



HAMMER

NOW DIG THIS!

ART & BLACK LOS ANGELES 1960-1980

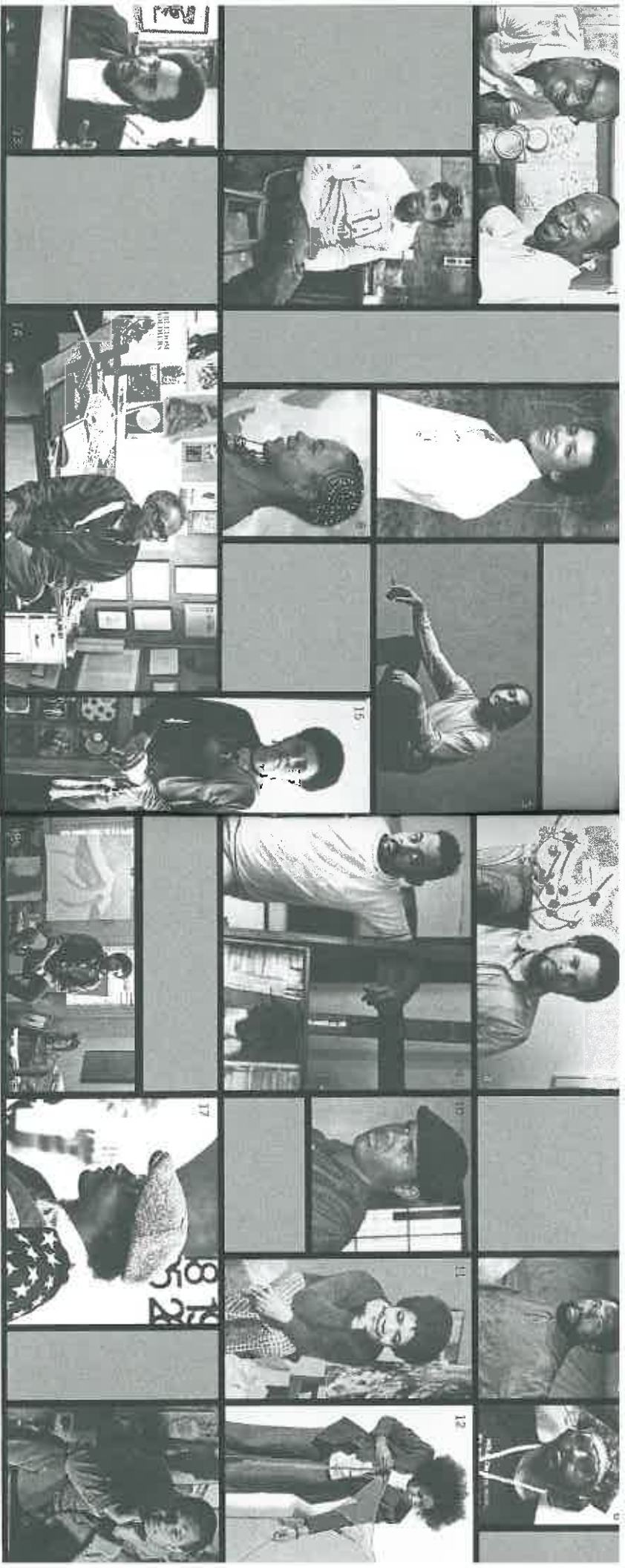
OCTOBER 2, 2011 - JANUARY 8, 2012

Alvin Ailey, J. Morgan Kousser, and others. The exhibition is a collaboration between the Hammer Museum and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibition is a collaboration between the Hammer Museum and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art. The exhibition is a collaboration between the Hammer Museum and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art.

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HAMMER Museum
10899 Wilshire Boulevard Los Angeles 90024
www.hammer.ucla.edu
310-443-7000



NOW DIG THIS!

