

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
515 WEST 26TH STREET
NEW YORK NY 10001
212 397 0742
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

Friends and Agitators:
Emma Amos, Camille Billops, Vivian Browne and May Stevens, 1965 - 1993
June 4 - August 13, 2021

RYAN LEE is pleased to announce *Friends and Agitators: Emma Amos, Camille Billops, Vivian Browne and May Stevens, 1965 - 1993*, an exhibition that traces the personal and professional intersections of four celebrated New York artists and activists: Emma Amos (1937-2020), Camille Billops (1933-2019), Vivian Browne (1929-1993), and May Stevens (1924-2019). The show includes work produced between 1965—when the artists began to establish a Soho scene—and Browne’s death in 1993. Several works have never before been exhibited in New York. Though the artists—all of whom are represented by RYAN LEE—worked across a range of styles and media, they shared a staunch activist spirit that shaped their careers and their legacies.

In 1965 Emma Amos was the youngest and only female member of the influential Black artist group Spiral, founded by Romare Bearden, Charles Alston, Norman Lewis, and Hale Woodruff. Vivian Browne, who discovered that painting was her most powerful weapon against racial injustice while a New York City college student, was well aware of Spiral’s activities. Browne first exhibited with Amos and the Spiral group in a small 1965 show in Yonkers. The two women shared a commitment to art-making that reflected the Black female experience, and through Browne, Amos was able to deepen her connections to both Black art and feminist activist circles.

That same year Browne painted her vibrant *Portrait of Camille*, which illustrates the burgeoning friendship between Browne and Camille Billops, whom she had met a year earlier while they were both Huntington Hartford Foundation fellows in Los Angeles. In Browne’s rendering, Billops sits tall yet relaxed, her confidence clearly radiating from her half-smile and piercing gaze.

Upon her arrival in New York in 1965, Billops joined Browne in the circle of activist black artists pushing for civil rights, quickly becoming involved in the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC), which was founded in 1968. Browne joined the BECC’s negotiating committee in 1969 and took up its fight to challenge the Whitney Museum’s exclusion of Black artists from the planning of the 1971 exhibition *Contemporary Black Artists in America*. In 1972 Browne and Billops became co-directors of the BECC along with Andrews, Clifford R. Johnson, and Russell Thompson.

Billops’s experiences of racism and gender bias permeated her work, which ranged from ceramics to printmaking and film. In the etching *I am Black, I am Black I am Dangerously Black* (1973) Billops combines her ongoing investigation of race and racism with a variety of stylistic influences absorbed from her travels across Asia and Africa. The result is a swirling black and white scene of fantastical plants and animals, anchored by a central female figure. In the early 1970s Billops began holding salons in her Soho loft, gathering like-minded artists and intellectuals to discuss contemporaneous social, cultural, and political issues. In 1975 Billops and her husband, the Black theater scholar James Hatch, founded the Hatch-Billops Collection, an archive of oral histories, photographs, and publications aimed at the promotion and preservation of Black culture. In 1981 Billops and Hatch began publishing *Artist and Influence*,

RYAN LEE

RYAN LEE GALLERY LLC
515 WEST 26TH STREET
NEW YORK NY 10001
212 397 0742
RYANLEEGALLERY.COM

an annual publication which featured interviews between prominent Black cultural figures and New York artists.

May Stevens had been living and working in Soho since 1967, anchoring a growing community of feminist artists and activists downtown. The monumental painting *Artemisia* (1974), which celebrates the long-ignored Italian baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1656), is emblematic of Stevens's commitment to challenging patriarchal hegemony and resuscitating forgotten women's history. Stevens was an active presence in the civil rights and feminist art movements, helping to establish the cooperative gallery SOHO20 in 1973, where both Amos and Browne would exhibit throughout the 1970s and 1980s. At Browne's suggestion, Billops connected with Stevens and expanded her own activism to white and multi-racial feminist spaces, including Soho20 and the Heresies Collective which produced *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*.

Between its establishment in 1976 and its final publication in 1993, all four women contributed—in varying degrees—to *Heresies*. Stevens was a co-founder and Amos was a member of the collective from 1982 to 1993. Billops was interviewed in issue #8, *Third World Women* (1979). Browne and Amos became driving forces behind the publication of issue #15, *Racism is the Issue* (1982), which examined race and racism within the feminist art movement; Browne and Stevens served on the editorial committee. Amos went on to become very involved in the Heresies collective, becoming president in the late 1980s.

Amos, Billops, Browne, and Stevens were part of a network of women artists in New York that blazed trails for the generations of artists and activists who followed. The extent of their activities is still coming to light, as exemplified by the recent revelation that Amos and Stevens were original members of the radical feminist art troupe the Guerilla Girls. The contributions of these four artists point to the diversity and divergence of the art of the civil rights era. There was no monolithic feminist or Black art, and even as these artists supported each other, they often disagreed on the best approaches to “progress.” The importance of their work as artists and activists during the 1960s and 1970s was ultimately recognized in the seminal 1985 exhibition, *Tradition and Conflict, Images of a Turbulent Decade 1963-1973* curated by Dr. Mary Schmidt Campbell at the Studio Museum in Harlem. It was the first time all four had shown together.

When Browne passed away in 1993 Stevens wrote her obituary, Amos produced a painting, and Billops and Hatch organized a memorial service at the SOHO20 space. While Browne's funeral was last time the four women would be together physically, they were immortalized in Amos's portrait series, *The Gift* (1990-1994). Between 1990 and 1994 Amos produced 48 watercolor portraits of dear friends—women artists and intellectuals as they visited her studio. They were made for Amos's daughter India, as a gift, and are a record of an extraordinary network of women who defined a generation.