The **Green Family Art Foundation** is pleased to present *Black Abstractionists: From Then ‘til Now*, curated by Dexter Wimberly, opening on **October 8,2022** and remaining on view until **January 29, 2023**.

*Black Abstractionists: From Then ‘til Now* brings together a multigenerational group of 38 pioneering, mid-career, and emerging Black artists. The history of Black artists working in abstraction is inseparable from the history of modern and contemporary art. While the older artists presented in this exhibition were often marginalized by the art world power structure of museums, galleries, and collectors for most of the 20th-century, their contributions, in the form of subject matter, innovation and style were inexorable. Initially inspired by the jazz of Black urban life, followed by one of the most radical periods in 20th-century American politics, the Black Power era, Black artists were making abstract art that was powerful, relevant, and salient. The artists that followed created abstract art inspired by the embers of those flames, with a more social conscious and Black community flavor. The current generation has taken these embers and transformed them into a more expanded heat, one that is more personal and revealing.

Artists include:

**Alma Thomas**

**Hale Woodruff**

**Beauford Delaney**

**Charles Alston**

**Norman Lewis**

**Thornton Dial**

**Jack Whitten**

**Ed Clark**

**Sam Gilliam**

**Frank Bowling**

**Daniel LaRue Johnson**

**Virginia Jaramillo**

**Melvin Edwards**

**Mark Bradford**

**Ficre Ghebreyesus**

**Odili Donald Odita**

**Julie Mehretu**

**Shinique Smith**

**Theaster Gates**

**David Hammons**

**Howardena Pindell**

**Mary Lovelace O’Neal**

**William T. Williams**

**McArthur Binion**

**Fred Eversley**

**Stanley Whitney**

**Glenn Ligon**

**Leonardo Drew**

**Rick Lowe**

**Kevin Beasley**

**Spencer Lewis**

**Oscar Murillo**

**Reginald Sylvester II**

**Rachel Jones**

**Vaughn Spann**

**Gabriel Mills**

**Jadé Fadojutimi**

**Michaela Yearwood-Dan**

A text by curator Dexter Wimberly accompanies the exhibition.

***Black Abstractionists: From then ‘til Now***

By: Dexter Wimberly

*Black Abstractionists: From then ‘til Now* brings together a multigenerational group of 38 pioneering, mid-career, and emerging Black artists. The history of Black artists working in abstraction is inseparable from the history of modern and contemporary art. While they were often marginalized by the art world power structure of museums, galleries, and collectors for most of the 20th-century, the contributions of Black artists were inexorable. During one of the most radical periods in 20th-century American politics, the Black Power era, a group of Black artists was working with what was, and still is, one of the most radical forms of art — abstraction. Radicalism is relative, though, and in this case politics and culture were on different tracks.[[1]](#endnote-2)

In America throughout the 1960s — as the civil rights movement crested, calls for Black Power sounded, and the Black Panther Party was birthed — the aesthetics of Black artists became itself a kind of revolutionary proposition. In 1965, after the assassination of Malcolm X, but several months before the passage of the Voting Rights Act (landmark legislation that prohibited racial discrimination in the American electoral process), the poet LeRoi Jones (who would later change his name to Amiri Baraka) founded the Black Arts Repertory Theater School in Harlem — effectively inaugurating the Black Arts Movement. The writer Larry Neal, his collaborator, described the movement’s goal to create art that “speaks directly to the needs and aspirations of Black America,” one objective of which was nothing less than “a radical reordering of the Western cultural aesthetic.” Figurative painting and sculpture were key components in how this reordering took place, and some of the most enduring visuals from the movement were explicitly realist depictions of Black people, their heroes, history, and their activism.[[2]](#endnote-3)

It took courage, focus, self-awareness, and ambition to be a Black artist making abstract paintings at that time. It would seem at that moment that certain Black artists were being backed into a corner: on the one side, they were excluded by mainstream institutions and the prevailing critical establishment, while on the other they were browbeaten by Black art watchdogs demanding adherence to a Black art orthodoxy.[[3]](#endnote-4) The relationship between Black abstraction and Black activism was tenuous and philosophically fraught. White art audiences, including those limited number of galleries, who were willing to inventory, sell, and buy

art made by Black artists, expected that art to embody the experiences and trauma of racism, which often meant didactic figuration. A certain tradition of Black activism also considered abstract art too ingratiating to mainstream Euro- American tastes, too mute on the pressing realities of racism.[[4]](#endnote-5)

The issue concerning “authenticity” and “the Black experience” is generally discussed in relation to the Black Arts Movement and its preference for images that contested the pervasive vilification, ridicule, and disparagement of African Americans in US popular culture. But the split that imagined “African American artist” as incompatible with “abstract artist” predates the Black Arts Movement by decades. As abstraction gained momentum after World War II, Black American artists were at the forefront of

aesthetic debates, but unlike their white counterparts, they also had to contend with an art world that saw them first as Black and second as artists. In his 1946 essay “The Negro Artist’s Dilemma,” Romare Bearden criticized the tendency to evaluate work by Black artists based on “sociological rather than aesthetic” criteria. Although Bearden himself worked in a more representational vein, he was acutely aware that as long as the sociological dominated the conversation, the formal innovations of both figural and abstract artists of color would continue to be dismissed.[[5]](#endnote-6)

In all instances, Black representation has involved the confluence of an artist’s individual perspective or desire for personal agency with the discourse of these movements circumscribing the parameters of Blackness in art. There has been a tendency toward figuration and realism in these movements, which have operated on principles of transparency, immediacy, authority, and authenticity. These well-meaning efforts ultimately reinforced a reductive notion of “Black art,” or the idea of an essence locatable in works of art by Black artists.[[6]](#endnote-7)

1. Holland Cotter, “Energy and Abstraction at the Studio Museum in Harlem,” *The New York Times*, April 7, 2006. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. Megan O’Grady, “Once Overlooked, Black Abstract Painters Are Finally Given Their Due,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2021. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Dawoud Bey, “The Black Artist as Invisible (Wo)man,” *High Times, Hard Times: New York Painting 1967 – 1975*. (Independent Curators International, New York, D.A.P. / Distributed Art Publishers, New York. 2006), 103. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Ben Davis, “Yes, Black Women Made Abstract Art Too, as a Resounding New Show Makes Clear,” *artnet News*, October 20, 2017. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Spectrum: Abstraction in African American Art, 1950-1975 (Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, New York City). Exhibition press release. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Adrienne Edwards, “Blackness in Abstraction,” *Art in America Magazine*, January 5, 2015.

**About the Curator:**

Dexter Wimberly is an American entrepreneur and curator based in Hayama, Japan. He’s the co-founder and CEO of the online education platform CreativeStudy. Wimberly has organized exhibitions in galleries and museums around the world. Prior to his curatorial career, Wimberly was the managing partner of the New York-based advertising and marketing agency August Bishop, representing a diverse array of clients including Adidas, The Coca-Cola Company, and HBO. Wimberly is also a Senior Critic at New York Academy of Art, and the founder and director of the Hayama Artist Residency.

**About the Green Family Art Foundation:**

The Green Family Art Foundation is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization.

The foundation’s mission is to provide a venue for, make grants to museums for the benefit of, and educate others about contemporary artists we believe communicate important ideas that are relevant and discussion worthy today and in the future.

The exhibition is located at 2111 Flora Street, Suite 110, Dallas, TX 75201. Hours are Wednesday-Friday, 11am-5pm and Saturday-Sunday, 11am-6pm. Admission is free.

For press inquiries, please reach out to info@greenfamilyartfoundation.org or call 214-274-5656. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)