Art and the Freedom Struggle

The works of Mumia Abu-Jamal
Art and the Freedom Struggle

THE WORKS OF
MUMIA
ABU-JAMAL
Black art has always probed the underside of the American Dream. In the 1960s, the Black Arts Movement applied, as Larry Neal made clear, political ideas to art and literature. Before that time, there was a debate between W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke about what was then called “Negro Art.” In a 1926 article in the newspaper *The Crisis*, Du Bois observed the “bounden duty of Black America to begin to create this great work of Beauty.” He then linked this work of Beauty to that of Truth. In other words, for Du Bois and Locke had their eyes on the literature, art, and music that was being produced in what has been called the Harlem Renaissance today, one aspect in thinking about practices of Black art is to focus our gaze on where some of that art is being produced.

Today, it is estimated that 37 percent of African Americans are in America’s jails. It is not a surprising statistic because one element of American anti-black racism is to make black bodies disposable. What that means is that with that truth we now need to turn to see where art is being produced; to see how – in the midst of conditions of disposability – beauty and truth are created.

This exhibition, “Art and the Freedom Struggle: The Works of Mumia Abu-Jamal,” allows us to develop that gaze. From America’s prisons, some of the most formidable thinkers have emerged and here I am thinking of George Jackson and of course Malcolm X to name two. To look at the artwork of Mumia one now has to ask: are we on the verge of seeing Black Art from America’s jails that will open up a distinctive space for Black Art in general? In one of the texts that accompanies this exhibition, Mumia notes that we typically “consider Art and Incarceration...as an oxymoron, a stunning incongruity.” That may be so, but the life of blackness
in the contemporary world means that art and various art practices emerge from all spaces in which Black life exists. To be human is to engage in the life of the imagination and to create symbolic forms out of our imaginative processes. In American jails, Black bodies continue this perennial struggle to be human. Art practices then become one terrain for their re-composition of self as human. This is what this exhibition means.

For this work, we need to thank the curator, Melaine Ferdinand-King, and the Curator of the Black Diaspora at the John Hay Library, Christopher West.

Of course, no thanks are huge enough for Ben Kaplan and Erin Wells who, since the Center began doing exhibitions, have been our installer and designer respectively.

ANTHONY BOGUES
Director, The Ruth J. Simmons Center for the Study of Slavery and Justice

“In truth, none of us are whole, as in finished,
for we are all beings
who are still in the process of becoming”

CURATORIAL STATEMENT


Known internationally as a political prisoner, Abu-Jamal warrants considerable attention as an artist and cultural critic. In depicting historical figures, pop culture icons, and personal visions, Abu-Jamal reveals how artistic production functions as a mode of self-expression, a junction between “inside” and “outside” worlds, and a powerful tool for social commentary. His paintings, drawings, poetry, and musical compositions disclose, in part, the interests and concerns of an outsider-observer committed to freedom and being free while making sense of a carceral state. Themes throughout the exhibition include abolition, Black liberation, community-building, music, and sports.

The gallery also serves as an activation space. While experiencing the works on display, viewers are encouraged to reflect on Abu-Jamal’s story alongside their individual agency and relationship to the notion of struggle. We aim to spark engaged activity on the local level related to issues of mass incarceration and spirited dialogue on the importance of responding creatively in times of political duress.

MELAINE FERDINAND-KING
Curator
PhD Candidate in Africana Studies
ARTIST’S BIOGRAPHY

Mumia Abu-Jamal is an internationally-celebrated Black American activist, journalist, and political prisoner. Prior to his imprisonment, Abu-Jamal co-founded the Philadelphia Black Panther Party, served as president of the Philadelphia Association of Black Journalists, and supported the MOVE organization as an activist and radio journalist. Since 1982, Abu-Jamal has maintained his innocence and fought his conviction for the 1981 murder of a Philadelphia police officer. Abu-Jamal was sentenced to death and is currently serving a life sentence without parole. He spent a majority of his time incarcerated in solitary confinement (22 hours daily for over 30 years) during which he created many of the works on display in this exhibition.

