

## WIMBERLEY'S MODE

Frank Wimberley is a mature artist whose work, although deeply informed by his long association with jazz and Abstract Expressionism, is neither wholly defined nor contained by these influences. The genitive impetus for this dual association is deeply rooted. Wimberley's mother was a ceramicist and pianist. While growing up in Pleasantville, New Jersey, he assisted his mother with her creations as well as pursuing his own youthful glaze experiments. After returning from Army service in 1945, Wimberley studied at Howard University honing his skills as a visual artist and developing an impassioned affinity for jazz. Wimberley has reminisced, that "jazz was the hottest thing around." Responding to his adult son's wish to play, Wimberley's father made a gift of a Conn trumpet.

Wimberley's time at Howard was divided between studying visual art and playing jazz. Unfortunately, the Conn was stolen after a rehearsal. It was replaced by lesser instruments that dampened his enthusiasm to be a musician. Following his studies at Howard, he married Juanita Thomas and moved to NYC. Wimberley's connections to the jazz world intensified even as he took the opportunity to immerse himself in the vibrant developing art scenes both uptown and in the Village. New York had become the center of the international art world: Abstract Expressionism was in its heyday, and the innovations of artists working in New York were widely reported and endlessly discussed.

The Abstract Expressionists were avowed jazz fans. A few of the second-generation New York School painters were also jazz musicians, most notably Larry Rivers. Among the well-known artists usually associated with this group, however, none were of African American background. New York avant-garde artists of the 1940s through 1960s appeared to be a rather non-diverse group. Certainly by 1967, the date of the earliest work in this exhibition, abstract art was generally considered the purview of white artists.

This view, though widely promulgated by Amiri Baraka and others, was not universal within the African-American community. Artists such as William T. Williams and Alvin Loving were creating and exhibiting abstract work. Miles Davis, a long-term friend of Wimberley's, purchased the artist's pottery, assemblages and wood constructions. As an admirer and avid collector, Miles encouraged others to collect Wimberley's work. Among the other prominent jazz musicians who were collectors and supporters of this artist's work are Julian Cannonball Adderly, Teo Macero, and Tony Williams, the honoree of a work in this show.

The presentation of abstract work by Black artists was the exception in 1969 when Wimberley's work was exhibited at C.W. Post College and Nassau Community College. Indeed, as the 1970s unfolded, an increasingly restrictive notion developed regarding just how African American art was supposed to look. Despite this situation, Wimberley's work was included in exhibitions at the Hudson River Museum in 1971 and the Museum of Modern Art in 1972. His first solo show, at Acts of Art Gallery in NYC, was mounted in 1973. Frank Wimberley's work has never been confined by either art-world expectations or parochial notions.

Frank Wimberley observed that, "Abstract Expressionism is like a thumb-print. It is simultaneously absolutely personal and universal." This simple assertion expresses a

dialectic that is central to Wimberley's work and its continued vitality. The artist intends and recognizes that his work is individual and tied intimately to its creator, while simultaneously being anonymous in that it is broadly human.

This desire for one's art to transcend the constraints of specific description and biography, while also remaining inherently genuine and personal, is one way in which Wimberley's work reflects the artist's engagement with jazz. Upon hearing the inspiring invention of a masterfully played saxophone, a listener's first notion is not the recognition of the individual player, but appreciation of the quality and humanity of the musical expression. Wimberley not only listens to jazz, but also has played it and had the acquaintance of some of the foremost practitioners of that art form.

It is as much Wimberley's involvement with jazz of the highest order as it is his studies at Howard University, under the tutelage of James Porter, Lois Mailou Jones, and James Wells, that shaped this artist's expression. The time spent with Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, and Ron Carter, among others, deeply informed his creative sensibility, his honesty, and his insight.

In *For Trane* of 1967, the artist's exploration of form in a nuanced geometric manner is reminiscent of an attempt to render the structure of a Coltrane composition. It is an analysis or analogy. Most of the artist's works from this period are overtly concerned with formal issues. As such, Wimberley's late 1960s and early 1970s art is very much of its era. This work appears to be allied with New Abstraction, Color Field, and Minimalist art. Wimberley's work, of this era includes, large geometric composition canvases and his monochromatic constructions.

