When writing about contemporary Afro-American art, I find the temptation to present an array of historical views and events by way of explaining recent developments somewhat hard to resist. Conscious that the inclination to do so may arise from a desire to cure both skepticism and ignorance and not merely from a thirst to justify the present by the past, I am determined to treat it as a fault, and limiting myself to brief retrospective reference, to admit only those events and values which will be regarded as constituent of contemporary Afro-American art. Nevertheless, I shall reserve the right to introduce such historical material as may help to document the points I wish to make.

It is probably a popular assumption that the American Negro has achieved an ineradicable part in American civilization in spite of all past or present attempts to set him apart from the same. But favorable to such an assumption is the solid basis of historical and scientific data so skillfully erected by both Negro and white scholars — anthropologists, sociologists, historians, and the like — who have devoted much or all their professional careers to the task of rediscovering and interpreting the Negro past. More important still for our understanding of the Negro's role in American culture is the realization that much of the flavor of American art derives not simply from local and regional contributions of both Negroes and
whites but also from inter-continental and international transference and persistence of American, African, European and Asian traits of human culture.

As concerns the persistence of African cultural traits in the Americas, that is abundantly evident in the insular communities of the Caribbean and the Antilles as well as in the Southern United States and in Brazil. Scholars like the late Melville J. Herskovits, Carter G. Woodson, Artur Ramos, Gilberto Freyre and Alain LeRoy Locke, have investigated such reciprocal influences between Africa and America in terms of the olden plantation cultures of North and South America as well as of related urban and industrial communities in the same geographical areas. They have found that the Negro artist over the generations has both invented and partaken of artistic styles, especially in music and song. Not only that, they disclose that the talented Negro has also occasionally borrowed from the olden as well as the prevailing currents of style available to him in the cultural baggage of the dominant white group.

The principal distinction to be noted, however, between Afro-American art of the Nineteenth century and that of today is a pervasive sense of malaise and spiritual alienation which turns up vividly in the work of the contemporary artist. This expression of disturbed or distraught feeling is scarcely comparable to the mournful or the melancholy moods of the Negro Spiritual or of the Negro worksong; for it contains strident harmonies and tensions of form, color and feeling which in the plastic arts as well as in music connote the emotions of love, hatred, despair or triumph in such concentrated doses as never burdened the Spirituals. As others have
noted, the dominant pulse of this art suggests an affective sense of world malaise or even of cultural rebellion and spiritual discontent, though there are moments when its backlog of aesthetic estrangement becomes recreated as style.

Leaving aside the anonymous as well as the known Negro handicraftsmen of the Nineteenth century, there remain not more than a dozen or so creative Negro artists of that century whose names are worthy of preservation in the annals of American art. In view, however, of the historical circumstances surrounding the Afro-American artist of that period this may indeed seem a large number of important artists. In any case, it hardly seems necessary at this time to advert to nineteenth century expressions by the Afro-American artist in order to understand contemporary Afro-American art. It may suffice to recall the cultural experience and the work of the first two decades of the present century when the picturesque realism which underlay the artistic interpretations of genre or "lowly life" as well as poetic, religious and various didactic themes had strong appeal for a Henry O. Tanner, a Meta Warrick Fuller and even for that notable poet and storyteller, Paul Laurence Dunbar.

Though a far cry from the romantic-realism of the Midwestern "mulatto artist" Robert S. Duncanson (1817-1872), or the bucolic lyricism of Boston-trained Edward M. Bannister (1828-1901), the early landscape and figure paintings of Tanner possess the flavor of the palpably present rural world of the southern Negro, while his later religious works, like so much of Dunbar's non-dialect verse, exhibit a taste for pious, pathetic, or even romantic sentiment. In both aspects of his art, Tanner was akin to as well as distinct from his first great teacher, the American painter, Thomas Eakins. Yet, the two artists do seem to share the invaluable gift of sagacious insight into human personality.