ART & BLACK LOS ANGELES 1960-1980 chronicles the vital legacy of the city's African American artists. The work of these practitioners was animated to an extent by the civil rights and Black Power movements, reflecting the changing sense of what constituted African American identity and American culture. The power of the black community strengthened nationwide as racial discrimination began to lessen as a result of new legislation and changing social norms. As there were plentiful opportunities for African Americans to make a livelihood in Southern California, Los Angeles soon had a substantial black population, and social, political, and economic changes drew transplants from around the country. Galvanized by these transformations, black artists worked to form a cultural community that became an important part of the city's thriving arts scene.

Now Dig This! examines a pioneering group of African American artists whose work, connections, and friendships with other artists of varied ethnic backgrounds influenced the creative community and artistic practices that developed in Los Angeles during this historic period. The exhibition presents 140 artworks by these artists and the friends who influenced and supported them during this period and explores and celebrates the significant contributions of African Americans to the canon of Los Angeles-based art.

During the 1960s and 1970s, artists in Southern California developed an aesthetic language that reflected their West Coast surroundings and explored various approaches to art making, including assemblage, "finish fetish," California pop, installation, and performance. Several prominent black artists began their careers in the Los Angeles area, including Melvin Edwards, David Hammons, Maren Hassinger, Senga Nengudi, John Outterbridge, Noah Purifoy, and Betye Saar. They were part of a unique support system that involved a confluence of artists, curators, scholars, and galleries in Southern California. Samella Lewis, Suzanne Jackson, and Dale Brockman Davis and Alonzo Davis opened galleries that became important outlets and gathering places for black artists. Lewis, a noted art historian, also wrote books and articles that established a benchmark for the documentation and analysis of the work of contemporary African American artists.

1) **Noah Purifoy** (left) and **Judson Powell** at *66 Signs of Neon* exhibition, c. 1966. Courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation; 2) **Maren Hassinger** in front of *Twelve Trees*, Los Angeles, 1978; 3) **Fred Eversley**, 1969. Photo © Jerry McWilliam. Courtesy Craig Krull Gallery, Santa Monica; 4) **Dale Davis** in his Los Angeles studio, 1970; 5) **John Outterbridge** in his Los Angeles studio, 1970; 6) **Ulysses Jenkins** performing *Dream City*, 1981. Photo courtesy the artist; 7) **John Riddle** in his Los Angeles studio, 1970; 8) **Suzanne Jackson** at Artcum Gallery, 1970s. Courtesy the Artcum Gallery records, 1966-1990. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC; 9) **William Paired** in his Los Angeles studio, 1970; 10) **Melvin Edwards** in his Los Angeles studio in 1960s. Courtesy Melvin Edwards and Alexander Gray Associates, New York; 11) Announcement for **Samella Lewis** and **George Clark** exhibition at Brockman Gallery, Los Angeles, 1969. Courtesy Charles White Archive; 12) **Senga Nengudi** setting up for a performance of *ASAP X* in her Los Angeles studio, 1976. Courtesy Just Above Midtown Gallery Archive; 13) **Alonzo Davis** in his Los Angeles studio, 1970; 14) **Charles White** in his Los Angeles studio, 1970; 15) **Betye Saar** in her Los Angeles studio, 1970; 16) **Dan Condo** in his Los Angeles studio, 1970; 17) **David Hammons** in his Los Angeles studio, 1970; 18) **Daniel LaRue Johnson** at a school on behalf of the South Bronx Multi-Purpose Supplementary Educational Center, c. 1968. Courtesy Ron Myles/Info. Images 2, 4, 5, 7, 9, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17 courtesy Robert A. Nakamura.

