



## African-American and African Diaspora Art

by Carla Williams

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Gay and lesbian representation in the visual arts created by people of the African Diaspora emerged most clearly in the late twentieth century as artists began to explore issues specific to gender and sexuality. Artists attracted to members of their own sex certainly existed all along, but prior to the late twentieth century their visibility was not nearly as apparent and their work did not deal explicitly with themes relating to their sexuality.

For example, the American expatriate nineteenth-century sculptor Mary Edmonia Lewis (1845-1890) was probably a lesbian and Harlem Renaissance-era sculptor James Richmond Barthé (1901-1989) was almost certainly gay, but neither Lewis nor Barthé publicly declared their homosexuality.

Drawing on a long tradition of autobiography in African-American history, however, contemporary artists rely heavily on self-portraiture, which almost necessarily involves the exploration of sexual and affectional issues. Perhaps because African-American culture has traditionally been unaccepting of homosexuality, many artists of color remain "closeted" longer than their counterparts in the majority white culture. Thus, many of these artists find themselves dealing with issues of external and internal homophobia as well as external and internal racism.

At the same time, however, much of the contemporary work incorporates desire and longing, in both sexual relations and in representing the self, as well as in demanding representation of lives and sexualities that are otherwise ignored or suppressed. As the focus of that desire, the body figures prominently in these representations.

For many artists, the simple act of representing the self in visual form becomes a radical declarative act; photography thus has been a primary medium through which to achieve visibility because the act of photographing validates the subject depicted. For both the artist and the viewer the artmaking process often functions as a form of therapy as wounds are opened and healed through the power of visualization.

Furthermore, reclaiming the historical imagery that every Diaspora artist shares is also an essential element in the empowerment of the gay or lesbian artist of African descent. In doing so, artists can embrace or reject stereotypes based on their own revaluation of images that have previously been imposed upon them. On the other hand, not every gay or lesbian artist of the African Diaspora addresses sexuality and gender issues in their work.

### Early Figures

Mary Edmonia Lewis, an African-American expatriate who lived and worked in Rome in the 1860s and 1870s, is noted primarily for her marble busts, executed in a neo-classical style, of American abolitionists and Transcendentalists, as well as sculptures of allegorical and literary subjects.



*The Negro Looks Ahead*  
by James Richmond  
Barthé.  
Northwestern University  
Library Special  
Collections.

James Richmond Barthé, the only Harlem Renaissance artist to exploit the black male nude for its political and erotic significance, is particularly noted for his images of dancing male and female figures. His work reveals both a mastery of traditional techniques and a deep interest in primitivism.

Also associated with the Harlem Renaissance was a friend and probable lover of Barthé, Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987). He was undoubtedly the most openly gay African-American artist of his time. In the 1920s and 1930s, he contributed homoerotic artwork and stories to a number of publications. His famous story, "Smoke, Lilies, and Jade" (1926), which may be the first depiction of homosexual and bisexual desire in African-American fiction, was accompanied by his illustrations when it appeared in the only published number of the literary quarterly *Fire!!*

### **Artists of Color in England**

In the 1980s England emerged as a hotbed of artistic activity for artists of color, especially individuals hailing from the West African country of Nigeria, a former British colony that has been self-governing only since 1960. Nigeria has contributed an extraordinary number of curators and artists (some of Nigerian descent rather than Nigerian-born) to the contemporary arts dialogue in England and North America, and many of them deal with gender- and sexuality-related issues.

Among these are artist and art historian Olu Oguibe (b. 1964) and curator and editor Okwui Enwezor (b. 1963), co-editors (with Salah M. Hassan) of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*; mixed media artist Yinka Shonibare (b. 1962); painter Chris Ofili (b. 1968); photographer and installation artist Oladélé Bamgboye (b. 1963); and gay photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode (1955-1989).

Part of the reason for this artistic emergence are the writings of prominent gay male theorists such as Kobena Mercer (b. 1960) and filmmaker Isaac Julien (b. 1960), who, in addition to writing about artists of African descent, have written extensively on the representation of Africans and African Americans by gay white artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe.

Sunil Gupta (b. 1953), a gay Canadian, India-born photographer considered "black" in his adopted Britain, focuses both his images and writings on the black, often African, male body. He is a member of Autograph, the Association of Black British Photographers, which was founded in London in 1988 to provide a forum and venue for photographic artists in Britain of Caribbean, African, and South Asian origin.

