FOREWORD
AL BOIME

Paul Von Blum’s latest book serves as a valuable bridge between the growing corpus of macro-based studies devoted to international black and African American culture and the much rarer and needed in-depth analyses of minority communities spanning the entire range of visual media. Von Blum carries us deep into the heart of contemporary Los Angeles and surroundings where he draws on the work of a vibrant community of gifted practitioners. This groundbreaking effort makes a paradigm shift in its systematic analysis of several generations of living artists and their visual representations belonging to the same ethnic and regional community. Von Blum deftly organizes his material around the triadic theme of “Resistance, Dignity, and Pride” to problematize the thematics of this body of artists who nevertheless share overlapping concerns about identity, culture, activism, and all the tragic variables traceable to the trauma of the African diaspora. It is as if Von Blum imagines the cultural and historical perspective of an all-black neighborhood in Watts or Compton, forged under conditions of oppressive racial segregation but strategically converted into a communal solidarity that unleashes wave after wave of creative energy. In this remarkable neighborhood, all the residents happen to be artists engaged in diverse practices and pictorial strategies, are mutually supportive and sustained by a network of enthusiastic museum curators, gallery owners, directors of cultural centers, and even patrons and corporate collectors of the arts. Yet even more extraordinary is the fact that this hypothetical test case is more real than imaginary, and this in a traditionally marginalized enterprise among a demographic group whose surplus wealth for historic reasons is minuscule compared to that of the dominant population. By localizing his exploration, however, Von Blum is able to bring his rich resources to bear on a vital, interactive and supportive segment of a challenged but resolute community.

The book is in many ways a complement to the author’s important Other Visions, Other Voices, where he used a similar approach to women artists working in the Los Angeles area. There he showed himself a profound student of feminist and gender issues, and in the present case he again demonstrates an encyclopedic grasp of the literature in the field and ability to contextualize his regional case studies within the broad sweep of African American history and culture. Equally important, his passionate and long-standing engagement with the civil rights movement and with the burning social issues of the day deeply informs his effective methodological framework. Finally, I found most moving the frank exchanges of the author and his interviewees; as these contained information of a highly personal and private nature, it is clear that Von Blum established a close rapport with his artists and earned their confidence and trust. I take this as testimony to his rigorous attention to the complexities of their experience.

I believe that this work will serve to inspire other scholars to undertake similar much-needed projects, treating “grass-roots” creativity and revealing the potential of imagery to inform and enrich not only a specific region and ethnic community but also contribute to a new Renaissance in which the ideal of the collaborative quilt will become a model for an authentic culture of diversity.

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