

A Utopian Space for Black Artists, Reimagined at MoMA

Just Above Midtown, an incubator of some of the most important Black avant-garde art of the 1970s and '80s, is the subject of a new exhibition.

By Aruna D'Souza

Sept. 13, 2022

Some of David Hammons's most important early shows took place here. So did the first appearance of Lorraine O'Grady's celebrated performance piece, "Mlle Bourgeoise Noire." It was where Senga Nengudi debuted her sculptures of stretched-out pantyhose weighted with sand, and where Howardena Pindell first showed her abstract "dot" paintings, composed of paper chads. Musicians like Greg Tate, Lawrence (Butch) Morris and Vernon Reid jammed here. Stevie Wonder showed up at the opening. And Miles Davis, whose tailor was also in the building, would pop in from time to time.

"The energy was just oozing out the door," Nengudi recalled of Just Above Midtown Gallery, known as JAM. "It was like a magnet would pull people in because there was always something going on."

JAM was founded by the artist and social activist Linda Goode Bryant in 1974 at 50 West 57th Street. Over the next 12 years and in three locations, it would become an incubator for some of the most

important Black avant-garde artists of the 20th century. More than just an art gallery, the artist Lorraine O'Grady has written, it was “a place as much as a world, a place where people ate together, discussed and argued, drank and smoked together, collaborated on work, slept together, pushed each other to go further, and partied 'til the cows came home.”

The predominantly white art world paid it little heed. The Museum of Modern Art, in particular, Goode Bryant said in a recent conversation, “was only four blocks away, and yet a universe away.”

Now JAM is the subject of a major exhibition at that very institution, opening on Oct. 9. The question for Goode Bryant and the exhibition's curator, Thomas (T.) Jean Lax, is how to capture its spirit — what Lax called the “unbridled sense of opportunity JAM offered to come by, try some stuff out, and, importantly, to fail.”

“I want to test that proposition,” Goode Bryant said. “Can JAM be JAM at MoMA?”





Linda Goode Bryant and Janet Olivia Henry (obscured) at Just Above Midtown at 50 West 57th Street, December 1974, from the exhibition “Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces,” opening Oct. 9 at MoMA. Camille Billops; via the Hatch-Billops Collection, New York

‘With the Resources We Have’

As Goode Bryant was planning the venture, Romare Bearden, one of the few Black artists shown by a major commercial gallery at the time, advised her that she'd need \$50,000 to get JAM off the ground. "I said, 'I don't have \$50,000, I don't know anyone who could give me \$50,000. So no, we're going to do this with the resources we have.' And those resources were basically my credit cards."

Goode Bryant was 25, a single mother with two toddlers and a full-time job as director of education at the Studio Museum of Harlem, intent on founding the first Black art gallery in what was then New York's premier art district. She was tired of waiting for predominantly white galleries and museums to make room for Black artists, and chafed at the way the New York-centered Black Arts Movement was narrowly defining what Black art could be. She saw exciting developments in abstraction, conceptualism, and performance emerging on both East and West Coasts.

"Everybody helped, everybody worked on this thing," said Janet Olivia Henry, a visual artist and early supporter of the venture. "People picked up her children, babysat, painted the walls, swept the floor, sat at the gallery, donated money if you had it. The mantra at JAM was 'We don't have any money. We don't have any money. We DON'T have ANY money.'"

Lowery Stokes Sims, the well-known curator and art historian, convinced her brother to help build out the space. O'Grady helped with promotion; Dawoud Bey and Coreen Simpson took photographs of events; Randy Williams borrowed a Sony PortaPak from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where he worked, to film them.

SYNTHESIS:

The combination of parts or elements into a complex whole.

A private viewing of the inaugural exhibition.

November 18, 1974 8-10 P.M.



Just Above Midtown Gallery

50 West 57 Street, 5th floor, New York, New York 10019

R.S.V.P.