Among the early (and current) members of Autograph whose work has been heavily promoted and published by the organization are, in addition to Gupta, gay photographers Ajamu (b. 1963) and co-founder Rotimi Fani-Kayode; lesbian photographer Ingrid Pollard (b. 1953); and gay American photographer Lyle Ashton Harris (b. 1965).

Gay British filmmaker Steve McQueen (b. 1969) emerged in the late 1980s with films exploring issues of displacement and exile. The journal *Ten.8*, published in Birmingham, England, has also been a rich source of discussion regarding sexual and gender identity.

Because many black British artists are not native-born or are first generation Britons, their work often addresses questions of both national and sexual identities. Ajamu's work, for example, articulates the dualities that black gay men experience. "Being a black queer photographer in England is akin to surviving in enemy territory," the artist wrote in 1998. "My mission is to create radical, challenging and innovative work that cuts through the bullshit surrounding the unsatisfactory/dishonest way that sex/sexuality and those with culturally forbidden lives/desires are represented (or hidden) within British society."

Rotimi Fani-Kayode, from a family of Yoruba priests, explored his sexuality through intimate self-portraits and portraits of male friends in which the body becomes both icon and metaphor for cultural displacement, spirituality, and sexuality.

Ingrid Pollard's work explores environmental racism, class, gender, and lesbianism in subjects ranging from self-portraits positioning the black woman's body in the traditional English landscape and diaristic tableaux about coming out to architectural details in cyanotype.

Another black lesbian artist in Britain is Jacqui Duckworth (b. 19??), a filmmaker whose work focuses on her battle with multiple sclerosis. She compares her "coming out" as a lesbian with "coming out" as a person living with a disease.

### **African-American Gay Male Artists**

Several gay and lesbian African-American artists have also achieved recognition; and, as in England, artists incorporating photographic imagery are at the forefront. Some artists employ explicit gay male imagery while others are more subtle in explorations of their sexuality.

Among the best known African-American artists is filmmaker Marlon Riggs (1957-1994), whose *Tongues Untied* (1989) is a controversial yet groundbreaking representation of black gay sexuality. Riggs' other films, such as *Ethnic Notions* (1987), *Color Adjustments* (1991), and *Black Is . . . Black Ain't* (1995), explore the history of race and ethnicity in the United States.

Some artists use self-portraiture to explore issues of the representation of gender and sexuality in the media and popular culture. New York-based Iké Udé is an important black presence as an artist, writer, and publisher of *aRUDE* magazine, which focuses on art, fashion and culture. He is not gay or bisexual, but his style might be described as "Victorian dandy" and is deeply influenced by African gender-role playing.

For his 1996 "Cover Girl" series, Udé recreated a series of popular magazine covers, from *Town and Country*, *Time*, *Ebony*, *Vogue*, and others, using self-portraits not only to subvert the dominant definitions of male and female roles but also to take shots at specific figures within the culture, such as Michael Jackson and Mike Tyson. In collaboration with Lyle Ashton Harris, Udé has also produced evocative works that challenge gender roles in popular culture and art history.

In his own self-portraits, Harris constructs a gay narrative through fantasy and cross-dressing. Harris' sexually explicit self-portraits are confrontational, calling attention to the exclusion of such images from the dominant media. Harris also collaborates with his brother, gay filmmaker Thomas Allen Harris (b. 1962).

Their 1994 triptych "Brotherhood, Crossroads, Etcetera" depicts the nude brothers embracing while holding guns and kissing while Thomas points a gun at Lyle's chest. The work explores notions of intimacy--not necessarily sexuality--between black males. "The images . . . speak to the ambivalence around two people who love each other critically," explains Lyle, "yet have dealt with issues of mirroring, envy and competition. This is nothing new for we are all familiar with the Cain and Abel biblical narrative."

Other artists have taken a more documentary approach to represent communities. For example, a portrait series by Vincent Alan W. (1960-1996), "Queens Without a Country: Afro-American Homosexuals Who Have Changed the Face of Berlin" (1986-1987), depicts black expatriate gay men in Europe. Previously, W. worked primarily in New York, where he photographed gay black life. The straightforward and honest Berlin images are coupled with the subjects' own words and shed light on a marginalized group as they speak of their desires, aspirations, and frustrations.

Still other artists have reclaimed their own family images and histories in the quest for identity. Darrel Ellis (1958-1992), a New York-based mixed media artist, started out making self-portraits until he discovered a cache of photographs his father, Thomas Ellis, had made in the 1950s. Ellis reworked them, using painting and drawing to explore identity within the family dynamic and to rewrite the familial narrative as a kind of self-therapy.