In the fall of 1966 UCLA's Dickson Art Center inaugurated its new building with the exhibition *The Negro in American Art*. Although the exhibition was national in scope, a significant portion of the artists were from Los Angeles and were part of a group working with Noah Purifoy and the Watts Towers Arts Center to reclaim the remains of the Watts uprising, which had taken place just one year earlier, by using them to make art. Seven artists in the current exhibition—Melvin Edwards, Daniel LaRue Johnson, Noah Purifoy, Betye Saar, Raymond Saunders, Ruth G. Waddy, and Charles White—were among the more than forty who participated in the 1966 show. Moreover, three of the works presented in the earlier exhibition—Edwards's *The Lifted X* and *August the Squared Fire*, along with Johnson's *Big Red*, all from 1965—are on view here. *Now Dig This!* expands on this legacy and considers the activities of African American artists in Los Angeles during these pivotal years through a broader lens.

Frontrunners

Los Angeles began coming into its own as a cultural capital with strong gallery activity and art patronage in the late 1950s. By the early 1960s the city had become a major center for art and culture. The careers of white California-based artists Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, John Baldessari, and Robert Irwin blossomed in that decade. The Dwan Gallery and the Ferus Gallery thrived. *Artforum*, the landmark art publication begun in San Francisco in 1962, moved to Los Angeles in 1965 for two years before heading to New York. During this time, the dedication of black artists such as Betye Saar, Charles White, Melvin Edwards, William Pajaud, and Samella Lewis helped thrust Los Angeles into the forefront of the national arts scene. These artists constituted a central group whose artworks and activism led to changes in the reception of black artists and influenced a subsequent generation. They pushed for recognition, showing initially in unconventional spaces such as homes and private clubs and eventually gaining greater exposure in more conventional galleries, university settings, and museums.

In 1956 Charles White, an established artist known for his social realist style and lyrical renderings of the black figure, moved to Los Angeles from New York. Eventually showing with Heritage Gallery (1964) and becoming a professor at Otis Art Institute (1965), White served as a larger-than-life example. He not only influenced the Los Angeles art scene but also taught several of the artists whose work is included in *Now Dig This!*, including David Hammons. Melvin Edwards came to Los Angeles from Texas in 1955 to earn his college degree and began creating abstract sculptures, some of them meditations on both historical and contemporary incidents of violence against African Americans. Edwards became one of California's most prominent black artists of the period and had solo exhibitions at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art (1966) and New York's Whitney Museum of American Art (1970). William Pajaud was also a vital early figure in the black Los Angeles art world. He was a member of the short-lived but important Eleven Associated gallery in the early 1950s. He later became director of public relations for Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company, one of the largest African American-owned businesses in the West, where he developed the company's collection of works by African American artists.

