

AFRICOBRA MANIFESTO?

“Ten in Search of a Nation”

Jeff R. Donaldson

Jeff R. Donaldson,
Wives of Shango,
1969. Watercolor on
paper, 30 × 22 in.
Azzi-Lusenhop Black
Arts Movement
Collection, courtesy
AfriCOBRA artists





AfriCOBRA group photo for an exhibition at the Faye Gold Gallery in Atlanta, Georgia. Photo: Adger Cowans

The whole thing started slow, real slow . . . suffering through an outdoor art fair in a wealthier Chicago suburb one hot July day in 1962, I asked Wadsworth Jarrell if he thought it would be possible to start a “negro” art movement based on a common aesthetic creed. And having little else to do—the wealthy anglos were not buying that day—we rapped about the hip aesthetic things that a “negro” group could do. When the sun went down, we packed up our jive, drove home to Chicago, and the lake breeze cooled the idea from our minds. But that was cool, it was only a daydream balloon ethered by ennui and the hot sun—we let it float. They were buoyant times. The “negro” sky was pregnant with optimistic fantasy bubbles in those days. Education, Integration, Accommoda-

tion, Assimilation, Overcomation, Mainstreamation. THE PROMISE OF AMERICA. We would be freed.

But this was before the Washington picnic, its eloquent dream and its dynamite reality at the church in Birmingham. This was before the very real physical end of Malcolm. And the end of the “negro” in many of us. And it was before James Chaney. Afro-American. Before Lumumba. Before Jimmie Lee Jackson. Before Selma. Black. Before the Meredith March. Black Power. Before Lutluoi, Sammy Young Jr., and the others. Before Watts and Detroit, Chicago, Harlem, and Newark. Black Nationalism. More Balloons, Separation, Self-determination. We would be free.



Jae Jarrell, *Urban Wall Suit*, 1970. Multicolored silk quilted patchwork, women's size 10, hand-painted graffiti, acrylic. Azzi-Lusenhop Black Arts Movement Collection, courtesy the artist



AfriCOBRA member Nelson Stevens

And the atmosphere of America became more electrically charged, the balloons jarringly shaken, many destroyed by the thunder and by the lightning of the real Amerika. And we (Jarrell, Barbara Jones, Carolyn Lawrence, me and other artists) bestirred ourselves, formed the OBAC (Organization of Black American Culture) artists' workshop and, following Bill Walker's lead, painted the *Wall of Respect* in Chicago. Black History. And thinking that we had done a revolutionary thing, we rested and nodded anew, among the few remaining balloons.

And then the dreamer's dreamer had his balloon busted on a Memphis motel balcony. And that was the last balloon. And it was Chicago again and Harlem again, and San Francisco and DC and Cleveland and everywhere. And COBRA was born.¹ And Law and Order. And off the pig. And we angrily realized that sleepers can die that way. Like Fred and Mark and very legally. And COBRA coiled angrily. Our coats were pulled. And the anger is gone. And yes, Imamu, it's Nation Time.

We are a family—COBRA, the Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists, is now AfriCOBRA—African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.² It's NATION TIME and we are searching. Our guidelines are our people—the whole family of African people, the African family tree. And in this spirit of familyhood, we have carefully examined our roots and searched our branches for those visual qualities that are more expressive of our people/art. Our people are our standard for excellence. We strive for images inspired by African people—experience and images that African people can relate to directly without formal art training and/or experience. Art for people and not for critics whose peopleness is questionable. We try to create images that appeal to the senses—not to the intellect. The images you see in an AfriCOBRA exhibition may be placed in three categories:

1. definition—images that deal with the past
2. identification—images that relate to the present
3. direction—images that look into the future

It is our hope that intelligent definition of the past and perceptive identification in the present will project nation-full direction in the future—look for us there, because that's where we're at.

This is “poster art”—images which deal with concepts that offer positive and feasible solutions to our individual, local, national, international, and cosmic problems. The images are designed with the idea of mass production. An image that is valuable because it is an original or is unique is not art—it is economics, and we are not economists.³ We want everybody to have some.

Among our roots and branches we have selected these qualities to emphasize in our image-making—

