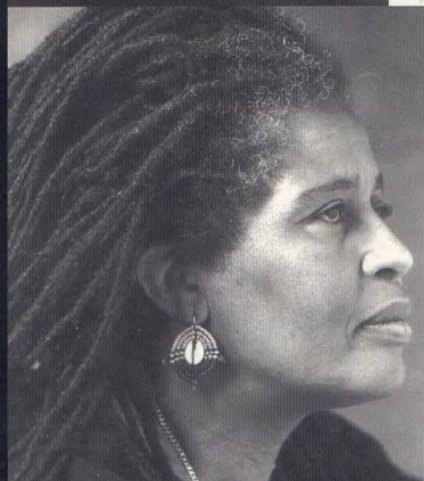




GUMBO YA YA:

*Anthology of Contemporary
African-American Women Artists*



Introduction by Leslie King-Hammond

JOYCE WELLMAN

Born N.Y. City, 1950. B.S. 1972, City College of New York; M.A. 1977, University of Massachusetts, Boston. Media: printmaking; painting.

My work involves the use of imagery that reveals itself through an unconscious process of placing color, form, cryptic signs and marks onto the surface of my paintings. The real challenge begins as I push and pull these abstractions in order to create visual sensations that evoke from the viewer an emotional response. This is my attempt to bring the viewer closer to a non-material and nurturing world.

After years of close-quartered graphic work and scaled-down conceptualizations on zinc and copper etching plates, Joyce Wellman took to painting again, and in 1985 images like *Desert Journey* began to emerge. Cryptic, perspectiveless, and bereft of Leonardo's vanishing point, *Desert Journey* extends Wellman's previous preoccupation with drawn linearities into a more immediate realm.

When plummeting into Wellman's work, one is immediately reminded of the slow motion underwater world. *Undersea Life*. is a conceptual ocean, carefully charted by Wellman in gestural demarcations that point out personal, intimate topographies. Action-engendering accent marks, abbreviated messages (i.e., the "S.O.S." which occasionally appears in her work), and abstracted body parts swim in this watery space, all of it infused with meaning and mystery.

Joyce Wellman, who is New York City-born and largely New York City-trained, prefers to go about her business in a decidedly New York City-free frame of mind. Her residency in the District of Columbia, along with her retreats to the Adirondacks, have triggered an art which on the surface may have something to do with urban labyrinths and graffitied discourses, but are actually population zero and spirit-charged. *Journey to Sun City* (1984), captures the dust-tracked memory and heat of an alive, sweltering environment minus references to architecture and citizenry *per se*.

Although *Journey to Sun City*, might refer to that similarly named, infamous, Las Vegas-like outpost in South Africa, Wellman only says, "If that's where you want to be." What art historian David Driskell refers to in Wellman's work as "the concept of journeying" means that the *process* of journeying has just as

much import as the *destination*. This idea is borne out both in the print *Journey to Sun City* and in its medium: a combination of several complicated printmaking techniques. Its brilliant colors, high contrast, and primordial images conjure a joy in the *possibilities* of form and content.

The fluidity with which Wellman moves from the concrete to the illusory is evidenced frequently in her graphics. *Creation*, a 1979 print done while the artist was affiliated with Krishna Reddy's color printmaking workshop in N.Y. City, and *Block Girls* of 1984 illustrate her range and development. *Creation* visualizes the Adam/Eve/Snake narrative while simultaneously touching on specific tales of "becoming" that are common among the Akan people of Ghana. More illustrational than subsequent prints, *Creation* is one of her first to formally articulate a kind of organic, almost surreal imagining of the tangible. *Block Girls* puns on its compositional self, and on those street corner "thugettes" who strike fear in the uninitiated. In their good-natured, memory-triggering narrative both prints force viewers to *intuit* the text more than to read it.

The feeling/sensing/intuiting process is evident in Wellman's approach to the figure. From its most obvious realizations, as in *Pathway Dancers*, to its most abstracted embodiments, as in *Jungle Journey*, the human figure in Joyce Wellman's art holds sensuality and a potential for action close to the surface. The white-on-black doodles of *Pathway Dancers* are miniature versions of the dancers themselves. Appendages and torsos, decked out in waves of design, function on behalf of an implied energy. These figures, who take on the shape of anthropomorphic arrows, reiterate Wellman's paean to "going places," both in form and spirit. In *Jungle Journey*, these personifications are perhaps more "arrow" than "human," recalling aboriginal totems and divining rods which mark points of contact for the ancestors, water, and/or other life sources. Pulsating like microscopic cilia, electric blues, moody purples, and hot reds in *The Water Family*, unlike the chromatics of *Jungle Journey* or the black

and white starkness of *Pathway Dancers*, qualify Wellman's concern for sensorial aliveness, shifting vitality to a high-key use of color.

