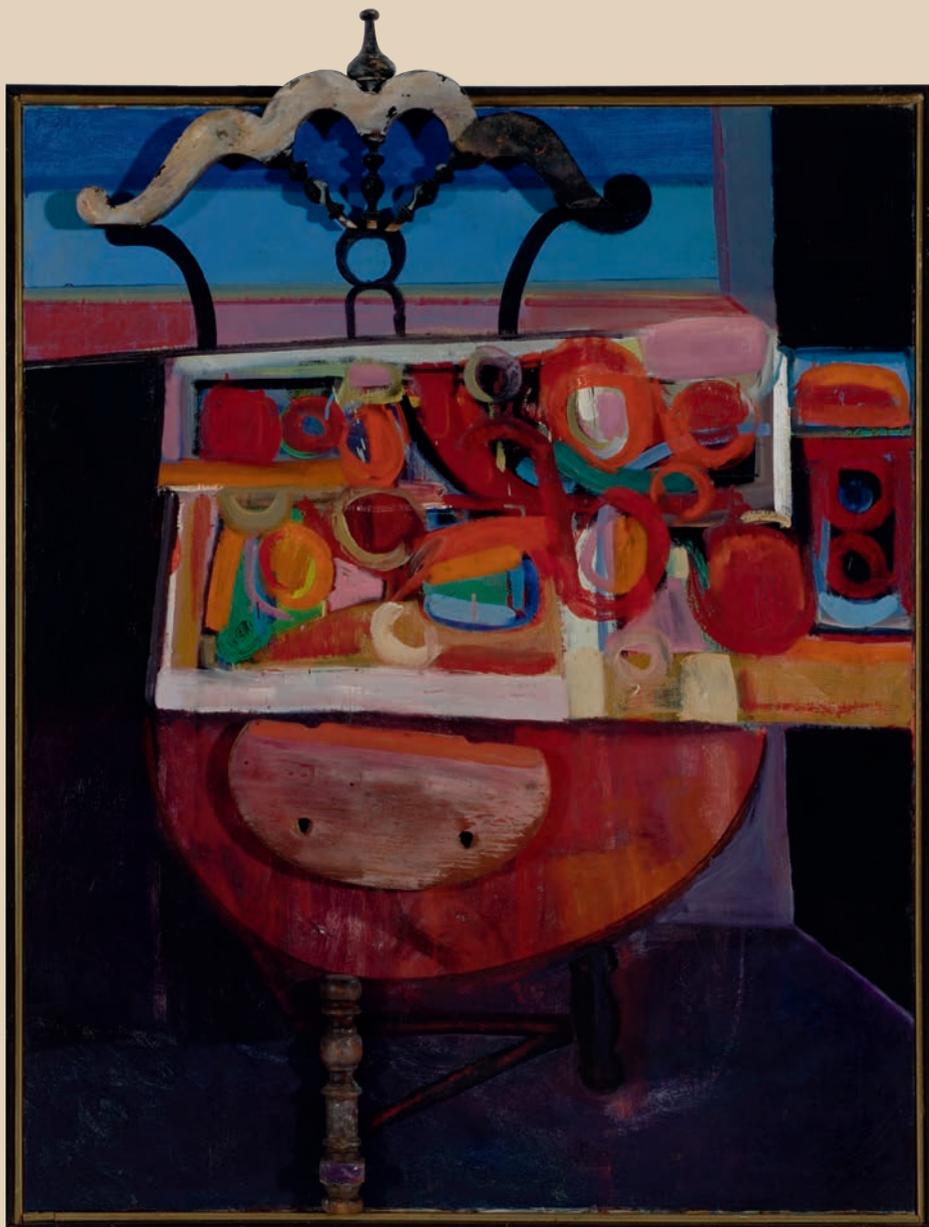


**Process,
Product,
and
Black
Practice**



A **SPACE** *for* **DIALOGUE** 102

HOOD MUSEUM OF ART, DARTMOUTH



I take comfort in histories and knowing that something came before me and something will come after me and that I'm just a part of it.

—Mark Bradford

Process, product, and practice: the three *Ps* of art making. This exhibition is an exploration of these three *Ps* and their implications for Black aesthetic practices through the relationship between process- and product-oriented works by African American artists. Within that relationship lies a goal of redefining Black consciousness in art.