Tanner was not among those artists who during the first fifteen years of the present century responded to the insistent demand for portraiture of the Negro and for a further elaboration of Negro genre. Yet, his younger contemporaries, W. E. Scott, Laura Wheeler Waring, E. A. Harleston and Archibald Motley delighted in such subjects. Indeed, Scott, Waring, and Harleston all demonstrated a passion for dignified if somewhat sentimental portrayals of Negroes as individuals or as representative types of either the middle or the artisan class; while Meta Warrick Fuller, who returned from her studies in Europe in 1904, William Harper and May Howard Jackson preferred elegant portraits and a variety of thoughtfully objective Negro themes with only occasional excursions into genre. Understandably inspired by Henry O. Tanner's success in Europe they were also keenly aware of a kinship with the then reigning school of American realism (the so-called "Ashcan School"), of which Henri, Sloan, Luks and Glackens were the leaders. They failed, nevertheless, to respond to that challenge which the great Armory Show of 1913 threw out to American artists and to American culture, — a challenge which the second generation of Afro-American artists would not ignore.

Only in the third decade of this century did significant modification of the Afro-American artist's preoccupation with veristic realism arrive. As Margaret Just Butcher in her The Negro in American Culture says:

"For the young Negro realists of the
twenties, the motive for being racial was art. The increasing tendency was to evolve from the racial substance something technically distinctive, something that as an idiom or style would add to the general resources of art. Much of the flavor of language, flow of phrase, accent of rhythm in prose (and verse and music), and color and tone of imagery that today gives distinction to Negro art was discernible in the work of Negro artists in the twenties. . . .”

As an effect of the impact of “The Negro Renaissance” of which Alain Locke became the principal spokesman, the work of the younger artists acquired not only new themes but also a more aesthetically free expression of subject matter. Stimulus in that direction came from the writings and preachments of articulate Negro leaders like W. E. B. DuBois, Charles S. Johnson and E. Franklin Frazier as well as from the exciting cadences and novel declarations of the poetry and prose of James Weldon Johnson. They were also inspired by the fine creative writings of Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Sterling Brown, Claude McKay, and Zora Neale Hurston’s “folk stories” so full of genuine regional flavor.

Alain Locke, like a professorial gadfly, buzzed about the artists with strong and sometimes shrill counsel toward retrospective communion with what he chose to dub the “ancestral arts” of black Africa. Actually, his counsel drew sanction from the influence of African art on the artistic styles of Cubism and German Expressionism which had emerged in the first fifteen years of the present century. Such precedent, notwithstanding, Locke’s preachments on “Negro Art” did have effect in the work of a few artists of the New Negro Movement. The early
paintings of Aaron Douglas and of Hale Woodruff, the graphic art of James L. Wells, and the sculpture of Sargent Johnson disclose a growing familiarity with African forms. Most curiously, Aaron Douglas, in his illustrations, accomplished an interesting transference of exotic shapes to the urban scene, thereby grafting upon his art an improbable enhancement of which Harlem ghetto-dwellers and visitors to Harlem alike were the subjects. From this moment on a definite gravitation towards the use of symbolic rather than purely representational forms was evident in Afro-American art.

Throughout the late 1930's and, in fact, also in the '40's a rival stylistic theme or modality, — more precisely, a divergent phase of European Expressionism — figured prominently in the alternately planar and impressionistic, but always multifaceted forms of Richmond Barthe's sculpture. Likewise, in the emotion-laden and explosively gesticulant figural and genre compositions of Malvin Gray Johnson and in the rollicking landscapes and Soutine-like expressionist canvases by William H. Johnson of Florence, S. C., something like the direct and powerfully sustained yet artistically controlled emotionality of James Weldon Johnson's poetized "Sermons" seemed joined to the blatant pulsations of Jazz.

In both form and facture clearly anticipating the art of the 50's, these variously ecstatic and angry moods of painting scarcely seemed opposed to the more aggressively geometric tendencies of African design which had taken charge of the productions of a few important artists. As a matter of fact, there were among the latter some who worked in both styles.