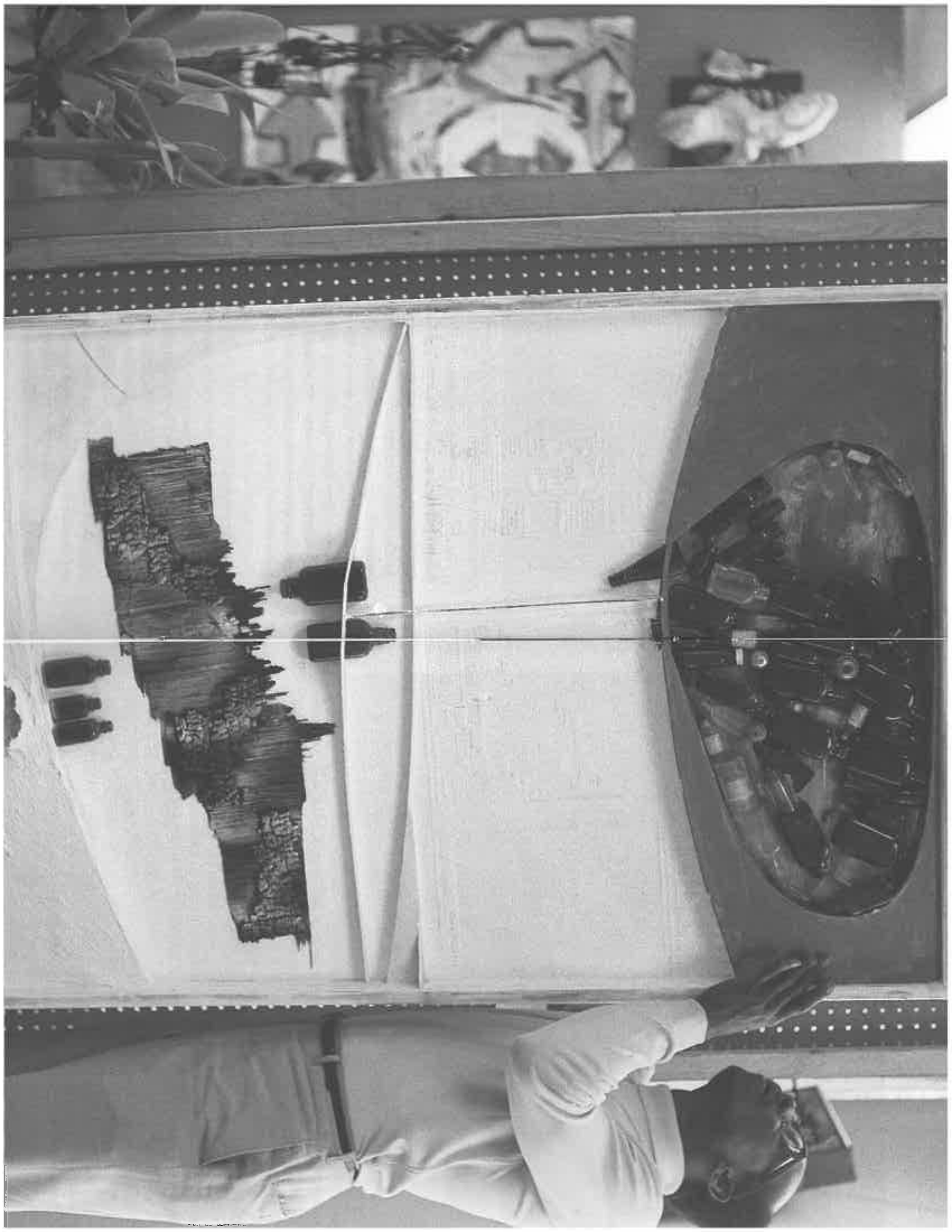


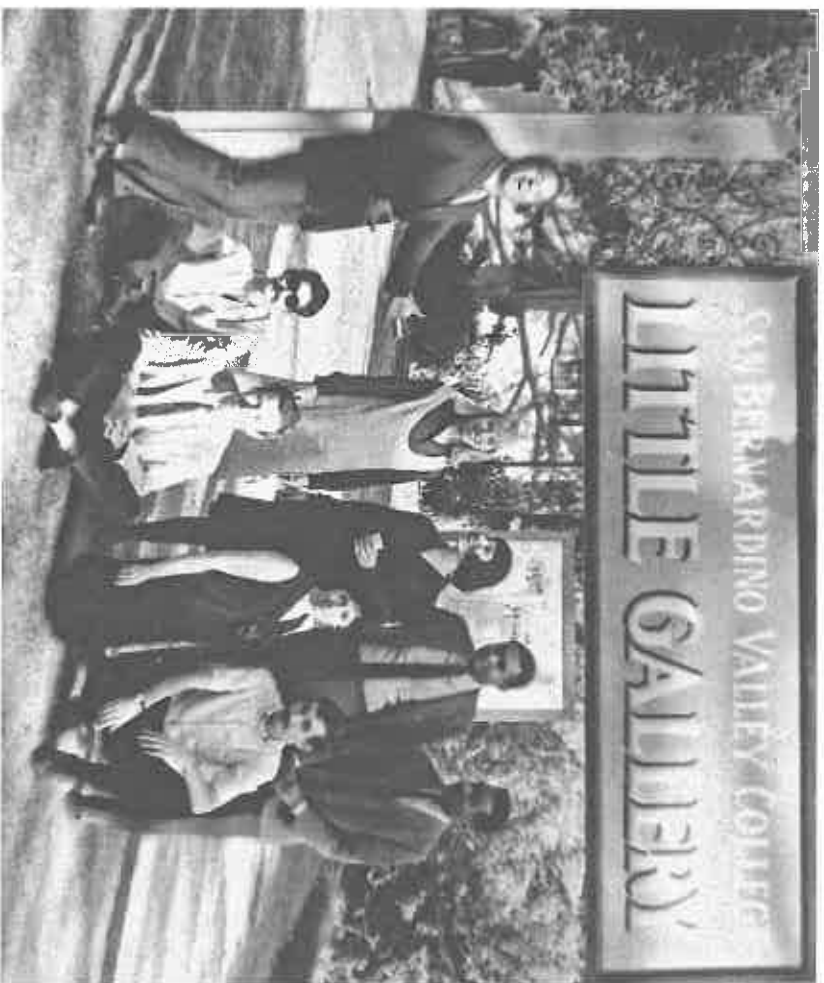
Above: "Assembling." On the set of the film *The Defiant Ones*, 1958. From left: Sidney Poitier, Charles White, Ivan Dixon, and Tony Curtis. Courtesy Charles White Archives.

