

ARTFORUM

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REVIEWS

Betty Blayton

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Ten circular canvases graced Elizabeth Dee's upstairs annex in a jewel-box exhibition dedicated to Betty Blayton, the late abstract painter whose artistic achievements have been partially eclipsed by her roles as cofounder of New York's Studio Museum in Harlem and as an advocate for African American artists. Housed at the original address of the museum she helped launch in 1968, and organized by independent curator Souleo, Blayton's first solo show since her death in 2016 began to mend this imbalance. Works from the 1970s—heady, terrestrial abstractions turned out in spicy oranges, browns, and golds—ran hot and cold between aqueous pink and blue tondos made in this millennium. Of the former group, a standout was *Forced Center Right*, 1975, with its Martian topography of claret, umber, and copper strata. Of the latter group, there was *Traveling Source Energies Dispersed*, 2011—an arctic fog of blue and white. At the exhibition's spatial and chronological center was *Flight*, 1996, a color field on a circular canvas where translucent petals of pink, blue, and green melt into a deep=blue groin.

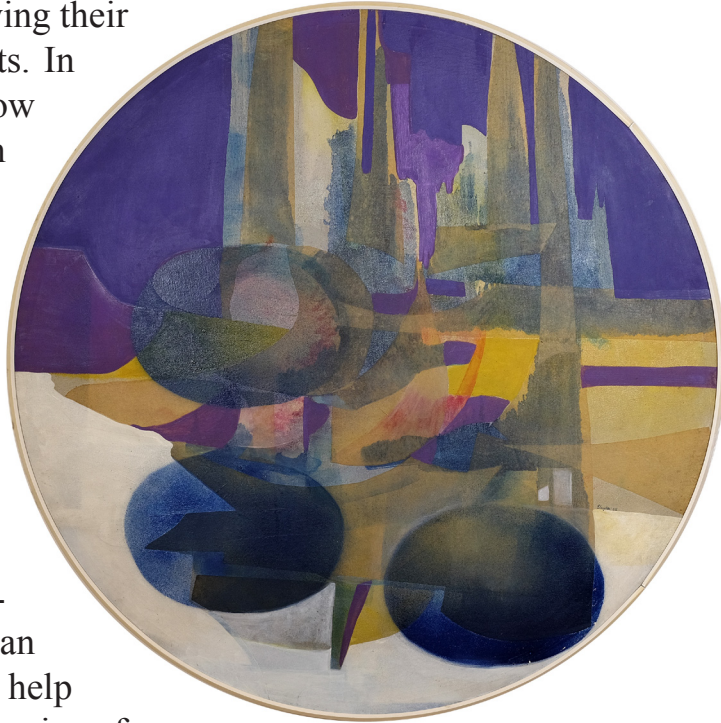
From fifteenth-century Madonnas to Robert and Sonia Delaunay's spiritualized formalism, the tondo format has historically conveyed a cosmic holism, intimating a transcendent space unhampered by corners or limits. The title of Blayton's earliest work in the show, *At One=ment*, 1970, captures this mystical orientation.

Symbolic without being arcane, a form resembling a robin's egg floats across a striated brown background. In contrast, the exhibition's most recent work, *Consciousness Traveling*, 2012, hung adjacently. A delicate yellow ribbon on the horizon resembles a hilly shoreline yielding to an amethyst sea. Also on the fringes of landscape was the dark and romantic *Souls Transcending*, 2004. Strange blue-black volumes in the foreground draw the eye upward toward muddy spires. Silhouetted against a deep-purple sky, they evoke vertiginous cliffs or a ruined castle.

Though her pacific, introspective paintings seem worlds away from the polemics of the Black Arts Movement, Blayton was no quietist aesthete. In 1971, she was one of 15 artists who withdrew from the Whitney Museum of American Art's "Contemporary Black Artists in America" over the exhibition's lack of African American curators. Nor was she a timid administrator. In 1977, she resigned from the Studio Museum's board in protest of the leadership's proposal to relocate to 104th Street in a bid to attract middle-class whites and the "three B's—the beautiful black bourgeoisie"—in the words of then chairman Richard Clarke.

While the museum's move south never came to pass (it instead relocated a couple of blocks west to its current location on 125th Street and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard), the debacle exposed the entanglements of art, race, class, and real estate that formed the backdrop of the

Studio Museum’s founding committee had hoped that a “new cultural resource in Harlem” would bring “future development and renewal.” Few could have anticipated the rapacious development Harlem is undergoing today, as real estate investment and speculation displace longtime residents and remake the neighborhood into yet another yuppie frontier, with galleries, as is usually the case, playing their vanguard role in driving up rents. In fact, Blayton’s posthumous show was part of the inaugural edition of Uptown, a multivenue triennial feting the opening of the Lenfest Center for the Arts: the gleaming, Renzo Piano – designed “cultural beacon” of Columbia University’s West Harlem expansion, long bitterly opposed by Harlemites for displacing the community. In this context, a show commemorating an elder stateswoman of Harlem’s art scene could not help but instrumentalize the past in service of the present. Fraught with irony, compromise, and, in some sense, melancholy, Blayton’s art could not transcend such vicissitudes (an impossible ask, to be sure). Instead, it stood in tension with them, bearing witness to a history of cultural self-determination while underscoring the difference between her art’s encircled harmony and the contentious, unequal world beyond the frame.



Betty Blayton,
Souls Transcending,
2004, acrylic on
canvas. 40 x 40”.

– *Chloe Wyma*