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*Love Thy Neighbor: Timothy Washington and the Black Assemblage Art Movement*

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January, 24 2014



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“Love Thy Neighbor,” opening on Saturday, January 25 at the Craft & Folk Art Museum, is the first solo museum exhibition of Leimert Park artist Timothy Washington. This long overdue solo show is a watershed event for Washington, a Chouinard Art School graduate, classically trained in painting, drawing and sculpture, who has been a part of numerous group shows over the last 40 years but has never had his own solo museum exhibition. This week L.A. Letters pays tribute to Washington, and briefly highlights the groundbreaking Black assemblage art movement that came to rise within Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s.

Timothy Washington was born in 1946 and grew up in South Los Angeles. He spent his childhood collecting discarded objects and drawing influence from Simon Rodia's Watts Towers. After graduating from Dorsey High School, he earned a scholarship to Chouinard Art Institute, where he received his B.F.A. in 1969. Chouinard later merged with Cal Arts in Valencia, but for several decades it was near MacArthur Park when the area was known for galleries, architects, and artist



studios on streets like Seventh or Wilshire. Washington flourished in Chouinard's lively environment; there are myths that Langer's Delicatessen on Alvarado would stay open to the wee hours filled with art students. Otis Art College was also in the neighborhood before it moved to Westchester in the 1980s. The area near MacArthur Park has a long history with the arts.

Washington was one of the youngest participants in the canon of Los Angeles' influential Black assemblage artists like David Hammons, Betye Saar, John Outerbridge, and Noah Purifoy. As contemporaries of the the L.A. Rebellion school of filmmakers, Horace Tapscott's Pan African People's Arkestra, and the Watts Tower Arts Center, among many other arts organizations, these artists "began to redefine black consciousness in art," writes scholar Daniel Widener. Washington is especially known for his folk art assemblage work, associated with Black heritage and spirituality.

Washington came up under giants like Noah Purifoy and John Outerbridge. Both had famously led students and artists out into the streets to pull burnt rubble and twisted metal from the aftermath of the 1965 Watts Riots. A groundswell picked up around the Watts Towers and 103rd Street. Washington was in perfect propinquity with the scene, as a student at Chouinard. Sooner than later he was in the company of his early heroes.

Besides the Watts Towers Arts Center, they gathered at the Brockman Gallery in Leimert Park. Washington exhibited in both the Brockman and Gallery 32, a groundbreaking gallery near MacArthur Park known for featuring Black artists in the late 1960s and 1970s. Scholar Paul Von Blum notes that Gallery 32 is also where Emory Douglas, artist and the Black Panther minister of culture, had a large gallery exhibition in 1969.

Washington was featured at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) in 1971 in the museum's first contemporary exhibition of Black artists. The show, "Three Graphic Artists: Charles White, David Hammons, Timothy Washington," featured his mixed media drypoint works. The same year, he was also the subject of an Emmy Award-winning documentary for NBC, called "Renaissance in Black: Two Artists' Lives."

Von Blum discusses the assemblage and collage movement in his essay on Black Art in Los Angeles, titled "Before and After Watts," in a 2010 anthology published by the New York University Press, called "Black Los Angeles." The longtime UCLA professor, and author of several books on African American artists in Los Angeles, gives a detailed backstory on the 1960s and 1970s period, in which Washington came up. Von Blum covers the Brockman Gallery, Gallery 32, and lesser known stories, like collaborations between the Blacks Arts Council, National Council of Jewish Women, the Westside Jewish Community Center, and "how the social activism of the post-Watts era stimulated a deeper intellectual consciousness about black art and solidified growing solidarity and networking among Los Angeles area black artists."

Von Blum's essay covers the period in which Watts Writers Workshop and Horace Tapscott were very active. The following years were fruitful for the L.A. Rebellion filmmakers, including a young Ben Caldwell. The spirit of taking urban decay and turning it into something beautiful was one of the major artistic themes of the period. The repurposing of objects has always been a form of making something new, "to cement symbolic found objects into place."

Richard Candida Smith, writing about the Assemblage Artists in an essay about Washington's contemporary Betye Saar, describes how these artists were empowering themselves by repurposing. Smith writes, "Recycling found objects into art denied that the usefulness of things could be limited by the purposes for which they were made."

Washington followed this principle early in his career when he was given an assignment in Chouinard to make a very personal artwork on the very same day he received notice that he was reclassified as 1A military status. This meant he could be drafted and sent to Vietnam at any point in time. Following this, "Washington knew that he wanted to work on a substance that was cold and hard, reflecting his feelings about going to war." Working with engraved metal did the job for his famous piece, "1A."



*Courtesy of the Craft & Folk Art Museum*

After being featured at LACMA at 25, Washington worked many years as a studio set painter for NBC and Disney, and continued to steadily produce art. As a family man, Washington took set painting work in the same manner as a studio musician, to make ends meet. In 1989 he was one of a select few featured in a major retrospective of influential Black Artists at the California African American Museum. He was also featured there in 2009. He's sold pieces to private collections and had his share of group shows, but this opening represents him getting his just due after a 45-year career.

For those that have seen "Still Bill" the documentary on Bill Withers, Washington is an artist cut from the same cloth as Withers. Both reflect a no nonsense personal spirituality and unwavering vision that makes each a singular artist of uncompromising power. Never one for fame or politics, Washington chose steady work over the roller coaster financial reality that afflicts freelance artists.

Now that he has retired, he is creating more art than ever. The timing is excellent to show a retrospective of his long



prolific career. LACMA and the California African American Museum have both loaned pieces from their collections for the show. The Craft & Folk Art Museum is the perfect place for Washington's opening, because they "aim to overturn expectations about what constitutes craft & folk art and to pay homage to the power of the handmade object."

The assemblages include sculptural wall works with wheels, tape measures, gears, thermometers, automotive parts, bells, macramé, spoons, chopsticks, and washboards, among a thousand other found objects gracefully juxtaposed. Guided by intuition, Washington assembles materials to make roadmaps and figurative sculpture, addressing the manipulation of space and the politics of found objects, and relations within the power structure. Though his work has been shaped by social upheaval of the post-Civil Rights Era, his work is grounded in a joyfulness zeitgeist, comparable to the music of Pharoah Sanders. An uplifting spirit guides his work with playful touches that add humor as well.

In 2013 he created the work "Sitting Duck," in reference to the shooting of Trayvon Martin. The form of a washboard was chosen "to put forward the hope that the truth would 'come out in the wash.'" Washington has also recently made a series of spoon portraits that will be on display. He wanted to make affordable art that could be portable. Pieces like "Several Faces, One Race" convey his tropes of love, compassion and unity. The humanity and love in his work is an overriding theme.

Washington's solo museum exhibition accomplishes numerous purposes in one event. Executive Director of the Craft and Folk Art Museum, Suzanne Isken, says, "Tim Washington is an important Los Angeles artist who has not fit the agenda of many of the larger arts institutions in Southern California, but his work corresponds well with our mission." Aside from carrying on the important work of the assemblage art movement, Washington's warmth is palpable. His use of embedded objects transmits hope and kindness in a time we need it more than ever.

The title of the show "Love Thy Neighbor" is from his 1968 sculpture of an embracing figure emitting unconditional love and kindness. Congratulations to Timothy Washington for his long overdue solo museum exhibition, and vast respect to him and his long career as a multimedia artistic giant in the geography of L.A. Letters.