Assembling

Assemblage is the technique of creating three-dimensional compositions from found objects. Similar to collage, which is two-dimensional, assemblage typically employs unexpected, nontraditional materials, which are combined to create a sculptural piece. The resulting artwork not only retains references to its original components but also takes on new narrative meanings, which may reflect the artist's personal experience or refer to a larger sociopolitical context. Assemblage is the technique most closely identified with West Coast art of the late 1950s and early 1960s. This art form gained greater recognition thanks to the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition *The Art of Assemblage* in 1961.

A number of black Southern California-based artists experimented with forms of assemblage. Daniel LaRue Johnson's black boxes and hybrid paintings were identified early on in more general discussions of West Coast assemblage, particularly in the 1960s, when his work was included in shows at Dwan Gallery and the Pasadena Art Museum. In 1965 the Watts rebellion caused many artists to rethink their approach to art making. Noah Purifoy claimed that the event truly made him an artist, while John Outterbridge and John T. Riddle employed assemblage in order to convey the intensity of this event and consider its potential as a representational strategy to explore the experience of African Americans. In 1966 Purifoy organized the exhibition *66 Signs of Neon*, praising the use of discarded and abandoned objects to create beautiful art. Betye Saar used the technique to highlight spiritual, political, and social concerns, as well as to question African American stereotypes in popular culture.

