Mary
Lovelace
O'Neal

Mary Lovelace O'Neal

Chasing Down the Image

Curated by
Sukanya Rajaratnam

Mnuchin Gallery

Acknowledgments

Our first meeting with Mary Lovelace O'Neal was unplanned and serendipitous. It was at the unveiling of *Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art* at the Baltimore Museum of Art last fall, where a recent acquisition of her work was installed, together with the work of other previously overlooked African American artists, in the context of the museum's lauded permanent collection. We were completely unprepared for how moved we would be, both by her powerful painting and her character. That chance meeting began what has been a whirlwind love affair, one that grew deeper when we went to visit Mary in her studio in Oakland and saw first-hand the true scope of the importance of her practice.

When we visited, fires were raging through northern California, blowing out the power in her studio; we looked at the works with flashlights. The significance of what we were seeing was nonetheless unmistakable. For more than five decades, Mary has pushed the boundaries of both art and life. An active participant in the civil rights movement, she has spent decades fighting for equality, resisting all attempts to be boxed in by other's expectations. As a woman of color working in the middle of the century, she belied the belief of her peers that figurative painting was the only way to accurately depict the experiences of her life, understanding abstraction's transcendental powers.

For over twenty-five years, the gallery has not only presented the canonical titans of postwar abstraction but has worked tirelessly to champion those working in the field whose impacts are only just beginning to reveal themselves, including Mary's friends and influences Sam Gilliam (2017), Ed Clark (2018), and Alma Thomas (2019). We are thrilled to include Mary amongst these legends of twentieth-century art, in her first solo show in New York since her 1993 exhibition at the French Embassy.

We are indebted to several people, without whom this exhibition would not have been possible. We are grateful to Lowery Stokes Sims for her thoughtful catalogue essay and Melissa Messina for her insightful interview. We extend our thanks to Emily Kuhlman and the team at the Museum of the African Diaspora, who have shared their devotion to Mary with us. We remain enamored of Patricio Moreno Toro, Mary's husband and fellow artist, whose vivacity is always appreciated. And lastly, we are indebted to Pamela Joyner and Fred Giuffrida, for their friendship and generous hospitality in San Francisco during the early stages of our conversations with Mary.

Our deepest gratitude goes to David Zaza, Logan Myers, and Sarah Wolberg of McCall Associates for their elegant catalogue design, and Tom Powel for his superb photography. Additionally, we are immensely appreciative of our in-house exhibitions team, including Liana Gorman, Emma Laramie, David McClelland, and Arrow Mueller.

Last but certainly not least, we would like to thank Mary for her significant contributions to the history of art, and for welcoming us into her life with open arms.

ROBERT MNUCHIN SUKANYA RAJARATNAM MICHAEL MCGINNIS

Contents

Face Value: Surface, Media, and Meaning in the Work of Mary Lovelace O'Neal

Lowery Stokes Sims

For much of the period between 1945 and 1980, which coincides with Mary Lovelace O'Neal's coming to artistic maturity, the treatment of the surface of a painting was a dominant critical and theoretical issue in contemporary art in America. Formalism, with its eschatological bent, posited an increasingly reductive approach to the surface of painting. This moment in art history was chronicled in the 2019–20 exhibition *The Fullness of Color: 1960s Painting* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, which examined the variety of painting techniques that marked the 1960s:

> Helen Frankenthaler applied thinned acrylic washes to the unprimed cotton canvas, richly saturating it like a dye, and Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland, and Jules Olitski methodically poured, soaked, or sprayed paint onto canvases, thus eliminating the gestural appearance that had been central to Abstract Expressionism in the 1940s and 1950s. In these new works, figure and ground became one and the same, united through color.[1]

Mary Lovelace O'Neal herself found such a path in her lampblack pigment paintings of the 1970s, which open the survey of her work in this exhibition. The story of how she came to use this material is just one in a life saga that—as O'Neal would describe it—alternates between her embrace of experimentation and her achieving success.[2]

O'Neal arrived in New York City in 1968 with her first husband, John O'Neal, who was a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War and a fundraiser for the Free Southern Theater. O'Neal decided to pursue her master of arts degree at Columbia University. She arrived there after studying at Howard University, where she worked with saturated colors and gestural surfaces reminiscent of the more painterly strain of Abstract Expressionism. But once in New York, she had to grapple with the aesthetic biases of her professors at Columbia who tended to support "the quiet surfaces of Minimalism."[3] She found herself in the position of having to demonstrate that she could "hide the physicality of surface."[4]

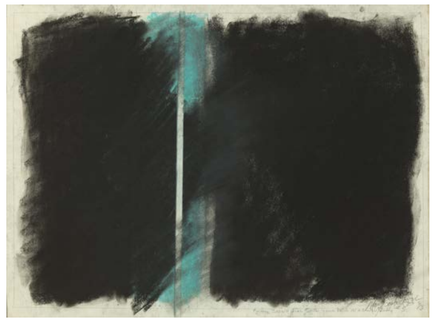
As O'Neal figured out how to subdue her surfaces, she was struck by nuances of color in the black elements in Franz Kline's painting *Chief*, 1950 (page 8), which she viewed at the Museum of Modern Art. She realized, "The geometry of his spaces suggested how I could push the planes around."[5] O'Neal continued:

> The environment and light in the museum revealed changes in the colors. The crackling and figures opened to reveal secrets of the underpainting where you might find some startling color, much like what happened with the cleaning of the Sistine Chapel.[6]

This realization was concurrent with a fateful foray to Pearl Paint, the legendary art supply store on Canal Street, where O'Neal rediscovered lampblack pigment. She had first experimented with this medium at Skowhegan in 1963, so she bought several bags at Pearl Paint and took them back to her studio. She was working in charcoal at the time, and she often excavated the surfaces of her works with an eraser. Initially she thought this was how she could work with the lampblack on canvas, but when she put the pigment into a bucket and rubbed it into unstretched canvas with her hands, she "had an epiphany," she said.[7]

O'Neal noted that this material and technique enabled her to address three issues that preoccupied art and culture at that moment: surface flatness, black as a color,

Franz Kline, *Chief*, 1950, oil on canvas, 58 ⅜ × 73 ½ inches (148.3 × 186.7 cm). Museum of Modern Art, New York



Mary Lovelace O'Neal, *"Little Brown Girl with your Hair in a Curl" / Daddy #5*, 1973, charcoal and pastel on paper, 18 × 24 inches (45.7 × 61 cm). Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, MI

and blackness as an existential, racial experience.[8] The intersection of conceptual and theoretical ideas around art with issues of race and gender was, however, very complicated. First of all, as Jordana Moore Saggese has noted, art critics in the 1960s and '70s

> still considered the techniques and concerns of abstraction and modernism as irrelevant to artists west of the Hudson or across the color line. As a consequence, many histories of abstraction have failed to include the contributions of African American and West Coast artists, despite recent scholarly efforts to document this history.[9]

Secondly, the African American art community could be sharply divided on the issue of figuration versus abstraction. Among O'Neal's cohort of black artists in the 1960s and '70s, figuration and abstraction were perceived as declarations of a particular political position: whether one was committed to their community or whether one was willing, in the words of art historian Richard Powell, "to subordinate blackness—and all that was associated with it—and to place themselves and their work in a larger, wider, and, ultimately, whiter art world."[10]

For O'Neal this situation had a particularly personal dimension as she navigated contemporary struggles for racial and gender equality in the 1960s and 1970s. Amid the social activism of the era, some black artists resisted the pressure of placing "the burden of politics on black expression."[11] Stanley Whitney, working in New York at this time, has spoken poignantly of the struggle for artists to figure out what they wanted to paint and how they could be true to themselves.[12] In his circa 1967 pamphlet *Black Is a Color*, Raymond Saunders asserted, "Art projects beyond race and color, beyond America. It is universal, and Americans—black, white, or whatever—have no exclusive rights on it."[13] And, as Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina note, by working abstractly black artists "disrupt[ed] the presumption that representation and narrative beholden to figuration are the prime modes of visualizing personal experience."[14] So despite her own history of political activism and association with Black Power activists such as John O'Neal and Stokely Carmichael, O'Neal found herself at odds with some of her artistic contemporaries because that activism was not necessarily reflected in her art.