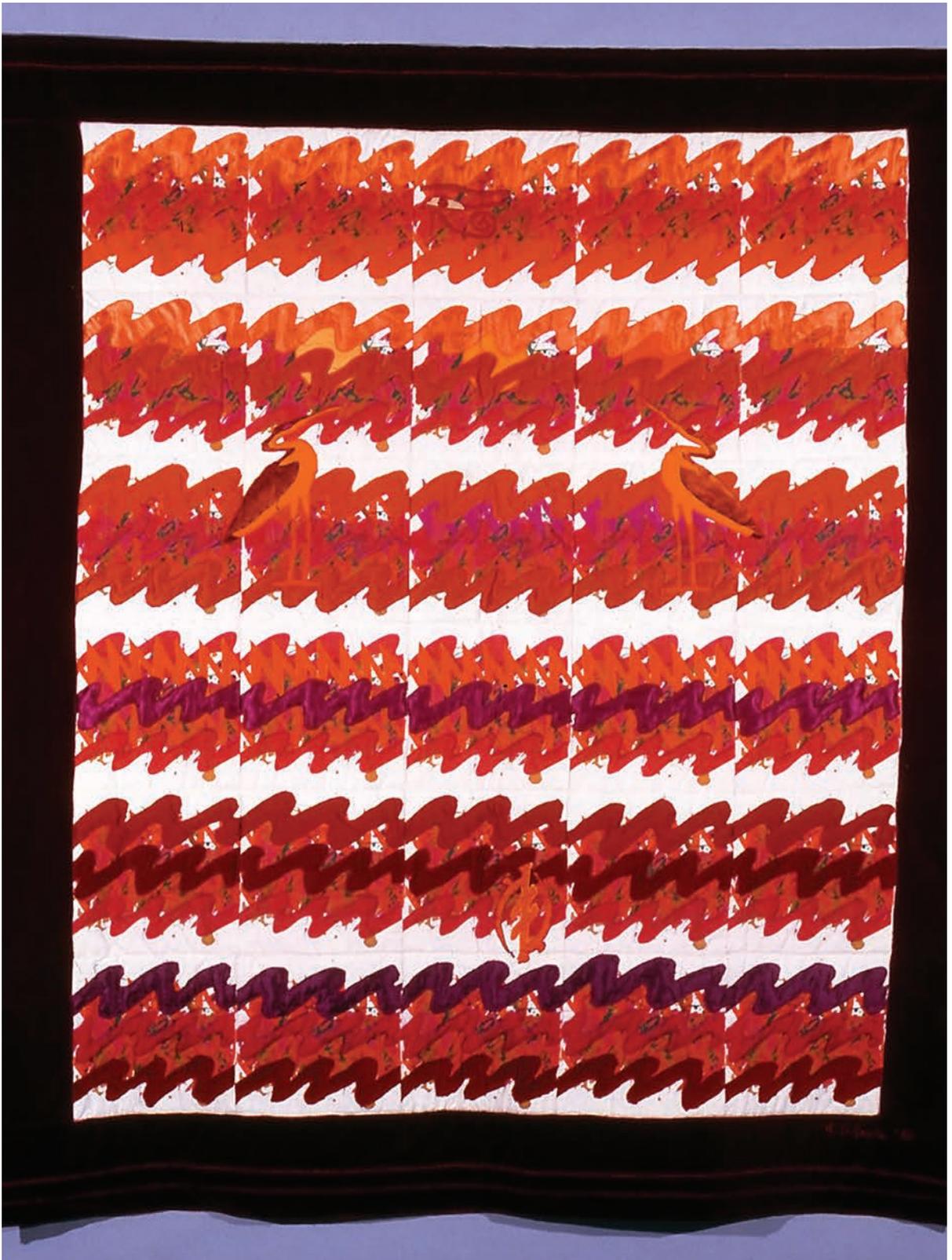
- (a) the *expressive awesomeness* that one experiences in African art and life in the U.S.A. like the Holiness church (which is about as close to home as we are in this country) and the demon that is the blues, Alcindor’s dunk and Sayer’s cut, the Hip walk and the Together talk.
- (c) *symmetry* that is *free*, repetition with change, based on African music and African movement. The *rhythm* that is easy syncopation and very very human. Uncontracted. The rhythm the rhythm the rhythm rhythm rhythm.
- (f) images that mark the spot where the real and the overreal, the plus and the minus, the abstract and the concrete—the reel and the replete meet. *Mimesis*.
- (g) *organic looking*, feeling forms. Machines are made for each other like we are made for each other. We want the work to look like the creator made it through us.
- (B) This is a big one . . . *Shine*—a major quality, a major quality. We want the things to shine, to have the rich luster of a just-washed ’Fro, of spit-shined shoes, of de-ashed elbows and knees and noses. The Shine who escaped the Titanic, the “li’l light of mine,” patent leather, Dixie Peach, Bar-BQ, fried fish, cars, *ad shineum!*
- (z) *Color color Color color* that shines, color that is free of rules and regulations. Color that shines. Color that is expressively awesome. Color that defines, identifies and directs. Superreal color for Superreal images. The superreality that is our every day all day thang. Color as bright and as real as the color dealing on the streets of Watts and the Southside and 4th street and in Roxbury and in Harlem, in Abidjian, in Port-au-Prince, Bahia and Ibadan, in Dakar and Johannesburg and everywhere we are. Coolade colors for coolade images for superreal people. Superreal images for SUPERREAL people. Words can do no more with the laws—the form and content of



