

# The Emancipatory Formalism of Arnold J. Kemp

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Selections from Possible Bibliography, 2015-20, black and white archival inkjet prints, 6.83 x 10 inches. each. Collection of Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art. Photos courtesy of the artist and and Fourteen30 Contemporary, Portland.

Ask Arnold Joseph Kemp to define Blackness, and he might respond, as it he did in an interview conducted earlier this year, by reciting a poem he wrote called *Fire and Ice*. It contains what I'm guessing are more than one hundred stanzas. Each begins with the words "It is black," and proceeds with an A-through-Z litany of rejoinders that includes references to books, films, corporate brands, nature, food, sex, clothing, mundane objects, overworked cliches and much else. This free-associative marathon lasts about eight minutes, and by the end of it, you feel as if the artist has compiled a comprehensive guide to all things Black: one that affirms race but also refuses to be constrained by it. (Examples from the letter 'D' include: "It is black death. It is black denim. It is black desire. It is black devil. It is black dice. It is black dick. It is black door.")

# MARTOS GALLERY

The reading is not part of the exhibition titled *I would survive. I could survive. I should survive*. Still, its appearance on the Manetti Shrem Museum of Art's website, as part of a Zoom conversation hosted by Sampada Aranke, the show's curator, serves as a perfect introduction to Kemp and the state of mind known as post-Blackness. It's a subject both Kemp and Aranke know well: He is dean of graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a former YBCA curator, and an artist known to Bay Area audiences from exhibitions at several local galleries, including Stephen Wirtz and Patricia Sweetow; she is an assistant professor at the Institute's art department and a visiting scholar at the museum, located on the UC Davis campus.



The term post-Black was coined by the artist Glenn Ligon and

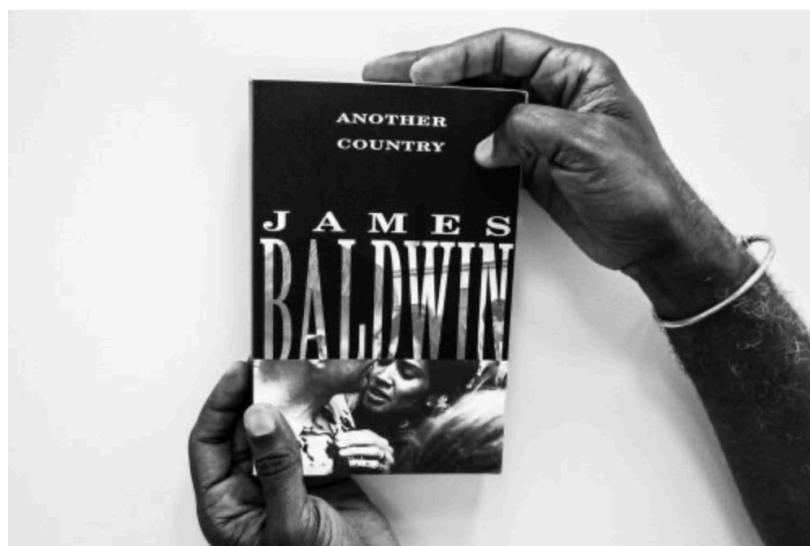
Installation view: Possible Bibliography

Thelma Golden, director and chief curator of The Studio Museum in Harlem. There, it became the basis for the groundbreaking 2001 exhibition (organized by Golden) called *Freestyle*. In addition to Kemp, it included Mark Bradford, Julie Mehretu, Layla Ali, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Sanford Biggers and 21 other artists. Kemp's appearance marked his national debut and established the conceptual framework through which his work, and that of his peers, came to be seen. It doesn't deny Blackness or seek an alignment with the "post-racial" fiction imagined by former President Barak Obama. Instead, it represents a determination to push beyond the binaries that defined the Black Arts Movement and the identity politics that dominated multiculturalism in the 1980s and 1990s.

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Black artists of Kemp's generation – he was born in 1968 – found both to be overly restrictive in that they demanded political work that was pointedly didactic and, most often, figurative. Kemp's output is, for the most part, abstract; it encompasses painting, sculpture, photography, installation, performance and writing – but not of a sort his elders would have endorsed. And while he pays homage to them, he does so without allegiance to anything save the notion that contemporary Black visual art – like jazz – is a collective enterprise with no hard-and-fast rules. For Kemp, it is mutable and multi-layered. It may valorize the efforts of individual virtuosos, but its value is measured by what it contributes to the collective dialog, be it among musicians on stage or with the community at large.

*Thus, the title I would survive. I could survive. I should survive.* is particularly apt. It is a compact, elegantly staged show that packs a wallop far out of proportion to its modest size. It occupies half of a medium-sized gallery and contains



Detail: Possible Bibliography

just two paintings, a sculpture, and a black-and-white photo montage comprised of 52 images that stretch across a long wall. The latter, titled *Possible Bibliography* (2015-20), shows the artist's hands in a variety of positions, lovingly embracing books by a group of authors (e.g., Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, Angela Davis, Fred Moten, Tricia Rose, Hilton Als) whose names, collectively, form a who's who list of Black American intellectuals. An exquisite display of serialism, the piece points not only to the artist's engagement with their ideas but to his physical relationship with books as objects, evidenced by what we see of his hands.