Saunders brought the conundrum of blackness and art into high relief in the late 1960s when he declared, "It's feeling the color, being the color. They say black's not a color? I say, Hey! What about me?"[15] That deceptively intense physiological response to the polemics that surround racial identity provides a context with which to engage works by O'Neal like *"Little Brown Girl with your Hair in a Curl" / Daddy #5* and *"...And a Twinkle in your Eye" / Daddy #6* (both works, from 1973, are in the Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, MI). Lilly Wei reminds us that O'Neal's titles for her works may be understood as specific in declaration but "arcane" and "hermetic" in association. They effectively suggest "a narrative that she did not necessarily depict in any obvious way," and function "more as a personal reference, 'a way in' for

The Lovelace family, circa early 1940s

Loïs Mailou Jones, David C. Driskell, and Mary Lovelace O'Neal, circa 1995

the artist, rather than an explication for the viewer."[16] Secondly, O'Neal's use of lampblack pigment (which by implication effected a positive re-contextualization of the negative connotations of minstrel theatrical conventions that stereotyped black people) allowed her to convey content in much the same way her older contemporary Norman Lewis deployed factual and metaphorical ideas about color to effect political statements. In works like these, the relationship of abstraction to blackness refers to the "perceived role of color—specifically blackness—in the production of art,"[17] and to, in the words of Ilayda Orankoy, an "unfiltered exploration of racial politics in the United States."[18]

O'Neal was fortunate to have had experiences and training in art "that were unheard for most Southern African Americans during that time."[19] She studied art early on at Tougaloo College in Mississippi—where her father was head of the music department—with Ronald Schnell, one of the many émigré artists who populated the faculty of black colleges in the 1940s.[20] Schnell, who was German, validated O'Neal's love of color with his own work that bore characteristics of German Expressionism.[21] Then, in the art department at Howard University, she encountered several individuals who both encouraged and challenged her self-determined path in life and art. Not only did she have to contend with pat ideas about blackness and one's art, but O'Neal—like many women in the 1950s and '60s—had to contend with society's expectations of nice bourgeois black women (particularly those enrolled at Howard University).[22] Despite her best efforts, she caused consternation among her professors at Howard, particularly the venerable Loïs Mailou Jones and the distinguished academic James Porter. But it was Porter who steered O'Neal in the direction of artist and art historian David Driskell, who mentored her for the duration of her time at Howard.[23]

O'Neal's peers at Howard form a most distinguished cohort: future mega-collector Walter Evans; future opera diva Jessye Norman; Lou Stovall, who went on to establish the influential printmaking studio Workshop, Inc.; Lloyd McNeill, who was the first recipient of an MFA degree from Howard; Starmanda Bullock, who became professor and chair of design at Howard; and painter Sylvia Snowden, who has taught at Howard, Cornell, and Yale universities.[24] Snowden has also acknowledged the influence of Driskell on her artistic development.[25] Snowden, like O'Neal, was introduced by Driskell to the Washington Color School and the Abstract Expressionists whose approach to paint and the surface is evident in the energetic surfaces both Snowden and O'Neal have favored throughout their careers.[26] O'Neal's work was also influenced, during the formative stage of her Howard years, by a residency at Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. She was chosen for the coveted residency with the support of David Driskell. She credits the experience with affirming her predilection for abstraction, and remembers friendships forged there with the likes of sculptor Nancy Graves.[27]

As Emily Resmer observes in a feature in the *Jackson Free Press* on the occasion of O'Neal's 2002 exhibition in Mississippi, her "journey as an artist has led her through

Mary Lovelace O'Neal in the Sahara Desert, circa 1980s

many phases in her work."[28] She continued the formalist strategies of her lampblack compositions through the 1970s, expanding her palette to include other colors, as seen in *Black Ember* (pages 24–25) and *Steam Engine* (pages 26–27). The surfaces of these works, as Melanie Herzog observes, feature "thin lines of masking tape" and "strips of color in pastel, acrylic, or oil." O'Neal's technique of overspraying colors created a "glittering" effect on the black paint, Herzog writes, which "adds yet another layer in the play between surface effects and profound depth."[29] O'Neal had observed these qualities in Franz Kline's paintings in the 1960s. By the 1980s, when she was firmly ensconced on the West Coast, her painting recaptured the "free-wheeling abstract expressionism" that had characterized her work during her years at Howard.[30]

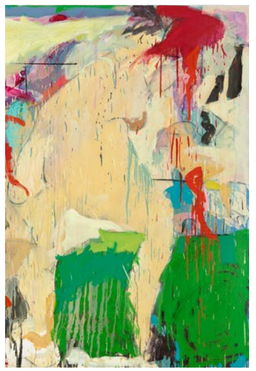
O'Neal's paintings often comprise thematic series, as a consequence of her "aerobic" working method:

> She paints in batches—"choreographing" as many canvases as she can fit on her studio walls at one time, so the works are parts of a larger theme created from the same big pots of paint, with individual pieces detailed while the other "brothers and sisters" dry.[31]

Paintings from the 1980s, such as *Thelonious Searching Those Familiar Keys* (pages 28–29), *Toni's Rose Petals* (pages 30–31), and *White Whale* (pages 32–33) from the Whales Fucking series, demonstrate how O'Neal's work featured figurative elements where "persons and objects often jumbled together."[32] The Whales Fucking series prominently features arched elements that suggest whales breaching or leaping out of the water. While these forms are "barely recognizable," they are "suggestive of narrative. . . . Movement and action are conveyed by dynamic brushwork and richness of color."[33]

Works of the 1990s, such as *Running with Black Panthers and White Doves* (pages 46–47) and *Kurban, a Sweeter Day to Come* (pages 44–45)—part of the Panthers in My Father's Palace series—capture O'Neal's experiences traveling in North Africa. The panther-like forms in these compositions may allude to the artist's radical political views, paying homage to the political and cultural forces that galvanized the black community in Oakland in the 1960s and 1970s. The title of the first painting and of the series as a whole draws inspiration from the libretto for the black king in Gian Carlo Menotti's opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*: "I live in a black marble palace with black panthers and white doves."[34] The series captures O'Neal's memory of her father's production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors* with his students at Tougaloo College.[35] The composition of *Running with Black Panthers and White Doves* is divided into different color regions, with architectural references to walls and arches and an open courtyard. O'Neal draws out similar planes in *Meaningless Ritual, Senseless Superstition* (page 36–37), from the early 1980s, where relatively flat rectangles of red and white juxtapose their more frenetic gestural counterparts.

Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *The Bather, known as the Valpinçon Bather*, 1808, oil on canvas, 57 ½ × 38 ⅝ inches (146 × 97 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris



Mary Lovelace O'Neal, *Hammem* (detail), circa 1984 (see pages 34–35)

Several paintings from the series Two Deserts, Three Winters, circa 1990s, feature central figures with outstretched arms, which O'Neal has designated as self-portraits; see *Pink Self Portrait* (pages 48–49), *White Self Portrait* (pages 50–51), and *Purple Rain* (pages 52–53). O'Neal says the figures are meant to be seen as straddling two deserts—the Atacama in Chile and the Sahara in Egypt—capturing her impression of arriving in Egypt directly from Chile in the 1980s. These figures are about "resolute resistance," the quality with which O'Neal has followed her life path. The environments reflect the different character of these deserts which she experienced "one right after the other." She found the Atacama to be masculine and crystalline, with its rocky, hard-packed surfaces, and the Sahara to be feminine, with its malleable, warm dunes. For O'Neal both locales "represent strength, conquering, grandiosity, loving, wonder, seeing, embracing, thanksgiving. Life in its truest self-seeing, [and] joy."[36]

These paintings remind us that O'Neal found ways to explore the "shifting and sliding planes" that were a hallmark of Hans Hofmann's pedagogy. For O'Neal, the major exemplars of shifting planes were Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's theater images. They enabled her to grapple with "the architecture of the figure . . . and the planes of the face," and to "establish volume using the same systems."[37] As a consequence, there are enough visual clues in these works for us to recognize in these "self-portraits" elements that suggest O'Neal's distinctive, oft-remarked sartorial presence. In his catalogue essay for the 2002 O'Neal retrospective, David Driskell described her characteristic "headwraps, earrings, bracelets, scarves, silk pajamas . . . fine dresses and suits."[38]

The Two Deserts, Three Winters series also carries O'Neal's visual memories of Morocco. See also *Hammem*, circa 1984 (page 34–35), where amid the flourish of drips and drags of paint a white whale and several red sprites cavort in an evocation of the traditional Middle Eastern steam bath. On the right side of *Hammem* is a female nude in a pose reminiscent of Ingres's 1808 *Valpinçon Bather*. O'Neal calls her paintings mixed-media works because, in addition to paint, charcoal, pastel, and dried pigment, she considers "extraneous elements—glitter, insects, string, etc." to be part of the history and spirit of her paintings' surfaces.

By the mid-1990s, O'Neal's painting surfaces became more pared-down. These works are populated by more or less homogeneous segments of swipes and daubs of paint that spread across the canvases sequentially like time captured sequences, along with effects that seem to be have been created by pressing paint into the surface with various implements. One can surmise here the catalytic artistic interchange between O'Neal and her husband, the Chilean artist Patricio Moreno Toro, over the last 38 years. At times the surface of the canvas is fully appointed with these swipes and daubs. See for example *Sunrise*

Mary Lovelace O'Neal, *Racism Is Like Rain, Either It's Raining or It's Gathering Somewhere*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, 86 × 138 inches (218.4 × 350.5 cm). Mott-Warsh Collection, Flint, MI

(page 63), whose lilting, pale colors capture the time of day; and *Tillie, Lassie, and the Don* (page 57) with segmented shapes in darker hues on the right which give way to yellows, whites, salmons, reds, and greens on the left. The marks are sparser in *If He Whispers to Me, I'll Know He's the One* (page 65), where O'Neal's paint application is veil-like, with contrasting globs of white and a series of red arcs. The activated regions frame the canvas's center, which is like a gateway into another dimension. The same effect can be observed in *Grave Robbers 4* (page 59), of circa 1998, and *Nemesio's Black Showers* (page 73) and *She Is Living in the Clouds* (page 71) from the early 2000s. Careful scrutiny of the surfaces of these paintings reveals miscellaneous—but never gratuitous—marks or scrapes into the surface, which further activate the visual impression. In a more elegiac mode, the three-panel work *Spun Silver*, from the early 2000s, features painterly tracings and meanderings that resemble flowers set against subtly nuanced backgrounds—one even offering a horizon line to convey the impression of a landscape.

