

Stephen Friedman Gallery

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In the Absence of Light: celebrating the history of black artists in America
Robert Daniels
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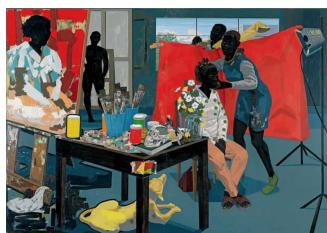


Image: Untitled (Studio), Kerry James Marshall, 2014. Photograph: HBO

In a compelling new HBO documentary, film-maker Sam Pollard speaks to prominent creatives to tell the struggle and success of African American art. “I get up at 7.30 in the morning and then I’m at my computer working, thinking about new ideas, pushing along the projects that I’m involved in,” 70-year-old Sam Pollard explains. The documentary film-maker, as an editor, frequently collaborated with Spike Lee on films such as *Mo’ Better Blues*, *4 Little Girls* and *Bamboozled*. His storied directing career features the seminal civil rights docuseries *Eyes on the Prize*, the electrifying blues documentary *Two Trains Runnin’*, and the Academy Award-shortlisted *MLK/FBI*.

Speaking by video call from his New York City home, Pollard’s hearty laugh accompanies a still buoyant curiosity. “Even at this stage of my career, I still love what I do. That’s a big part of keeping me in the game. I love making films. I love talking about films. I love the process of showing how films are put together,” he says. His boundless energy – which includes a daily schedule of interviewing by Zoom, promoting and developing new projects, and teaching at NYU – has propelled him to release 10 separate documentaries over the last six years that captures both the prominent and little-known figures in African American history.

His new HBO-produced film *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*, in that same spirit, recounts David Driskell’s groundbreaking *Two Centuries of Black American Art*. First mounted at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Lacma) in 1976, it’s an engrossing survey of African American art since 1750 that inspired attendees and future artists, and spurred questions surrounding representation.

“Originally, Henry Louis Gates and myself thought we should build it around Thelma Golden’s 1994 exhibition that was at the Whitney, *The Black Male*. She was the one who suggested we reach out to David Driskell,” recalls Pollard. “I met up with David at his apartment on 100th Street and Central Park West. We had a very nice dinner and talked about the genesis of *Two Centuries* and the artists that he included in the exhibition.” Driskell’s keen curation provided Pollard’s film with an easy entry point to not only unearth the legacy of the Lacma event, but to document foundational black artists like Elizabeth Catlett, Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, Selma Burke and Norman Lewis. A collection of creatives specializing in painting, architecture, decorative arts and drawings who used the arts to assert their power.

Pollard could have constructed a documentary solely concerning *Two Centuries*. The exhibit is so rich in breathtaking works by still generally unknown black artists, as evidenced by the film’s sumptuous montages of the pieces. Pollard, however, ambitiously opted to expand the film’s scope to include contemporary artists who could further speak to the event’s legacy.

He interviewed Carrie Mae Weems, Hank Willis Thomas, Jordan Casteel, Faith Ringgold and Amy Serrano in New York City. Then traveled to Maine to meet with David Driskell. Flew to Chicago for Kerry James Marshall and Theaster Gates, then to Atlanta to see Radcliffe Bailey, Los Angeles for Betye Saar and her daughter Alison Saar, and finally to San Francisco to speak with Richard Mayhew and Mary Lovelace O’Neal. These inclusions allowed

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Pollard to flex Black Art: In the Absence of Light into a memorialization of Two Centuries while investigating the present landscape in the art world for African American artists.



Image: David Driskell. Photograph: HBO

Pollard, for instance, nimbly critiques gatekeeping white critics and curators by first spotlighting the 1969 exhibition Harlem on My Mind. The curation led by Thomas Hoving included very little input from black voices, and took an unsettlingly anthropological approach to highlighting the history of Harlem, resulting in protests surrounding the Met. Later while reviewing Two Centuries, white critics such as the New York Times writer Hilton Kramer bewilderingly asked: “Black Art or Merely Social History?” “The question used to be ‘What critics write anything about black art?’ It was such a rare occurrence. Then it became, ‘They really don’t know what they’re talking about when they do.’ That’s not universal, but there were a lot of things that they missed,” explains the conceptual artist Fred Wilson, who is featured in the documentary.

The lexicon to critique black art partly stems from a critical question posed by the artist Norman Lewis: is there a black aesthetic? “The notion of a black aesthetic was something that was very important in the 60s and 70s coming out of the civil rights struggle and the black power movement,” says Pollard. In Black Art: In the Absence of Light the varying textures of that aesthetic are put on full display. From Kara Walker’s provocative black cut-paper silhouettes to Kerry James Marshall’s emphatically black-painted figures to Theaster Gates’s evocative sculptures composed of clay, tar and reclaimed building materials.

