her legendary 'face' at book launch

Legendary model, Beverly Johnson isn't trying to send any particular message with her new memoir appropriately, if not modestly, titled 'The Face that Changed It All.' In the book she covers becoming the first African-American woman on the cover of American Vogue, substance abuse, sexism in the modeling industry and an alleged assault by Bill Cosby. But what's the takeaway for readers?

"My book is my story and you take whatever message you want from it," she said on the red carpet at the Museum of the City of New York on Wednesday, September 9.

Guest and model, Kim Alexis had a bit more to say. Often Johnson's legacy is viewed solely in terms of her impact on black models. But she also inspired models of all races such as Alexis. Wearing a dark wig from her forthcoming line, she shared her admiration for Johnson.

"We are both from Buffalo, NY and it was nice knowing girls came from my area that did really well," she recalled. "I liked her strength and elegance and she was such a role model."

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Black Girls Rock! and bold soul sisters sound off!

rollingout.com/2015/04/03/black-girls-rock-bold-soul-sisters-sound-off/

By Souleo

April 3, 2015



Dr. Helene Gayle, Erykah Badu, Nadia Lopez, First Lady Michelle Obama, Regina King, Tracee Ellis Ross, Beverly Bond, Debra Lee, Ava Duvernay, Cicely Tyson (l to r)/Courtesy of BET

Women's History Month drew to a close, or should we say a crescendo this past week with two special March end-of-the-month events, where women were celebrated and given a platform to share their thoughts on a host of topics, including the F word: feminism.

At the Apollo Theater's panel discussion, *Bold Soul Sisters: A Revolution of Sound and Style*, moderated by music journalist and essayist Christian John Wikane, four legendary recording artists (Rochelle Fleming of First Choice, Nona Hendryx of Labelle, Ruth Pointer of the Pointer Sisters, and Kathy Sledge of Sister Sledge) reflected on the cultural impact of 1970s girl groups who revolutionized the scene with their progressive style, provocative lyrics, and feminist stance.



Kathy Sledge/Credit: c. bay milin

The taping of BET's *Black Girls Rock!* show at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, included several musical offspring of the aforementioned acts with the likes of Erykah Badu, Lalah Hathaway, Jill Scott, Janelle Monae, and more. Taking its namesake from the nonprofit organization founded by DJ and philanthropist, Beverly Bond, *Black Girls Rock!* honored women from actress Cicely Tyson (Living Legend Award) to educator Nadia Lopez (Change Agent Award). And oh yeah, first lady Michelle Obama just so happened to make an appearance during the show, which airs Easter Sunday, April 5 at 7 p.m. EST.

Check out our highlights from each event where the women in attendance discussed the state of feminism, the connection between Black women and gay men, and intergenerational communication.

On Gloria Steinem's recent suggestion in *Black Enterprise* magazine that Black women invented the feminist movement:

"Gloria is the chick you associate with that word, feminism. So it is interesting and layered that she said that. Feminism sometimes has this stigma attached to it. But I embrace that idea that Black women carried a lot of things on their shoulders like culture. I already know who I am as a Black woman and culturally where I stand, but it is interesting."

—Lalah Hathaway

To read the entire column click [here](#).



Kathy Sledge/Credit: c. bay milin