



GUMBO YA YA:

Anthology of Contemporary African-American Women Artists



Introduction by Leslie King-Hammond

CYNTHIA HAWKINS

Born New York City, 1950. B.F.A. 1977, Queens College, CUNY; M.F.A. 1992, Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Md. Medium: painting.

At 8 or 9 years of age, I would take Gardner's *History of Art* out of the library on a regular basis. I remember especially being intrigued with the cave paintings and totemic sculptural forms. I never had art lessons except for Jon Nagy and I hated painting by numbers, too controlled for me even then. I would say that I had a natural inquisitiveness when it came to painting, to art in general. But there was no one around who really knew about art.

I will never forget the report in the *Long Island Press* that the Met spent 1 or 2 million dollars on a painting, a lot of money back then (I think this was in the late '50s or early '60s). I devoured the article, and I studied the newspaper reproduction, as bad as it was.

One very important episode occurred during high school. For some reason there were two Jackson Pollocks on exhibit behind glass (so they were small). I wondered where this work came from, where in him did it come from, how could this be. I was enthralled, amazed. I think that is what finally gripped me about art, that it has so many faces, so many forms, and it is up to the artist which way to go. However, I entered college thinking I would be an American history major. But this only lasted a year before I began to study painting in earnest.

Today I feel that painting is a gift from God. I am in love with the very act of painting – the magic, mystery, and meaning. It is about the self, and the world, and vision. Anyone who says painting is dead has no vision.

A journey through Cynthia Hawkins's work reveals the maturation of a highly individual exploration through the permutations of color, light, and space in two dimensions. Hawkins has always been intrigued with space – both known and unknown. Her stylistic meanderings always come back to the same essential truth – picturing planar realities on canvas. One must realize that abstract work is a language so personal and unique that any attempt at general reading is impossible. Hawkins utilizes a highly developed vocabulary of abstraction.

As art historian and critic Judith Wilson has pointed out, Hawkins's work exists as direct heir of the entire, burdensome history of post-World War II art with, among other salient points, its emphasis on reductivism. Hawkins is a diligent student of art history without being a slave to the many unyielding doctrines. She has obviously gleaned pertinent essentials which give her work an informed, yet

highly original, quality. Like many contemporary abstract painters, Hawkins works large and her process is purposefully nonlinear.

Early works were painted, sculptured wall pieces that involved three dimensions. Her dealings with space then took on an imposed complexity. Painted on all four sides as well as top and bottom, the works changed as the vantage point was changed. The works were neither painting nor sculpture, but both in the most difficult way. Hawkins also shows an interest in geometry, a system devised to conquer, confine and understand space. The paintings from this period are built around triangles and grids that involve a never-ending creation of squares which appear and reappear throughout.

Later paintings still wrestled with the idea of space, but Hawkins's clear intention was to conquer this mechanical dilemma in two dimensions. The palette expanded, and color as a compositional imperative entered the works, adding an emotional as well as intellectual aspect. Swatches of thickly laid paint made a final surface that concealed a series of paintings which came first. Not necessarily created as drawings to inform the final product, the layers provided the steps essential to create the final, visible end. They exist in an exuberance of colors – reds, pinks, greens, and yellows – all coexistent with an abundance of white. Because of their relative lightness, the works are uncontained, like a window opened.

Two exemplary paintings from this period, *Landsite* and *The Well* (both 1988), suggest a spatial presence both wide and deep. These large paintings can also be read as cogent investigations of color and light. Hawkins's liberation, made possible by the last fifty years of abstract painting, is distinctly evident. The paintings also serve as the crucial conduit between other, concurrent stylistic investigations that bring Hawkins directly to the "Currency of Meaning" series, which bear to conclusion the many concerns that have haunted Hawkins's art-making.

The series is numbered sequentially, reading visually

Cynthia Hawkins, *Creed of Athanasius*, 1991, o/c.



Cynthia Hawkins

like a book, each element of each canvas a sentence or a phrase, every work a paragraph adding to the whole. Hawkins's ruminations are concerned with meaning – its value (currency) and its power. Her work reflects the residue of her readings about figurative art, which appear to have led Hawkins to the conclusion that abstraction is not the literal opposite of figuration, but a stylistic and cognitive consummation. The meaning(s) one gains is/are both the subjective and individual interpretation of the artist's intentions. Meaning, then, is the fundamental facet in this series.

Currency of Meaning #5 and *#6* (both 1989) are painted like vertical diptychs, combining two very different – albeit related – ideas in one canvas. In both of these works one-half of the painting is expressly familiar territory – the other, new, uncharted ground. The artist refers to this compositional device as an indication of motion akin to a television screen which offers image after image in a continuous stream. Within her characteristic tactile surface, she has incorporated a graphic brushwork. The bottom half of *#5*, separated from the top section by a blue line with bright orange circles, is a fence-like grid of irregular squares that cover what could be another painting. With its marbled, wet-into-wet effect, the surface highlights neither one nor the other color, but the symbiotic merger of both.

The top half of *Currency of Meaning #6* combines blues that range from turquoise to midnight. Triangles, which often inhabit the imperceptible ground in other works, make their presence known here with variations of color. Clefs in the surface display the darkest underlayer, which outlines and restrains the space. This painting is divided by a line filled with triangles. The bottom half harbors a grid of squares, some of which appear rectangular, filled in unevenly and incompletely with lines of color. Hawkins's need for expansive surface is restrained as she explores mark-making on each square with a playful, experimental abandon. What is a static tract in one painting becomes a syncopated field in the other.

Ruby, Ruby, a reference to the scarlet of the painting's middle passage, is divided into three parts. The top third is a verdant green field populated with both full and empty squares. Their disjointed nature makes them seem like scattered pebbles. With deliberate hand, Hawkins fills in some of the squares with a wash-like white, leaving others merely out-

lined. The middle passage partially obscures the presence of a grid. This dominant, middle expanse is hemmed in at both top and bottom by thin dividing lines, both a diversion and a constraining device for the painter. The lower third is the most unusual. On a black ground, Hawkins draws six determinative triangles, surrounded by luminescent half-moon-shaped-marks. This passage brings us closer to newer, more untried concerns in Hawkins's work. With a variation of approaches, Hawkins sets an unavoidable temper for the experience of divulging meaning(s) which the paintings in this series demand.

The dialogue that Cynthia Hawkins sets out to have with her viewer through her paintings has very few unnecessary words. Her work shows none of the frivolous meanderings for sake of artistic fashion or aesthetic fad. She is unconcerned with stylistic idle chitchat. What she seeks to convey in her ambitious body of work is a dense, well-conceived verse with rich, efficacious meaning.

– THELMA GOLDEN

Hawkins lives in Baltimore with her husband and two young children. Her solo exhibitions include the Cinque Gallery and the Just Above Midtown/Downtown Gallery, and the Paul Klapper Library, Queens College, all in New York City; and the Frances Wolfson Art Center at Miami-Dade Community College, Miami, Fla. Her work has been included in numerous two-person and group shows at Decker Gallery, School 33 Gallery, and the Mechanic Theatre Gallery, Baltimore, Md.; Hudson Guild Gallery, Grace Borgenicht Gallery, the Studio Museum in Harlem, Kenkeleba Gallery, and Jamie Szoke Gallery, New York City; Mississippi Museum of Art, Jackson; University of Massachusetts at Amherst; and in New Jersey at Montclair State College and Aljira Gallery, Newark.