The current resurgence of interest in O'Neal's career certainly had its impetus in her inclusion in the 2017 exhibition *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*, a groundbreaking project curated by Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina for the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibition highlighted the neglected contributions of African American women artists to the abstract corner of the art world. O'Neal's 1993 painting *Racism Is Like Rain, Either It's Raining or It's Gathering Somewhere* was particularly singled out by critics. It was the lead image in the exhibition review published by Jeffry Cudlin in the *Washington City Paper*.[39] Angela Carroll, writing for *Bmore Art*, described it as "a witty and unsettling rumination that likens the conditions that foster and proliferate racism to precipitation."[40] Carroll continues:

> Like liquid that gathers in the atmosphere until gravity forces the heavy molecules to fall to earth as raindrops, racism aggregates in the cloudy group-think of the fearful. When the weight of collective ignorance gets too heavy to ignore, the group-think hive mind ruptures and enacts vile tortures and systemic oppressions onto the world.[41]

Ben Davis, writing for *Artnet*, describes O'Neal as the "key discovery" of the exhibition. He asserts that the "two halves" of *Racism Is Like Rain*

> redouble the external contrast between the biographical narrative that you can project into the composition and the independence of its abstract forms. That tension forms part of the context of the work.[42]

It would seem that, however belatedly, O'Neal has finally been recognized for her singular ability to deploy art as a way "to transcend a world of struggle, and all the many gradations in between." This, as Davis suggests "is another piece of the puzzle of making sense of this past for the present."[43]

NOTES

1. *The Fullness of Color: 1960s Painting*, December 18, 2019–August 2020 at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, was curated by Megan Fontanella.
2. Mary Lovelace O'Neal, telephone conversation with Lowery Stokes Sims, December 28, 2019.
3. If O'Neal's relationship with Stephen Green was uneasy, she found support from Adja Yunkers, then teaching at Barnard College and working as a visiting professor at Columbia. O'Neal, telephone conversation with Sims, December 28, 2019.
4. Ibid.
5. Mary Lovelace O'Neal, telephone conversation with Lowery Stokes Sims, January 22, 2020.
6. Mary Lovelace O'Neal, email to Lowery Stokes Sims, January 30, 2020.
7. O'Neal, telephone conversation with Sims, December 28, 2019.
8. Ibid.
9. Jordana Moore Saggese, "The Pleasures and the Perils of Abstraction," review of *Choose Paint! Choose Abstraction!*, exhibition at the Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, *International Review of African American Art Plus*, June 2012, http://iraaa.museum.hamptonu.edu/page/The-Pleasures-and-the-Perils-of-Abstraction. Susan E. Cahan also has some pertinent documentation of the art world's attitudes towards black artists working abstractly; see *Mounting Frustration: The Art Museum in the Age of Black Power* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).
10. Richard J. Powell, *Black Art and Culture in the 20th Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), p. 102.
11. Ibid.
12. Stanley Whitney, interview by Lowery Stokes Sims, in *Stanley Whitney: Dance to the Orange* (New York: The Studio Museum in Harlem, 2015).
13. Raymond Saunders, *Black Is a Color* (San Francisco: privately printed pamphlet, c. 1967), quoted in Saggese, "Pleasures and the Perils of Abstraction."
14. Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina, "Magnetic Fields: An Introduction," in *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*, ed. Dziedzic and Messina (Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017), p. 13.
15. Raymond Saunders, quoted in Jim Quinn, "Art Lessons," *Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine*, February 25, 1990, p. 32.
16. Lilly Wei, "Painting!" in *Mary Lovelace O'Neal*, exh. cat., ed. René Paul Barilleaux (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art, 2002), p. 56.
17. Ibid., p. 125.
18. Ilayda Orankoy, "Spotlight: Mary Lovelace O'Neal," *Broad Strokes* (blog), National Museum of Women in the Arts, October 17, 2017, https://blog.nmwa.org/2017/10/17/spotlight-mary-lovelace-oneal/.
19. Emily Resmer, "The Art and Passions of Mary Lovelace O'Neal," *Jackson Free Press*, December 6, 2002, https://www.jacksonfreepress.com/news/2002/dec/06/the-art-and-passions-of-mary-lovelace-oneal/.
20. See Lucette Lagnado, "When Jewish Scholars Fled to the South," *Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2009, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB124053723862951143.
21. David Driskell, "Reviewing the Social Circumstances of Mary Felice Lovelace O'Neal's Art," in *Mary Lovelace O'Neal*, exh. cat., ed. René Paul Barilleaux (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art, 2002), p. 15.
22. See O'Neal, telephone conversation with Sims, January 22, 2020. See also Driskell "Reviewing the Social Circumstances of O'Neal's Art," pp. 12–21. O'Neal was not alone in dealing with the predicament of social probity and artistic license; see Lowery Stokes Sims, "Black, Woman, Abstract Artist," in *Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today*, ed. Erin Dziedzic and Melissa Messina (Kansas City, MO: Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, 2017), pp. 35–47.
23. See O'Neal, telephone conversation with Sims, January 22, 2020. See also Driskell, "Reviewing the Social Circumstances of O'Neal's Art."
24. See Driskell, "Reviewing the Social Circumstances of O'Neal's Art," p. 17. We can also note the presence of several black artists working abstractly in Washington, DC. There was Alma Thomas, who had a retrospective exhibition at the Howard University Art Gallery in 1966; Kenneth Victor Young, who worked at the Smithsonian Institution as an exhibition designer; and Felrath Hines, the noted paintings conservator who worked at several institutions in Washington including the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden.
25. See Victoria L. Valentine, "Washington Renaissance: 8 Distinguished Artists Reflect and Connect in Wide-Ranging Discussion of African American Art in 20th Century Washington," Culture Type, April 12, 2017, https://www.culturetype.com/2017/04/12/washington-renaissance-8-distinguished-artists-reflect-and-connect-in-wide-ranging-discussion-of-african-american-art-in-20th-century-washington/.
26. See Melanie Herzog, "Mary Lovelace O'Neal: Painting Outside the Borders," in *Mary Lovelace O'Neal*, exh. cat., ed. René Paul Barilleaux (Jackson: Mississippi Museum of Art, 2002), p. 28.
27. O'Neal, telephone conversation with Sims, December 28, 2019.
28. Resmer, "The Art and Passions of Mary Lovelace O'Neal."
29. Herzog, "Painting Outside the Borders," p. 35.
30. Resmer, "The Art and Passions of Mary Lovelace O'Neal."
31. Ibid.
32. "Mary Lovelace O'Neal," The Women's Studio, https://thewomensstudio.net/2018/04/30/mary-lovelace-oneal/.
33. Ibid.
34. Resmer, "The Art and Passions of Mary Lovelace O'Neal."
35. See Driskell, "Reviewing the Social Circumstances of O'Neal's Art," p. 38.
36. O'Neal, telephone conversation with Sims, December 28, 2019; and email to Sims, January 27, 2020.
37. O'Neal, email to Sims, January 30, 2020.
38. Driskell, "Reviewing the Social Circumstances of O'Neal's Art," p. 20.
39. Jeffry Cudlin, "At the National Museum of Women in the Arts, *Magnetic Fields* Highlights the Black Women Often Left Out of the Abstract Art Canon," *Washington City Paper*, November 30, 2017, https://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/arts/museums-galleries/blog/20984380/magnetic-fields-expanding-american-abstraction-1960s-to-today-reviewed.
40. Angela Carroll, "Abstract Freedom, Spiritual Emancipation," *Bmore Art*, January 15, 2018, http://www.bmoreart.com/2018/01/abstract-freedom-spiritual-emancipation.html.
41. Ibid.
42. Ben Davis, "Yes, Black Women Made Abstract Art Too, as a Resounding New Show Makes Clear," *Artnet News*, October 20, 2017, https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/yes-black-women-made-abstract-art-too-and-how-a-vital-new-show-makes-clear-1121906.
43. Ibid.

Works

The Four Cardinal Points Are Three: North and South

circa 1970s

lampblack pigment, masking tape, and pastel on unstretched canvas

85 ¼ × 144 ½ inches (216.5 × 367 cm)

This painting takes its title from a line from the poem “Altazor, a Voyage in a Parachute: Poem in VII Cantos” (1931) by the Chilean avant-garde poet Vicente Huidobro (1893–1948).