Due to the collective cultural memory of African Americans, Black artists' perception of materiality is altered. African American identity is constructed with the knowledge that materials and how one employs them are essential aspects of existence. With a history of enslavement and its legacy of disenfranchisement, African Americans have often faced limited access to materials. This, in turn, has sparked an innovative quality in the work of black artists, fostering distinct aesthetic practices through the exploration of materials and their relationship to the artist. For example, David Driskell uses pieces of a chair in *Gate Leg Table*, then imposes his own vision to complete the figure of the chair in paint. This is evidence of the Black imagination

completing an untold history. The process Driskell undertakes to create his own story out of existing objects is largely related to both the final product and his practice. Because these artists and their materials are racialized, the viewer must engage in another layer of interpretation.

There are complex conditions of visibility for the Black body, which is so often overlooked or seen as less than human. Ralph Ellison describes this in his 1952 classic, *Invisible Man*:

I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.¹

In writing on these conditions of visibility—or rather, invisibility—in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, French psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon coined the term “epidermal racial schema.”² Fanon describes this as the internalization of the projections put on blacks by the white gaze. For Fanon, this schema works to inform a black person's sense of self. Art is an outward projection of one's self: out of an artist's studio comes an artist's thoughts translated into visual form. Within this schema, Black artists must find a way to move both their bodies and their work (and how they create it) through the history of Black art making.

The surfaces and materiality of art and of skin are inextricably linked. If the Black body has been deemed invisible, what does this say about the work that Black artists produce? How do projections of invisibility materialize in two-dimensional surfaces? Sam Gilliam faces this in *Untitled 1971* (above), where he uses his hands to shape the fiberglass paper that he has saturated with color. In shaping the surface by hand, Gilliam draws a parallel to the shaping of

the Black experience, making work that, in its material nature, is more accepted and readily seen than his own skin.

Through the manipulation of materials, Black artists look to make meaning out of the Black experience. In *Wonder #9* (below) and *Ssblakalblak!*, Ellen Gallagher approaches this mission through the subtle representation of forms that recall Black minstrel practices. The repeated figures work as parts of a whole, representing the individuality subsumed within the monolithic identity ascribed to Black people. When asked about her process, Gallagher responded, "What was exciting for me was that what was happening was whimsy, a decision made with an improvisational spirit."³ This begs the question, what roles do improvisation or impulse and artistic intellect play in the three *Ps*?

Alison Saar tackles ideas of consciousness and cultural memory in *Inheritance*, which she represents as a formidable weight. The artist carved into a woodblock, taking away pieces in order to create a transcendental figure representing the inheritance of oppression. The spiritual essence of her artwork brings her practice to the forefront of the contemporary Black Arts movement. By revealing the stereotypes attributed to the Black form, Saar reminds her audience of how heavily these projections still weigh on African Americans.

In John Wilson's rendering of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the artist's mark-making process generates meaning. The vertical and horizontal lines that bisect Wilson's etching evoke both a symbol of Christianity and the crosshairs of the rifle used to assassinate King in April 1968. The nearly life-sized portrait feels almost incomplete, as King's detailed, contemplative face gives way to the sparest suggestion of his lapels. In a reversal, perhaps, of Ellison's experience, Wilson emphasizes King's black skin while the rest of the image fades to invisibility. Through Wilson's visual processes, he imbues the final product with meaning, inviting the viewer to complete the image, just as Driskell does in his *Gate Leg Table*. Like Driskell, Wilson puts his own and the viewer's process of meaning making on display.

Personal histories and inheritance play a large role in the process of art making. In writing on Black artists and material, Sampada Aranke says these "artists reposition the ways

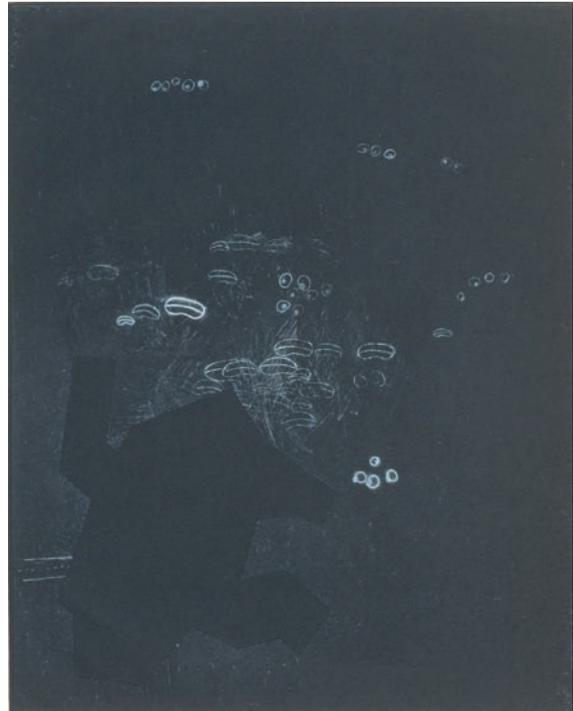
that materials alert us to the textures of black life that are often flattened by logics of visibility alone, and in so doing open up corporeality and materiality as crucial archives of black radical aesthetic."⁴ *Process, Product, and Black Practice* examines the ways embodied experience and cultural memory inform Black representational approaches to art that transcend visibility.

