

THE MANY HATS OF RALPH ARNOLD

ART, IDENTITY & POLITICS

During the tumultuous 1960s and '70s, the prolific artist Ralph Arnold made photocollages that appropriated and commented upon mass media portrayals of gender, sexuality, race, and politics. These complex visual arrangements of photographs, abstraction, and declarative text serve as an exploration and assertion of Arnold's multilayered identity as a black, gay veteran and prominent member of Chicago's art community.

The work *Who You/Yeah Baby* (1968), for example, puts the US Army recruitment icon Uncle Sam in close proximity to a coterie of male dandies appropriated from mainstream advertising, producing a queer subtext that is reinforced by the humorously propositional title. Located within an otherwise abstract canvas of stripes and patterns, the collage offers a subtly calculated dig at the white, heteronormative masculinity typically associated with abstract formalism in the middle of the twentieth century. Arnold's collage aesthetic—in which he reconfigured familiar images and styles to create new aesthetic relationships—functions as a metaphor of both his appropriations of diverse artistic techniques and his prescient recognition of the intersectionality among the social categories of race, gender, and sexuality.

The Many Hats of Ralph Arnold: Art, Identity & Politics brings together Arnold's most significant contributions to the art of collage. Noteworthy works include the recently rediscovered and restored triptych *Unfinished Collage* (1968), which memorializes the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., and was the centerpiece of the historic exhibition *Violence! In Recent American Art* at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (1968). Arnold's *Black Music Box* (ca. 1980) asserts

his pride in black culture at the same time that his sexuality and lifelong relationship with a white man conflicted with the Black Arts Movement's emphasis on heterosexual black masculinity. As an apparent response to such rigid social expectations, he made photo-conceptual works like *The Many Hats of Ralph Arnold* (ca. 1975), which shows him posing in a variety of personas and masculine archetypes, signifying his progressive belief that identity is fluid, dynamic, and always enacted in relation to an audience (note that he meets our gaze in every image). Arnold also made abstract paintings and collages that testified to the omnipresent role of the mass media and contained overt television imagery alongside more covert references to the letters "TV."

By the early 1980s Arnold's refusal to be easily identified with one style or another and his multilayered identity placed him outside of canonical art history's narrowly defined movements, relegating this once central artist to a sideline role in retrospective histories of the era. During the 1980s and '90s Arnold focused on his teaching and service to the art community while continuing to create humorous and vibrant collages that celebrate the history of black music and imagine an alternative history for Napoleon, a figure who served as a cipher for the artist's struggles, ambitions, and sexual desires. Arnold passed away in 2006, leaving behind an artistic legacy and life story that offer precedent and provocation to address similar issues of art, identity, and politics in 2018.

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