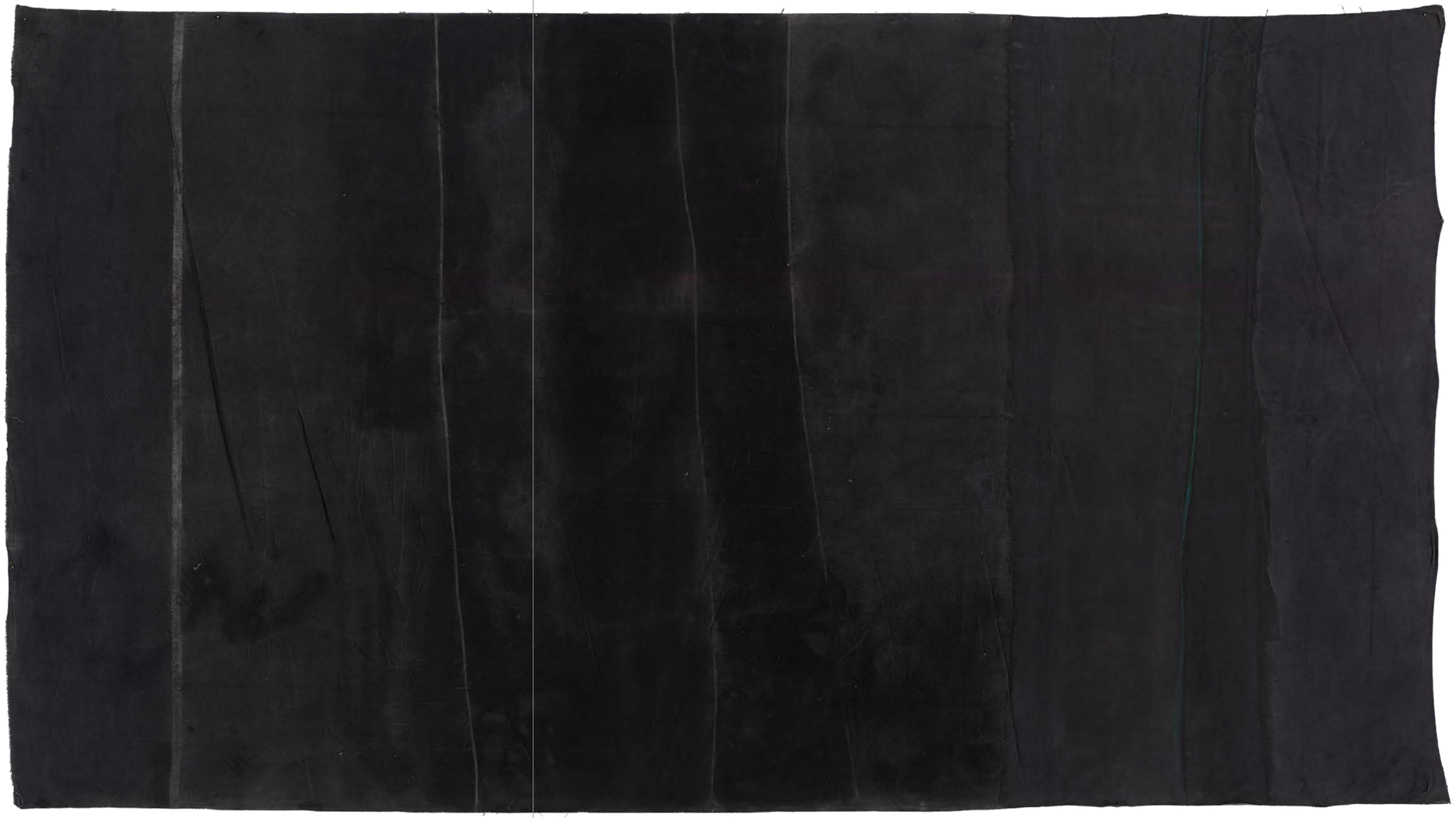
Blacker than a Hundred Midnights Down in a Cypress Swamp

circa 1970s

lampblack pigment on unstretched canvas

83 ¾ × 151 inches (212.7 × 383.5 cm)

This painting takes its title from a line from the poem "The Creation" (1922) by James Weldon Johnson (1871–1938), African-American novelist, poet, songwriter, attorney, and activist.



Black Ember

circa 1970s

mixed media on unstretched canvas

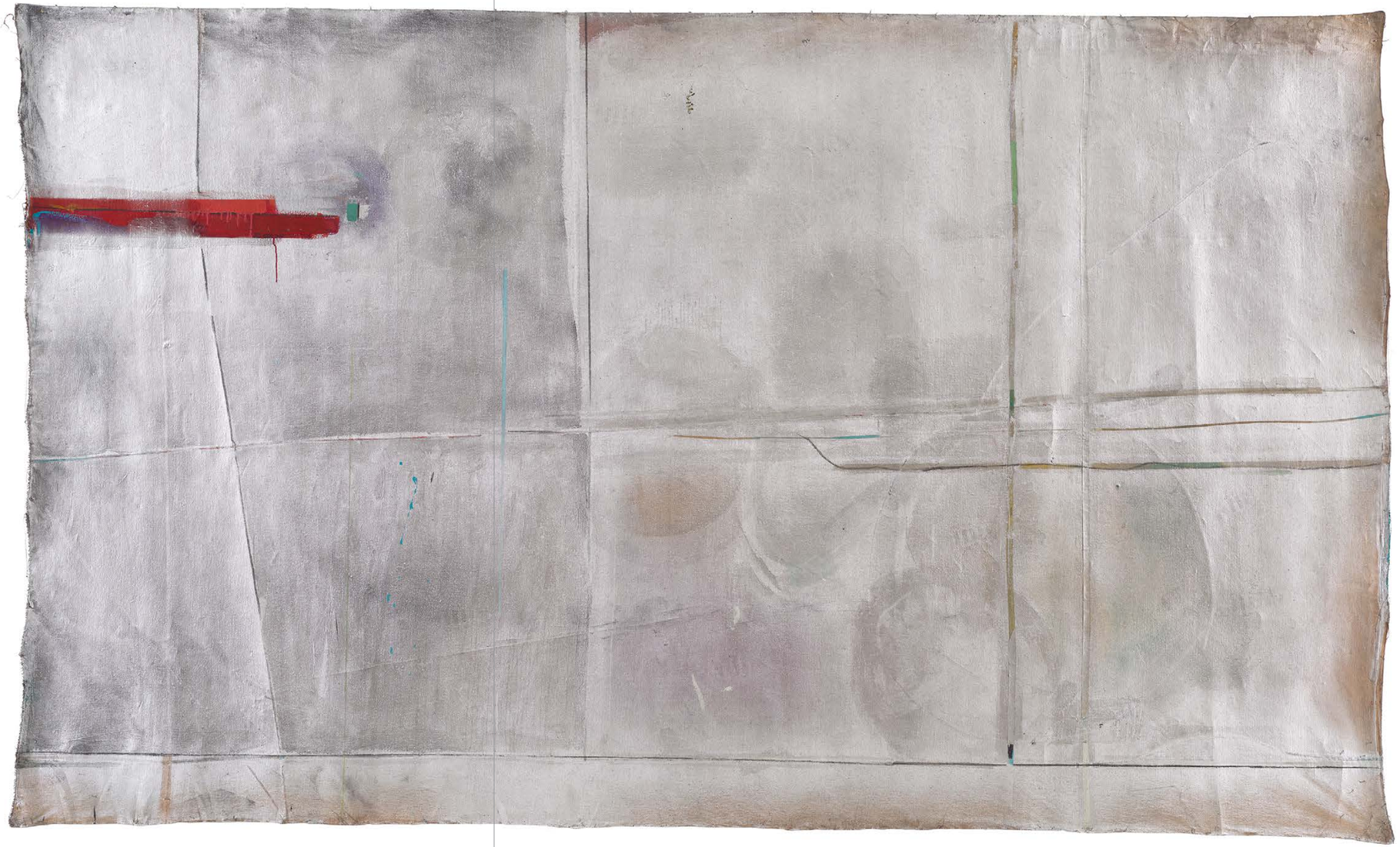
72 ¼ × 145 inches (183.5 × 368.3 cm)

Steam Engine

circa 1970s

mixed media on unstretched canvas

83 × 139 ½ inches (210.8 × 354.3 cm)



Thelonious Searching Those Familiar Keys (from the Whales Fucking series)

circa 1980s

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Toni’s Rose Petals (from the Whales Fucking series)