An invitation to “Synthesis: The combination of parts or elements into a complex whole,” an inaugural show at the gallery in 1974. Collection Linda Goode Bryant; via The Museum of Modern Art, New York

Goode Bryant’s overriding concern was creating an artist-driven institution. The photographer Lorna Simpson said that part of what made Goode Bryant’s programming “so surprising and interesting” is that invitations were free-form and open-ended, driven by artists’ intellectual curiosities instead of market demands. The freedom to

pursue one's own interests and make work in a space that was “unapologetically Black” gave Simpson, fresh out of graduate school, “license to dream my own work.”

That approach sometimes made the actual selling of art a challenge. When Hammons had his first New York solo show in 1975, everyone expected him to exhibit his body prints, in which the conceptual artist used his, or someone else's body as a living stamp to make works on paper. Goode Bryant presold the show to eager collectors. Instead, Hammons presented “Greasy Bags and Barbecue Bones,” collages made using brown paper bags stained with fat, food remains, and wire sculpture adorned with black hair. The provocative work sparked a debate at the opening so intense that Goode Bryant had to tell people to “sit down, shut up, and have a conversation” — which they did.

To satisfy her desire for the body prints, she and Hammons staged a “Print-In” at the gallery during which Hammons helped people make their own, which they could take home.



David Hammons (left) and Suzette Wright (center) at the Body Print-In, in conjunction with Hammons's exhibition "Greasy Bags and Barbecue Bones," 1975, from "Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces" at MoMA. via David Hammons and Collection Linda Goode Bryant; Photo by Jeff Morgan



David Hammons, “Untitled,” 1976. Grease and pigment on paper. “Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces.” David Hammons; via Hudgins Family Collection, New York

Securing nonprofit status in 1976 eased some financial pressures, but only a little. “Linda was doing all sorts of things, meeting all sorts of people, having all sorts of ideas,” recalled the sculptor Maren Hassinger. “We were a bunch of fairly young people, people under 40, gifted people who had this ambition about being artists and Linda was someone we gathered around because she was the one with the business skills who could manage to find a place to rent and ways to show art.”





Lorraine O'Grady, "Untitled (Mlle Bourgeoise Noire)," 1980. Lorraine O'Grady/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Photo by Freda Leinwand, via Schlesinger Library, Harvard Radcliffe Institute

Collectivity, Community, Collaboration

The cross-pollination among artists, dancers and musicians that took place at JAM is the stuff of legend: Butch Morris, Senga Nengudi and Cheryl Banks (1981). David Hammons, Bill T. Jones, Philip Mallory-Jones (1983). Senga Nengudi, Blondell Cummings, Yasunao Tone (1982). Many collaborations operated along the principles of Morris's concept of "conduction," a method of live musical composition, a structured form of improvisation.

“Linda is a master of putting people together,” said Arthur Jafa, the filmmaker and artist, “of saying OK, something’s gonna be interesting if I put David Hammons and Bill T. Jones in a room together and tell them to, like, do something. Whether or not it looks like a disaster on the outside, it’s gonna be interesting.”

In 1980, because of a 300 percent rent hike, the gallery was forced to relocate. It ended up at 178-80 Franklin Street in TriBeCa. Now, with more square footage and surrounded by a burgeoning number of other “alternative” spaces, including Franklin Furnace, Exit Art, the American Indian Community House, and the Basement Workshop, collaboration took on a different cast. One of the first exhibitions at the new JAM invited neighboring arts organizations to exhibit jointly, bringing artists of Indigenous, Asian, Latino backgrounds and white women artists into this Black-centered space.



Senga Nengudi performing “Air Propo” at JAM, 1981. via Senga Nengudi and Lévy Gorvy

Lax characterized JAM’s approach as refusing the idea of integration of Black artists into a white art world, with all of its structural problems, in favor of desegregation — creating a world that valued Black culture, and in doing so making space for anyone who sought new forms of freedom.

This didn’t sit well with everyone. Willie Birch said in a recent conversation that after showing with JAM early on, he became more and more drawn to Dominican and Puerto Rican artists “who never abandoned their Africanness.” Nor was Goode Bryant’s invitation to collectivity always reciprocated: according to MoMA’s research for

the exhibition catalog, when JAM offered its space to two artists who were organizing a 1981 event to protest a Guggenheim show that had no women in it, these artists failed to include a single woman of color.