But further, and in tune with the dance steps or the telling cadences of Negro music then popular, there had begun to appear first in the urban genre paintings by Archibald Motley, and later in those of Jacob Lawrence what must be acknowledged as the visual equivalent of syncopated rhythms such as had long distinguished Afro-American music. In short, a new polarity of form and substance was beginning to find place in Afro-American art independently of any prior sanction of the New York Armory Show. Although race pride had imposed an historicistic tendency in the beginning, the artists were now developing their themes with attention to nature, to design and the realities of culture.

It should be recalled that in the late 1930's the word "regionalism," denoting a resurgence of popular themes in American life and art at both local and regional levels of experience, was applied by critics of art and literature to the creative productions of writers like Julia Peterkin, Erskine Caldwell and Sinclair Lewis, and to the painters Thomas Benton, Grant Wood, and John Stuart Curry and Edward Hopper. These artists represented an artistic trend quite different to those modalities of Cubism, of Non-objective art or Abstraction which had been set going in the art world of America after the 1913 Armory Show. To a large extent, painting and sculpture were caught up in the aims of social realism as interpreted in the works of some of the great Mexican mural painters — Orozco particularly, but also Rivera. Nevertheless, the larger aesthetic values of their so-called regionalism would scarcely have been appreciated had it not been for the fervid apologetics of criticism written by such an admirer of their efforts as was Thomas Craven who wished to stem the tide of modernism breaking upon
our Western shore with a force which carried it all the way to 57th Street and ultimately into the halls of the Museum of Modern Art.

At that very hour, Afro-American artists were acutely aware of special problems of professional opportunity, of recognition and of patronage. They often charged discrimination and aired their views in the New York Times and in other journals of wide circulation. They took such action in the interest of securing for themselves the same freedoms and prerogatives as their fellow white artists were already enjoying and which they conceived as a “natural endowment” of their profession. It is interesting to recall even now that the troubled outlook of the Afro-American artist was expressed by the poet Countee Cullen in a remarkable poem entitled “Yet Do I Marvel” which was published in 1925. Perhaps the question Cullen then posed is yet not fully answered:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black and bid him sing.*

Similar problems were actually posed for the Negro painter and sculptor. An article in the New York World in 1930 carried the terse remarks of two Negro painters on the question of the “racial content of art,” and each was a categorical denial of the importance of racial content. Malvin Gray Johnson, a painter, registered his viewpoint as follows:

“A noted American etcher has accused Negroes of imitating their white fellow-workers. No doubt this is true. Not so much from the standpoint that they imitate white artists of this or any other country in as much as they are trying to do what artists of all races do—follow the principles of fine arts technically. . . . The distinguished etcher admits most of these things himself, but says: ‘While few of the Negro artists used subjects of Negro life the approach is no different than that of the white painters.’ How can it be? We Americans of both races know and live the same life, except that the Negro encounters restrictions.”

It should not be forgotten that the Amy Spingarn prizes of 1924 and the Harmon Foundation Awards of a few years later were established to give encouragement and recognition to Negro writers as well as artists. Indeed, the Harmon Awards also singled out Negro leaders or intellectuals who had made meritorious contributions in almost any field of endeavor. Perhaps it should be taken as evidence of a wider current appreciation or acceptance of Afro-American art that comparable awards are no longer made available to the Negro artist in America.