1981

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

White Whale (from the Whales Fucking series)

circa 1980s

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Hammem

circa 1984

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Meaningless Ritual, Senseless Superstition

circa early 1980s

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Forbidden Fruit (from the Lost in the Medina series)

circa 1990s

mixed media on canvas

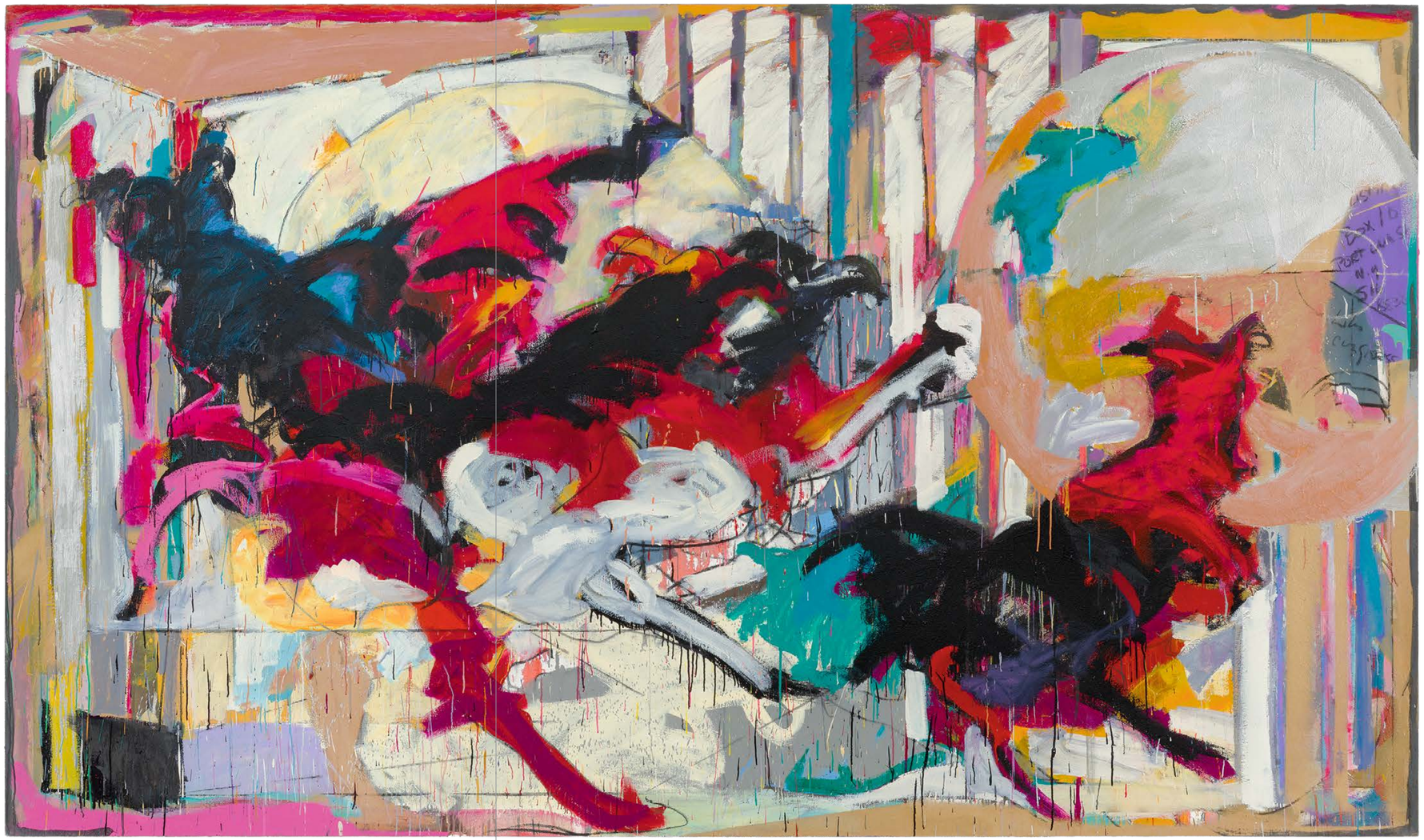
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Running with My Black Panthers and White Doves a.k.a Running with My Daemons (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series)

circa 1989–90

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)



Following the Bedouins (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series)

1989

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Kurban, a Sweeter Day to Come (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series)

circa 1989–90

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Running with Black Panthers and White Doves (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series)

circa 1989–90

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Pink Self Portrait (from the Two Deserts, Three Winters series)

circa early to mid-1990s

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

White Self Portrait (from the Two Deserts, Three Winters series)

circa early 1990s

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Purple Rain (from the Two Deserts, Three Winters series)

circa 1990s

mixed media on canvas

81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)

Try a Little Tenderness

circa early 1990s

mixed media on canvas

84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)

Tillie, Lassie, and the Don

circa 1998

mixed media on canvas

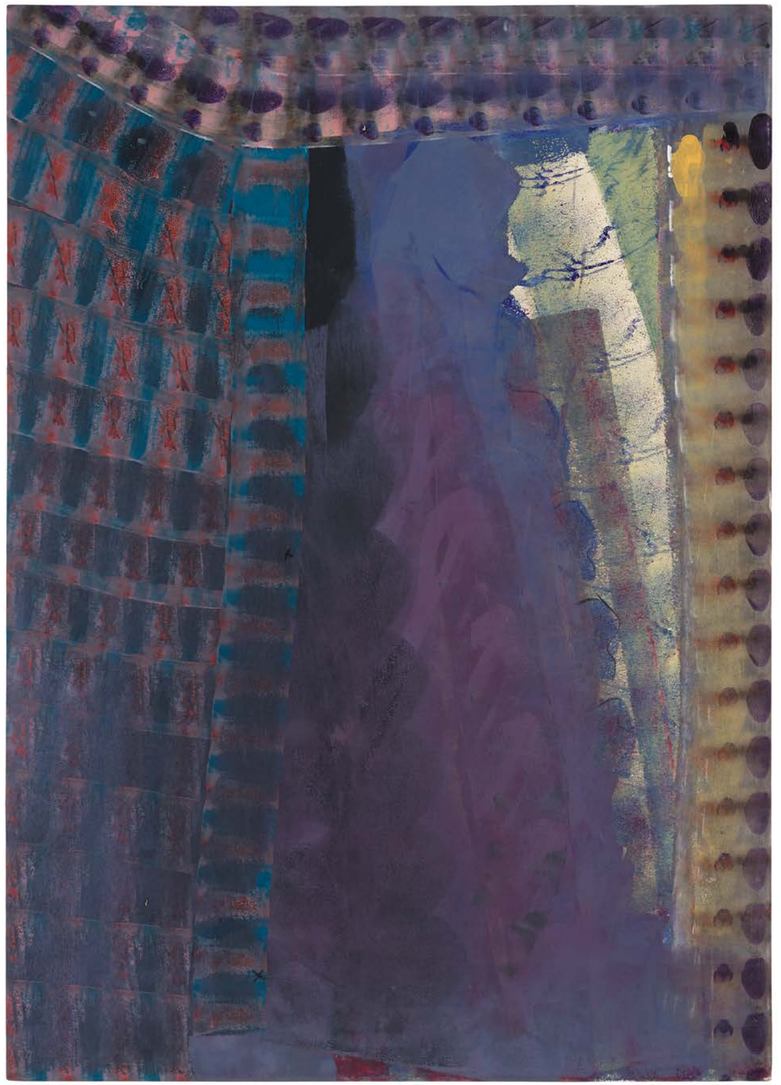
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)

Grave Robbers 4

circa 1998

mixed media on canvas

84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)



There Are No Such Thing as Witches (But They Do Exist) No. 2

circa mid- to late 1990s

mixed media on canvas

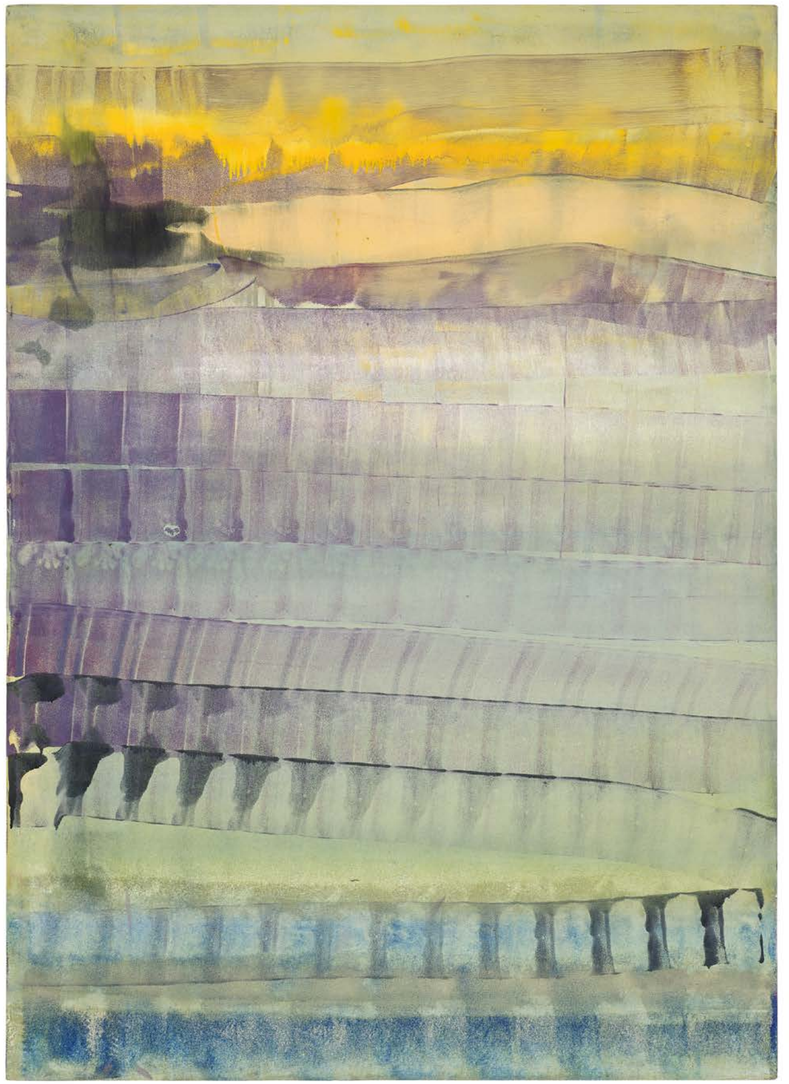
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)