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Heavily creased, they more closely resemble those of an elderly laborer than those of the young-ish artist/academician seen in the Zoom interview mentioned above. The implicit message, if there is one, is that intellectual labor is hard work. Beyond that, *Possible Bibliography* challenges viewers to become conversant in Black thinking, which is a worthy goal in a university setting such as this. The danger, of course, is that it might be construed by some to mean that understanding Kemp is contingent upon absorbing the content of the books pictured. It's not. But it helps. So, too, does an understanding of mid-20th century Modernism and its strained relationship with blackness and Black artists, which is the show's real subject. The question it asks is: can the exclusionary (whites-only) legacy of Abstract Expressionism be re-routed to reflect a post-Black sensibility?



Night Watch, 2017-20, graphite, ink wash, and flashe on canvas, 69 x 69 inches

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Two large paintings, stationed at opposite ends of the room, answer with an emphatic yes. Both are, essentially, heavily embellished quotes from Ad Reinhardt's series of black paintings, made in the early 1960s as part of an effort to "purify" painting by purging it of references to everything but paint itself. But it was more than just Greenbergian formalism taken to extremes. The effort, heavily influenced by Asian philosophies, was an attempt to visualize nothingness and induce a transcendent state in viewers. The odd thing is, Reinhardt's own writings describe these works in terms that were almost entirely negative, and those associations, coupled with the common understanding of the word black to mean dark forces, throw Reinhardt's works into a different light than the one in which they appeared when he first showed them at the Museum of Modern Art in 1963. To be clear, Reinhardt wasn't using black to either promote or conceal a racist agenda, but his narrow (read: race-blind) view of it did rub some Black artists the wrong way. One of them was jazz pianist Cecil Taylor, who, in a 1967 roundtable discussion hosted by *artscanada* in which he and Reinhardt participated, criticized the painter for failing to recognize the more profound social and political implications of the color black.

For Taylor, wrote Nicholas Croggon in *Canadian Art*, *artscanada's* successor, black meant 'Black power': not only the recently emerged liberation movement, but also the longer history of the 'Black way of life' that sustained it. As such, directly countering Reinhardt's evocation of black as an idealized and universalist aesthetic experience, Taylor's black was contingent and concrete, tied to both the life of his local community and the political struggles of a global African liberation movement."

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**Our Friends Teach Us Some Things and Our Enemies Teach Us the Rest, 2017, 69 x 69 inches.**

The encounter, Croggon continued, "underlined the structural whiteness that defined the art industry of 1960s North America, in both its modernist and postmodernist guises. As the Black Power movement was at that moment very clearly laying out, such whiteness worked more covertly than other forms of racism, often involving a seeming embrace of both civil rights and Black voices. Yet, as was the case with Taylor, such voices were usually pressured to perform their specific 'blackness,' leaving unremarked the condition of whiteness that was assumed to underpin all representation and existence. This, for Frantz Fanon, was the hellish ontological circle that plagued the existence of the colonized: to be forever the 'other' to a universal white subject."

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Kemp's evocation of Reinhardt undermines that position in several ways. By hanging both paintings – *Night Watch* (2017-20) and *Our Friends Teach Us Some Things and Our Enemies Teach Us the Rest* (2017) – close to the floor, Kemp affords viewers a physical relationship to the works that a typical museum display would otherwise foreclose. And his sizing of them at a height and width equal to his own reach – 69 inches square – amplifies the impact. Kemp's real innovation, though, rests with his handling of the canvases' right and left edges. On them, he paints a spidery "scaffolding" interrupted by stains. So, instead of arresting our gaze at the surfaces as Reinhardt's paintings do, these works offer expansive perimeters that encourage navigation. Thus, formerly impenetrable surfaces become in Kemp's handling, portals to someplace *else*. They invite viewers to partake of what Derek Conrad Murray, writing in these pages about Oliver Jackson, called "the emancipatory pleasures of formalism."



**Dark Glass, 2015, stained glass, welded steel, 7 1/2 x 20 x 20 inches. Photo: Cleber Bonato**

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Those same pleasures extend to the sole sculpture on view, *Dark Glass* (2015). It's a 20 x 20-inch stainless-steel box set about six inches off the floor. Inside the shallow container rest three pieces of stained glass whose colors (red, green and black) correspond to those of the Pan-African flag, adopted by The Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League in 1920, in reaction to a racist song from 1869 called *Every Race Has a Flag but the Coon*. The structure whose edges show visible discoloration from welding, recalls a crude cooking element, while the glass slabs, stacked one atop-the-other, call to mind Duchamp's iconic sculpture, *The Large Glass* (1915-23) and the old melting-pot cliché of disparate peoples united by shared values and beliefs. It is, in other words, a political treatise disguised as minimalist sculpture: the very definition of "emancipatory formalism."

# # #

*Arnold Joseph Kemp: "I would survive. I could survive. I should survive." At the **Manetti Shrem Museum of Art** through November 12, 2021.*