In February, 1936, the First American Artists’ Congress was held in New York City for the purpose of exposing to the American art world and

*The complete poem from which these lines are excerpted runs as follows:

I doubt not God is good, well-meaning, kind,
And did he stoop to quibble could tell why
The little buried mole continues blind,
Why flesh that mirrors Him must
some day die,
Make plain the reason tortured Tantalus
Is baited by the fickle fruit, declare
If merely brute caprice dooms Sisyphus
To struggle up a never-ending stair.
Inscrutable His ways are, and immune
To catechism by a mind too strewn
With petty cares to slightly understand
What awful brain compels His awful hand,
Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black and bid him sing!
to the world in general the plight of the American artist and the critical state of American art. Only one Negro artist was a member of that body of 360 artists who discussed and later published their findings on every issue ranging from museum and government neglect of the arts to the rental and reproduction rights in his art that an artist was bound to protect. Lynd Ward produced a paper on "Race, Nationality, and Art" which linked up with Aaron Douglas’s discussion of "The Negro in American Art." It is not known how many Afro-American artists may have learned about the proceedings of the American Artists’ Congress and the resolutions passed, or how many may have admitted its salutary influence on their hopes. Yet, in the 1930’s and 40’s, when the Public Works of Art Projects were being administered, the number of Negroes who became beneficiaries of government provisions for training and for public art commissions was far greater than such indifference to the aims of the Artists’ Congress would have allowed us to conjecture.

Out of the welter of artistic and cultural activity of that period emerged the significant work and careers of Charles White and Eldzier Cortor of Chicago, Hughie Lee-Smith of Cleveland, Ernest Crichlow, Charles Alston and Henry Bannarn of New York, and Elton Fax of Baltimore. To many, these artists may have seemed but the continuators of the "New Realism" of the early 1930’s. Actually, they were probing much deeper into the emotions of fear, hatred, loneliness, despair, and triumphant joyousness, uncovering a range of feeling hardly suspected by their older colleagues.

Even among this brilliant galaxy, Charles White and Jacob Lawrence loomed gigantic. Lawrence who since his beginnings in the mid-1930’s had become the best-known Afro-American artist, was then, and still remains almost exclusively an interpreter of Negro life. Lawrence’s simple close-knit harmonies seem to probe the very soul of the Negro; and no other American artist so deftly translates prose narrative into symbolic color.

Charles White, like Lawrence, is also a devoted interpreter of the Negro. Not a color prestidigitator like Lawrence, he relies chiefly on the eloquence of his black-and-white prints and drawings, which sometimes are of great size, to convey his message. He prefers a compositional format which leaves the subject surrounded with a field of white space that works as an implied extension of the forms. With the Negro as subject he consistently strives to build up a vignette of black beauty oozing through a delicate crackle of forms densely or thinly laid. Were there space in which to make a comparison of his work with that of Andrew Wyeth whose artistic approach to the human condition is not dissimilar, it might prove instructive. I believe, however, that by looking at Wyeth one grasps more readily the universal values in White’s art. By looking at White and then again at Wyeth the latter’s interest in a narrower human world may seem less clinical and more empathic.

Less well known to those who follow the development of the Negro theme in American art are the younger contemporaries of White and Lawrence. Such printmakers as the fine engraver, Norma Morgan, and that maker of excellent woodcuts and wood-engravings, Walter Williams, deserve wider recognition than that which a few important prizes
taken in collective exhibitions has bestowed on them.

It probably surprises no one that the names of dead artists mentioned in the company of the living can stir emotions of regret in those who have known the difficulties encountered by the Negro in the past to live by his art. And, one regrets the comparatively brief careers of the notable self-taught artist Horace Pippin who died in 1946, and the sculptors Augusta Savage, Henry Bannarn and Marion Perkins, for all these were gifted persons who gave promise of uniquely individual achievements. Of the three, only Pippin’s art has commanded wide posthumous appreciation both here and abroad.

It is impossible to discuss the work of all these artists at length. All the same, attention must be called to the marvelously poetic paintings of Charles Davis, Harlan Jackson, Charles Sebree, Lucille Roberts and Lois M. Jones. The mark of the mature and fecund artist is on each of them. They have added generously to the themes originated — or discovered — by the Afro-American artist. Their use of color to create or to suggest a mood will well repay the student of such effects. Charles Davis’ “Victory at Dawn,” an oil painting of 1941, is still for me one of the great paintings of that year or of any year.