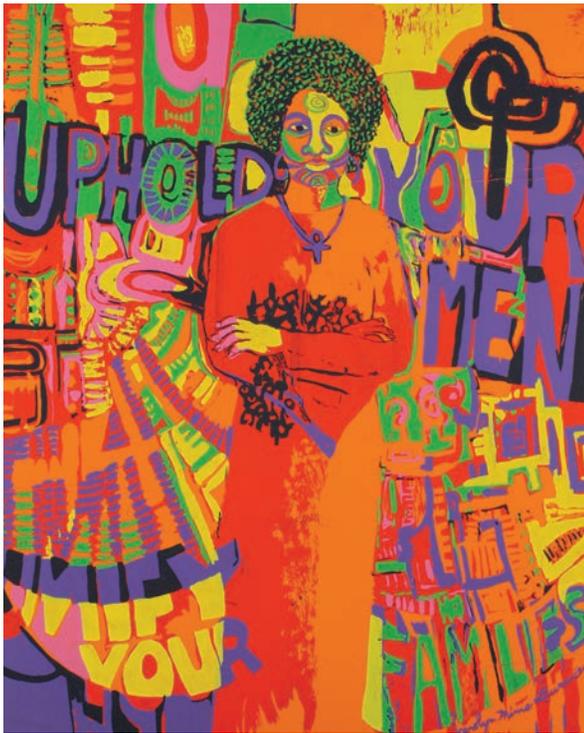
AfriCOBRA members Adger Cowans (left) and Frank Smith (right)



Adger Cowans



Michael Harris, *A Love Supreme*, 1982. Quilt with screened fabric, trapunto, appliqué, and cloth. Courtesy the artist



Carolyn Lawrence, *Uphold Your Men*, 1971. Screenprint on paper, 30 x 24 in. Azzi-Lusenhop Black Arts Movement Collection, courtesy the artist

our images. We are a family. Check the unity. All the rest must be sensed directly. Check out the image. The words are an attempt to posit where we are coming from and to introduce how we are going where we are going. Check out the image. Words do not define/describe relevant images. Relevant images define/describe themselves. Dig on the image. We are a family of image-makers and each member of the family is free to relate to and to express our laws in her/his individual way. Dig the diversity in unity. We can be ourselves and be together, too. Check.

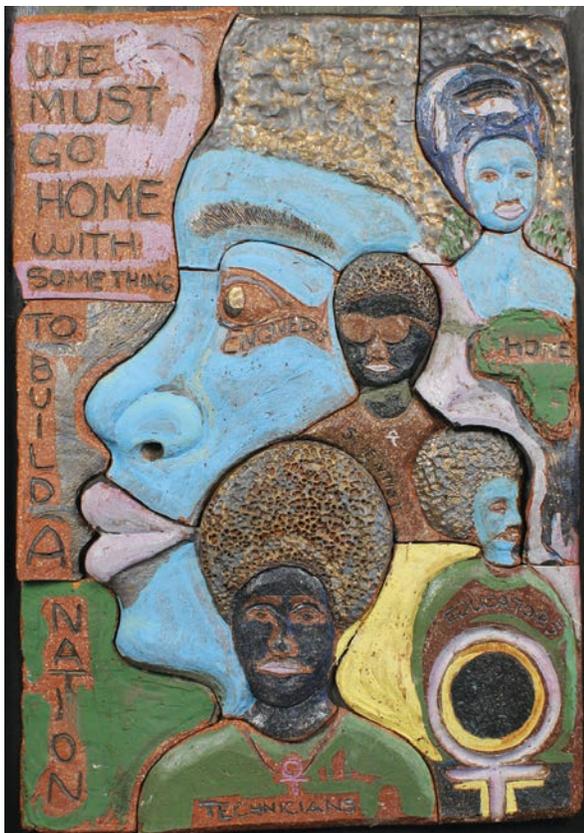
We hope you can dig it, it's about you and like Marvin Gaye says, "You're what's happening in the world today, baby."

Jeff R. Donaldson was a member of the Organization for Black American Culture, and in 1967 he organized the visual art workshop that created Chicago's seminal Wall of Respect mural. As a painter, Donaldson participated in over two hundred group and solo exhibitions internationally. He also served as a professor, art department chair, and dean of the College of Fine Arts at Howard University. He died in February 2004.

Notes

The *Manifesto* was first published in *Black World*, October 1970, 80–86.

1. At first we were five. Jeff Donaldson, Jae Jarrell, Wadsworth Jarrell, Barbara J. Jones, and Gerald Williams. 1968.
2. Then we were seven. Napoleon Henderson came in the fall of 1969. Nelson Stevens brought us SHINE during the same period.
3. Now we are ten, with Sherman Beck, Omar Lama, and Carolyn M. Lawrence. May 1970.



Howard Mallory, *We Must Go Home with Something*, ca. 1970. Glazed and painted stoneware construction in artist-made frame, 34 x 24 in. Azzi-Lusenhop Black Arts Movement Collection, courtesy the artist