

July 31, 2021

Black Female Artists Who Got Their Start in 1960s and 70s are Focus of Two Group Exhibitions in New York

by VICTORIA L. VALENTINE on Jul 31, 2021 · 7:58 pm

ACTIVE IN THE 1960S AND 70S, Black women artists had to deal with politics, even if their work wasn't overtly political. Some of the most prominent figures from the time, including **Vivian Browne**, **Emma Amos**, **Camille Billops**, **Suzanne Jackson**, **Senga Nengudi**, and **Betye Saar**, rallied with their peers, taking stands and speaking up for themselves.

The artists established platforms, organizations, and spaces for discussing and showcasing their work; protested the lack of representation of Black artists in major museums; raised issues specific to Black women artists when their white female so-called allies ignored their concerns; and when they were not given the same attention as Black male artists, created opportunities of their own.



Installation view of "You've Come A Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show," Ortuzar Projects, New York, N.Y. (June 8–July 31, 2021). Shown, in foreground, SUZANNE JACKSON, "Rag-to-Wobble," 2020. | Courtesy Ortuzar Projects

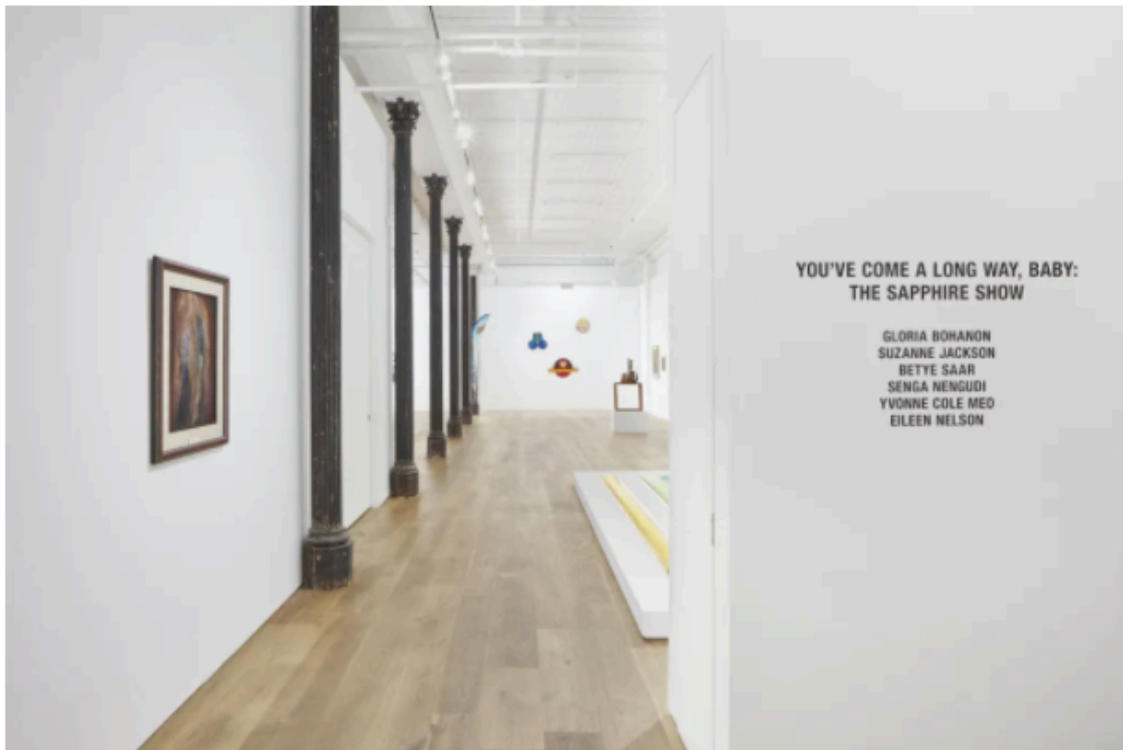
Two New York galleries are staging group exhibitions dedicated to showcasing their work and shedding light on their stories. The shows present an extraordinary legacy of Black women artists based in New York and Los Angeles, who starting early in their careers, through their organizing, collaboration, leadership, and perseverance, created pathways for themselves and generations of artists to come.

"Friends and Agitators: Emma Amos, Camille Billops, Vivian Browne and May Stevens, 1965-1993" is on view at Ryan Lee Gallery in Chelsea. The exhibition brings together the work of the four late New York artists who worked out of lofts in Soho and helped build the art scene in the neighborhood. As the title of the show makes clear and the gallery notes, the artists "shared a staunch activist spirit that shaped their careers and their legacies."