Sebree’s art shows definite inclination towards the mystical or ineffable in human life. His work, conceived in a mood of contemplation, recalls the glowing purity of Byzantine enamels. By contrast, Lois Jones’ usually brilliant palette has produced some of the most diverting panoramas of Haitian life and landscape.

It is not my intention to write a survey of Afro-American art or to list the many artists who have risen above the level of amateurism or professional mediocrity during the past twenty-five years or so. I must, however, mention by name quite a number of mature artists of the “new generation” without regard to age. Were it possible to review the work of each artist individually I would do so. Just now, it would seem more useful to write of the social impulses, the ideas or the ideologies and opinions which have admittedly given direction to their practice and substance to their works.

First of all, the remarkable staying power demonstrated by some of the earlier artists whose careers began with the onset of the “New Negro Movement,” is one of the happier aspects of the progress of “the minority artist.” In short, the current artistic activities of men like Hale Woodruff, Charles Alston, Jacob Lawrence, Aaron Douglas and James L. Wells are still fertile and influential. In addition, their willingness to serve as mentors to the young aspiring artists or to place their experience at the service of those persons or institutions which would promote the opportunities of the artist, must be deserving of highest praise. Moreover, older artists like Sargent Johnson, Charles Alston, Hughie Lee-Smith, Margaret Burroughs and Charles McGee have not put aside the race theme altogether, but have expanded its values in keeping with the evolving language of modern art. A sign of this is their use of bolder rhythms and of free association techniques of abstract expression. Such diversity characterizes as well the whole of the present generation: No single simplistic tenor of style or thought prevails. Not even “realism” as formerly understood dominates the minds and techniques of all the artists today.
Nor does "abstraction" of any single aesthetic variety claim all. "Pop" and "Op" and the several types of "hard-edge" painting are not really rejected, but are occasionally resorted to with a caution dictated by the artist's understanding of the language of symbolism or by his own plastic language.

Negro history still has its illustrators among the older artists who occasionally paint murals; but for all their use of documentary imagery, artists like Allan R. Crite, Woodruff, Stallings, Lee-Smith and McNeill have stayed clear of the further multiplication of stereotypes masquerading as racial or social symbols. An impressive number of the new generation have been making abstract forms and color an occasional vehicle of their personal aesthetic impulses; but occasional use cannot be the same as unreserved adoption that might easily jeopardize the artist's own variety and freshness of concept. In that context the striped, patched or stippled and frequently taped "or floated abstractions of Sam Gilliam and Alma Thomas of Washington, D. C. are both novel and dynamic."

The philosophy and aims of Pan-Africanism translated into the broader concept of "Negritude" is nothing new, seemingly, to the Negro artist. Long ago he endorsed the feelingful necessity to identify with concepts of race or of blackness whether of African or of American origin. Having read DuBois and Locke, Rayford Logan and Langston Hughes and the great books of Richard Wright and James Baldwin, any Negro member of the new generation might be responsive to a culture propaganda that favors identification with the values of race, race culture, and place, including the necessity to reconstruct the "Negro image."

Hale Woodruff shows concern for this legacy of the Afro-American artist in his introduction to the Catalogue, "Ten Negro Artists of the United States"*, for therein he poses the following question: "What criteria are appropriate to the valid assessment of the art of a people?" and answers it by saying that "we must probe beyond subject content and aesthetic language to get at our roots . . . [since] "the most valid measure of any art lies in the impact of qualities outside the obvious, that is to say, in the domain of the spirit and the senses, intangible but real . . . ."

While I do not agree that what the senses report to the artist is necessarily intangible, I do feel that Mr. Woodruff has touched on at least one sure index to the motivations of the Negro artist; that is, the spirit; or translated into terms that I should prefer, a lively sensibility, the very trunk nerve of the artist's own subjectivity focused and intensified by experience.

Though the artists of whom I am thinking may now and again appear to return to positions still held by the older men, this should be understandable in the context of group loyalty or in terms of the movement of group ideologies within society. Let them link their sensibility, if they will, to the hopes and purposes of their fellows, or to society as a whole, if it be good for society. There is already sufficient evidence to assure that they easily distinguish the realities of art from the mirage of propaganda.

