

RYAN LEE

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Vivian Browne
Africa Series 1971-1974
May 6 – June 25, 2022

RYAN LEE is pleased to announce *Vivian Browne: Africa Series 1971-1974*. The exhibition will include eight paintings and five works on paper from the *Africa Series*, a major body of abstract works by the prominent painter Vivian Browne. This pivotal body of work in Browne's career followed a highly influential trip to West Africa in 1971. This will be the first time these works have been exhibited together since 1974. The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue with an essay by Dr. Leslie King Hammond, who cites Vivian Browne's *Africa Series* as an important example of the overlooked nature of Black American artists' vast contributions to the development and establishment of modernist American aesthetics, as well as the omission of African influence from the mainstream art historical narrative in the United States. This will be Browne's second solo exhibition and third overall at the gallery.

According to Dr. King Hammond, "Browne was a woman of her time and yet, in many ways— ahead of her time, with an inquisitive eye on the state of humanity." Placed in the context of the post-civil rights 1970s, the uncompromisingly abstract African works stood at odds with prevailing ideas of what Black art "should" look like or stand for. "During the Civil Rights Era, one had to paint Black themes, Black people, Black ideas, I didn't," Browne explained. "I was painting my kind of protest, but it didn't look like Black art..." Browne's unflinching commitment to her artistic vision set her apart from popular contemporary "Black" aesthetics. A passionate civil rights and feminist activist and professor of Black art history at Rutgers University, Browne's artistic and political principles and curiosity in the world blend into her work, reflecting her unique and authentic vision.

The vividly colored *African* paintings capture Browne's experience of visiting an ancestral land that remains somewhat foreign to her as an African American person. Her stay on the African continent was an artistic breakthrough, and the powerful works she created upon her return to the United States marked a decisive shift to abstraction in her practice. Previously a more figurative artist, her *Africa Series* respond to the emotional responses she experienced during her voyages. "The expression was an abstract idea—not an abstract of a particular thing, but an abstract of a particular feeling, of a particular surrounding and an experience," Browne explained. "The colors were much more heightened; the use of pattern was there because that was pervading everything that I saw or reacted to in Africa."

Punctuated by the ubiquitous patterning Browne witnessed during her voyages to Nigeria, Benin, and Ghana, the paintings included in RYAN LEE's exhibition range in scale and levels of abstraction. The explosion of intersecting patterns and abstracted tiles of color dominate the composition of the large-scale painting, *Diversities* (1973), and reference an effusion of sounds and patterning that Browne was exposed to in Africa. In contrast, *The Gathering* (1973) incorporates faces and animals, as well as references to masks and genitalia.

This fall, Browne's works will be included in the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition, *Just Above Midtown: 1974 to the Present*, on JAM Gallery founded by Linda Goode Bryant. Browne was included in the inaugural exhibition of this landmark gallery alongside prominent artists such as David Hammons and Camille Billops, among others.

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Vivian Browne (1929 Laurel, FL – 1993 New York, NY) was an American artist known for her sociopolitical portraits and abstracted paintings inspired by her travels. Mindful of her particular experience as a Black woman artist, she probed the intersection of misogyny and racism throughout her life and practice. “Black art is political,” Browne said in 1985 to Black American Literature Forum. “If it’s not political, it’s not Black art.”

Born in Florida and primarily raised in New York, Browne received both a BS and BFA from Hunter College in 1950 and 1959, respectively. She attended the Art Students League for a short time, and in 1972 she studied at the University of Ibadan in Nigeria. From 1971 through 1992, Browne taught at Rutgers University in Newark. She headed the art and design department from 1975 to 1978, and in 1985, she became a professor of contemporary Black and Hispanic art, painting and other fine arts courses.

Browne was driven by content over form, and over three decades her work spanned many interests and impulses. She often depicted her friends and contemporaries, but she was particularly compelled by the realistic, even unflattering aspects of humanity. Her first major body of work from the late 1960s, *Little Men*, incarnates male anger and frustration. Across over 100 paintings and drawings, middle-aged men—naked or in business suits—suck their thumbs and wave their arms with grotesquely contorted expressions. As Browne said in a 1968 interview for the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art, “I got into knowing that I could see into people, that I could get what I saw down which was very often not what other people saw.”

After a 1964 fellowship at the Huntington Hartford Foundation in Southern California, Browne began to paint landscapes and produced distinct series on subsequent trips to Nigeria, China and back to California. She also worked with Bob Blackburn’s Printmaking Workshop and contributed to the important portfolio, *Impressions: Our World, Volume I, 1973–74*, alongside Emma Amos, Benny Andrews, Eldzier Cortor, Norman Lewis, Vincent Smith and John Wilson.

Browne was a member of the influential feminist collective, Heresies, and contributed to its eponymous publication, including serving on the editorial board for its historic 1982 Vol 4. No. 3, *Racism is the Issue*. Along with May Stevens, Sylvia Sleigh, and 17 other women artists, Browne co-founded of SoHo 20 Gallery on Broome Street in 1973. She was also on the board of Feminist Institute, the first women’s art school in New York.

Browne received numerous awards throughout her life, including a MacDowell Colony Fellowship and recognition as a Distinguished Teacher of Art by the College Art Association. In 1986, she was honored by Mayor Koch of New York City for her achievements in the arts, and in 1990, she served as a Fulbright panelist. Browne’s work is held in numerous public collections including the Hatch-Billops Collection, Emory University, Atlanta; Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, Ireland; Museum of Modern Art, New York; Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York; and the Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford.

In 2022, two of Browne’s drawings from the permanent collection were exhibited in *Art as a Verb* at the Museum of Modern Art, celebrating the ever-changing rituals in pan-African art, and in 2019, Browne was included in *Postwar Women* at the Art Student League, commemorating the institution’s alumnae active between 1945 and 1965. In 2018, her work was featured in *Acts of Art and Rebuttal in 1971* at Hunter College, a revisiting of the 1971 protest exhibition organized by members of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition in response to the Whitney Museum’s refusal to appoint a Black curator for their survey *Contemporary Black Artists in America*.