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Lisa E. Farrington. *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2005. 354 pp. $55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-516721-4.

Reviewed by Lisa Gail Collins (Department of Art and Program in Africana Studies, Vassar College)
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African-American Women's Creativity

In 1981, the gallery at Illinois State University held the first historical survey of art by women of African descent. Curated by Jacqueline Fonvielle-Bontemps, "Forever Free: Art by African-American Women, 1862-1980" was the earliest comprehensive exhibition to focus on the visual and material manifestations of black women's creativity in the United States. In launching this ambitious traveling show, Jacqueline Fonvielle-Bontemps and her collaborator Arna Alexander Bontemps sought both to enrich the historical record and to enhance present circumstance. In essence, they hoped the show would: "Make it possible, for the first time, to effectively include the art created by black women in America in art history curriculums; that the show will help broaden the public image of black women in America, an image which has rarely acknowledged the artistic creativity of black women, let alone granted them an aesthetic sensibility; that it would, if given the opportunity, encourage interest and participation in the graphic and plastic arts by black women of all ages; and hopefully, that it would make a positive contribution to the development of a valid and meaningful critical standard for the art black women have created in America." [1] Featuring over one hundred works by forty-nine different artists, including work by Edmonia Lewis, Meta Warrick Fuller, Nancy Elizabeth Prophet, Augusta Savage, Selma Burke, Lois Mailou Jones, Elizabeth Catlett, Margaret Burroughs, Betye Saar, Vivian E. Browne, Faith Ringgold, Camille Billops, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Helen Evans Ramsaran, Suzanne Jackson, Stephanie Pogue, and Maren Hassinger, this landmark exhibition was accompanied by a vital catalogue with essays by David Driskell, Roslyn Walker, and Keith Morrison.

Acknowledging her debt to this seminal show, art historian Lisa E. Farrington, in *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists*, expands upon this formative project and graciously offers us the most comprehensive survey to date of art by African American women artists from the antebellum era to the present day. Divided into two parts, a historical survey and an overview of the contemporary scene, and largely organized around individual artists and their work in relation to the key social, cultural, and artistic contexts, the book spans nineteenth-century quilts to twenty-first-century new media art. In her opening chapter "The Image," Farrington sketches the changing portrayal of African women and women of African descent in Western fine art and popular culture from antiquity to the 1970s. She explains that conventional portrayals took a decidedly distorted turn in the eighteenth century as "transatlantic exploration and colonization" (p. 13) and "the European need to dominate Africa" (p. 13) worked to negatively inform dominant images of black people in the Western imagination. A blend of social history and art history, this first chapter provides the basis for one of Farrington's driving interests: to show how African-American women artists have struggled against burdened representations by recasting their own images through the "weapon" (p. 25) of the visual arts.

Centered around issues of imagery and identity the following chapters, in Farrington's words, comprise "a chronological assessment of African-American women artists, analyzing the impediments they faced in gaining access to the realm of the professional artist, evaluating the art they produced, and examining how both their art and their exploits have reinvented their public and private identities" (p. 4). The chapters in part 1 examine the art of formally and non-formally trained nineteenth-century artists; Jazz Age art, artists, and ideals; New Deal cultural workers and their work; and art and activism in the context of progressive social movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. Organized around stylistic developments, the chapters in part 2 offer new analyses of contemporary artists working abstractly, conceptually, vernacularly, and in relation to the discourses of pluralism and postmodernism.

Perhaps chapter 4, "The Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro," best demonstrates Farrington's driving interest in visual misrepresentation and artistic correction. After delineating the climate of confidence, optimism, and pride that characterized the Jazz Age, and the reality of prejudice, violence, and repression beneath it, the author explores the art of Laura Wheeler Waring, Lois Mailou Jones, and Beulah Ecton Woodard and discusses how their art of the 1920s and 1930s worked to supplant images of a mythic "Old Negro", entangled in the pathology of slavery, with images of a modern, autonomous, and prideful "New Negro."

Farrington's focus on the creativity of African-American women offers new insights on visual art and its histories. For example, in comparison to earlier surveys of art by African-American artists, including those by David Driskell (1976), Samella Lewis (1978), Romare Bearden and Harry Henderson (1993), Richard Powell (1997), and Sharon Patton (1998), Farrington's chapter on the Harlem Renaissance, or New Negro movement, is notably slim. After pondering Farrington's chapter, one suspects that previous surveys privileged this sociocultural movement by centering arts and ideas produced by men. When considered without male-produced art, as Farrington considers it, the movement appears to warrant much less attention than is customary. This critical insight, however, is only implicitly made; it is neither explicitly theorized nor discussed in the book. Yet this striking disparity with earlier surveys begs discussion of the larger gender dynamics of the movement and its era. How, for example, were processes of inclusion and identification gendered during the New Negro movement?

Though the need for further theorizing on the impact of gender is critical to this chapter, the book as a whole would also benefit (as my work would too) from further articulation of just how and why black women visual artists can serve as a vital organizing concept and why gender is, to borrow Joan Wallach Scott's phrase, "a useful category of historical analysis." [2] For me, the crucial question for students and scholars is: What do we learn about nineteenth- and twentieth-century art and history by foregrounding the art and lives of African-American women? Building on the seminal 1981 exhibition "Forever Free" and the work of her predecessors, Lisa Farrington in *Creating Their Own Image: The History of African-American Women Artists* brings us closer than ever to the answers.

Notes

[1]. Arna Alexander Bontemps and Jacqueline Fonvielle-Bontemps, *Forever Free: Art by African-American Women, 1862-1980* (Alexandria, VA: Stephenson, 1980), p. ii.

[2]. Joan Wallach Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 28.

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