Abu-Jamal is the current co-host of the podcast, “The Classroom and the Cell” with Marc Lamont Hill. His books have sold more than 100,000 copies and have been translated into seven languages. He continues to critique, create, and struggle for the global liberation of oppressed peoples while behind bars.

“I am a thinker, writer, activist, creative being, man, dad, husband, grandpop, and son. But just to keep it simple: I’m a free Black man living in captivity. That’s who I am.”
WHEN WE SPEAK about art in the Black freedom struggle, we’re really speaking about the heart, the core, the essence of the Black freedom struggle because there has never been a Black freedom struggle that has not been accompanied, in some sense, by art. Back during some of the darkest days of African-American existence in the United States, it was also the time of some of the most glorious music-making by Black artists who created art forms that the world had never heard before. I speak here about jazz, specifically jazz. In the time where Black people were under legal – what can only be called in hindsight – apartheid. Legal repression and legal oppression.

The world of the arts, especially music, was exploding with a kind of brilliance and life that affirmed in the darkest days of our existence, our humanity. And also, I must say, our genius. When you think about Duke Ellington... his big bands and someone as revolutionary on the stage as Miles Davis – these two jazz artists sent messages around the world. Messages in their music about the humanity, the grace, the beauty, the brilliance and the combativeness, the resistance, the resilience of Black people in the United States. And, there was, especially during the 30s and 40s of the 20th century, a small exodus of African-Americans who fled the United States to live in places like France or Spain and other parts of the world where they could walk down the street and be treated like a human being. James Baldwin spent time in Paris. Richard Wright. And I could name a dozen artists, writers, dancers, performers, musicians.

I’m reminded of a funny story that I read in a book by Quincy Troupe about Miles Davis... because of his brilliance and his inability to play the humble Negro. I remember a story about him playing on 42nd Street in Manhattan and he left the club to smoke a cigarette, that’s all. A cop walks up to him, tells him, “Keep it moving, buddy”. [Miles] said, “Keep it moving! I’m working here.” And the cop beats him up and assaults him. And his name, Miles Davis, is on the marquee to the club. Every time Miles came to Philadelphia, the narco squad would bust him. Well, [Miles] liked drugs, he used them, and he loved it. A few months later, he gets tired of this, and he goes to France, and Miles is walking down the gangplank and into where people are registered, and their passports are checked. He sees this red carpet and... then gets to the people, and he says, “Who’s this red carpet for?” [The French people respond] “Oh, Monsieur Miles, we love you. You’re such a genius.” The French start kissing him and embracing him, [Miles] didn’t know that the red carpet was for him. And the French really threw their love at him because they had listened to him, they knew his genius. What did Miles do? Miles had to get up and get back into the United States because it was so juicy and comfy in France, that he couldn’t create, he couldn’t make music. He needed the American nastiness to give him the grit to create some of the most brilliant music that’s ever been created. And Miles created at least two different forms. He was a master. He went to Juilliard because his parents had some money because they owned some stores. He went to Juilliard [and he] stayed there a little bit, and say, “Aye ain’t nothin’ you cats can teach me.” And he turned around, and he left. So when you think about the role of the arts in the freedom struggle - our music, our paintings, our sculpture, our dance, our song and our facility with creating a new kind of music, really move the world.

With love, not fear. This is Mumia Abu-Jamal.

Mumia Abu-Jamal (2024)
FEW UNDERSTAND STRUGGLE better than Mumia Abu-Jamal. In his 40+ years of incarceration (at least 30 of which he spent in solitary confinement), Mumia has become one of the most prolific writers and enduring freedom fighters of our time. As one of our incarcerated elders, his work deserves recognition and deep exploration.

BROADLY SPEAKING, Mumia is concerned with uncovering the truth and meaning of struggle. He has much to teach us about pressing forward in the face of oppression.

