

GALLERIES • WEEKEND



John Yau | 3 days ago

Jeff Donaldson's Celebration of an Alternative History

Donaldson wanted to replace the history of demeaning stereotypes of Black people that had been presented by white, mainstream culture. By connecting his work to Africa and developing a powerful transnational view, he aimed to develop an alternative history rooted in struggle



Jeff Donaldson, "Paternal Homage" (1971), mixed media, 27 x 27 inches (courtesy Kravets Wehby Gallery)

In 1963, fifteen Black photographers, including the great Louis Draper, got together and founded the Kamoinge group in Harlem. That same year, the artists Romare Bearden, Norman Lewis, Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston and others formed the Spiral group. They met at Bearden's loft on Canal Street from the summer of 1963 until 1965, the year Malcolm X was assassinated. In the wake of his death, the poet Imamu Amiri Baraka started the Black Arts Repertory Theater/School in Harlem. The scholar Larry Neal, who helped Baraka, declared that the Black Arts movement was the "aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept." Although they worked in different mediums, these artists understood what W.E.B. Dubois meant in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) when he wrote:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others



Jeff Donaldson, "Agony of Angola" (1974), mixed media, 34 x 18 inches

All of these groups formed while the options of what was possible in the mainstream art world were being carefully parsed over and narrowed down. In the late 1950s and early '60s, there were many artist-run galleries and exhibitions in Manhattan, including one put on by the Spiral group. By 1963, with the rise of the Civil Rights movement, the art world had undergone a rapid and dramatic change: it became more restrictive. In New York, this meant that Minimalism, Pop Art, Color Field painting, and Painterly Realism were the choices. Chances were good that if you did not work in one of these modes, you were ignored or

dismissed. Many artists became or remained invisible, including those connected to the Black Arts movement. Another kind of segregation took place.

This segregation was exemplified by the disastrous exhibition *Harlem on My Mind: Cultural Capital of Black America, 1900-1968*, mounted by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which opened in January 18, 1969, and did not contain a single work by an African American. There was no art at all, in fact, just feel-good photographs and images. To make matters worse, the catalog accompanying the exhibition had one main essay, written by a 17 year-old Black student, which contained anti-Semitic statements.

While a number of things are being done to get out from under this ugly legacy— in which aesthetics was used to justify exclusion — it continues to cast its shadow. Take the case of Jeff Donaldson (1932 – 2004), who, with four other artists, co-founded the group AfriCOBRA (African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists) in Chicago in 1968, the year Martin Luther King was murdered, race riots were erupting across America, and the Vietnam War was raging. Originally called Cobra (Coalition of Black Revolutionary Artists), the addition of the prefix “Afri” to this group signified an important aesthetic shift — the recognition that the ancestors of Black Americans came against their will from Africa, and living in America meant that you were a member of a diasporic community.



Jeff Donaldson, "Wives of Sango" (1969), mixed media, 36 x 24 inches

Jeff Donaldson at Kravets Wehby Gallery (February 23 – April 8, 2017) is the artist's first solo exhibition in New York. The thirteen works in the exhibition were done between 1969 and 1999, a thirty-year span. Materially, the works can be divided into two groups: paintings done in acrylic on canvas; and mixed media works in which the artist carefully cut, layered, and painted corrugated sheets of cardboard, both the smooth and ribbed sides.

In the earliest work in the exhibition, “Wives of Sango” (1969) (it is often spelled “Shango”), Donaldson depicts the Yoruba god of lightning’s three wives (Oshun, Oba, and Oya) in modern dress. The middle is facing frontally, while the ones on either side turn toward the painting’s edges. They are wearing bandoliers, with rifles slung over their shoulders. The artist has affixed sections of gold and silver foil to the dresses of the women on the left and right, meticulously patterning their clothes and skin without overwhelming their features or body. The reference to a Yoruba god’s wives is meant to instill pride and a feeling of nobility in the viewer, the sense that Black people living in America were descendants of majestic warriors.



Jeff Donaldson, “Soweto SoWeToo” (1979), mixed media, 39 x 30.5 inches

Donaldson wanted to replace the history of demeaning stereotypes of Black people that had been presented by white, mainstream culture. By connecting his work to Africa and developing a powerful transnational view, he aimed to develop an alternative history rooted in struggle. In the mixed media piece “Soweto/So We Too” (1979), he layers and paints sections of corrugated cardboard into a target of concentric circles. Above the target and the word “SOWETO,” there is a frieze-like band of silhouetted figures running towards an abstract eye in the center of the band. The pupil of the eye contains an image of Soweto, the South African township where mass protests against apartheid resulted in the deaths of more than twenty people, most of whom were Black. The protests were in response to the government’s decision to implement a policy in which all schoolchildren would be educated in Afrikaans (the language of the oppressor) rather than their native language.

The words “So We Too” run along the bottom of the piece, a pun through which Donaldson conveys his view that the Black struggle for freedom and equal rights is worldwide, and that there is a bond between African Americans and the Black South Africans living under apartheid. The use of corrugated cardboard imbues the work with an urban grittiness as it recalls the sheets of corrugated steel used to build the poverty-stricken shanty towns ringing cities like Johannesburg and Cape Town: he has transformed cheap packaging material into an art that is simultaneously political and decorative.



Jeff Donaldson, "One For Bear Den" (1991), mixed media, 66 x 42 inches

Donaldson's combinations of figures, words, Christian symbols, Ancient Egyptian symbols such as the ankh (the sign for life) and hieroglyphics, Afro hairdos, and decorative and psychedelic patterns made from paint, metallic foil, and newspaper photographs anticipates the Pattern and Decoration movement as well as the work of artists as different as Chris Ofili and Mickalene Thomas. Given his forward-looking artwork and dedication to developing an alternative Black iconography, it is both shocking and unsurprising that he never exhibited in New York in his lifetime. His body of work and political activism underscores the multiplicity of narratives running through recent art history, and that the one focusing on the rise of Minimalism and Pop Art tells only part of the tale.

Jeff Donaldson continues at Kravets Wehby Gallery (521 West 21 Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through April 8.