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*Gallery 32 and Its Circle*

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1 LMU Drive, Los Angeles

(310) 338-2880 <http://cfa.lmu.edu/laband>

by *Scarlet Cheng*

Gallery 32 and Its Circle

For a brief time in the late 1960s, Gallery 32, dedicated to exhibiting emerging artists -- often ones of African American descent -- operated in the historic Granada Building on North Lafayette Street, near MacArthur Park. To constitute an overview of Gallery 32's brief but important history, curators Carolyn Peter and Damon Willick retrieved the works of some twenty artists who showed at Gallery 32 during its two-year lifespan. Some of the artists -- Betye Saar and John Outterbridge, for example -- are now well known, but most are far less familiar, including gallery founder Suzanne Jackson. A student at Otis Art Institute nearby, Jackson was inspired by her teacher, Charles White, who believed that art could be an effective tool for social activism and change. (Although White did not show at Gallery 32, he was included in the survey because of his influence.) Jackson lived above the gallery and maintained it not only as a showcase but as a lively gathering place for artists, activists, and their friends. While not all the work in this retrospective was actually shown there, all the work is from the period.

Gallery 32 existed at the end of the Civil Rights era and during the heyday of the Black Power Movement, and many works in the show deal with black identity and black pride. Part of this was expressed in positive body imagery. For example, in Elizabeth Leigh-Taylor's *Worshipper* a black man raises up both arms, radiating life and energy, and in her *Sharona* a woman with deep-set eyes and full lips looks out with a calm and steady gaze, certain of where she is and where she will be going in life. White's large work on paper, *Seed of Love*, depicts a very pregnant black woman from the side, emphasizing her swelling form as a happy, forward-looking moment. Other works in the show suggested the struggle of African Americans against racial discrimination and inequality. David Hammons's *The Door* (admissions office) is a full-sized door, standing upright, with an inset glass pane and the imprint of two hands, a face, and a torso -- the collision of a body trying to get in, to gain admission. It speaks to the exclusion of black people from colleges and universities in particular, but also from mainstream institutions under the control of ruling-class Caucasians.

Some works are more subtle in their point of view. Betye Saar's early works reveal a clear and distinctive aesthetic vision, whether in prints or in assemblages. Inspired by Joseph Cornell, she placed found and recycled objects in boxes, sometimes dividing them into compartments, as in *Omen* and *Nine Mojo Secrets*. A collage by Dan Concholar -- an inverted triangle outlined in turquoise sitting inside a torn-away outer canvas -- seemed to fuse Lucio Fontana and Minimalism. Its title, *African Cosmology*, hints at the artist's own reference point.

This important show uncovered a forgotten history and provided a glimpse of a moment when artists felt vibrant and hopeful, believing that art could change the world -- a far cry from the pervading cynicism of today! Underscoring that history were three vitrines filled with announcements, notes, and price lists, as well as photographs of artists and installations. Co-curator Carolyn Peter, director of the Laband Gallery, hopes that this small survey will instigate more research and lead to a larger show about Gallery 32. May that hope be realized.