In 1971 the Metropolitan Museum of Art acquired the silkscreen *Edythe*. By 1972, in such works as *Puff*, Wimberley was employing found objects and torn paper to create expressive collages that were to deeply inform his developing esthetic. In his collages of the 1970s and 1980s, the formality of his earlier work has been subsumed into the artist's exploration of accident and surprise. California-based ceramic sculptor Peter Voulkos' 1978 exhibition at the American Craft Museum had a profound influence on Wimberley's art. The impact of the freedom and physicality of Voulkos' two-dimensional works can be seen almost immediately in such mixed-media collages as *Paper Thin* of 1979. Importantly, humor enters the work in recognizable form during this stage. Not surprisingly, these works are among the earliest to receive broad exposure and acknowledgment.

Through the 1980s, this artist continued to explore painting, collage and sculpture. During this time the artist assimilated an understanding of the physics of sculpture (that is, concrete form), as well as the freedom of collage and joy in the physicality of paint. Writing about Wimberley's collages for the East Hampton Star in 1980, Phyllis Braff observed that "Wimberley uses fragments to increase the kinds of visual energy on a surface, beyond what is possible to accomplish with paint alone." She goes on to note that his works "have the power to suggest gentle recollections of music or poetry." The sculptures from the beginning of the decade, such as *Vessel* of 1982, seem to be the equivalent of the paintings. Whereas, by the middle of the decade most three-dimensional works, such as *Blue Construction* of 1985 and *Night* from about the same time, take on a greater autonomy and presage aspects of the later paintings.

Wimberley's work of the early 1990s manifest his exhilaration in the command of materials and technique. This is obvious when encountering the found metal and mixed media wall piece *Homage to James Baldwin* of 1992, the collage *A Word with Herman Cherry* of 1993, as well as such paintings as *Approach from the Far Side* of 1991 and *On Hearing Mulgrew* of 1992. It is during this decade that the confidence and self-assuredness of a master increasingly brings a complex subtlety to the work. Wimberley's best work of the 1990s clearly evidences his mature and independent aesthetic. Significant indicators of the continued vitality and regard for Frank Wimberley's work include a Pollock-Krasner Fellowship in 1998 and the acquisition of *Twilight Squall* by the Schomburg Center in 2000. Also of note, in 1999, was a retrospective exhibition at Adelphi University and Best in Show honors at the Parrish Art Museum.

Helen A. Harrison, writing for the *New York Times*, observed of *Silver with Black and Brown* at the Parrish, "Frank Wimberley's acrylic on canvas is a study in subtlety punctuated with just the right touches of bravado." Compositions of the middle and late 1990s often appear simpler than earlier works. Broad, nearly monochromatic expanses are articulated primarily by surface texture. Sometimes, such as in *White Lines* of 1994, the underlying structure of the composition is almost completely veiled by a highly textured monochrome surface. *I'm Not So Sure of What You Said* of 2000 shows the artist, for the first time, allowing brushstrokes to nearly render in a manner that hovers between calligraphy and sketching. These works seem most allied to music. They evoke the modal work of Miles Davis. They look the way *In a Silent Way* and *Spanish Key* sound.

Frank Wimberley's solo show at June Kelly Gallery in 2001, *Compositions For Matter*, was a milestone. Alvin Loving proclaimed "That was some show!" In her catalogue essay Phyllis Braff observed, "Wimberley's approach is thoroughly abstract, yet the physicality of his pigment and the emphasis on muted earth tones frequently trigger cognitive associations with characteristics of crusty, dense geological phenomena." As the art writer most fluent with Wimberley's work, Braff goes on to state, "There were points in Wimberley's three-decade career when his abstractions established fully resolved, inventive organizations that defined the surface. Much of the new work now pushes beneath the frontal plane, making vague, undefined spatial depth part of the experience. Recurring discoveries also play an essential role in his new sense of field."

Frank Wimberley's recent work is classical. It is expression informed by reflection. It is apart from dominant contemporary trends. It is historically informed without being nostalgic. This work is sincere art in a time of disingenuous artifice. Braff concluded her 2001 essay stating "Wimberley's explorations have tremendous potential." Just as the ever evolving expression of Wayne Shorter employs and transcends the post-bop vocabulary of jazz to convey deeply felt experiences and soaring aspirations, Wimberley's art richly utilizes and expands the language of expressive abstraction to produce timeless intensely human statements.

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