In Tribeca, Ortuzar Projects is presenting "You've Come A Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show." The exhibition pays homage to a landmark show in Los Angeles that was open for five days over the Fourth of July weekend in 1970. When a corporate-backed exhibition of Black artists invited only one female artist to participate, women artists came together in quick succession to put on the Sapphire Show. Founded by artist **Suzanne Jackson**, Gallery 32 served as the venue.

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More than 50 years later, "You've Come A Long Way, Baby" features works by the six artists in the original Sapphire Show: Jackson, **Gloria Bohanon** (1939-2008), **Betye Saar**, **Senga Nengudi** (formerly Sue Irons), **Yvonne Cole Meo** (1923-2016), and **Eileen Nelson** (formerly Eileen Abdulrashid).

The exhibition presents 29 paintings, drawings, prints, and sculptures produced between 1966 and 2021. Works on view include "Wood City" (circa 1970s), a sculptural assemblage by Nelson; Jackson's "The American Sampler Painting" (1972) and "Rag-to-Wobble" (2020), a more recent sculptural mixed-media painting free of any support; Bohanon's Love Notes, whimsical, cylindrical mixed-media works on board, from 1980; Cole Meo's "Status Quo" (circa 1965), a mixed media painting on board depicting a series of clinched fists holding paper money, against a color-blocked background; Sengudi's sculptural "water compositions" originally made in 1969-70, with brightly colored, heat-sealed vinyl; and "Auntie & Watermelon" (1973), a mixed-media assemblage by Saar.

Also featured, Saar's "Rainbow Mojo" (1972), which is painted on leather, was included in the landmark touring exhibition "Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power."

The current exhibition marks the first time the group has shown their work together since 1970. The artists were part of a community of Black artists in Los Angeles developing experimental practices, working with found materials and culturally symbolic objects, using their bodies as a medium, and creating in collaboration and through performance.

An experimental space, Jackson operated Gallery 32 from 1969-70. The gallery was in the same orbit as Brockman Gallery and the Watts Towers Arts Center, serving as a nexus for a community of Black artists that centered art, politics, and the struggle for justice.

Jackson hosted poetry readings, musical performances, and fundraisers for the Black Panther Party and the newly formed Black Arts Council, as well as exhibitions with Saar, Emory Douglas, Timothy Washington, and David Hammons, who showed his earliest body prints. The Sapphire Show was followed by a solo exhibition of Cole Meo, before Gallery 32 closed for good.

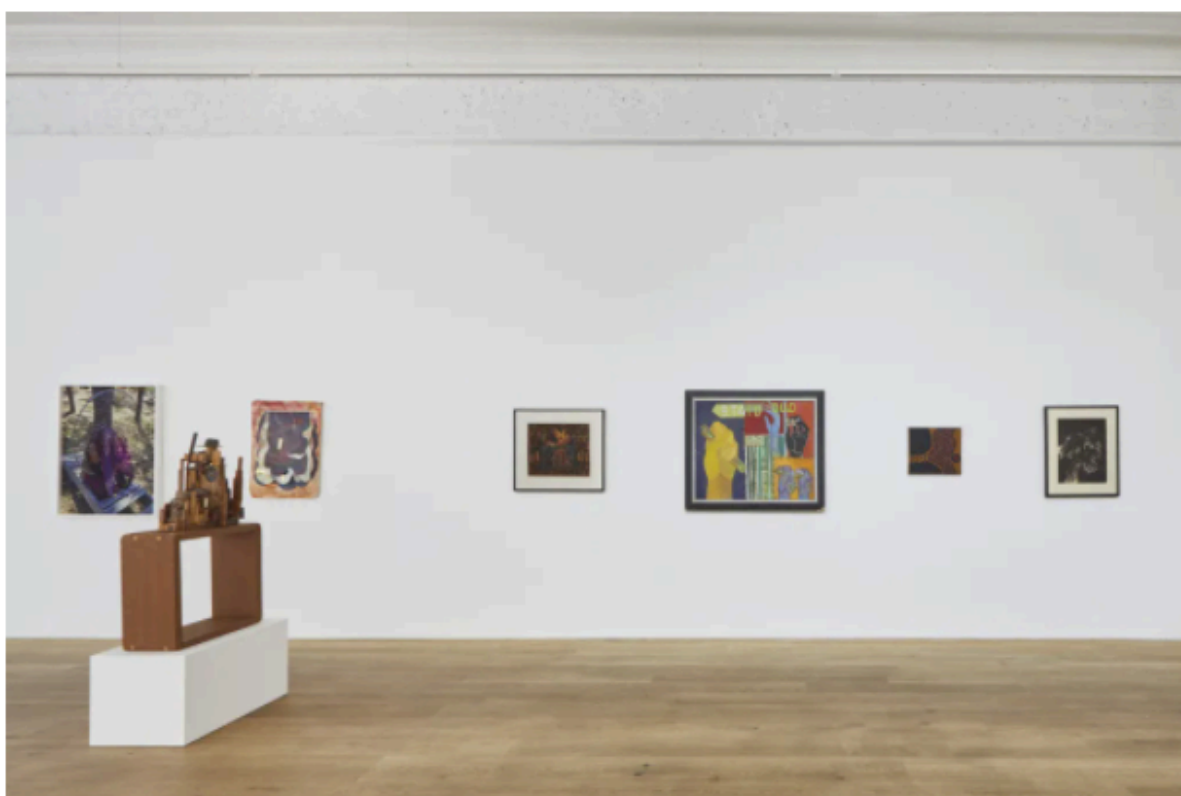
At Ortuzar Projects, where Jackson is represented, the Los Angeles artists are largely presenting conceptual and assemblage art. At Ryan Lee, nearly all of the works by the New York artists are figurative. The selections reflect the stark regional differences in style and aesthetics among Black artists at the time.