Art and The Freedom Struggle is motivated by my thinking with Mumia in preparing the archives, especially his essays “Art & Incarceration” (2013), “Music and Revolution” (2013), and “The Role of Art in the Movement” (2011). This exhibition is about responsibility—responding to our shared condition as people by taking the helm where we can and using our power for the good of others. In solidarity with Mumia, this exhibition asks: “What are your creative tools and skills? How can you use them to restructure our collective imagination and strengthen our commitment to liberation?”

As I developed the exhibition from the archives, I confronted what scholar Geri Augusto calls “the curator’s conundrum,” the challenge of deciding what works should or should not be exhibited. This project also required a curatorial adjustment—an embrace of displaying works never intended to be in any gallery. In making this adjustment, I shifted my focus from beauty to responsibility. This acquisition of Mumia’s papers by Brown University make me, as a scholar, feel accountable to the moment. Mumia was incarcerated and sentenced to death at age 28, not much older than I am now. This fact and the difference in our circumstances were a constant point of reflection for me. As I carried out this work, it was important for me to create a space where we can reckon with the meaning of this acquisition, learn more about Mumia Abu-Jamal’s offerings, and work as a community toward a future aligned with his emancipatory visions. In this space, I ask visitors to join me in concentrating less on art’s face value and its aesthetic merit and more on the meaning. What does it mean for this work to hold a place on gallery walls? What does inclusion in Brown’s collections mean for these objects, the communities they should serve, and Mumia’s freedom?

I hope that “Art and the Freedom Struggle” moves folks to recommit to the long durée of struggle, visit Mumia Abu-Jamal’s archives at the John Hay Library, and learn more about Mumia as a revolutionary artist and activist. This is a token of gratitude to Mumia Abu-Jamal and other freedom fighters, for their example of how to use our power creatively, afraid yet undeterred. We owe them far more.

I am honored to present this exhibition to the public.

Melaine Ferdinand-King
Curator
PhD Candidate in Africana Studies

Curator’s Reflection
WHEN WE CONSIDER Art and Incarceration, this originally sounds like an oxymoron, a stunning incongruity. But, in fact, these drab, colorless human storage boxes are bursting with art. For those with an eye to see, the arts are bursting through like sunlight on Easter morning. There is a stunning amount of talent hidden behind these walls, more even than I believed.

We should not be surprised that many young men see themselves as rappers, for rap, hip hop is their dominant form, and if you mingle amongst men under 30, you’ll hear the sing-song rhythms of rap songs, either repeating the work of someone in videos, or someone’s original composition. As rap is well, rap – it is a truly democratic art form and everyone thinks they are the next Biggie – or the next Tupac.

But that isn’t all.

I’ve seen play piano keyboards with tenderness, grace and immense talent. For some men, a keyboard is an instrument for making beats – beds to rap over. Others play R&B standards, Stevie Wonder, The Temptations and the like. And still others play songs of their own composition: works of considerate imagination, of sweetness and beauty.

Some guys play for the prison chapel, accompanying sermons, or gospel songs.

That this incredible talent exists here is all the more remarkable because there is no music class here. Men either learn from other men, or they simply teach themselves, through trial and error, or study from books.

A story: There’s a young man here, who, like many men his age, loves music; although he’s never studied it, nor played an instrument. He’s been told, almost his whole life, that he’s learning disabled. As a consequence he has difficulty reading. A few months ago, he acquired a keyboard. He produced 3 beats the first night! Within a few weeks, he and his cellmate recorded a song with a catchy hip-hop beat, but above it all, flowing in and out, was a remarkable jazz solo, the light airy sound of a soprano saxophone.

It wasn’t just good – it was excellent – and it sounded like something you’d hear on the radio.

I asked, “Who played that?”

He answered, “I did.”

I asked, “How did you do that? Where did it come from?”

He said, “I heard it.”

I asked, “What do you mean ‘heard it’? On the radio?”