Sunrise

circa late 1990s

mixed media on canvas

84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)



If He Whispers to Me, I'll Know He's the One

circa 1999–2000

mixed media on canvas

84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)

Set Them Wings on That Table a.k.a. Dem Bones

circa 1998

mixed media on canvas

84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)

Long Ago and Far Away, Age Upon Age, My Tillie

circa late 1990s

mixed media on canvas

84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)

She Is Living in the Clouds

circa early 2000s

mixed media on canvas

84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)

Nemesio’s Black Showers

circa early 2000s

mixed media on canvas

84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)

Checklist

The Four Cardinal Points Are Three: North and South
circa 1970s
lampblack pigment, masking tape, and pastel on unstretched canvas
85 ¼ × 144 ½ inches (216.5 × 367 cm)
Pages 20–21

Blacker than a Hundred Midnights Down in a Cypress Swamp
circa 1970s
lampblack pigment on unstretched canvas
83 ¾ × 151 inches (212.7 × 383.5 cm)
Pages 22–23

Black Ember
circa 1970s
mixed media on unstretched canvas
72 ¼ × 145 inches (183.5 × 368.3 cm)
Pages 24–25

Steam Engine
circa 1970s
mixed media on unstretched canvas
83 × 139 ½ inches (210.8 × 354.3 cm)
Pages 26–27

Thelonious Searching Those Familiar Keys (from the Whales Fucking series)
circa 1980s
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 28–29

Toni's Rose Petals (from the Whales Fucking series)
1981
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 30–31

White Whale (from the Whales Fucking series)
circa 1980s
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 32–33

Hammem
circa 1984
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 34–35

Meaningless Ritual, Senseless Superstition
circa early 1980s
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 36–37

Forbidden Fruit (from the Lost in the Medina series)
circa 1990s
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 38–39

Running with My Black Panthers and White Doves a.k.a Running with My Daemons (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series)
circa 1989–90
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 40–41

Following the Bedouins (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series)
1989
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 42–43

Kurban, a Sweeter Day to Come (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series)
circa 1989–90
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 44–45

Running with Black Panthers and White Doves (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series)
circa 1989–90
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 46–47

Pink Self Portrait (from the Two Deserts, Three Winters series)
circa early to mid-1990s
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 48–49

White Self Portrait (from the Two Deserts, Three Winters series)
circa early 1990s
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 50–51

Purple Rain (from the Two Deserts, Three Winters series)
circa 1990s
mixed media on canvas
81 × 138 inches (205.7 × 350.5 cm)
Pages 52–53

Try a Little Tenderness
circa early 1990s
mixed media on canvas
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 55

Tillie, Lassie, and the Don
circa 1998
mixed media on canvas
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 57

Grave Robbers 4
circa 1998
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84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 59

There Are No Such Thing as Witches (But They Do Exist) No. 2
circa mid- to late 1990s
mixed media on canvas
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 61

Sunrise
circa late 1990s
mixed media on canvas
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 63

If He Whispers to Me, I'll Know He's the One
circa 1999–2000
mixed media on canvas
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 65

Set Them Wings on That Table a.k.a. Dem Bones
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Page 67

Long Ago and Far Away, Age Upon Age, My Tillie
circa late 1990s
mixed media on canvas
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 69

She Is Living in the Clouds
circa early 2000s
mixed media on canvas
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 71

Nemesio's Black Showers
circa early 2000s
mixed media on canvas
84 × 60 inches (213.4 × 152.4 cm)
Page 73

Chasing Down the Image

Mary Lovelace O'Neal Interviewed
by Melissa Messina

Melissa Messina: I'm blown over by the power of your Lampblack pieces (1960s), doubly struck that you were in your mid-to-late twenties when you made them. You were in Columbia's graduate program at a time when Minimalism, a very white and male dialogue, had a stronghold. It is clear that you had command of your materials and compositions. You were a contender in this arena. Was this work a direct response to that conversation?

Mary Lovelace O'Neal: I came [to New York] on the heels of the dominance of Abstract Expressionism, where it was being knocked off the hill by this Minimalist attitude. I was coming to Columbia with a lot of heavy, brushy, de Kooning–esque attitudes, and Stephen Green—who had been a teacher of [Frank] Stella's—became my major advisor, and he and I started bumping heads almost immediately. He was suggesting that this brushy, fast thing that I was doing was done. I disagreed with him and we fought bitterly. It wasn't so much that I was defeated or succumbed to him. What I wanted to do was to figure out a way to become a part of that current dialogue, to find out what it was about, and if, sincerely, there was something for me to learn. So I set about looking into issues like flatness.

And so I took old compositions that I had on paper, and even some I had done on canvas, and I just started to sort of white out some areas to try to quiet things, to try to pretend that there were not those underpinnings. Then I started to use charcoal almost exclusively. I could take an eraser and go back into it and reserve areas where I would drop in colors. [Then] it occurred to me that what I was doing with the black drawings, I could figure out how to make work in vast areas. Of course, I was aware of Barnett Newman; I knew that he had something to teach me, but what he was doing was not what I was interested in doing. So even though I became involved with these white male attitudes, I was somewhere else with it because I could see the geometry working for me.

MM: Is this how the Lampblack paintings began?

MLO: Well, one day I had gone out to get supplies [at] Pearl, that big paint shop downtown. As I was going up and down the rows, I saw this bag that had somehow been cut and was allowing this black powder to very slowly slip out and form a little pile on the wooden floor. It was just beautiful to me. I decided that there was something I could do with that. I bought several bags of that powdered pigment and brought it back to the studio.

Something was incubating in the back of my head and trying to force its way into my consciousness. It was an experience I had at Skowhegan years earlier in 1963 when I was fed up with painting and with not experiencing any real breakthroughs. I saw a sign in front of the sculpture barn that said they were going to have a lecture. I came in and the artist had a pot bubbling with beeswax. And while he started his lecture, he started to pour what I later learned was lampblack powdered pigment into that pot. And he stirred it and stirred it, and it was beautiful. [Later] I went over to the sculpture lab and got the hot plate and set up beeswax and the powder and just started mixing, not knowing any proportions. And I found an old piece of wood and I just knocked some nails and stuff together, I started to build my own armature. And it just grew and grew. And then I left it alone; I needed to get back to painting. The upshot is, that [summer] I got two

prizes. Somebody had put my little sculpture in among those competing sculptures and I got an honorable mention in painting and in sculpture.

MM: And at Columbia, years later, you remembered this material?

MLO: Exactly. It was like an epiphany! It came out of nowhere, but obviously it'd been percolating because why else would I have bought that black stuff? And how is it that I happened to walk down those wood floors and find that little pile and be attracted to it? So there's all of this scary, spiritual stuff attached to what it is we make. It's magic.

Anyway, I remembered that stuff at some point, and I started to try to rub it into the canvas but those canvases had been gessoed. I realized that I had to work on the floor and [got the canvases] off the stretcher bars. I realized that gesso wasn't allowing. And I was rubbing my hands raw. There was a chalkboard eraser on my table; and so I started to rub it in and then things grew. I was demanding more of the space. I started drawing, starting with still lifes and with figures. And then I would just hide them, push them back down, and came up with these real velvety surfaces. And then I started using the actual interruptions in the canvas itself, the weave of the canvas, to give me some activity, so that I was really not giving in to this absolute. You know, a refusal to have the canvas speak.

MM: The Lampblack pieces also depict flatness in how they're presented as unstretched canvases tacked on the wall. Why didn't you re-stretch them?

MLO: Because it didn't make sense to me if I was talking about flatness. The thing is, if you pay attention to materials, they will make demands.

After you've gotten all of the materials sorted out and placed, you realize, "I don't know what to say here." And then you just have to be brave enough to go into that white space. Every time you get up there, I don't care who you are—if you are Toulouse-Lautrec or Noland or whoever—you've got to contend with that thing in front of you. If you are really wanting to be a part of this thing you're making, you listen to it. You impose things and maybe it says, "No, not working. I don't want to do that." And then you figure out how to appease it, or how to bring it into its wonderfulness, its glamour. And that's, for me, the way that works.

MM: People try to relate your thin lines to Barnett Newman's zips, but for you they function more conceptually. They're windows into these underpaintings that came out more fully in the work you made after moving to California. You've described the imagery as always having been under the Lampblack paintings and that you just gave it permission to come to the surface. Is that accurate?

MLO: That's accurate.

MM: First though, what brought you to California?

MLO: There were a number of things. [My husband] John O'Neal and I were having issues. We lived in the midst of Harlem. And I got tired of having to step over junkies; it was really frightening to be coming in late at night. Even in the mornings on the way to work, I would have to crawl through them and it was uncomfortable. You'd act like you're bad, like, "Don't even think about my pocketbook, I'll kick your ass." You had to have that kind of attitude. So that was part of it.

