

# The New York Times

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

## Romare Bearden's Rarely Seen Abstract Side

Although famous for figurative works, the American modernist had a little-known foray into abstract painting that included some of his best work.



Romare Bearden's "Wine Star," from 1959, on view (and online) at DC Moore Gallery. Credit...Romare Bearden Foundation; via DC Moore Gallery

**By Roberta Smith**

March 19, 2020, 10:00 a.m. ET

An unfamiliar side of the work of the great American modernist Romare Bearden is the subject of an exceptional exhibition on view (by appointment) and online at DC Moore Gallery: the improvisational abstract paintings he made from 1958 to around 1962.

Bearden (1911-88) is best known for his indelible figurative collage depictions of African-American life in all its quotidian richness, strength and struggle. These efforts, arguably his greatest, even took some artistic revenge. Made of fragments of cutup magazine images, their angular figures and faces in particular pushed Cubism back toward its primary source, African sculpture.

Bearden developed his new collages in the early 1960s and unveiled them at the New York gallery Cordier & Ekstrom in solo shows in 1964 and 1967. They were almost instantly acclaimed. They were both formally innovative and fraught with the signal event of their era: the civil rights movement.

These magnificent collages preoccupied Bearden for the rest of his life and have tended to overshadow the rest of his multifaceted career. This point is made by a single Bearden work: the powerful but little-known “The Visitation” (1941), acquired in 2014 by the Museum of Modern Art, and currently on view. (MoMA also has a gorgeous abstract Bearden, “The Silent Valley of the Sunrise,” from 1959, acquired in 1960 but not on view.)

“The Visitation” — a gouache that has the sturdy presence of an oil painting — portrays Mary, the mother of Jesus, and her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, as black women of undeniable gravitas. Its distinctive blend of social realism, biblical storytelling, Renaissance monumentality and African art reflects Bearden’s broad erudition and sophistication.

Bearden’s far more obscure abstractions at DC Moore have tended to be given short shrift in his biographies and retrospectives. The 19 canvases here formed the bulk of an overdue museum survey, “Romare Bearden Abstraction” organized in late 2017 at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Harrison, N.Y., by its director, Tracy Fitzpatrick.



“Mountain of Heaven,” circa 1961. Bearden mixes oil paint and casein, which don’t mix, but contract into jewel-like globules. Credit...Romare Bearden Foundation; via DC Moore Gallery



"White Mountain," circa 1962, oil and casein on canvas, cut and mounted on painted board with graphite. Credit...Romare Bearden Foundation; via DC Moore Gallery

These paintings should startle. They are elegant, gritty works, alive with spontaneous splashes, pours and rivulets of paint, and they effortlessly claim a place in the history of American postwar abstraction, stain painting division.

With their complex textures and elemental suggestions of water and rock, weathering and randomness, they bring a deeper emotional resonance to Color Field painting. In the implosive “Wine Star,” of 1959, some kind of geological event, epic or minuscule, is witnessed from above.

The intuitive experimental confidence with which Bearden varied his techniques and materials is especially visible here. In “Mountain of Heaven” he mixes oil paint and casein, which don’t mix, but contract (seemingly rapidly) into little jewel-like globules of white on brown. In “White Mountain,” the same admixture congeals into a dry, mineral hardness.



