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The Phillips Collection Presents *Vivian Browne: My Kind of Protest*

The landmark exhibition highlights the artist and activist’s significant contributions to American art and explores the intersections of abstraction, figuration, and political expression over her four-decade career.



WASHINGTON, DC—The Phillips Collection presents *Vivian Browne: My Kind of Protest*, the first comprehensive museum retrospective of the artist, activist, and educator Vivian Browne (1929–1993). The exhibition highlights Browne’s contributions to 20th-century American art through her distinctive approach to color and form, her challenging of traditional categories of abstraction and figuration, and her work at the intersections of art and social commentary. Bringing together over 60 paintings and works on paper across several key series, including previously unknown works and ephemera from the artist’s estate, the exhibition uncovers the depth of Browne’s four-decade-long career and her enduring commitment to activism and education. Co-organized by the Contemporary Arts Center and The Phillips Collection and co-curated by Adrienne L. Childs and Amara Antilla, the exhibition will be on view from June 28 through September 28, 2025.

With an expressive hand and expansive worldview, Browne navigated the Black Arts and Feminist movements with passion and purpose, joining artists groups that advocated for inclusion. Informed by what she described as “emotional landscape(s),” her paintings and prints variously address the politics of race and gender, respond to her international experiences, and reflect on her love of nature and

ecological concerns. Browne’s works are deeply personal reflections on the world around her. Although she was immersed in the vibrant New York arts scene of the 1960s and 1970s alongside renowned artists such as Faith Ringgold, Norman Lewis, Emma Amos, and Robert Blackburn, the true scope of her work remains largely under-recognized.

“The Phillips Collection has long been a platform for American artists like Vivian Browne who innovate, motivate, and challenge the status quo,” says **Jonathan P. Binstock, Vradenburg Director & CEO at The Phillips Collection**. “We are excited to present Vivian Browne’s dynamic body of work to explore how it enhances our understanding of the complexity and beauty of American art and its diverse histories, particularly in relation to issues of feminism, power and politics, race, gender, and the natural environment.”

My Kind of Protest assembles works inspired by Browne’s extensive travels, including in China, Africa, and California. Her journeys are documented in a visual travelogue of paintings and drawings, with her *Africa Series* evoking a dual sense of yearning and estrangement from ancestral lands. Her politically charged *Little Men* series from the late 1960s, consisting of 100 works, 70 of which still survive, uses grotesque and humorous exaggeration to satirize the masculinity she encountered in the workplace.

Inspired by her local communities and global travels, her art demonstrates that in spite of the intersectional forces of racial and patriarchal oppression she faced, Browne chose to focus on her personal aesthetic concerns as opposed to the political climate in which she operated. She resisted the expectations to focus on a Black nationalist agenda espoused by the Black Arts Movement activists. Browne consistently maintained that she was not an “issue oriented” artist but instead produced personal reflections that were *her* kind of protest.

As a politically engaged artist, Browne was involved in several activist organizations. She served as an initial director of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition (BECC) and joined Where We At (WWA) in 1971, a community of Black women artists striving to create space for those overlooked by the predominantly male-led Black Arts Movement. Additionally, she was an active member of the Women’s Caucus for Art (WCA), SOHO20 Gallery, and the Heresies Collective, a feminist group known for its publications exploring the intersections of art, feminism, and politics.

“Vivian Browne’s work, often overlooked in her time, reflects how she navigated the expectations placed on Black artists in the 1970s and 1980s,” says **Adrienne L. Childs, Senior Consulting Curator at The Phillips Collection**. “Her protest was about resisting the expectations placed upon her as a Black artist during a time when many were expected to produce figurative work. Instead, she advocated for her own individual artistry, blending personal narrative with broader social engagement. This unique approach makes her work incredibly relevant today, inviting viewers to engage with complex themes that resonate deeply.”

