

You've Come A Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show

Gloria Bohanon, Suzanne Jackson, Betye Saar,
Senga Nengudi, Yvonne Cole Meo, Eileen Nelson
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Ortuzar Projects is pleased to present *You've Come A Long Way, Baby*, a historical group exhibition that revisits the *Sapphire Show*, the first survey of African American women artists in Los Angeles and, likely, the United States. This collaborative project was staged over the July Fourth weekend in 1970 at Gallery 32, the experimental space run by Suzanne Jackson from her loft in the Mediterranean Revival Granada Buildings in Los Angeles from 1969 to 1970. Ortuzar Projects' exhibition traces the legacy of the *Sapphire Show* through approximately thirty drawings, paintings, prints, and sculptures made between 1966 and 2021 by the six artists in the original exhibition: Gloria Bohanon, Suzanne Jackson, Betye Saar, Senga Nengudi (formerly Sue Irons), Yvonne Cole Meo, and Eileen Nelson (formerly Eileen Abdulrashid).

Along with the Brockman Gallery and the Watts Towers Arts Center, Gallery 32 was one of few venues in the postwar era run by Black artists active at the fringes of what was considered the Los Angeles art scene. Jackson's non-traditional gallery hosted exhibitions, readings, fundraisers, performances, and intimate conversations about how and what it means to make art. Some of this debate, which often ran late into the night, spilled over from Charles White's drawing class at the nearby Otis Art Institute. Gallery 32 offered the rare opportunity to test those ideas—and art's commitments to the aesthetic, the political, and the social—in practice. The gallery presented David Hammons's earliest body prints, rare visual and sonic artworks by the Black Panther Party's Emory Douglas and Elaine Brown, a group show supporting the newly organized Black Arts Council, and a poetic-musical happening by the Suns of Light Ensemble.

Another such event was the *Sapphire Show*, organized spontaneously in reaction to an exhibition of Black artists, sponsored by the Carnation Company, that had invited only one female contributor. Although scant record remains of this well-meaning corporate project, it was egregious enough to raise the ire of the women artists around Gallery 32. The *Sapphire Show* came together quickly through the combined efforts—and frustration—of the six participating artists.

Without photographic documentation from the era, the Ortuzar Projects exhibition aims to reconstruct the *Sapphire Show* by assembling works produced in the late 1960s and early 1970s, including Bohanon's mystical applied acrylic works (*Rio on My Mind*, c. 1970); Jackson's graphite sketches (*Interlocation*, 1969) and painted effigies (*Not Every Clown Lives at the Circus*, 1967); Saar's mythological work in print (*A Siege of Sirens*, 1966); Nengudi's lustrous, vinyl-sealed fluid (*Untitled Water Composition*, 1969–70); Cole Meo's canvases densely accrued with obscure material (*Forbidden Fruit in Garden of Eden*, 1965); and Nelson's sculptural assemblage seeded with organic amulets (*Wood City*, 1970). The later works on view—such as Jackson's *Rag-to-Wobble*, 2020 and Nengudi's *In My Backyard*, 2020—by turns contradict, transform, or complement the earlier efforts of each artist and those of her peers, which for the first time since 1970, can be seen in juxtaposition here.

This exhibition indexes the period of the *Sapphire Show* and after, revealing resonances and reverberations that have recurred since then. Across space and time—in some cases, more than fifty years—the artworks articulate a plurality of approaches to form, abstraction, line, materiality, and image-making in an explicitly dialectical mode, rooted in friendship and common feeling. One concern collectively broached is the repression of the otherworldly in postwar American life; another is the near total rejection of “Euroethnic” standards in favor of a cultural and aesthetic syncretism that can only be adequately viewed as avant-garde, now, in hindsight.

The primary surviving document from the original *Sapphire Show* is a print of the exhibition poster, which features childhood photos of the six artists ranging from the cradle to the cusp of adulthood. 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.

The *Sapphire Show* bridged the July Fourth holiday weekend, rhyming with the national celebration of Independence Day, between solo shows of Elizabeth Leigh-Taylor and Yvonne Cole Meo, at the conclusion of Gallery 32’s brief but influential run. By together foregrounding their(minority) position as practicing artists, even visionaries, Bohanon, Jackson, Saar, Nengudi, Cole Meo, and Nelson powerfully expressed their agency within a cultural context impervious to their work.

Gloria Bohanon (b. 1939, St. Louis; d. 2008, Los Angeles) taught painting, printmaking and design at Los Angeles City College for thirty years and served as one of the first members on the Los Angeles County Museum of Art’s Black Arts Council.

Yvonne Cole Meo (b. 1923, Seattle; d. 2016, Pasadena) was both a practicing artist and art historian, like her peers Samella Lewis and David Driskell. Her doctoral thesis focused on the parallels between traditional West African forms and the Black Arts Movement, contributing early scholarship on non-Western references in postwar American art. She taught at Pasadena City College and Fisk University, and also worked as an art teacher in the Los Angeles Public School System.

Suzanne Jackson (b. 1944, St. Louis) lives and works in Savannah, Georgia. From 1969–1970 she ran Gallery 32 from her studio at 672 South Lafayette Park Place in Los Angeles. Her work is in the permanent collections of the California African American Museum, Los Angeles; the Baltimore Museum of Art; and the Art Institute of Chicago, among others.

Betye Saar (b. 1926, Los Angeles) lives and works in Los Angeles, California. Her survey exhibition, *Betye Saar: Call and Response* is currently on view at the Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson after traveling from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Morgan Library & Museum, New York. Saar's work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, among others.

Eileen Nelson (b. 1938, Chicago as Eileen Anderson, a. k. a. Eileen Abdurashid) lives and works in Novato, California. Recent exhibitions featuring her work include *Carol Allen, Eileen Nelson and Bernard Healey*, Gallery 305, Marin County, CA (2012) and *Black Creativity*, Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago (2010).

Senga Nengudi (b. 1943, Chicago as Sue Irons) lives and works in Colorado Springs, Colorado. Her retrospective, *Senga Nengudi: Topologies*, is currently on view at the Philadelphia Museum of Art after traveling from Lenbachhaus, Munich; Museu de Arte de São Paulo; and the Denver Art Museum. Nengudi's work is in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, New York; the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles; the Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; and Tate Modern, London, among others.