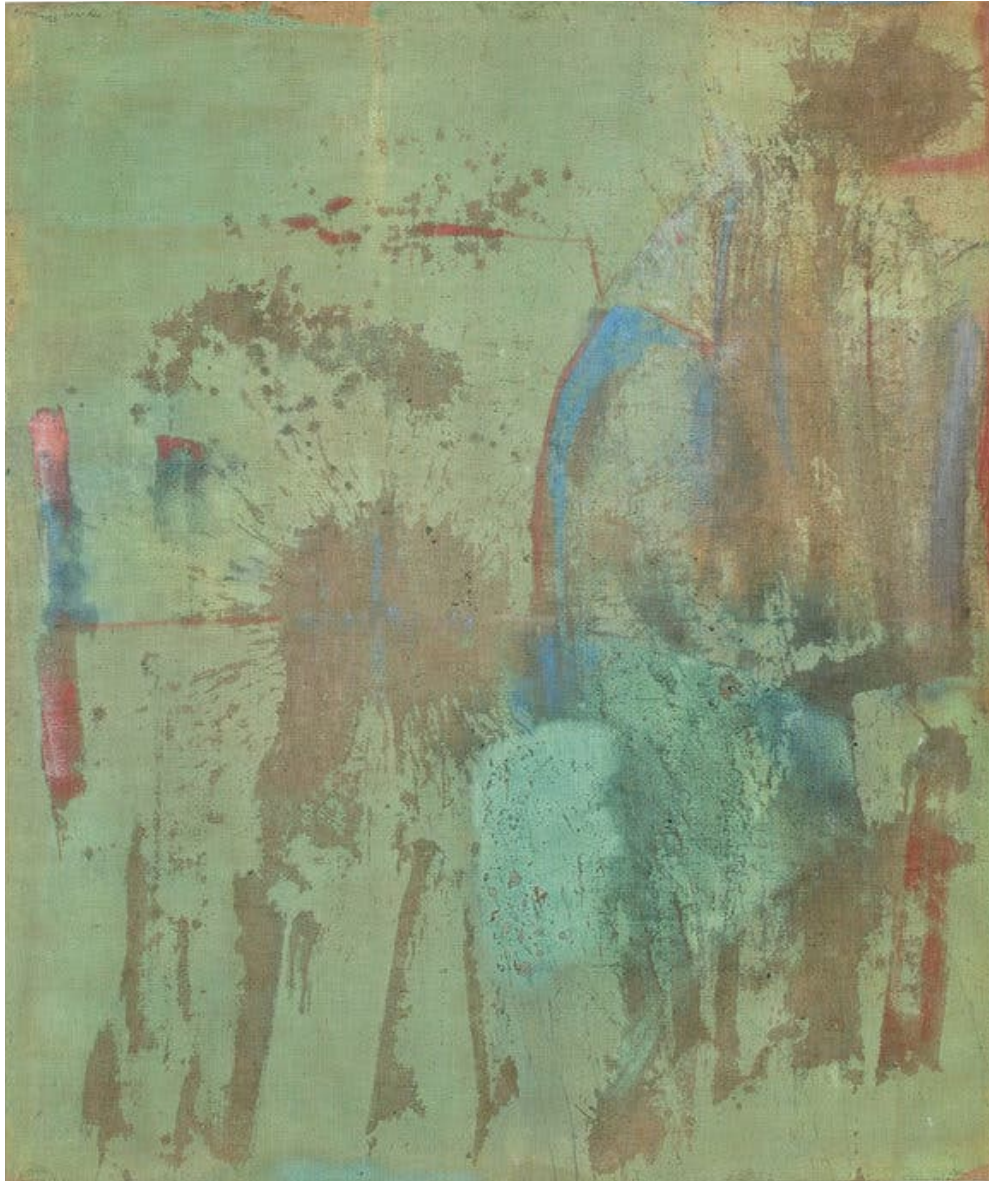
In “River Mist,” from 1962, the wavy-edged pieces of canvas painted blue or silver overlap, suggesting wisps of moisture rising from a body of water. Credit...Romare Bearden Foundation; via DC Moore Gallery

The abstractions are sometimes treated like a detour from Bearden's involvement with the figure, but are actually integral to its final flowering. For one thing he often collaged pieces of painted canvas to thin board, which directly points to his elaboration of the technique, in paper, from the mid-1960s on.

In the evocatively titled "River Mist," wavy-edged pieces of canvas painted blue or silver overlap, suggesting wisps of moisture rising from a body of water — although we are challenged to decide which pieces are river and which are mist. At the same time, the ease with which Bearden's scissors cut these ripples makes the material surface itself mesmerizing. Elsewhere Bearden complicates his combination of collage and painting. In the undated "Untitled (Green)," he paints on the background board in mostly green and black and then shapes and cuts holes in a large piece of silver-painted canvas so that the colors peek through or around it at different points. The totality evokes a heraldic banner, but also a fortress facade.



"Untitled (Green)," undated, oil, casein and colored pencil on canvas that has been cut and mounted on painted board, complicating the artist's process. Credit...Romare Bearden Foundation;, via DC Moore Gallery



“Green Torches Welcome New Ghosts” (1961), “a field of pale green with faint intimations of a procession of beings of some sort,” our critic says. Credit...Romare Bearden Foundation; via DC Moore Gallery

And while absent from his figurative styles, Bearden seems unbothered by bodily illusions. In “White Mountain,” the motif is formed from two cutout pieces of mineral-dark canvas side by side. Their eccentric profile, isolated against white, forms a kind of muscular torso, not unlike Matisse’s 1909 “Bather,” striding through water, or one of Modigliani’s caryatids. Three small corners of brilliant red add the suggestion of blood, and living flesh.

While most stain painting technique in the 1950s and early ’60s derived from Helen Frankenthaler’s innovative “Mountains and

Sea,” of 1952, Bearden developed his approach on his own. After 1956, when Bearden moved from Harlem to a loft on Canal Street near Chinatown, he started studying informally with a calligrapher he knew only as Mr. Wu, who had a bookshop on Bayard Street. Mr. Wu showed Bearden the often more delicate techniques of Chinese ink painting which Bearden soon adapted to oil paint by thinning it with turpentine (which all stain painters did). This way of working provided a new ease by bringing Bearden, who had never liked the thickness of oil paint, close to one of his favorite mediums, watercolor.

Of course Bearden added his own variations. One of his most amusing, most effective tactics is evident in “Green Torches Welcome New Ghosts” (1961), a field of pale green with faint intimations of a procession of beings of some sort. This ethereal scene is interrupted by a splash of turpentine that erases the color and returns us to the reality of the bare canvas and the artist’s spontaneous actions upon it.

### **Abstract Romare Bearden**

Through April 25 at DC Moore Gallery.

Due to current New York restrictions, DC Moore Gallery will be temporarily closed to the public. For updated information, please visit the gallery’s website [dcmooregallery.com](http://dcmooregallery.com) or email the gallery at [email@dcmooregallery.com](mailto:email@dcmooregallery.com)

Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art. [@robertasmithnyt](https://twitter.com/robertasmithnyt)