

## David Driskell: The 1960s and 1970s

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Booth S6



David Driskell, *Soul X*, 1968. Oil on linen, 50 ¼ x 40 in.

For the 2017 edition of **Art Basel Miami Beach**, **DC Moore Gallery** will showcase paintings by **David C. Driskell** from the 1960s and 1970s. Driskell, now 86, is a legendary African American artist and art historian. As an artist, scholar, and curator, he has made substantial contributions to these fields that have changed the way we think about American art. His paintings and collages unite a strong modernist impulse with his personal vision and memory. Marked by the artist's abiding color sensibilities, his work from the 1960s and 1970s bears the imprint of a turbulent era and Driskell's synthesis of the European, American, and African art forms he knew firsthand.

The years between the March on Washington in 1963 and the end of the Vietnam War in 1973, galvanized by the Civil Rights Movement and often called the "turbulent decade," represent a lived experience for Driskell. During the decade these works were conceived, 1965-1975, Driskell served as Associate Professor, acting chair of the Department of Art, and acting director of the Gallery of Art at Howard University in Washington, D.C. (from 1962-1966), and was Professor of Art and Chairman of the Department of Art at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee (from 1966-1977).

The Black Arts Movement fostered a powerful trajectory toward Afrocentric subject matter in African American art at the time. Not all artists followed this stream, but it was one Driskell found absorbing. During his years at Fisk University, expressive Blackness was in vogue, and Driskell was fully at home in this arena, using African and African American themes seamlessly and often syncretically. He shared with Romare Bearden, whom he invited to Fisk in 1973, a mutual devotion to an iconography that was expressive of Black culture and fundamentally classic, as timeless and reusable as any within the art historical canon. Both artists created distinctive iconographies that drew upon African and American history, myth, and experience. Collage paintings by Driskell such as *Woman with Flowers* (1972), from a 1970s series centered on Black womanhood, expand the representational scope of American art.

While works with overt protest are rare in Driskell's oeuvre, he found compelling reasons to initiate several works of sociopolitical commentary during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Important compositions in this vein include *Of Thee I Weep* (1968), *Soul X* (1968) and *Ghetto Wall #2* (1970). The direct speech and explicit reference to the American flag, atypical in the long arc of his artistic production, confirms Driskell's place in the mainstream, that is, the Blackstream consciousness that underpinned his artistic and educational milieu. The Janus-like nature of the American flag, as a symbol of liberation and oppression, has been utilized by many, including his peers. With the hand-lettered and cut-and-pasted text in *Of Thee I Weep*, Driskell underscores the inconstant nature of the flag as a stand-in for fervent patriotism. Historically specific to the Vietnam War, the collage painting nonetheless imparts an ongoing lamentation through its weeping figure and collaged text that reads in part, "Our war policy is not working...."



David Driskell, *Shango*, 1972. Egg tempera and gouache on paper, 24 x 18 in.

Many of Driskell's works of the late 1960s through the mid-1970s clearly reflect the era of the Black Arts Movement and the Afrocentric impulses it advanced. But they are first and foremost individualized, personal responses by an artist of the era, not one constrained by it. Equally important to his iconography were the first trips undertaken to the African continent, between 1969 and 1972, after which he used African art as sites of memory and ancestral legacy rather than intrinsic forms. Driskell absorbs, distills and recycles iconic African art forms into honorific personal visions—flattened, decorated, and resurfaced in his signature style, color and calligraphy. A commanding image, *Shango* (1972) reimagines a Yoruba ritual object, a carved dance wand (*oshe shango*), as a medieval or Byzantine period icon, syncretic in meaning as well as form.

During the "turbulent era," Driskell focused on advancing African American art and artists, documenting the enduring and "symbolic presence of Afro-American culture in the visual arts."<sup>1</sup> His practice was less of a shout than an assiduous affirmation of the ever-present Blackness in American art and culture and related African legacies. In 1966, James Porter described Driskell's aesthetic responses as having the effect "of prayer and of emotional release instead of despair," noting that, "such paintings are directional signals to action for those who are competent to understand their symbolic language."<sup>2</sup> *Soul X* exemplifies this response: an iconic, Christ-like, half-length figure, framed by a celestial orb, and pressed from the inside against a suggested window, is universal and particular in its meaning. The conceptualization recalls Driskell's *Behold Thy Son* (1956)<sup>3</sup>, (a tribute to Emmett Till),<sup>4</sup> and *Black Crucifixion* (1964),<sup>5</sup> in which the added text "Soul," and mark "X"—which can be read as a cross, a strike, and an X—invokes Malcolm X, who was assassinated in 1965.

Born in 1931 in Eatonton, Georgia, Driskell received his BA in Fine Art from Howard University and MFA from Catholic University, both in Washington, D.C. He attended Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Skowhegan, Maine in 1953, and has retained a lifelong relationship with the school, serving as visiting faculty, lecturer, and board member. His pioneering scholarship underpins the current field of African American art history. In 1977, Driskell joined the Department of Art at the University of Maryland where he remained until his retirement in 1998.

His numerous awards and honors include the prestigious National Humanities Medal in 2000. The University of Maryland opened The David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora in 2001 to celebrate his legacy as an artist and art historian. In 2005, the High Museum, in Atlanta, established an annual award in his honor, The David C. Driskell Prize, given to an African American artist or scholar. In 2016, the artist received the Skowhegan Lifetime Legacy Award. Driskell lives and works in Hyattsville, Maryland and Falmouth, Maine.

1. David C. Driskell, *Amistad II: Afro-American Art* (Nashville, TN: Fisk University, 1975), p. 41.

2. Julie L. McGee, *David C. Driskell: Artist and Scholar* (Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate, 2006), p. 85

3. Collection of the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAAHC).

4. McGee, p. 38.

5. Private Collection