He replied, “Naw, I heard it, like, in my head.”

I was stunned.

And yet – incarceration unleashes hidden talents in those encaged. I’ve seen drawings in pencil or pen, painting in watercolor or acrylic, even sculpture of truly amazing craft, skill, and vision, artworks that could proudly be exhibited in any gallery or museum in America, made by prisoners. And poetry to make you wonder or weep. Hidden behind brick and steel, in shadowed cell, alone, in twilight – art lives.

Art is that which makes us human. And in this place, in the most inhuman of places, art yet lives – colorful, resplendent, magical echoes of creativity – yet lives.

MUMIA ABU-JAMAL
November 27, 2010
Typed from handwritten draft by Melaine Ferdinand-King

GALLERY OF WORKS
“How does the arts speak to us?
They nourish our souls; or they cripple them.
They lift our hearts,
or they shatter them into bits
of self-hatred and
shattered dreams.”
RIGHTS HUMANE?

What good is human rights, without the right to Life?
The Constitution ain’t nothin’ but paper, it ain’t nothin’ but lies, that vanishes like vapor;

If you don’t wanna believe me, good, pay me no mind;

But see what happened to the MOVE 9, convicted of murder in a Philly courtroom, Where American justice spelled the death of freedom;
Where a blinded judge called them criminals, for kicking John Africa’s Truth, subliminal, for exposing this demonic system is critical, for building a Revolution against all that’s wrong, it’s natural!
And for daring to open up so many ears, The Move 9 was sentenced to 900 years!

What good is human rights, without the right to life?
The Constitution ain’t nothin’ but paper, it ain’t nothin’ but lies, that vanishes like vapor!
Panther Walk
LYRICS AND MUSIC BY MUMIA ABU-JAMAL, 2011.

There was a time, in otha days
when Black Panthers walked thru the cit–ay—!
They rolled strong all day long
That they don’t today is a pit–ay!
They fed the be–bess and helped old la–dies,
and struggled for Re–vo–lu–tion!
They defended the People
from the forces of evil
with their ideas and their guns;
All they wanted was power for everyone!

Pow–er for everyone!
Black people, brown people, red, yellow, pink people, yes, even poor white people;
Pow–er for everyone!

They wanted Pow–er for everyone!
They said: “Pow–er to the People!”
Pow–er for everyone!

With red books in their hand, they dared to
take a stand
to bring Freedom to the Black Nation;
the government came, and using some lames,
They brought COINTELPRO Operations;
With Panthers in jail the Movement went to hell
People left in deep frustration;

Cuz they ain’t got Power for their People;
Cuz they need Pow–er— Pow–er for their People, Power to be Free!
They need Pow–er to be Free!
They need incarceration brutalization–impoveri–
zation globalization — people left in isolation!

How can we call this freedom’s land?
When it was built by slavery’s hand!
From 1492 many millions were slew;
From the day Co–lumbus sailed ocean blue.
This is–this is– a Vampire Nation!
Been that way since its creation!
This is–this is– a Vampire Nation!

I sing it without exaggeration!

But why call it Vampire Nation?
It ain’t Dracula’s generation;
This is–this is– a Vampire Nation!
Been that way since its creation!
This is–this is– a Vampire Nation!

Call it out–no hesitation!

Panther Walk
Sheet music 2011
MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Vampire Nation
LYRICS AND MUSIC BY MUMIA ABU-JAMAL, 2009.

From the very beginning
To this very day,
This country has gone–its own special way;
from placing Indians in chains and graves;
to bringing Africans–across the waves;

How can we call this freedom’s land?
When it was built by slavery’s hand!
From 1492 many millions were slew;
From the day Co–lumbus sailed ocean blue.
This is–this is– a Vampire Nation!
Been that way since its creation!
This is–this is– a Vampire Nation!

Panther Walk
Sheet music 2011
MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

“Let our song be freedom”
“Our recent ancestors knew that culture was a vital part of a larger, social movement.”