At that time there was a great migration west. Half of the people I knew were coming west. I had some friends working in Marin County and some [Black] Panthers. And there were these great rifts developing, had developed, in the [civil rights] movement between the SNCCs and the COREs. Some with attitudes like Martin had. Martin had been killed. Malcolm had been killed. Medgar had been killed. And, you know, what's the answer to this? You're young and you have the ability to move.

MM: Sounds like you were ready for some new adventures in a new environment.

MLO: Well, I don't even know about adventure because adventure was my daily companion. I mean, just getting to work was an adventure! But I met people out here [in California] after a series of little jobs.

MM: You had always been active in the movement, one of the earliest SNCC organizers in DC. Did you remain connected to the movement when you went out to California?

MLO: Yes, I did, because I somehow ended up with these new relationships inside the Panther party, and a lot of that was due to [my former boyfriend] Stokely Carmichael. People were coming back and forth organizing. I was the only person among my group of SNCC and CORE people who was not actually employed day to day. So I was sent to DC to be the West Coast representative. And what was happening was so frightening; everybody was so paranoid because the FBI and the CIA—all of those motherfuckers—had managed to get inside the movement and so everyone was afraid. It was an intensely paranoid period because you didn't know who had infiltrated.

It turns out that Carlos Villa, whom I had met and showed my work to, had been trying to find me. He caught up with me and said that he wanted to offer me a [teaching] job. But one of the things that made me decide to stay in California was it just seemed so scary [in DC], you didn't know who was your friend. And I knew that there were people [on the West Coast] I could trust. I was sure of that.

So to respond to your question, there was a great number of reasons that I left the East Coast. I had no intention of staying in California [though], because I didn't like it. I met Arthur Monroe who sent me to Mexico, to Ajijic. It was an artist compound.

MM: So you had a brief stint in Mexico?

MLO: Yeah, I was going to be this great expatriated African American woman artist. And then I got down there and those Mexican men were acting like Italian men. I'd say, "If you put your hands on me, I'll kill you." And the weather got funky, and my Spanish was rotten. That was not my spot. I wasn't supposed to be there. And so I came back.

MM: And you started making the Whales Fucking series. Where did they come from and how did California affect your work?

Mary Lovelace O'Neal giving a painting demonstration at Jackson State University, Jackson, MS, 1985

MLO: By this time, in 1970, I was teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute. I was super crazy and only disciplined about my work, and pretty disciplined about teaching, but other than that I was out there! One day my student and I decided to go to Ocean Beach. We happened to be on that beach when these whales were migrating and it was just the most incredible thing. Even far away, to see them jumping up to the sky and then just falling back down into the water. Imagine how much water they were pushing around. What a hell of a time they were having! And I began thinking about them.

There had been, for ages, a disrespect of these wonderful animals, these "people" who could talk to each other and who could make love, who could fuck! It had some sexual implications in terms of my own experience as a woman, as a sexually involved human being. It was about power, really. And it was also about their genteel quality.

Also, there was a great move to stop people from whaling, to protect them and to really learn about them. It became of interest to the masses.

But really, they just came from wherever they came from, and they brought themselves into being. It was like, "No more hiding out, we're up here." And I could use paint and charcoal, and could use what I'd learned about flatness and what I'd learned before I came [to California]. What I'd learned at Howard, from David Driskell and James Porter and Loïs Mailou Jones. I was free and my work was my way of maximizing my freedom. I didn't have to listen to anyone. And those whales were saying, "Right, let's get it!" I needed that in and out, that breathing, that kind of life force, that softness. And I had moved back to liquid. I was wanting that liquid. You can literally see me coming out of that flatness that had allowed the black work to be. Even when I came with these big, big whales, they were still quiet, in a way. And then, as I got more confident, though I didn't even see it that way, those other whales that are more agitated came, like that blue whale and then the *White Whale* (page 32).

MM: Yes, they become more gestural.

MLO: That fast brush started to happen, almost de Kooning–esque, coming all the way back from Howard. I'm always regrouping and pulling. It's like I'm not letting anything go. I'm holding on to stuff because it's useful and, though it doesn't show up in every painting, you can actually see—as I saw—where the change was taking place.

MM: You see it with some distance and time.

MLO: Yes, you can see where the planes were moving and shifting. That choppy, agitated brushwork is my getting back to it, getting back to what I love to do. And when it was happening, I didn't even know it. I didn't say, "Well, I'm gonna go in now and make these really agitated surfaces and divide them up in this way." It doesn't happen that way, for me anyway.

MM: Tell me more about your studio practice.

MLO: My studio was the one place I could go and work it out. Feelings about my father and my family, and all the things that are tragic and things that are joyful. I didn't even know I was working it out. I might paint furiously for two or three days in a row and not even come out of that studio. It's a very, very odd way to live your life, just in that studio and coming out of there looking like a crazy person, full of lampblack or paint. And then acting crazy so that these crazies [on the street] will know you are crazier than they are. Because I'd be coming out of the studio at three or four o'clock in the morning.

MM: But you traveled a lot. You and your husband [Patricio Moreno] Toro went to Africa, Asia, and Europe throughout the '80s. I'm curious how this inspired you.

MLO: I had to be careful when I got back the first time from Morocco, because all of those images and where we went—to Fez and all the way down to Marrakesh and everywhere in between—[were like] these postcards in my head. Because Egypt, Morocco, the Sahara are like postcards. You think you're going to run into Jesus out there because it's just so biblical! The Atacama is really tough and rugged, and the Sahara is just rolling and beautiful; you almost have male and female. But when you come home with those postcards in your head, they get in the way of the paint. You really have to try hard to move around it and give the paint the chance it needs.

MM: Did these experiences inspire the Two Deserts, Three Winters series?

MLO: Yes, they came about when I had sabbatical in 1989 and Toro and I traveled to Morocco into Egypt. We went from one desert, the Atacama—which I had absolutely fallen in love with, the driest desert in the world—to the Sahara, which is very different. And so what those women—I have to cop to them being self-portraits at some level—are doing is straddling those two deserts. And that's why it's Two Deserts, Three Winters. We experienced winter in Chile and then winter in Morocco.

MM: What was the third?

MLO: When I came back, we stopped in Chicago. The semester didn't start until the new year so I was in Chicago with my family in 10 feet of snow.

But all of those things were influences. I worked in the sun on the roof during a residency. I would go up and there I saw all of the life of women. Women owned the rooftops.

MM: In Morocco?

MLO: All over. All over Africa you'll see it, that's where the women's life is going on. They're in underwear or slips, and they are combing the hair of their children. And the maids are preparing lunches and cutting up vegetables. And taking care of their babies and nursing. And then

Mary Lovelace O'Neal in her studio, date unknown

they've got small animals. It's like life is above the street level. It's so wonderful. But you incorporate all this, it's just waiting to explode into what you're making.

MM: What about the Panthers in My Father's Palace series?

MLO: They came after the whales and they came after Morocco. But they were always percolating. I was in a palace [on residency] with all those mosaics and started to think of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, an opera that my father produced as a yearly Christmas offering when he was [teaching] at Arkansas State. I was probably twelve years old and would have to go for all of the rehearsals, so I knew the whole opera.

It didn't come back into my life until I was in Morocco and living in that palace. I had a bed by this window and I would look out at the ocean and the stars. The whole thing was magic. And it was then that all of those things started to be remembered. The mosaics and the quietness and shadows just [opened my] imagination.

MM: So your father was an inspiration for the series?

MLO: Well of course. How could I not think about the opera and not think about him? And the fights I had with him because I didn't want to be in it! We were those kind of kids that he kept trying to civilize, so we had dance lessons and cooking classes and paint brushes and paste and this and that. It became a part of me in ways I didn't know. My father had always been there, always saying, "Go out and explore the vast, vast world. Otherwise, you're not gonna have anything to talk about, if you are talking about painting." So, yes, I did think about him.

MM: The panthers moving through planes are so striking, but you also use architecture in interesting ways. I'm struck by your phrase "shifting planes." Your use of architecture is more "allusionistic"—to tell a story—than illusionistic. You've said that you have "an architectural foundation" in all of your paintings.

MLO: Yeah, because I want to be inside of those paintings. I want to go in there, and I want other people to go in there. And so there are rooms, and the question is: how much stuff can you get into a room?

I had such difficulty understanding three-point perspective. But [my professor] Mr. Driskell was very helpful

Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Robert Colescott, David C. Driskell, and Robert Schnell
in front of *Thelonious Searching Those Familiar Keys* (see page 28–29), circa 1980s

in saying, "Think about it as planes." And so I later learned to get that kind of depth that was denied in the early flat paintings. But I knew it was always under there. That's why my interruptions are not really the kind that Barnett Newman has, because if you really look at it, one line operates like two or three planes in back of one or the other, therefore acknowledging space, or lying about it. You know, that's what painters are; they're liars. They try to make you believe that things are there that aren't.

When I came to California, there was a freeing up because so much is tower-like in New York. [Here] you're not oppressed by those caverns, with everything right on top of you. And that was of one the things, too, about coming to California, and those whales and that light. Here in Northern California, it's just a light play. I was so fascinated by that. There was a different way of organizing space and finding ways of pushing back.