SUZANNE JACKSON, "The American Sampler," 1972 (acrylic wash on canvas, 48 x 3/4 x 39 inches / 121.9 x 1.9 x 99.1 cm). | © Suzanne Jackson, Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects



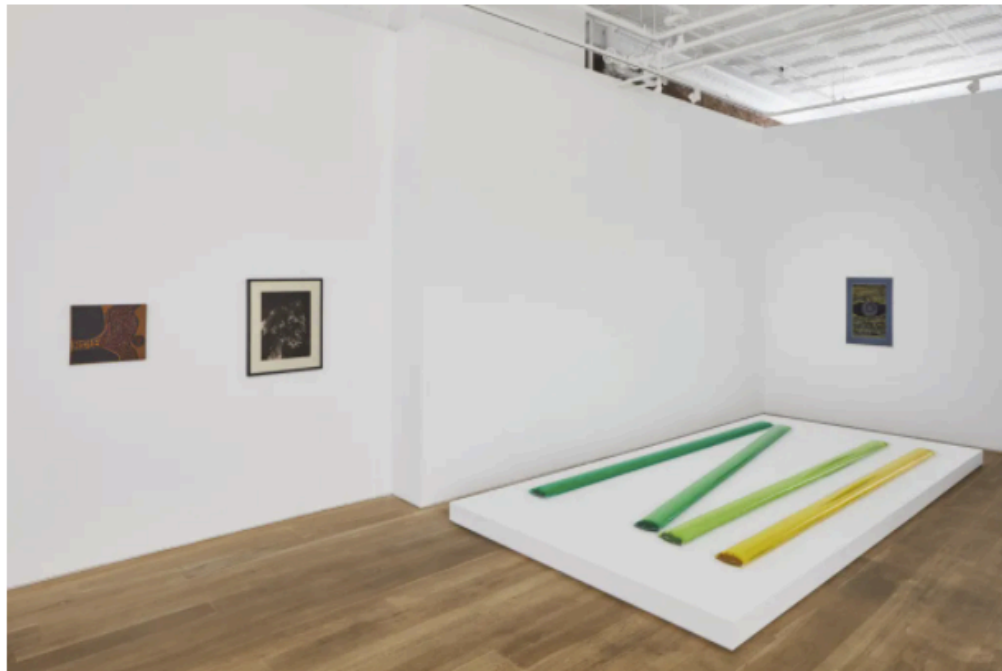
Installation view of Senga Nengudi, "Untitled Water Composition," 1969–70/2021 (heat-sealed vinyl and colored water, 42 x 15 inches / 106.7 x 38.1 cm), Edition of 2/2 + 1 AP. I © Senga Nengudi, Courtesy Ortuzar Projects



Installation view of "You've Come A Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show," Ortuzar Projects, New York, N.Y. (June 8–July 31, 2021). I Courtesy Ortuzar Projects