Mumia Abu-Jamal
Rev. Nat Turner
Colored pencil, pen on paper
4.5 in. x 5.75 in.
N.D.
Postage stamp design.
MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
Mumia Abu-Jamal
LaTasha Colander, Lauryn Williams, and Marion Jones

Watercolor on paper
5 in. x 6.75 in.
2004

Rendering of the 2004 Olympic Women’s Relay runners.

MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Mumia Abu-Jamal
76ers star Allen Iverson

Marker, pastel, pen, watercolor on paper
4 in. x 9 in.
2003

MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Mumia Abu-Jamal
Venus II

Acrylic on paper
7.5 in. x 9.5 in.
2007

Based on a photograph of Venus Williams at the Wimbledon Championships in 2007.

MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
HOMELESS
How can this be home?
I may eat here, sleep here, bite here, fight here, and occasionally dream here, But it ain't home.
Home is where the heart lives, where babies scent, where rest resides, where dream become real; I may have spent thousands of hours, days, months in here; But I've never lived; Not for a minute.

NUTS (OR NOT?)
They scream incessantly, Banging on bars, raging, shrieking, with eyes poised inward, Reflecting pains as deep as seas, And we call them 'nuts'.
We do not scream, bang, rage at least outwardly. As we turn slowly on spits like quiet lambs, We're not 'nuts', Are we?

HOMELESS
Handwritten poem
June 10, 2010
MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

NUTS (OR NOT?)
Handwritten poem
July 9, 2010
MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY
ART AND THE FREEDOM STRUGGLE

Mumia Abu-Jamal

Jill Scott, soul singer
Colored pencil, marker, pen on paper
4 in. x 7.5 in.
2003
MUMIA ABU-JAMAL PAPERS, MS.2022.009, BROWN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Emory Douglas

Black Panther Party: All Power to the People
Poster work on paper
27.5 in. x 20 in.
Circa 1970

Mumia Abu-Jamal

Untitled
[armed woman and child]
Poster work on paper
17.5 in. x 22.5 in.
1967

Emory Douglas

Black Panther Party: All Power to the People
Poster work on paper
27.5 in. x 20 in.
Circa 1970

Emory Douglas

Untitled
[armed woman and child]
Poster work on paper
17.5 in. x 22.5 in.
1967
Activation Space
The varied prompts are designed to foster deeper contemplation and dialogue around the exhibition’s themes. Feel free to respond by creating a poem, statement, or drawing in the space provided.

How do you understand the relationship between art and politics?
Which struggles are you trying to overcome? In what ways are you creative?

What scares you about using your gifts?
How has the exhibition and Mumia Abu-Jamal’s story inspired you to use art as a critical resource? How will you try to free yourself? To free someone else?
Get Involved

VISIT THE ARCHIVES

Mumia Abu-Jamal's personal and professional papers are currently housed at the John Hay Library at Brown University as part of the “Voices of Mass Incarceration” collection.

WRITE TO MUMIA ABU-JAMAL

Mumia Abu-Jamal
Smart Communications/
PADOC Mumia Abu-Jamal AM 8335
SCI Mahanoy
PO Box 33028
St Petersburg, FL 33733

BE PART OF THE SOLUTION

These Rhode Island based organizations lead political education workshops, community-oriented solutions to harm, and direct action campaigns against oppressive systems.

ACCESS THE ARTS

These Rhode Island based hubs offer accessible art, workshops, as well as creative support.

And they will continue long after I’m gone.”

The struggle for social justice is bigger than me.

“The struggle against the prison industrial complex is bigger than me.”

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“The struggle against the prison industrial complex is bigger than me.”
SELECTED READINGS AND RESOURCES


Davis, Angela Y. Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. United States, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011.


“The question must be, ‘Is this expression oppositional or is it acquiescent? Does it challenge what needs to be challenged or does it roll over and play dead?’”