

RYAN LEE

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Emma Amos

Falling Figures

September 10 – November 7, 2020

RYAN LEE is pleased to announce *Falling Figures*, an exhibition of paintings by Emma Amos. This is the first exhibition to mine this motif in Amos's work, an exploration that began with her *Falling Series* (1988-1992) and continued into the twenty-first century. Amos was a celebrated artist and educator who began her career in New York in the 1960s. She was the only female member of the influential African American artist group Spiral, alongside Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, and Hale Woodruff. Amos, whose work ranged from graphic, to expressionist, to figurative, has always understood that, as she put it, "to put brush to canvas as a black artist was a political act."

The falling figures that populate the canvases on view in this exhibition reverberate with anxiety, which Amos described as a response to a sense of "the impending loss of history, place, and people" among African Americans. This fear of alienation from one's personal history and thus identity is palpable in paintings such as *Will You Forget Me?* (1991) in which a plummeting Amos clings to a painting of a photograph of her mother, India. The black-and-white photograph, taken many years earlier, seems to slow Amos's descent, as the stable, elegant India calmly meets our gaze from her seated position. A different sort of anxiety permeates *Targets* (1989). The central image is of a young African-American couple, gripping each other in a fearful embrace. Their eyes are wide and searching as they plunge into space, flanked by a white rabbit and a bull's-eye—two literal targets for sport. This image not only makes painfully clear the sense of helplessness that accompanies falling, but also the very real threats that await the young couple on the ground below. The scenes in both *Will You Forget Me?* and *Targets* are set against boldly colored abstract backgrounds and are bordered by African cloth (including Kente, Burkina Faso, and Kanga). Amos, who had a background in weaving and textile design, often included fabric elements in her work, and in these paintings the sumptuous and colorful cloth both grounds the images and reestablishes a connection to one aspect of Amos's cultural roots.

Amos intentionally painted her falling figures in a range of skin tones in order to combat the reductive notion of blackness being propagated by a white male-dominated New York art world. As she explained in a 1994 artist's statement, "I became especially concerned with the issues of freedom of expression in figurative imagery, particularly the symbolic use of dark bodies. Researching the impact of race, I found that white male artists are free to incorporate any image.... Much of this work continues to be seen as groundbreaking in its expression of the will to cross boundaries. When African-American artists cross boundaries, we are often stopped at the border."

Many of these paintings have never been exhibited to the public before. A selection of these works were last included in Amos's 1993 solo exhibition *Emma Amos: Paintings and Prints 1982-92*, curated by Thalia Gouma-Peterson for the College of Wooster Art Museum. This exhibition traveled to the Wayne Center for the Arts in 1993, the Southern Ohio Museum and Cultural Center in 1994, and the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1995. It was accompanied by an exhibition catalogue with essays by Gouma-Peterson, bell hooks, and Valerie J. Mercer. Further, Amos's monumental triptych *The Overseer* (1992) was also included in Art in General's 1994 exhibition *Emma Amos: Changing the Subject; Paintings and Prints 1992-1994*, curated by Holly Block. This exhibition traveled to the Montclair Museum of Art in 1995, and was accompanied by an exhibition catalogue with an essay by bell hooks.

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Emma Amos (b. 1937 Atlanta, GA – d. 2020 Bedford, NH) was 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 explored the politics of culture and issues of racism, sexism and ethnocentrism through her paintings and works on paper. Over six decades, she 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 was 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 Art Institute of Chicago; Bass Museum of Art, Miami; Birmingham Museum of Art; British Museum, London; Bronx Museum of Art, New York; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Cleveland Museum of Art; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art; Fowler Museum of Art, Los Angeles; James F. Byrnes Institute, Stuttgart, DE; Minneapolis Inst of Arts; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Museo de las Artes, Guadalajara, MX; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Newark Museum; Smithsonian American Art 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 work was recently included in the Phillips Collection's *Riffs and Relations: African American Artists and the European Modernist Tradition*, the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles's *With Pleasure: Pattern and Decoration in American Art 1972–1985*, and the Whitney Museum of American Art's *Spilling Over: Painting Color in the 1960s*. In 2020, the exhibition *Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power* traveled to the DeYoung Museum in San Francisco and the Houston Museum of Fine. *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey*, a retrospective of Amos's work, will open at the Georgia Museum of Art in 2021 and will travel to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Munson-Williams-Proctor Arts Institute in New York.