Relatedly, multimedia artist Glenn Ligon (b. 1960) also uses the family album format. In one series, he juxtaposes his own family photographs with amateur gay male pornographic images. He intersperses these disparate images literally to insert the body of the gay male into family history.

For the 1993 Whitney Museum Biennial exhibition, Ligon created "Notes on the Margin of the 'Black Book'" (1991-1993) in direct response to Robert Mapplethorpe's celebrated yet controversial photographs of the black male body.

Like Ellis, photographer Christian Walker (b. 1954), originally from Atlanta, also alters the surface of his photographic prints, made from old family images, using oil, charcoal, and pigments. Walker's work deals with miscegenation, race relations, and the family dynamic rather than his own sexuality.

### **African-American Lesbian Artists**

Although black lesbian visual artists are a diverse group, it nevertheless remains difficult to find women artists who identify as both lesbian or bisexual and of African descent. Still, a number of African-American lesbian photographers and filmmakers have emerged in the last twenty years. While their work is less well known and well documented than that of their male counterparts, they also explore themes of community, family, and sexuality, often through representations of the self.

Like their male counterparts, lesbian artists have also had articulate writers and critics to advance the discussion surrounding their images. While black lesbian novelist and poet Jewelle Gomez wrote about images of her family and of black women in 1987 without addressing lesbian identity, in 1995 critic Jackie Goldsby located black lesbian desire in Vanessa Williams' *Penthouse* magazine pictorial, which featured her engaging in simulated sex with another woman. Goldsby's essay points out the persistent invisibility of the black lesbian body as virtually none of the sensationalistic press accounts of the publication of the images actually addressed the lesbian content of the photographs.

Using the documentary approach to break down that invisibility, San Franciscan Jean Weisinger (b. 1954) makes self-portraits as well as portraits of women and the lesbian community. In 1996 Aunt Lute Press published a calendar of her portraits of women authors, many of them women of color and/or lesbians.

The varied photojournalistic work of photographer and curator Valeria "Mikki" Ferrill (b. 1937) has focused on everything from black cowboys to "Dykes on Bikes" at the Gay Pride parade in San Francisco, giving faces to both racial and sexual communities that are little known in mainstream society.

Using representational imagery but in a much more interpretive vein is H. Lynn Keller (b. 1951), a San Francisco-based photographer and filmmaker whose work addresses identity, politics, and spirituality.

Likewise, Carla Williams (b. 1965), a Santa Fe-based artist, uses self-portraits to investigate representations of the black female body throughout photographic history. She positions herself as both photographer and subject to break down the separation between the object and the viewer's gaze. In addition, Williams' website, [www.carlagirl.net](http://www.carlagirl.net), functions as a source of information about black artists (especially women artists) and gay and lesbian artists to help facilitate access to resource materials.

Working in the tradition of British photographer Jo Spence who, along with lesbian photographer Rosy Martin, pioneered the practice of phototherapy, African/Caribbean/Canadian artist Karen Augustine (b. 19??) deals explicitly with sexual abuse and black women's mental health in her photo/text mixed media works. "Drawing from my own experience, I noticed various dynamics within the abuser/abused relationship," Augustine writes in a self-interview. "I couldn't deny the role my sexuality, class, gender and race played in this straight, white man's need to express his power over me." Augustine also writes about black women's sexuality and art.

African-American lesbian filmmakers Jocelyn Taylor (b. 19??), Yvonne Welbon (b. 1962), and Cheryl Dunye (b. 1966) have also garnered much attention in recent years for their work regarding black lesbian identity. Dunye's *Watermelon Woman* (1996), in which a black lesbian is determined to restore not only a name but a lesbian history to a forgotten film actress once billed only as "Watermelon Woman," mirrors the filmmaker's own attempt to give an eloquent cinematic voice to black lesbian lives.

## Conclusion

The gay, lesbian, and bisexual artists of the African Diaspora largely work in representational media. Their work explores race and sexuality, although it is by no means limited to such subjects. Indeed, their increased visibility--their openness as gay or lesbian and of African descent--gives them freedom to explore every aspect of their complex lives and worlds.

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### **About the Author**

**Carla Williams** is a writer and photographer from Los Angeles, who lives and works in Santa Fe. Her writings and images can be found on her website at [www.carlagirl.net](http://www.carlagirl.net).