

HYPERALLERGIC

The LA Artists Who Advanced Black Stories Through Art-Making

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The network of artists and collectors who were pulled into John T. Riddle's orbit is the focus of an exhibition at the Craft Contemporary.



Timothy Washington, "Love Thy Neighbor" (1968-69), metal, wood, nails.

LOS ANGELES — The artist John T. Riddle, Jr. just wanted to be an abstract painter before reading *Seize the Time*, a 1970 book by Black Panther Party co-founder Bobby Seale. Having spent nine years putting himself through night school to earn a degree in art education, Riddle was preparing for a career as an artist when the book shook him to his core. "Here's a black person who I respected saying that what I did wasn't worth anything," Riddle said in a 1992 interview. "Unless it advances social consciousness and promotes black development and all that — that then it has value."

Unable to justify practicing art for art's sake, Riddle went on to produce a body of work encompassing both



abstract forms and histories of Black rebellion. Some of his early works emerged from the wreckage of the 1965 Watts Rebellion, transforming charred or discarded objects into assemblage pieces that evoke both the riots' physical rage and world-making possibilities. In the aftermath of urban rebellion, Riddle was one of several Black artists who took interest in sifting through the ruins for objects to be repurposed into art. Some of these artists, like John Outterbridge and Noah Purifoy, were his colleagues and mentors.

The network of artists and collectors who were pulled into John Riddle's orbit is the focus of *The RIDDLE Effect*, an exhibition at the Craft Contemporary that brings together works by Riddle alongside those of his close peers and former students. Curated by Jill Moniz, head curator of the California African American Museum, the show demonstrates the degree to which Riddle took to heart the advancement of Black people through his art-making as well as his role as a lifelong educator and mentor to younger artists.

John T. Riddle, Jr. was born in 1933 to a family with deep roots in Los Angeles. His father, John Riddle, Sr. helped design and build homes alongside the architect Paul Revere Williams, whose private residential architecture still dot the city's historic neighborhoods. Helen Wheeler, his mother, was the first African American woman to graduate from the University of Southern California Law School. A stint in the Air Force from 1953 to 1957 left Riddle feeling disillusioned about becoming a pilot after experiencing racist discrimination that limited Black servicemen to food service and cleaning jobs. Nearly a decade later, he earned an art education degree and became a ceramics teacher at Los Angeles and Beverly Hills high schools, eventually earning a master's degree in fine art in 1973.

Mark Steven Greenfield was Riddle's student at Los Angeles High, and would follow in his teacher's footsteps by becoming an artist. A reproduction of Greenfield's portrait of John Riddle is displayed at the start of the exhibition, a psychedelic watercolor in which the artist is at work in his studio, goggles over his head, and welding tool in hand. A ceramic work by Greenfield from 1968, when he was about 17 years old, is displayed alongside two works by his former teacher. These works reflect the political turmoil of their time: one ceramic work by Riddle depicts the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing in 1963 while Greenfield's neon-green ceramic piece resembles a tear gas canister likely used by police against political demonstrators.

Riddle's sense of political irony and critique are shared by another former pupil in the exhibit, the artist Joe Sims who passed away this year. The irreverently titled "America's Problem Solver," an assemblage piece by Riddle from 1970, combines pieces of metal to form the shape of a rifle scope or gun barrel. Nearby, an artwork by Sims, "American Support System," precariously balances a set of crutches and an American flag, possibly a reference to the nation's broken healthcare system or its military that produces generations of psychologically and physically wounded soldiers.

Another one of Riddle's former students at Los Angeles High, artist Bret Price, oversaw the restoration of Riddle's 1968–69 sculpture "Fallen Man," also on view at the exhibit. The large-scale work represents an abstract figure falling head first with arms and legs twisted in an unnatural motion. The title and date of the piece suggest the work could be in reference to the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert F. Kennedy. Today, the piece takes on another unsettling resonance — the image of a man falling from the World Trade Center during the September 11 attacks in New York City.

There are other artworks by teachers and artists who ran in the same circles as Riddle. Artists like Timothy



Washington and John Outterbridge shared Riddle's love of using found objects, albeit to different effect and purpose. Outterbridge's hulking iron and wood piece "Vertical" resembles a piece of rusting cargo ship, while Washington's "Love Thy Neighbor" takes on a more figurative, otherworldly form. The RIDDLE Effect also includes later works from Riddle's career, including a series of mixed media collage works depicting not just the dehumanizing treatment of African people as commodities during the transatlantic slave trade, but also the resistance and ingenuity of Africans through centuries of enslavement and forced migration to the Americas.

Like the painter Charles White who was a fellow teacher at Otis Art Institute (now Otis College of Art and Design), John Riddle's influence as both an artist and educator helped pave the way for younger generations of Black artists, many of whom are represented in The RIDDLE Effect, to pursue a life of art making when such a choice might not have been accessible or even imaginable for them. As an emerging artist who had his first solo show at Brockman Gallery in 1968, Riddle relied on a network of Black artists and collectors, an art world that flourished without the recognition and support of White institutions, to help shape his practice and career.

Today, Riddle's generation of artists are part of museum shows and blue chip galleries. Across town from the Craft Contemporary, there's a group retrospective of late-career Black artists at the Broad Museum and a solo show at Hauser & Wirth of David Hammons — one of Riddle's colleagues who used to joke about being the only Black artist working in Los Angeles when all of his peers were hanging out at Brockman Gallery. While this might seem to portend a major cultural shift in which Black artists finally get the recognition they deserve, The RIDDLE Effect makes the case that the intergenerational efforts of educators and mentors like John Riddle are what is needed to help the next generation of Black artists build their own communities and institutions as well as thrive on their own terms.

The RIDDLE Effect continues at the Craft Contemporary (5814 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles) through September 8. The exhibition was curated by jill moniz.