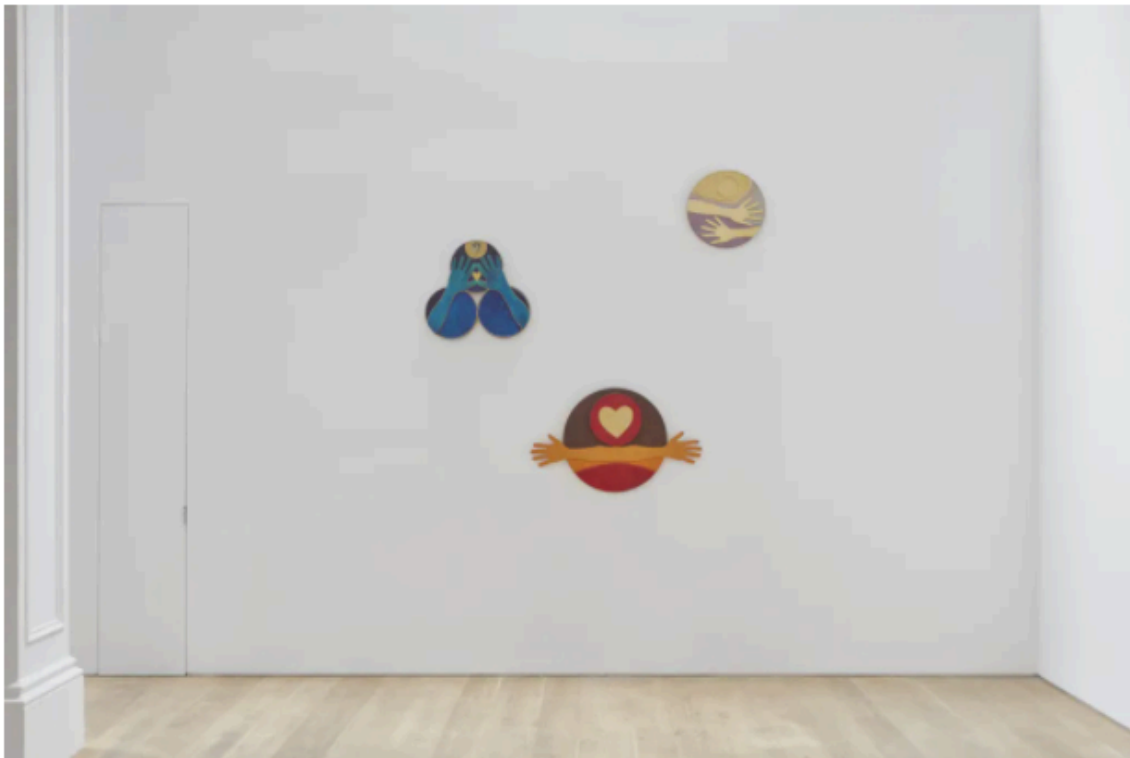
SUZANNE JACKSON, "Rag-to-Wobble," 2020 (acrylic, cotton paint cloth, vintage dress hangers, 86 x 63 with 14 inches variable bulge / 218.4 x 160 with 35.6 cm). | © Suzanne Jackson, Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects



Installation view of "You've Come A Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show," Ortuzar Projects, New York, N.Y. (June 8–July 31, 2021). Shown, SENGA NENGUDI, "Water Composition V," 1969–70/2018 (Heat-sealed vinyl and colored water, Plinth Dimensions: 5 7/8 x 189 x 94 1/2 inches / 15 x 480 x 240 cm), Edition of 2/2 + 1 AP. | Courtesy Ortuzar Projects



BETYE SAAR, "Rainbow Mojo," 1972 (acrylic painting on cut leather, 19 3/4 x 49 3/4 inches / 50.2 x 126.4 cm). | © Betye Saar, Courtesy Ortuzar Projects



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BETYE SAAR, "A Siege of Sirens," 1966 (lithograph on paper, 20 x 15 inches / 50.8 x 38.1 cm), Edition 16/20. | © Betye Saar, Courtesy Ortuzar Projects



The exhibition poster is the only key documentation of the 1970 "Sapphire Show" that remains. The poster was designed by exhibiting artist Eileen Nelson (formerly Eileen Abdurashid) and misspells Betye Saar's last name. The artist's are shown in youthful photographs, ranging from childhood to near adulthood. | Courtesy Suzanne Jackson and Ortuzar Projects

Ortuzar Projects on the title of the exhibition, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show":

This joint (self-) presentation as a multifaceted figure coming of age under the loaded pseudonym, Sapphire, plays satirically against institutionalized exclusion and general social invisibility. The character of Sapphire Stevens appeared in the notorious post-"minstrel" radio broadcast Amos 'n' Andy (1928–60), which later aired on CBS television (1951–54) with Ernestine Wade in the Sapphire role. Under strong pressure from the NAACP, the show was eventually cancelled, and syndicated reruns were pulled after 1966. This key reference in the Sapphire Show hinges on the caricatured stereotype of a clever woman who debunks the harebrained shenanigans of her male peers, with an intelligence also humorously unpalatable to a mainstream (white) audience. The subtitle for the exhibition—You've Come a Long Way, Baby—directly appropriated the slogan for the women's brand of cigarettes sold by Virginia Slims. Considering the background events of the women's liberation movement since the development of the birth control pill, the relatively recent Watts Rebellion (August 1965), and the historical fact of the London-based Virginia Company's introduction of slavery in the American colonies (1619), the tagline reads almost skeptically, as a question of retrospective advancement with which Bohanon, Jackson, Saar, Nengudi, Cole Meo, and Nelson simply—brazenly—identified.