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**ArtSeen**

# *You've Come a Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show*

By Zoë Hopkins

Over 50 years later, the fierce energy of the *Sapphire Show*—as well as the electric sense of political possibility that characterized the context it emerged from—has been re-enlivened in an exhibition at Tribeca's Ortuzar Projects. Titled *You've Come a Long Way, Baby: The Sapphire Show* (a reversal of the original exhibition's title and subtitle), the exhibition is an intimate gathering among old friends. Old and new works by each of the artists represented in the original exhibition flock together in a gorgeous reunion of living and passed on spirits.

ON VIEW
Ortuzar Projects
June 8 – July 31, 2021
New York

Senga Nengudi, *Untitled Water Composition*, 1969–70/2021. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

Much like a number of contemporaneous Black art exhibitions, the *Sapphire Show* maintains no archive, with the exception of a single poster used to advertise the exhibition. Immediately upon entering Ortuzar Projects, visitors are treated to two glass vitrines containing exhibition posters, notecards, photographs, and books loosely related to Gallery 32 and other happenings in Black Los Angeles during the late 1960s and early '70s. Yet the exhibition is formidable in its contestation of the archive. Rather than letting an exclusionary archive delimit its domain, it embraces a combination of speculation and direct testimony from participants to piece together the story of the *Sapphire Show*. *You've Come a Long Way, Baby* dares to imagine an exhibition that itself sought to imagine otherwise, to radically rethink what was possible for Black women artists at the time.

Betye Saar, *Rainbow Mojo*, 1972. Courtesy the artist and Roberts Projects, Los Angeles. Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.

The exhibition at Ortuzar Projects is not reducible to a regrouping of the artists who participated in the original show; it is also an act of conjuring, a harnessing of the transgressive energy that lay at its core. Even in the configuration of the space, the exhibition evades the normative. In a rebellion against the stiflingly clinical sensibilities of conventional white cube presentation, order gives way to a chorus of energy. The works are hung in playful proximity to one another, brimming with shared ebullience. A trio of brightly colored yet stoic paintings by Gloria Bohanon hang like guardian angels on the back wall while Senga Nengudi's *Water Composition V* (1969–70/2018), a colossi of four electric green and yellow tube-like structures, lies dormant on the floor. The already subversive presentation of objects is made even more striking by the lack of formal and material cohesion between them. Almost all of the artists work across at least two mediums, developing an uproarious bricolage. Painting, sculpture, photography, and assemblage tangle together, performing a kind of disorderly conduct that feels powerfully expressive of the radical experimentality that the *Sapphire Show* was devoted to.

The artists themselves also rigorously negotiate with history. Works like the text-driven *Roots* (c. 1970) by Gloria Bohanon and the print *Generations* (1993) by Yvonne Cole Meo foreground the question of lineage, reaching toward a place and time to call home. And of course, the exhibition's title is dense with historical meaning: it is a reference to the *Amos 'n' Andy* character Sapphire Stevens, who has become a mythology of sorts, the definitive trope of the overly assertive Black woman. The presence of Sapphire, along with other historically situated stereotypes of Black femininity like the Mammy figure, looms over the exhibition in works like Betye Saar's *Auntie & Watermelon* (1973) and Suzanne Jackson's *Sapphire & Tunis* (2010–11). The former, a sculptural assemblage burrowed inside a wall mounted case, reclaims the brutal iconography of racism by pairing a watermelon-bearing Mammy figurine with a gun that alludes to a struggle for liberation. The latter is a breathtakingly complex collage of paper, cardboard, and paint that renders this history into abstraction. Saar and Jackson not only claim ownership over these motifs of violent othering, but also explode these images into a vocabulary that holds revolutionary potential. In reimagining what these figures represent, Saar, Jackson, and the other *Sapphire* artists seem to also set them free. Their forms glint with renewed life, intoxicating the gallery with riotous possibility.

Suzanne Jackson, *The American Sampler*, 1972. Courtesy the artist and Ortuzar Projects, New York. Photo: Timothy Doyon.

### Contributor


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**Zoë Hopkins** is a junior at Harvard College studying Art History and African American studies. She has held internships and other positions at Creative Time, Artforum International Magazine, The Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Harvard Art Museums, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As a Mellon Mays Undergraduate Fellow, her research and writing focus on Black feminist aesthetics.