

# Stephen Friedman Gallery

Forbes

Review: HBO Original Documentary 'Black Art: In The Absence Of Light'

Chadd Scott

8 February 2021



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HBO's original documentary, "Black Art: In the Absence of Light," serves as a powerful introduction for mainstream audiences to a small cross section of the countless brilliant Black visual artists working today with a whiff of the genius that preceded them. Viewers with an awareness of contemporary art will be familiar with



most of the material presented. No problem there. The documentary is refreshingly non-academic, presented for the premium cable network's broad viewership. Consider "Black Art: In the Absence of Light" a Black art history 101 class.

Image: Artist Amy Sherald working on Michelle Obama's portrait. Courtesy HBO

### Lesson 1: David Driskell.

For this "class," Driskell is both subject and professor. An accomplished painter, Driskell's greater impact on the art world generally, and Black art and artists specifically, was as a curator, educator and historian. His revolutionary exhibition, "Two Centuries of Black American Art," debuting at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976, inspired the HBO documentary.

Cementing the essential contributions of Black artists in America in the 19th and 20th centuries, the exhibit would eventually travel to the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts, the High Museum of Art in Atlanta and the Brooklyn Museum.

"What David did was, he said, 'this is Black art, it matters, and it's been going on for 200 years—deal with it,' art historian Maurice Berger says in the documentary.

"David Driskell's presence in the art world is the significance of him sending the elevator back down," artist Amy Sherald explains in the film. "He was a trailblazer for all of us, and when there were no Black voices in the art world, for him to assert himself in the way that he did, helped move us forward during a time when we were still fighting for space in museums and in galleries."



Image: Artist, curator, educator, historian David Driskell painting in his studio. Courtesy HBO

"Black Art" doesn't secure Driskell's place in history. He'd done that himself long ago. It is a great reminder. Thirteen honorary doctoral degrees in art. Author of seven books on African-American art, co-author of four others, publisher of 40 exhibition catalogs. Driskell was honored by President Bill Clinton as a recipient of the National Humanities Medal in 2000. The following year, the University of Maryland, where he taught for decades, established the David C. Driskell Center. The center honors Driskell by preserving the rich heritage of African-American visual art and culture. In 2005, the High Museum of Art established the David C. Driskell Prize, the first national award to recognize and celebrate contributions to the field of African-American art and art history.

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The High currently exhibits "David Driskell: Icons of Nature and History," through May 9. The show will travel to the Portland Museum of Art in Maine and the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C. Between the exhibition and the documentary, Driskell features as one of the most prominent voices in the art world in 2021.

Driskell died from complications related to COVID-19 at age 88 on April 1, 2020. "Black Art" producer and director Sam Pollard fortunately spent hours with the artist talking over his career and observing him painting prior to Driskell's passing.

Every word Driskell speaks in the documentary carries the weight of gospel. Scenes of him painting will be especially treasured.

Driskell was interested and championing artists to the end. "I don't care where I was, I would look up and David Driskell would be there supporting me, and he did that for hundreds—not just dozens—hundreds of other artists," artist Carrie Mae Weems said in a panel discussion for media organized by HBO to support the film. "He would fly around the world to be at your opening if he supported you, to understand what was happening, to look at that work and to cheer you on—to (let you) know that you had somebody deep in your corner—and he never made a fuss about it. His last days he actually spent at Theaster's (Gates) exhibition at the Park Avenue Armory. I look up and there in the audience—not feeling well that day—was David Driskell, wanting to know what all these other young artists were up to, what they were about."

## Lesson 2: Today's Black artists



Image: Artist Kerry James Marshall in his studio. Courtesy HBO

"Black Art" offers a magnificent introduction to many of today's preeminent Black artists. For viewers already familiar with their names and achievements, spending this time remains a joy.

Kerry James Marshall presents, as usual, to be the most insightful, intelligent, plainspoken personality in the art world when talking about painting.

Faith Ringold, a rebel's rebel.

Amy Sherald and Kehinde Wiley, painters of the Obama's presidential portraits, are featured. Both seem lit from the inside to shine onto the world.

Theaster Gates' deep philosophy.

Radcliff Bailey at work in his studio takes viewers into a rarely seen sanctuary.

Kara Walker's cutouts and Domino Sugar Factory installation remain as essential, provocative and shocking as the day they were produced.

There will be viewers for whom these artists and this artwork are new. Revelations. As Driskell's exhibition did 45 years ago, introducing a wider world to these artists may be the film's enduring legacy.

Presenting them together creates a remarkable time capsule of creative genius.

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Image: Artist Kara Walker working on a cutout. Courtesy HBO

### Lesson 3: Become the light

The “absence of light” referenced in the documentary’s title, as eloquently explained by Gates at the end of the film, refers to attention. Recognition. Acknowledgement. Black creatives have been doing the work all along, they just haven’t been receiving “the light.”

That’s what Driskell did. He flipped on the switch. Dim at first, brighter with each passing year. Glowing with the power of 100 suns today.

Viewers can provide their own “light” to Black artists by visiting their exhibitions, following them on social media, collecting their art.