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CRITICS' PICK PARIS

“Black Paris: Artistic Circulations and Anti-Colonial Resistance, 1950–2000”

Centre Pompidou | Place Georges-Pompidou

March 19, 2025 - June 30, 2025

By Mara Hoberman 

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Roland Dorcély, *Léda et le cygne* (Leda and the Swan), 1958, oil on canvas, 58 3/4 × 46 1/8". Photo: Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI/Janeth Rodriguez-Garcia.

“Paris noir: Circulations artistiques et luttes anticoloniales, 1950–2000” (Black Paris: Artistic Circulations and Anti-Colonial Resistance, 1950–2000), the Pompidou’s penultimate show before a five-year renovation, harks back to an exhibition series that defined the institution at its naissance. Pontus Hultén’s “Paris–New York” (1977), “Paris–Berlin” (1978), and “Paris–Moscow” (1979) promoted a Paris-centric international artistic discourse. More than four decades on, “Paris Noir,” cocurated by Alicia Knock and an international team of curators and researchers, identifies the French capital as a nexus for Black artists hailing from the Caribbean, Africa, the Americas, and Europe over a period of more than fifty years. Drawing attention to artists traditionally omitted from the art-historical cannon, this

Organized in thematic chapters progressing chronologically, works by one hundred fifty artists are linked to the Black experience through writers and activists of the time. James Baldwin articulates why Black Americans (Beauford Delaney, Ed Clark, Kelly Williams, and many others) often felt like they experienced less racism in France than in the United States. Édouard Glissant, Suzanne and Aimé Césaire, and Léopold Sédar Senghor, meanwhile, describe a harsher reality for African and Caribbean artists. Artistic style and historical reception range widely throughout the exhibition. While Clark garnered attention for “Untitled (Vétheuil),” 1968, a series of round paintings made during a sojourn at Joan Mitchell’s studio, Haitian artist Roland Dorcély, a student of Fernand Léger, encountered Parisian gallerists who would not even look at his work and reportedly expected him to be wearing “a loincloth, a quiver, and arrows.”

A section called “Revolutionary Solidarity in Paris” highlights art made in reaction to the Caribbean independence movements, the May ’68 uprisings, and the French-Algerian War. One example is Cuban-born Guido Llinás’s *Pintura negra* (Black Painting), 1968, which features a torn protest poster covered by thick black brushstrokes. This work, as well as Llinás’s archives, have been acquired by the Pompidou through the “Paris Noir Fund,” established to add Black artists to the permanent collection. Ongoing research, outreach, and acquisitions (thirty-plus artworks so far) beyond this one show will hopefully bear heavily the Pompidou’s renaissance.

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