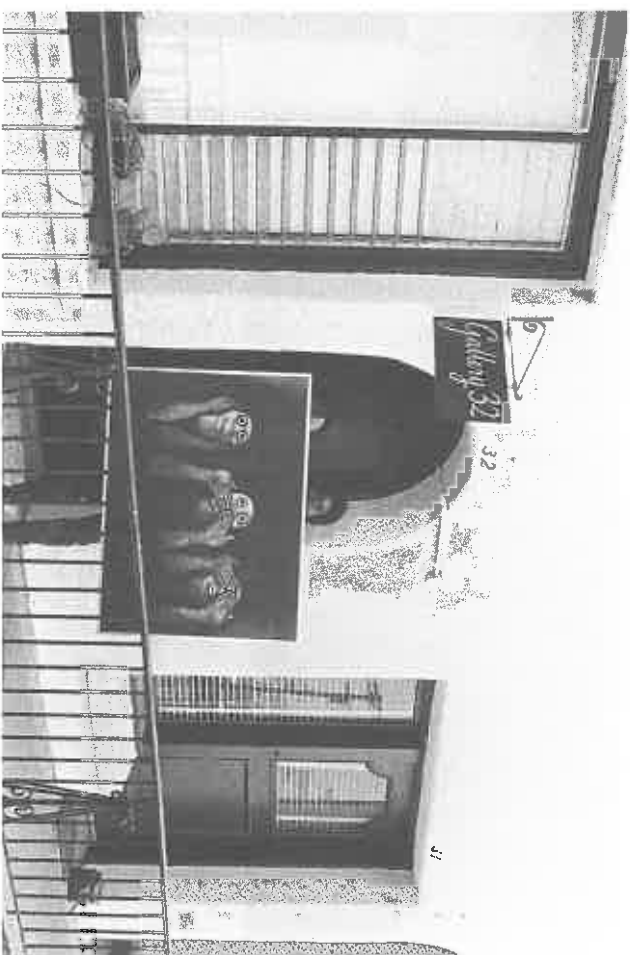




Los Angeles Snapshot

While it is crucial to explore the role of the African American community in Southern California during this period, it is important to note that there was a strong network of supporters and friends who stood behind these artists, some of whom were not black. During this period artistic collaboration and political activism crossed racial lines. In addition, Los Angeles-based artists were strongly connected to black artists across the state and the country. Artists from various ethnic backgrounds worked alongside the black artists featured in *Now Dig This!*, including Tyrus Wong, an Asian American who was a member of Eleven Associated, a co-op gallery founded by African American artists in the 1950s. Mark di Suvero, who was born in China to Italian parents, was another prominent artist working in California at this time. He and Melvin Edwards collaborated on the Artists' Tower of Protest (commonly known as the Peace Tower), an antiwar sculpture erected in 1966. Di Suvero also contributed to John Outterbridge's Containment Series by lending Outterbridge his power tools to craft the works. Academic institutions such as Chouinard Art Institute also facilitated introductions between artists, including Ron Miyashiro and Daniel LaRue Johnson. Mexican American artists such as Andrew Zemeño were also creating activist works during this period. Outterbridge, who at the time was running the Compton Communicative Arts Academy, worked with Chicano artists such as Zemeño and associated alternative institutions such as the Mechicano Art Center.

While racial boundaries were being confronted during this era, black female artists also engaged with the women's movement. In 1973 Betye Saar curated *Black Mirror*, an exhibition devoted to black women artists at the Womanspace Gallery, the predecessor to the Woman's Building. At that time she met Sheila Levrant de Bretteville, a renowned graphic designer who would go on to be a cofounder of the Woman's Building; they have collaborated on various projects since that time. Black artists in Los Angeles were also tied to African American artists working in Northern California. Bay Area-based artist Raymond Saunders was a friend of Betye Saar and Fred Eversley. Marie Johnson



(Calloway), also based in the Bay Area, exhibited concurrently with Saar at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1977. Calloway also organized the show *Twentieth Century Black Artists* at the San Jose Museum of Art. There were strong ties between black artists working in Northern and Southern California throughout this period, and this relationship is reflected in both the visual and the conceptual aspects of their work.

Artists/Gallerists

Lacking representation in mainstream institutions, African American artists opened their own venues in the 1960s and 1970s. Spaces such as Gallery 32, founded by painter Suzanne Jackson, and the Brockman Gallery, established by brothers Dale Brockman Davis and Alonzo Davis, a sculptor and a painter, respectively, became places to see

Previous page: Noah Purifoy installing 66 Signs of Neon exhibition at University of Southern California, Los Angeles, c. 1966. Photograph courtesy of Harry Drinkwater. Above, left–right: Artists in the Yes on 310 exhibition at Little Gallery, San Bernardino Valley College, 1964, including Melvin Edwards (far left), Ron Miyashiro (seated, far left), Virginia Jaramillo (standing, third from left), and Daniel LaRue Johnson (standing, second from right). Courtesy Virginia Jaramillo. Above: Timothy Washington in front of



cutting-edge work and havens for discussions, poetry readings, and fund-raisers for social causes. These spaces, and the artists who ran them, played an important role in the progressive struggles of the period while contributing to the diverse art scene in Los Angeles.