And the architecture in Africa is so strong, so all of that plays into it. I used to dream a lot, after we had spent a night with the Bedouins in Morocco. Down in the mountains, we slept under all of these rugs. I used to dream that I actually lived in a tent with rugs and baskets and couches. So [the architecture] has to do with where I've been and what I saw and what I thought about it.

MM: I see this so well in your paintings, these planes and patterns collapsing and expanding. This seems connected to the way you move between "non-representational" abstraction and the figure. So many artists pick a camp, and you have never done that. Did you ever feel pressure to choose?

MLO: Well, after I was out of those institutions of learning and in my own space, I could do what I wanted to do. I could experiment and figure it out. And there were lessons that I had learned but hadn't been able to do anything with that went back to my days with Driskell.

And someone like me, who is essentially dyslexic, I learn things differently. It's hard for you to teach me. To learn it, I have to put it into my pot and twirl it and twist it and tweak it until I can understand it. So years later, I'd have these epiphanies in my studio: "That's what he was talking about. That's what she meant when she said that." This stuff comes to you when you need it, but you have to be there to receive it.

MM: Tell me about your use of the word "families"? I keep saying "series," but you prefer "families."

MLO: There are some stand-alone pieces, like *Hammem*. It happened and it doesn't have any real sisters and brothers. It did what it was supposed to do. But the paintings mostly do come in batches, like those Panthers that are running and are more agitated, with things swirling around them and planes moving back and forth and in and out. Some of them don't like to be alone. They want to be with other people and then they can see each other. But essentially they are still the same group of siblings and they're very close to each other. They are a family.

MM: You've talked about working out ideas across time, that series roll into each other. In this show, one sees ideas that you return to over time. It strikes me that some of the later works from the early 2000s are dark and chalky, like *Nemesio's Black Showers*. Are these connected to the Lampblack works? Were they a revisitation?

MLO: Absolutely, absolutely! Because I think that this is who we are. We are not just one thing. We are a collection of all of our years. And what I'm doing is reusing things. That darkness had some meaning, and it became very meaningful when I was experiencing certain kinds of losses. It's like recycling, repurposing. It was a good thing, so now you find another use for it. And you don't have to go looking for it. It comes to you.

So it's like all of those attitudes about flatness. I didn't want my painting to look like [Frank] Stella's. You know, just dead. I could go back to what Driskell was trying to say, or Ms. Jones, or Mr. Porter. I've been really lucky. I've grown up with people who had an interest in helping me be who I am.

MM: Helping you find ways to chase down the image.

MLO: Yes.

MM: While black women working in abstraction are now being better contextualized and reintroduced to new audiences, for many people this may be their first introduction to your work. What do you want people to take away from the show?

MLO: A painting!

MM: Good answer.

MLO: That's exactly what the fuck I want them to take, a painting!

Chronology

1942
Mary Lovelace O'Neal is born February 10 in Jackson, MS.

1960–64
Studies at Howard University under David Driskell, Loïs Mailou Jones, and James Porter. Becomes active in the civil rights movement alongside then-boyfriend Stokely Carmichael.

1963
Attends the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture on a summer scholarship from Howard University, where she is first introduced to lampblack pigment.

1965
Marries John O'Neal, co-founder of the Free Southern Theater with Gilbert Moses.

1968–69
Moves to New York and receives MFA from Columbia University. While in New York, she becomes involved with the Black Arts Movement, working with and befriending artists such as Joe Overstreet, Amiri Baraka, and Emilio Cruz. Begins the Lampblack series.

1976
Marries her second husband, attorney Lolis Elie, who helped desegregate New Orleans.

1977
Represents the United States at the Second World Black and African Festival of Art in Lagos, Nigeria.

1979
Two-person exhibition at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art with George C. Longfish. Begins the Whales Fucking series. Hired as an assistant professor at University of California, Berkeley.

1982
SOLO EXHIBITION
Gallery of Art, Howard University, Washington, DC.

1983
Meets and begins a relationship with Chilean painter Patricio Moreno Toro, who becomes her third husband.

1984
O'Neal is introduced to Robert Blackburn and encouraged to learn printmaking in his studio. Blackburn invites her to participate in the international arts festival in Asilah, Morocco. Her time in Morocco sparks a childhood memory of her participation in the opera *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, which leads to the beginnings of the Panthers in My Father's Palace series.

SOLO EXHIBITION
Jeremy Stone Gallery, San Francisco.

GROUP EXHIBITION
East / West: Contemporary American Art, California African American Museum, Los Angeles.

1985
Awarded tenure in the Department of Art Practice at University of California, Berkeley.

1989
Travels to Morocco, Egypt, and Chile on a humanities research grant, which provides the inspiration for her Two Deserts, Three Winters series. In Chile, O'Neal befriends Nemesio Antúnez, director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago.

1989–90
GROUP EXHIBITION
Introspectives: Contemporary Art by Americans and Brazilians of African Descent, California African American Museum, Los Angeles; Bronx Museum of Arts, New York.

1990
Marries Patricio Moreno Toro.

SOLO EXHIBITION
De Saisset Museum, Santa Clara University, CA.

1991
Curates the exhibition *17 Artistas Latino y Afro Americanos en USA* at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes in Santiago with the support of Nemesio Antúnez, featuring artists such as Robert Colescott, Emilio Cruz, David Driskell, Sam Gilliam, Joe Overstreet, Raymond Saunders, and Sylvia Snowden.

1992
SOLO EXHIBITION
Porter Randall Gallery, La Jolla, CA.

1993
Receives the "Artiste en France" award, presented by the French government and Moët & Chandon. Participates in six-month residency at the Cité International des Arts in Paris, where she has a solo exhibition the following year. Meets other creatives in Paris, including Toni Morrison and Nina Simone.

SOLO EXHIBITION
French Embassy, New York. O'Neal's last show in New York for over 25 years.

1994–97
Represents the United States at the Third and Fourth Triennales of Graphic Arts, Musée d'art contemporain de Chamalières, France.

1997
SOLO EXHIBITION
Stella Jones Gallery, New Orleans.

1999
Awarded a grant from the Walter and Elise Haas Creative Work Fund, allowing her to collaborate with composer Olly Wilson on a joint exhibition and performance, which debuts in 2003 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco.

1999
Appointed chair of the Department of Art Practice at University of California, Berkeley.

2000
SOLO EXHIBITION
Bomani Gallery, San Francisco.

2001
Represents the Untied States at the Amadora 2000 VII Bienal 1st International de Gravurua in Amadora, Portugal, and the Biennale Interazionale dell'Arte Contemporanea in Florence, Italy.

SOLO EXHIBITIONS
Bomani Gallery, San Francisco.
University Art Gallery, California State University, Stanislaus.

2002
SOLO EXHIBITION
Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson; The University of Mississippi, Oxford; Delta State University, Cleveland; Mississippi University for Women, Columbus; and University of Maryland Art Gallery, College Park.
Stella Jones Gallery, New Orleans.

2004–06
GROUP EXHIBITION
Images of America, African American Voices: Selections from the Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Darrell Walker, Walton Arts Center, Fayetteville, NC; Heckscher Museum, Huntington, NY; California African American Museum, Los Angeles; Lowe Museum, University of Miami, FL; Marianna Kistler Beach Museum of Art, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS; and Morris Museum of Art, Augusta, GA.

2006
Retires from University of California, Berkeley, becoming professor emerita of the Department of Art Practice.

2007
SOLO EXHIBITION
Togonon Gallery, San Francisco.

2012
GROUP EXHIBITIONS
Choose Paint! Choose Abstraction! Celebrating Bay Area Abstract Artists, Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco.
African American Art Since 1950: Perspectives from the David. C. Driskell Center, University of Maryland, College Park.

2017–18
GROUP EXHIBITION
Magnetic Fields: Expanding American Abstraction, 1960s to Today, Kemper Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; and Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, FL. The exhibition is favorably reviewed and sparks renewed interest in her work.

2018
Recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award at the 29th Annual James A. Porter Colloquium at Howard University.

2019
Her 1995 painting *Running Freed More Slaves than Lincoln Ever Did* is acquired by the Baltimore Museum of Art.

GROUP EXHIBITIONS
Generations: A History of Black Abstract Art, Baltimore Museum of Art, MD.
The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection, Saint Louis Art Museum, MO.

2020
SOLO EXHIBITION
Mary Lovelace O'Neal: Whales, a Romance. . . , Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco, a Smithsonian affiliate.

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

Mary Lovelace O'Neal

Chasing Down the Image

Curated by Sukanya Rajaratnam

February 6–March 14, 2020

Mnuchin Gallery
45 East 78 Street
New York, NY 10075

Partners: Robert Mnuchin, Sukanya Rajaratnam, Michael McGinnis
Exhibition Directors: Liana Gorman, Emma Laramie
Director of Operations: David McClelland
Senior Registrar: Arrow Mueller

Captions:
Cover: *Running with My Black Panthers and White Doves a.k.a Running with My Daemons* (from the Panthers in My Father's Palace series), circa 1989–90 (see pages 40–41)
p. 2: Mary Lovelace O'Neal in her studio, circa early 1970s
p. 6: Mary Lovelace O'Neal in her studio, circa early 1970s
p. 82: Mary Lovelace O'Neal in her studio, circa 1980s
p. 92: Mary Lovelace O'Neal, 2019

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