

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
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Emma Amos

Black Bodies

October 19 – December 16, 2017

Reception: Saturday, October 21, 2–4PM

RYAN LEE is pleased to present Emma Amos: *Black Bodies*, an exhibition of paintings by the artist and educator. Amos, known for her witty, probing, and masterfully colored figurative paintings, began her career in New York in the early sixties. She was the youngest and only female member of the African American artist group Spiral and worked as a textile designer for Dorothy Liebes while she established herself as an artist. Spanning four decades, *Black Bodies* highlights Amos's continued celebration of the black body as a source and site of power and beauty.

Throughout her career Amos has used figures to ground her narratives. The black body—whether abstracted, anonymous, or recognizable as her own or that of an important historical figure—serves as agent, theme, and subject of Amos's interrogation. Works such as *Tightrope* (1994) combine postmodern preoccupations like the constructed nature of images and a suspicion of master narratives with identity politics. In *Tightrope*, Amos paints herself in a Wonder Woman suit and black robe negotiating a tightrope strung over a frenetic blur of spectators and disembodied eyes. In her outstretched arms she holds two paintbrushes in an X and a t-shirt printed with a nude female torso. The torso is taken from Paul Gauguin's 1899 painting *Two Tahitian Women*, which appears miniaturized in photo transfers onto fabric at the four corners of Amos's painting, punctuating its border made of African fabrics. Quoting from both the modern art canon and popular culture, Amos makes clear that she is an active and powerful agent—artist and super hero—in a balancing act. She assumes the role of the female artist, while she acknowledges the risk involved in challenging inherited perceptions of the black female body as a sexualized object for visual consumption.

Amos's paintings from the eighties and early nineties remind viewers that the power of images is culturally determined, and that it is necessary to be conscious of and to question the value systems that imbue these images with meaning. The 1995 painting *Thank You Jesus for Paul Robeson (and for Nicholas Murray's Photograph - 1926)* explicitly grapples with these concerns via the figure of Robeson, a singer, actor, athlete and Civil Rights activist. Amos paints Robeson's nude body as it appears in Murray's photograph, taken after Robeson had concluded his football career and graduated from law school. Murray's original black and white photograph appears seven times in a vertical row flanking Amos's portrait, opposite a row of photo transfers of a Greco-Roman frieze. Amos's emphasis on the sculptural nature of Robeson's form, and its juxtaposition with images of classical masculinity, suggest that ultimately all images—and the ideals they promote—are constructed.

Amos's recent work explores the graphic and sculptural potential of her exuberantly painted figures. *Look to the Sun* (2014) will be exhibited for the first time. Amos has written that she hopes her paintings "...dislodge, question, and tweak prejudices, rules, and notions relating to art and who makes it, poses for it, shows it, and buys it." While consistently dealing with fraught themes of the representation and (in)visibility of black bodies, in Amos's oeuvre the black body as form and force remains exalted and empowered.

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Emma Amos (b. 1937 Atlanta, GA) is a distinguished painter, printmaker, and weaver. She was the youngest and only woman member of Spiral, the historic African American collective founded in 1963, as well as a member of the important feminist collective, Heresies, established in the 1980s. Influenced by modern Western European art, Abstract Expressionism, the Civil Rights movement and feminism, Amos explores the politics of culture and issues of racism, sexism and ethnocentrism through her paintings and works on paper. Over six decades, she has employed color theory, innovative printmaking and weaving techniques, photo-transfer and collage. Amos graduated from Antioch College in Ohio in 1958 and the Central School of Art in London in 1960. She subsequently moved to New York and became active in the downtown arts scene, working alongside prominent Spiral artists such as Romare, Bearden, Hale Woodruff, Norman Lewis, Alvin Hollingsworth and Charles Alston. In 1965, she earned her Masters in Arts from New York University and taught art at the Dalton School in New York. She is a former Professor and Chair in Visual Arts at the Mason Gross School of Art at Rutgers University where she taught for 28 years. Her work is held in the collections of the Bass Museum of Art, Miami; Birmingham Museum of Art; British Museum, London; Bronx Museum of Art, New York; Fowler Museum of Art, Los Angeles; James F. Byrnes Institute, Stuttgart, DE; Museo de las Artes, Guadalajara, MX; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Newark Museum; Studio Museum in Harlem, New York; Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, and Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, among others. Amos's prints were recently included in the British Museum's 2017 *American Dream* exhibition, and her paintings were included in Tate Modern's *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* and the Brooklyn Museum's *We Wanted A Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85*. In 2016, Amos received Georgia Museum of Art's Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson award and was honored by the Studio Museum in Harlem as an Icon and Trailblazer, along with Faith Ringgold and Lorraine O'Grady. In 2020, Amos will be the subject of a retrospective exhibition at Georgia Museum of Art at Georgia University in Athens. Amos still lives and works in downtown Manhattan.

Concurrently on view in RLWindow is Nicole Cohen: *Library (Donald Judd's)* (October 19 - November 25), viewable from the High Line at 26th Street. For press inquiries, please contact Bridget Casey at bridget@ryanleegallery.com or 212-397-0742.