Browne was also deeply committed to education, beginning her teaching career in the 1960s, when she taught humanities in primary and secondary schools. From 1971 to 1992, she served as a faculty member at Rutgers University in Newark, where she taught contemporary Black and Hispanic art, painting, and other fine arts courses. During the mid-20th century, a global movement emerged within the Black diaspora, celebrating Black creativity and the synergies among Black artistic expressions in Africa, Europe, and the Americas. For many Black American creatives in the 1960s and 1970s—the years

in which Browne came of age as an artist and activist—the idea of Africa held powerful, multifaceted implications.

The exhibition also highlights her late-career paintings and works on paper from the late 1980s and early 1990s, which reflect her attentiveness to the interplay between humanity and the natural world. These include lyrical landscapes and grid-like compositions juxtaposing electrical towers with ancient sequoia trees. “My painting is informed and determined by many spatial experiences,” Browne wrote, “top edge of the world vistas, engulfing underwater depths, mystical inner earth enclosures.” Her late-career works embrace a distinctive form of gestural abstraction, embodying a deep intimacy and reverence for nature.

“Browne’s art transcends simple categorization; it is both a celebration of her unique experiences and a powerful critique of societal norms,” says **Amara Antilla, Independent Curator**. “By embracing her love of color, gesture, and abstraction, she carved her own path. Her dynamic use of color and form challenges viewers to reconsider their understanding of art and activism, making her an essential figure in American art history.”

EXHIBITION SUPPORT

The exhibition is co-organized by The Phillips Collection and the Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati.

Major support for the exhibition tour and associated programs has been provided by the Mellon Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, Terra Foundation for American Art, and the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.



The presentation of *Vivian Browne: My Kind of Protest* at The Phillips Collection is made possible, in part, by the Linda Lichtenberg Kaplan Exhibition Fund.

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EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

The exhibition is accompanied by a robust catalogue published by The Phillips Collection in association with D Giles Limited. Edited by Amara Antilla and Adrienne L. Childs with contributions by Darby English, Ethel Renia, and Lowery Stokes Sims, and forewords by Christina Vassallo and Jonathan P. Binstock, the catalogue explores Browne’s distinctive form of quasi-abstraction and her innovative approaches to feminist thought and grassroots organizing. Newly recovered archival material sourced from public research collections and the artist’s estate chart her vital role as an arts activist. Available at the museum gift shop and online at shopphillipscollection.org.

IMAGE GALLERY

High-resolution press images are available upon request. Please contact lcantrell@phillipscollection.org.

IMAGES: Vivian Browne in her studio with *Little Men* and *Africa Series*, 1974, Photo: Jeanie Black Courtesy of Adobe Krow Archives, Los Angeles, and RYAN LEE Gallery, New York; Vivian Browne, *Bini Apron*, 1973, Acrylic on canvas, 49 3/4 x 51 3/4 in., The Phillips Collection, Washington, DC, Gift of Adobe

Krow Archives for Vivian Browne, Los Angeles. Image courtesy of RYAN LEE Gallery, New York, 2024. © Vivian Browne.

ABOUT THE PHILLIPS COLLECTION

Founded in 1921, The Phillips Collection is a welcoming home for all where the vision and spirit of artists thrive in intimate settings. As the first museum of modern art in the United States, the Phillips houses one of the world's most celebrated Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, and modern art collections, and continues to grow its permanent collection with the work of important living artists. Its distinctive domestically scaled architecture combines three structures built over more than 125 years, among them the former home of the founders, Duncan and Marjorie Phillips. The Phillips's impact extends nationally and internationally through its diverse, scholarly exhibitions; award-winning education programs for educators, students, and adults; and renowned Phillips Music series. Popular and impactful programs include those focused on art and wellness, its festive monthly Phillips after 5 events, and intimate Living Room talks. Through authentic programs and partnerships at Phillips@THEARC, the museum's satellite location in Southeast DC, the Phillips extends its reach into Wards 7 and 8 and Prince George's County, Maryland. The Phillips Collection is a private, non-government museum, supported primarily by donations.

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