Joyce Wellman's aesthetic proximity to the so-termed "Washington Color School" demands some consideration. While conceptually distant from the systemic rainbow paintings of Gene Davis or the stoic geometries of Kenneth Noland, Wellman's art does relate to the more expressive offshoots, specifically to the paintings of Sam Gilliam. Her *Journey Thru Migration*, a yellow/sky blue/purple mélange of virulent color juxtapositions, recall Gilliam's explorations into similar junctures in form and color. But whereas Gilliam avoids direct references to the human figure, Wellman allows the shapes created by her roller to invoke walking legs, flexed torsos, and arms akimbo. The brush, expressionistic treatment of both figures and ground in Wellman's painting takes the smaller-scaled prints, with their shared emphasis on warm-against-cool, tangible-against-enigmatic, to other levels of interpretation.

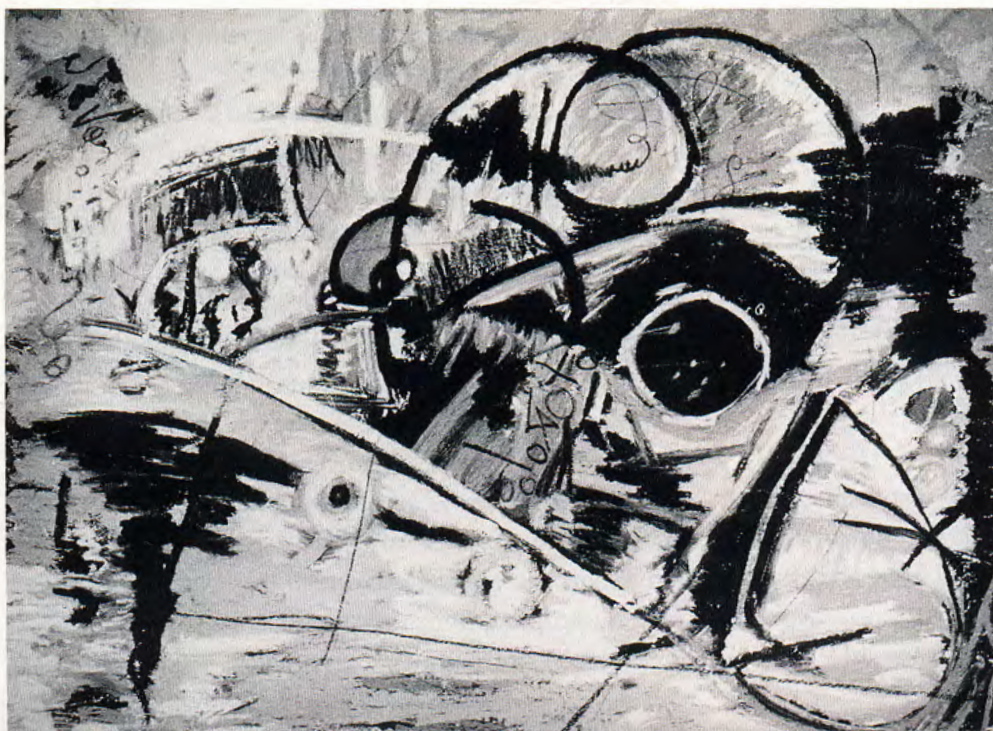
The journey between paintings and prints, as in Wellman's journey between the figure and the surrounding space, reach an apex in the color viscosity etching *Artist's Alter Ego in Metamorphosis*. The play between the composition's primary figure and its pictographic, message-laden context is fascinating. The overriding concerns for Wellman – an art of process; an "implosion of color, form, and

space"; and the triggering of timeless, limitless associations – seem especially at work in this print. But what makes this image succeed beyond Wellman's objectives is a delectable density. The confluences of color, closeness, and text allow our twenty-first century receptors to operate at full tilt, factoring out each visual ingredient for its respective effects. The layers in this and other works by Wellman join a host of other multilayered expressions in the African-American tradition (black urban fashion, Afrika Bambaataa's musical riffs, Greg Tate's critical writings) by demanding perceptual simultaneity from the audience.

Wellman's highwire solo between printmaking and painting elicits at times a reeling sensation, capable of confounding those who find media leaps disconcerting. But for those who are conversant in many different art languages – the painterly, the graphic, the abstract, and the figurative – Wellman's art will "lead" you into "that other self. . . that is interfacing subconsciously with our environment."

– RICHARD POWELL

Wellman has frequently exhibited in the Washington, D.C. area, including solo shows at Howard University Gallery of Art, Gallery 900, University of the District of Columbia, and at First American Bank. Her work has also been shown in N.Y. City; Baltimore, Md.; Minneapolis, Minn.; and Traverse City, Mich. Wellman has received several awards and fellowships, including three from the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities. She is an education specialist for Wider Opportunities for Women in Washington, D.C.



Joyce Wellman, *Bug Head*, 1989, oil on paper, 38 x 50" w.