Turiya Adkins '20
Homma Family Intern

NOTES

Epigraph: Mark Bradford, "Politics, Process and Postmodernism," *art21.org*, November 2011, <http://art21.org/read/mark-bradford-politics-process-and-postmodernism/>.

1. Ralph Ellison, *The Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1952), prologue, 4.
2. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Penguin Classics, 2019), 67.
3. Tina Kukielski, *Being an Artist: Artist Interviews with Art21* (New York: Art 21, 2018), 218.
4. Sampada Aranke, "Material Matters: Black Radical Aesthetics and the Limits of Visibility," *e-flux*, no. 79 (February 2017), <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94433/material-matters-black-radical-aesthetics-and-the-limits-of-visibility/>.



CHECKLIST

Benny Andrews, American, 1920–2006. *Eight Ball in the Side Pocket*, 1975. Ink on paper. Gift of Constance G. Brown; 2014.102

David Driskell, American, 1931–2020. *Gate Leg Table*, 1966. Oil and found objects on canvas. Purchased through a gift from Evelyn A. and William B. Jaffe, Class of 1964H, by exchange; 2018.6

Melvin Edwards, American, born 1937. *Untitled*, 1974. Sprayed acrylic, red crayon on paper. Gift of the artist; W.974.375

Ellen Gallagher, American, born 1965. *Ssblakalblak!*, number VI, iii, from the *Portfolio of 10 Prints*, 2000. Silkscreen and etching on Okawara paper. Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; 2005.80.7

Ellen Gallagher, American, born 1965. *Wonder #9*, number VI, iv, from the *Portfolio of 10 Prints*, 2000. Silkscreen and etching on Okawara paper. Gift of Hugh J. Freund, Class of 1967; 2005.80.10

Sam Gilliam, American, born 1933. *Untitled*, 1971. Watercolor on fiberglass paper, shaped by the artist. Purchased through the William B. Jaffe and Evelyn A. Jaffe Hall Fund; W.973.433

Alison Saar, American, born 1956. *Inheritance*, 2003. Woodblock print with chine collé on Japanese paper. Purchased through a gift from the Lathrop Fellows; PR.2003.64.1

Alison Saar, American, born 1956. Woodblock for the print *Inheritance* (black ink), 2003. Hand-carved woodblock with colored inks. Gift of the artist; 2014.34.2

Alison Saar, American, born 1956. Woodblock for the print *Inheritance* (red ink), 2003. Hand-carved woodblock with colored inks. Gift of the artist; 2014.34.1

Raymond Jennings Saunders, American, born 1934. *No Tellin'*, 1970. Mixed media on paper. Purchased through the Julia L. Whittier Fund; D.972.82

Raymond Jennings Saunders, American, born 1934. *Untitled*, mid-20th century. Collage, watercolor, graphite, spray paint, and ink on heavy wove paper. Gift of Varujan Boghosian; MIS.992.10

John Wilson, American, 1922–2015. *Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 2002. Etching and aquatint with chine collé. Purchased through the Olivia H. Parker and John O. Parker '58 Acquisition Fund; PR.2002.17.2

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The exhibition *Process, Product, and Black Practice*, part of the museum's student-curated *A Space for Dialogue* series, is on view at the Hood Museum of Art, November 7, 2020–January 3, 2021.

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Cover image: David Driskell, *Gate Leg Table*, 1966. Courtesy of the artist and DC Moore Gallery, New York

Inside left: Sam Gilliam, *Untitled*, 1971

Inside right: Ellen Gallagher, *Wonder #9*, number VI, iv, from the *Portfolio of 10 Prints*, 2000

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