Surprisingly enough, however, one

* A catalogue-brochure prepared for the American Negro artists exhibition at the World Festival of Negro Arts, Dakar, Senegal, April 1966.
finds that within the very group of young artists in New York City which have been associated with the leadership of Hale Woodruff, Romare Bearden and Charles Alston, that is, the "Spiral" group, a sharp division of opinion on this very head has arisen. In Art News for September, 1966, an article on the group publishes the following report:

"They have met as a totally divergent group ranging in age from 28 to 65, which includes a court clerk, art dealer, floor waxer, a Ph.D. candidate and restorer of old masters — first meeting three years ago to discuss what they considered a far more vital issue: What should be their attitudes and commitments as Negro artists in the present struggle for Civil Rights . . . Should you participate directly in the activities of the Movement? Do you have special qualities to express as a Negro artist? What is your value as an artist who is both American and Negro? etc. . . . They knew that something set them apart from other painters, but were not sure that "something" had a tangible form that could be transmitted through art. They referred to this possibility as "the Negro image." . . . Felrat Hines proposed an answer: "There is no Negro image in the 20th century — not in the 1960's. There are only prevailing ideas that influence everyone all over the world. Each person paints out the life he lives."

While this schismatic development within "Spiral" need not cause the rest of us to take sides, I must point out that it does re-emphasize the Negro artist's subscription to social philosophies as well as to aesthetic ones. More interestingly still, it reveals his concern with his own artistic drives or his uncertainty about the same. Clearly, in a few cases, he is caught upon the horns of the old dilemma, that is, the conceptual versus the real in modern art. But in this instance, one observes that not even the powerful example of Romare Bearden's wonderful cubist-surrealist collages — his "Projections" of the Negro image in American society — could galvanize the group into one homogeneous unit from the side of ideology of which I am writing. Instead, one notes an impressive range of tendencies has emerged, all the way from the cryptically symbolic to posteresque "Op", and from the minimal image to collage or montage of found objects — signifying not so much a Negro mystique as a kaleidoscope of mixed emotions of pain, restlessness, frustration, anger, protest, but rarely love. In short, nowhere does one find general adherence to a plausible common denominator of form or to the "good gestalt" as raised or suggested in Mr. Woodruff's introductory piece already referred to.

To some of us the recent artistic movement in Watts, Los Angeles may seem an answer to the non-unity of the Spiral group. It may well be; but I very much doubt that it could be. Not that aesthetic differences on such a grand scale as seen in modern art do by their effect make that art eclectic in the derogatory sense usually applied. On the other hand, there is no way of predicting what kind of artistic response artists will make to such an affecting social and racial crisis as occurred in Watts; but it is reassuring or should be to all that they have responded constructively, and that the majority of those who have done so are Negro. Their response has been uniform only in the sense of having adopted a slogan or title for their first exhibition. The title — "66 Signs of Neon" has for my ear a strangely cryptic fascination. Educationally and socially, these artists have assumed
common goals; artistically, they have adhered to individual ways of expressing their sincere self-consciousness about Watts. Believing in "the art of communication as a creative act" they have made up their own appraisal of Watts as a subject of art:

The ultimate purpose of this effort, as we conceived it, was to demonstrate to the community of Watts, to Los Angeles and to the world at large, that education through creativity is the only way left for a person to find himself in this materialistic world.

Junk was chosen as the medium for a variety of reasons, in addition to its obvious impact as the artifacts of tragedy . . . On another level, the assemblage of junk illustrated for the artists the imposition of order on disorder, the creation of beauty from ugliness. Its analog was the essence of communication, for the placing of unrelated objects in a pattern conceived by intellect and emotion made them speak coherently . . . It is evident that it is a utilization of the August 11th event, but that it transcends it, and rises above social protest. It seems to be saying that there is some uncertainty about our direction. That we all take equal responsibility for the Wattses of the world, and that only we can prevent their happening again.

