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By Dorothy Spears

## '60s Legacy, Personal Histories

LESLIE HEWITT was not yet a glimmer in her parents' eye when the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington. Still, whenever Ms. Hewitt, a 30-year-old artist, sees images of the crowds at this 1963 event, she searches the more than 200,000 faces for her mother.

"I know I'll never find her," said Ms. Hewitt, whose mother attended with her church group from Queens. Yet "knowing she was there, part of that historic moment made the civil rights movement very much a part of my life," she said. "It kept me from taking it for granted."

Ms. Hewitt is among the six individuals and one artist collective included in "After 1968: Contemporary Artists and the Civil Rights Legacy," an exhibition opening on Saturday at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta. Organized to commemorate the 40th anniversary of Dr. King's assassination, the show explores the enduring relevance of social change in the works of many African-American artists born in or after 1968.

A generation removed from the civil rights movement, the artists selected for "After 1968" — Ms. Hewitt, Deborah Grant, Adam Pendleton, **Jefferson Pinder**, Nadine Robinson, Hank Willis Thomas and the collective Otabenga Jones & Associates — are skeptical of how history, language and images are presented in popular culture. In different ways, and through a variety of mediums, their works demonstrate that history is not delivered intact by a single authority but by an accumulation of individual and collective voices.

Robert Pruitt, a founding member of the four-member Otabenga Jones & Associates, said many of these voices continue to be omitted or overlooked. "Especially when you're talking about black history, the full and complete truth is something we've had to seek out on our own," he said by phone from his home in Houston. (Ota Benga, a Congolese Pygmy, was put on display at the Bronx Zoo in the early 1900s.)

Mr. Pruitt said pivotal moments in black history are typically presented solely as either a tragedy or a struggle. He cited the murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in Mississippi in 1955. He said what interests him and his contemporaries most is not the killing of a teenager from Chicago visiting the segregated South but his mother's insistence on keeping the coffin open at the public funeral, even though Emmett's face had been beaten beyond recognition.

Usually the politics of such resistance "are whitewashed," he said. "That kind of energy, that stance, is sucked out" of the history and reportage.

For the exhibition Otabenga Jones & Associates is distributing packets that include a children's activity booklet, posters and buttons commemorating ideas and events of the black liberation movement to a specified ZIP code in the Atlanta area where few residents are museumgoers, Mr. Pruitt said.

In an attempt to tap multiple histories the artists featured in the High Museum exhibition often recycle photographs, images and sound effects from popular media to show how subtly yet powerfully a meaning can be manipulated by context.

At a photo lab in TriBeCa, Mr. Thomas recently scrolled through images of his digitally altered photographs on a laptop before arriving at his well-known image of the shaved head of an African-American man bearing a raised scar in the shape of a Nike logo.

Mr. Thomas said his work is intended to elicit comparisons between the branding of slaves by their owners and the marketing strategies used to brand today's athletes. "Today we brand ourselves," he said. "Professional athletes are prided for their size and how well they take orders."

Mr. Thomas's fascination with the practice began with an object lesson. In 2000 his cousin Songha Willis was killed after an armed robbery upon leaving a club in Philadelphia with two friends. "The worst part about it," he said, "we didn't even have to ask if the killers were black." They were.

Mr. Thomas responded to the killing by making photographs that plumbed the issue of black male identity and branding.

For the High Museum show he is exhibiting advertisements from 1968 to the present that are directed toward African-Americans, because, he said, "we can learn as much about ourselves from advertising as we can from daily life."

Ms. Grant also recycles advertisements, but her works have a handmade quality and are created with paper and scissors. In her Harlem studio recently she rifled through a ragged copy of Life magazine that she had already cut many images from. Pointing to a 1970s advertisement for Gaines-Burgers dog food, she said, "Even something like that might be politically charged, depending on what it's next to."

Ms. Grant emphasized that although she collects magazines from antiques stores and thrift shops, she is not interested in nostalgia and has no qualms about eviscerating them. They're "not hard to cut up at all," she said.