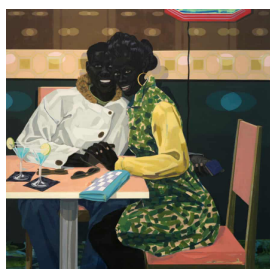


Image: Untitled (Club Couple), Kerry James Marshall, 2014. Photograph: HBO

“The next iteration of the discourse that the film could engender is thinking about the idea of diaspora. For example, I was very much influenced by the transatlantic. Meaning someone like Isaac Julien or the late, great Stuart Hall. They had a much more nuanced understanding of say blackness, if you will, or queerness, in terms of gender,” clarifies the artist Lyle Ashton Harris. His arresting series of black-and-white photographic prints, Constructs, generated acclaim and rebuke from critics in the Thelma Golden-curated Black Male exhibition, which is featured in Pollard’s film. “Initially as someone who was young at the time, it was challenging to have this amazing yet vitriolic response. Not only with racism from the art world toward Thelma, the Whitney, etc but also the critique of the community, whether that’s the Whitney or the west coast.”

Black Art: In the Absence of Light demonstrates how representation in its multiplicity is distinctly empowering. Take Kerry James Marshall’s wide-eyed enthusiasm when relaying how, at 21 years old, he attended Two Centuries. “The scope of the show, the amount of work that was available that you’d only seen in books before. For an artist ... seeing the real thing matters a lot,” relates Marshall. Or how Pollard’s film opens with the erudite Driskell appearing in a cream-colored suit on national television with Tom Brokaw to eloquently discuss the aims



of his exhibition. The moment is twofold: Driskell is sharing the inherent representation at the heart of Two Centuries while being a black man speaking to a wider audience on The Today Show. Both proliferate the consciousness of black people in different, critical ways.

Image: Insurrection (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On), Kara Walker, 2000. Photograph: HBO

Pollard also carves out sections to underscore Faith Ringgold’s feminist artistic struggle to relate the importance of female artists, and to make known the importance of herself, even in the face of the male-dominated power

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structure prevalent in the art world of the 1960s. He also follows Richard Mayhew, Driskell, Radcliffe Bailey and Gates into their studios to capture them at work. “For me, it really opens the film up so you’re not just listening to them talk about their work, but you’re seeing them at work, which is very important,” says Pollard. Seeing black artists mine their craft is as substantial as when a little girl sees Amy Sherald’s Michelle Obama portrait or a little black boy comes into contact with Kehinde Wiley’s Barack Obama or when they see Marshall’s casual paintings set in barbershops and barbecues.

Pollard also relates the significance of black patronage by featuring avid celebrity collectors to postulate about the oncoming gold rush of black art. “There have been generations of Afro-American collectors, for example, Clarence Otis, the former CEO of Darden restaurants. He and his wife Jacqui, have put together an extraordinary collection,” explains Ashton Harris. “Even when he didn’t have money, Driscoll as a young man started buying art. If someone watches this film and sees Swizz Beatz is collecting art, it may motivate them to want to go out and collect,” shares Pollard.

While once black creatives struggled to break into the mainstream, now museums are working to acquire works and add black members to their boards. This trend, however, isn’t totally novel. “This has happened more than once. It happened in the 1940s after the war. Then it went back to the normal disappearing act of black artists. Then it returned in the 1970s for a brief moment. People became interested in African American art because of the black power movement,” notes Wilson. “This current situation has gone much deeper than before. Every institution that I know is being very self-reflective. They are really trying to catch up.”

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Pollard himself, who witnessed the first black cinematic wave, and is now seeing another, knows the cyclical nature of representation in the arts. “All of a sudden you had *Boyz n the Hood*, *Straight Out of Brooklyn* and *Juice*. And then we didn’t see it any more. But now it’s come back again. Now you’ve got Ava [DuVernay] and Regina [King],” he observes. “But I’m too cynical to believe that it’s just going to stabilize. It doesn’t work like that.”

In some ways, the documentary is not only a celebration of how far black art exhibitions have come since Driskell’s *Two Centuries*, it’s also an insurance policy in case this inclusive environment doesn’t stabilize. In case the wider world retracts into the familiar pattern of exclusion. And while there will always be incubators like the Studio Museum in Harlem, independent black-owned galleries, and Barack and Michelle Obama’s striking portraits hanging in the National Portrait Gallery – the duty is still incumbent upon conservationists like Driskell and Pollard to edify the already hard-won victories. “The only thing you had after the *Two Centuries of Black American Art* appeared at the museums in Los Angeles and toured in Dallas and Atlanta, and then came to Brooklyn, was the catalog,” explains Pollard. “Now you have not just a catalog, but a documentary that speaks to the lasting legacy of David Driskell and the importance of his work. And how it’s absolutely important now.”