Depending largely on the techniques of "assemblage," which are not entirely new in the world, the Watts group has ennobled the half-destroyed and sometimes fire-transformed materials taken from the ruins of Watts to become the matrix of their sculpture. Indeed, nearly all their work is sculpture, although a few lithographs have also been devoted to their purposes. In the domain of assemblage we have the purely fantastic as well as the more plastically abstract; and artists like Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell are bringing to the idiom a certain uniqueness of subject as well as feeling. Should this tendency persist it may enlist the energies of other Negro artists and ultimately bring into modern American art a vast new range of subjects with accompanying moods and aesthetic ideas of striking novelty and elaboration.

The possibilities of this surmise were anticipated to a surprisingly large degree in the October 1966 "Negro in American Art" show held in the Galleries of the University of California at Los Angeles. There one saw as part of a total chronological spread of American Negro art of about one hundred years, the best work by some of the most talented of the younger Negro artists. Though their works manifested varying degrees of skill, the suitability of the medium chosen by the artist could not in any case have been challenged. Among painters, the contributions of Alvin Hollingsworth, Mavis Pusey, Raymond Saunders, Daniel Johnson, David Driskell, Sam Gilliam and Wilbur Hayney were most outstanding. John Rhoden of New York, one of the most inventive of the young sculptors, was conspicuous by his absence from the show, but the morbidly Baudelairean fantasies in steel forged by that adept technician in metal, Richard Hunt, could easily have made a moving altarpiece to "Saint Robot" along with the "Sir Watts" by Noah Purifoy and "A Necessary Angle" by Melvin Edwards. And the presence there of other sculptural assemblages by the young Todd Williams and by John Stevens only made one wonder what difference the inclusion of some major bronzes by Harold Cousins and his great compatriot, Barbara Chase, might have made in the total qualitative impact of the sculpture section.
I began this essay by remarking the differences in emotion and contemplation between the Afro-American art of the present and that of the Nineteenth century. In the Los Angeles show one felt that the violins of racial strife or bitterness were a little muted; nevertheless, the sense of racial alienation on the one hand and of artistic withdrawal into fantasy and other realms of inner consciousness on the other was inescapably present. The compartmentalized cosmos of Bettye Saar's "Astrologer's Window" and the fractured tonal beauty of Marvin Harden's larva-like "Melancholia #25" were like songs of despair or apostrophizing odes to a new spirit of resignation, if not of defiance. Like Purifoy's "Sir Watts" and Melvin Edward's "A Necessary Angle" these works are an astonishing mixture of the banal and the implausible, and by their poignancy of feeling recall the satirical paintings and sculpture of the now extinct German school of Neuesachlichkeit out of which came the artists Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, and George Grosz.

Yet, it is unlikely that we shall ever have a truly great Afro-American artist among us until American society completely accepts the Negro and his valid interpreters. This wished for relationship is still far from arriving although it is so much desired by all who love America and hope that she will fulfill the democratic promise of equality. Present social conditions indicate the need to establish a greater cultural purpose in the heart of this nation. This must be accomplished, not merely for the sake of culture but for peace and human salvation. The present militancy of the Negro relative to this necessity has been interpreted as the actual conscience of America pricking her towards goals of social justice and moral action. This, in fact, is a cultural upsurge of crucial importance, and it offers the artist and the writer unprecedented opportunities for the development of mobility and independence of creative thought and imagery.

The question is, will the Afro-American artist continue to exploit his present opportunities in the realization that such an engagement is more than a test of sheer tenacity? It is a challenge to his whole capability, even though the answer to the query actually rests with the Negro people and not, specifically, with their interpreters. Afro-American art since the middle of the nineteenth century has been an index or reflection of the black man's struggle for freedom. Therefore, only the as yet unspent social and cultural drives of black Americans can unfailingly sustain the Afro-American artist as he embraces the broader opportunities of the future.