She affixes the clippings to painted panels and then adds other "found" symbols like the scribbled crown, attributed to the Latin Kings gang, which was co-opted by the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Growing up in Coney Island, Ms. Grant noticed the crown and other tags on burned-out buildings and trains, which marked gang territory, she said. "If you were beaten up or something happened to you, someone pointed to the tag" on a wall or subway car, Ms. Grant explained. Now she sees these images — and the very act of tagging — as intrinsically political.

While some artists in "After 1968" focus on how they were defined by culture and history, others are more concerned with events from which they felt excluded. "I'm really interested in moments I didn't exist in," said Ms. Hewitt, a photographer and video artist, standing on a recent afternoon before her installation at the 2008 Whitney Biennial.

Although the Atlanta exhibition centers on recent photographs taken in an empty store in Queens, it also includes snapshots from holiday gatherings taken by members of her family before she was born. For her such everyday imagery serves as a reminder that family life and community can flourish during times of upheaval and protest. "When it comes to the black

power movement, there is so much documentation of violence, discontent and aggression,” she said. “I didn’t always see my personal story.”

Ms. Robinson, a sculptor and sound artist, found her personal story missing from art history, particularly the canonical story of Modernism.

She recounts the moment in 1993 when she said she found her artistic voice. “I was standing in one of the galleries at the Museum of Modern Art” at a retrospective of Minimalist white paintings by Robert Ryman, she said. The exhibition “took my breath away,” she said. Then, glancing around the gallery, she realized she was the only black person there.

“I saw myself,” she said, “and I didn’t see myself.” She bought a three-inch black speaker from a surplus supply store, returned to her studio, where she had been making her own series of white paintings, and placed it in the middle of a white canvas. That was the beginning of the “Boom” paintings, her first mature series.

Ms. Robinson’s piece for the Atlanta show invokes the Kelly Ingram Park protest in May 1963 in Birmingham, Ala., in which more than 600 children were confronted by firemen wielding high-pressure water hoses and policemen with attack dogs. Her work will juxtapose the sound of water and dogs barking with gospel moans and Pentecostal sermons.

A companion show to “After 1968” at the High Museum addresses the civil rights years proper. “Road to Freedom: Photographs of the Civil Rights Movement: 1956-68” includes more than 200 photographs drawn primarily from the museum’s permanent collection. Among these are a dozen photographs by Bruce Davidson, including several protest images that have inspired the younger artists in “After 1968.”

In an interview in his apartment-cum-studio on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, Mr. Davidson recalled embarking in 1961 on what would become a four-year odyssey across the South documenting protest marches and demonstrations by the Freedom Riders. “I didn’t really know what I was getting into,” he said.

Riding from state to state, he said, his talent in the 50-yard dash was crucial to his success at shooting from close range and then escaping without getting caught or having his film confiscated.

Forty years after Dr. King’s assassination the unresolved nature of so many issues involving race makes an exhibition like “After 1968” a mixed bag for some of the artists.

“I’m a little ambivalent about being pigeonholed,” Mr. Pendleton said recently at a TriBeCa silk-screen studio, where his paintings for “After 1968” were being fabricated. As he spoke, two employees dragged a squeegee across a giant screen, pressing the black letter “L” onto a series of large canvases. Each canvas will present variations on the words “black Dada,” with visual references to Sol Lewitt’s incomplete cube.

If these works had not been destined for “After 1968,” Mr. Pendleton said, he would have made them anyway. He added, “You have to ask yourself: Is an exhibition like this a kind of segregation in itself?”

Interviewed by phone from Atlanta, the show’s curator, Jeffrey Grove, responded, “For any exhibition with a thematic ideology, that’s going to be an issue.” He said the High Museum hoped eventually to acquire works by the “After 68” artists for its permanent collection.

Mr. **Pinder**, a video artist from Washington, said that when he teaches art theory at the University of Maryland, his students often discuss the issue of artists being identified by race.

“One of the things we always wonder is, ‘Can we get beyond this?’ ” he said. “At this point, we can’t. So the question I ask my students is, ‘Why not face it head on?’ ”