Among the most influential figures in the local arts community was Samella Lewis. She was active in Los Angeles in the 1960s as the director of education at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and taught art history at various area universities, most importantly Scripps College in Claremont. In the 1970s Lewis also opened several important galleries—the Gallery, Gallery Tanner, and MultiCul—as well as helping to found the Museum of African American Art. Lewis championed the work of black artists through books and magazines, editing the two-volume *Black Artists on Art* (1969–71), establishing the magazine *Black Art: An International Quarterly* in 1976, and two years later publishing the book *Art: African American* (still in print under the title *African American Art and Artists*).

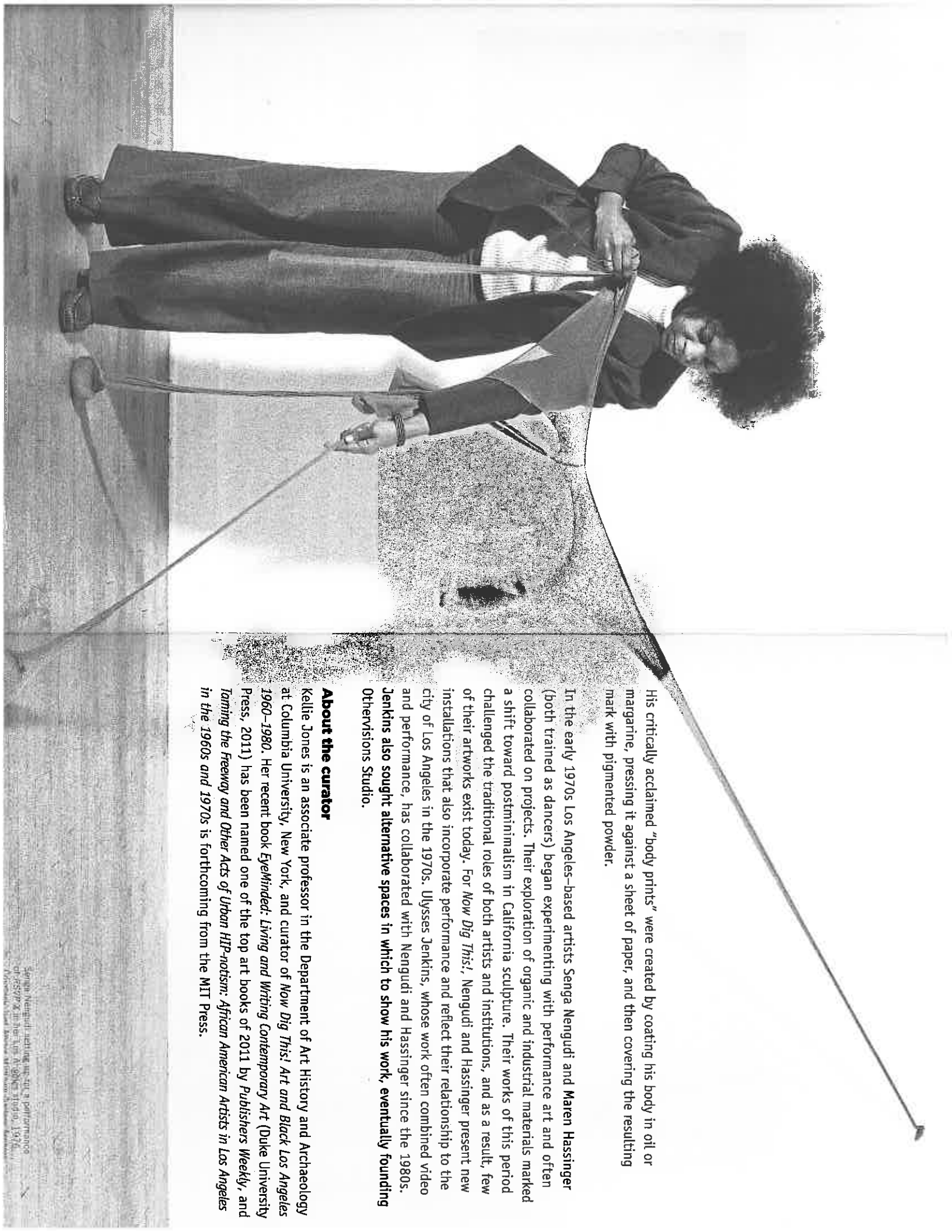
Suzanne Jackson founded Gallery 32 in 1968. Although it was open for only a few years, the gallery greatly contributed to Los Angeles's black art scene by exhibiting works by emerging artists while also providing a space for discussions about art, political activism, and society. Brockman Gallery, founded in 1967 by Dale Brockman Davis and Alonzo Davis, was a similar hub. Until its closing in 1989, it played a crucial role in supporting the careers of many young artists, including several of those featured in *Now Dig This!*