The Exhibition

Major exhibitions over the past several years have brought the importance of JAM into increasing focus, including “Now Dig This: Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960—1980,” “We Wanted a Revolution,” and “Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power.” But Goode Bryant resisted organizing a museum show about JAM. “I don’t do dead art shows’ I would say,” she said with a laugh. “I had no desire to embalm or freeze artists who were still alive and making work.”

It took Thelma Golden, longtime steward of the Studio Museum of Harlem, four years to finally persuade her. “I imagine it as a utopia — that’s how it exists for me,” said Golden, who regrets that she was too young to have experienced JAM directly. “Linda was creating a Black space that was invested in the most complex definition of what that could be.”

“Thelma was very patient and persistent and insistent,” Goode Bryant said. “She asked me ‘Wouldn’t you rather tell the story yourself?’” When Lax left a position at the Studio Museum for MoMA, the curator revisited the idea with her, and planning began in 2018.





Linda Goode Bryant, founder of Just Above Midtown, at MoMA. She also commissioned artists to perform and show their work at Project EATS sites around the city. Elliott Jerome Brown Jr. for The New York Times

One of the most important tasks was figuring out what actually happened at JAM, and what remained a beautiful but unrealized ideal — there were lots of those. Lax and the MoMA team were given access to Goode Bryant's extensive archives, which will form a crucial part of the exhibition, along with art that was shown in exhibitions at the gallery's three locations.

Pointedly, the show will include a selection of unpaid bills and collection notices that Goode Bryant kept in her files — a frank acknowledgment of the roadblocks JAM faced. It's a way, Lax said, of being “emotionally honest about what the conditions were at the time.”

Equally challenging was imagining the ways in which JAM'S improvisational, process-oriented approach could be supported by MoMA. So a significant part of the exhibition will be a series of events meant to evoke, if not quite reproduce, what made the undertaking unique — less a reconstruction, Lax writes in the catalog, than a “rickety re-enactment.”

Goode Bryant has commissioned a video installation by Jafa and Garrett Bradley — a first-time collaboration — to be shown at MoMA. In January, artists will present their creative responses to her prompt, “What do you carry with you from JAM?” No one knows in advance what people are planning to do. Yet another program will feature organizations that are carrying on JAM's legacy in the present.

A February performance festival at the museum will include a Butch Morris “conduction” by Vernon Reid and Burnt Sugar the Arkestra Chamber, a band founded by Greg Tate; a performance by the actor

Alva Rogers; and a new collaboration by Nengudi and Kaylynn Sullivan TwoTrees.



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Flyer for Spiderwoman Theater's "Three Works for Three Nights," 1985. The group, a multicultural collective, had strong ties to New York's Indigenous communities. Collection Linda Goode Bryant; via The Museum of Modern Art, New York

After JAM was evicted from its third and final physical space — a 25,000-square foot behemoth in SoHo — Goode Bryant left the art world, first to become an award-winning documentary filmmaker, and later to found Project EATS, an organization that operates urban farms in Brownsville, Brooklyn, Randalls Island, East Harlem, the Bronx, and the Lower East Side. Her whole career, she explained, has been driven by a belief that “art should be discovered as part of daily life, and that it should have real life consequences.”

She is still wrestling with the complexity of showing JAM at MoMA — and wanting to see the show expand beyond the museum walls.

It was important to her that some new work not be funded by the museum as an acknowledgment of the distance that existed historically between the two entities. “How do you understand JAM or engage JAM without that non-relationship being part of the context?” GoodeBryant said.

She has commissioned pieces from Hammons, Hassinger and others to be performed or shown at Project EATS sites, including on a rooftop farm below a mixed-income apartment tower and across the street from public housing on the Lower East Side.

“I loved the idea that people could look out their window and engage the work on their own terms, whenever and however they wanted, without setting foot in MoMA,” she said.