Left–right: Brockman Gallery at 4334 Degan Boulevard, Los Angeles, 1970s. Courtesy Noah Purifoy Foundation; Exhibition announcement, Brockman Gallery, Los Angeles, 1969. Courtesy Brockman Gallery Archive; Flyer for *West Coast Black Artists* juried exhibition, Brand Library Art Galleries, Glendale, California, 1976. Courtesy Brockman Gallery Archive.

This exhibition not only documents the friendships that these gallerists shared but also emphasizes their contributions as artists, which has often received much less critical attention than their gallery work.

Post/Minimalism & Performance

During the late 1960s and 1970s several artists retreated from using blatant narratives in their work and embraced minimal and conceptual practices, which were in some cases performance- or multimedia-based. By experimenting with these visual realms, artists were able to transcend preconceived notions of a “black aesthetic.” The artwork featured in this section is eclectic, reflecting the myriad styles, materials, and forms of the period. Fred Eversley, a Brooklyn-born engineer turned artist, was at the forefront of California minimalism with sculptures made from plastic resin that reflected the vibrant Venice Beach environment in which he was living. Eversley’s use of slick, often transparent or vibrantly colored industrial materials allied him with the Southern California “finch fetish” movement. David Hammons arrived in Los Angeles in the 1960s, studied with Charles White at Otis Art Institute, and had his first solo exhibition at Brockman Gallery in 1971. As Hammons’s practice evolved, he began to explore issues of spatial aesthetics through both performance and multimedia.



His critically acclaimed “body prints” were created by coating his body in oil or margarine, pressing it against a sheet of paper, and then covering the resulting mark with pigmented powder.

In the early 1970s Los Angeles-based artists Senga Nengudi and Maren Hassinger (both trained as dancers) began experimenting with performance art and often collaborated on projects. Their exploration of organic and industrial materials marked a shift toward postminimalism in California sculpture. Their works of this period challenged the traditional roles of both artists and institutions, and as a result, few of their artworks exist today. For *Now Dig This!*, Nengudi and Hassinger present new installations that also incorporate performance and reflect their relationship to the city of Los Angeles in the 1970s. Ulysses Jenkins, whose work often combined video and performance, has collaborated with Nengudi and Hassinger since the 1980s. **Jenkins also sought alternative spaces in which to show his work, eventually founding Othervisions Studio.**

About the curator

Kellie Jones is an associate professor in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University, New York, and curator of *Now Dig This! Art and Black Los Angeles 1960–1980*. Her recent book *EyeMinded: Living and Writing Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2011) has been named one of the top art books of 2011 by *Publishers Weekly*, and *Taming the Freeway and Other Acts of Urban HIP-hopism: African American Artists in Los Angeles in the 1960s and 1970s* is forthcoming from the MIT Press.