



A Place at the Table

AIPAD member and gallerist Karen Jenkins-Johnson talks diversity in the art world.

December 12, 2018



Aida Muluneh, *The Amusement at the Gate*, 2017
Courtesy of the artist and Jenkins Johnson Gallery

Jenkins Johnson Gallery is a national dealer of contemporary art representing international artists working across disciplines. Owner and AIPAD member Karen Jenkins-Johnson brings over 25 years of experience to the gallery's exhibition program. The gallery represents artists who are in the collections of, and have been part of exhibitions at, many museums around the world. Their works have been widely published as artist monographs, in art journals, and among critical theory texts.

Founded in 1996, Jenkins Johnson Gallery has thrived for years due to the vibrant, compelling work it has displayed in dozens of exhibitions over the years. When one steps back from the individual exhibitions and artists, the gallery as a whole boasts a point of differentiation from many other prestigious galleries: Its impressive list of acclaimed artists is notably diverse.

The diversity of Jenkins Johnson Gallery artists offers a chance for collectors to consider what they might be missing in terms of stories, style and perspective. We were fortunate to speak with Jenkins-Johnson herself to hear her perspective on diversity in art, progress or lack thereof, and support for emerging artists. We begin with Jenkins-Johnson's road to gallerist.

Tell us a bit about your background, including how Jenkins-Johnson Gallery came into existence and what its trajectory was like.

I came to the Bay Area to get my MBA at UC Berkeley. Before that, I was a certified CPA at a large firm in Seattle. I studied entrepreneurship at Berkeley because I knew I wanted to combine these skills with something I loved: art. There was an economic downturn in 1988 and I graduated in 1989. It wasn't the right time to start a business, so I spent six years working for other galleries, learning the business from the bottom up. In 1996, I opened Jenkins Johnson Gallery in its current space in San Francisco. We focused on representational painting for a number of years, and I still immensely enjoy exhibiting figurative painting for all the possibilities it represents.

We started to broaden our scope from solely figurative painting and sculpture to photography and video in 2004. A year later, in 2005, I opened my gallery in New York, and in that space we focused primarily on new media. We weathered nine years in Chelsea through the recession. From there, we focused on our San Francisco space, and in 2017, I opened Jenkins Johnson Projects in Brooklyn. The mission of that space is to enhance the cultural environment of its community, encourage collaboration, and provide a space for active dialogue. The space welcomes a rotation of guest curators who present exhibitions of international contemporary artists working across disciplines. Within that program, we emphasize curators and artists of color.

Over the years, I've had the pleasure of working with artists, writers and curators from around the world, and I look forward to continuing to do so.

Let's talk progress. In a 2009 profile with Photograph magazine, you were quoted as saying, "[James] Van der Zee introduced Americans to black life. ... People didn't know how we live. Among collectors, I know there's not a whole lot of demand. But that's going to change." Now that nine years have passed since this piece was published, have you seen the demand increase? If so, was it to the extent you would have expected in 2009?

Yes. By the time Obama was elected, it was very clear that the art world was opening up for artists, writers and curators of color. There were signs everywhere, higher auction prices and a great deal more museum shows by artists of color. By 2015, the New York Times featured an article on this on November 29, 2015, titled "Black Artists and the March to the Museum," mentioning artists like Norman Lewis, Alma Thomas, Bob Thompson, Eldzier Cortor, Betye Saar, Beauford Delaney and Aaron Douglas, who are all among the generations of artists not as widely recognized for their incredible contributions. At the 57th Venice Biennale last year, Mark Bradford, a black man, represented the United States.

Meanwhile, at my gallery in 2012, we became the West Coast representative for Gordon Parks. His works are integral to the photographic canon and have, of course, been well received. In 2014, I had the pleasure of showing both Parks and Roy DeCarava at Paris Photo as the first black-owned gallery to show at that art fair. The next year, we were the first black-owned gallery to show at Art Basel, Miami Beach, where we featured Roy DeCarava.

Broadly, it seems we have more institutions recognizing gaps in their collections due to the decisions made to exclude women and people of color by past directors, and they are designating funds to collect from these marginalized groups. They're hiring curators of color to further these actions. This is progress. There is still plenty more to do, but considering the way things were, I'm excited for this direction, and I cannot wait for more change.

To dealers interested in representing emerging artists of color, what advice do you have to offer?

Treat them as you would treat any artist. Listen to their needs and support their perspective, offer their work to museums and collections who are excited by and understanding of their work. Learn about their work, its history and the dialogues they would like to further. In short, help them build a solid foundation. And listen.

To collectors interested in the work of emerging artists of color, are there any such artists who are particularly exciting to you right now?

I think that there are so many artists who are working right now and have something to say. As long as collectors know what it is that excites them — what brings them to collecting — it should prove quite fun to learn about emerging artists thinking about similar things. I hesitate to single out specific artists because there are so many. For me, anyone who is pushing the boundaries of photography is exciting, like Aida Muluneh, LaToya Ruby Frazier and Shikeith. There are also artists working across photography, video, film and collage, like Carlos Javier Ortiz, Basil Kincaid, Paul Anthony Smith and Erica Deeman. There are so, so many more.

What do you get out of participating in fairs, such as The Photography Show, professionally and personally? Are there ways you feel fairs specifically should reach out to a more diverse audience of collectors?

I get quite a lot from participating in fairs like The Photography Show. I meet and connect with many collectors, curators and other dealers. It's a great experience and I am always excited to share and see.

The Photography Show has included more contemporary work since it moved to Pier 94, but more focus is still needed on how contemporary artists are expanding the medium of photography. I hope to see more dealers and artists of color featured at the Show, and it would be wonderful to see more young collectors coming through the booths.

In a Sept. 2018 piece for The Washington Post, photographer Yagazie Emezi said, "I believe that a lot more minds in our industry need to be expanded in order for us to not only see more works represented, but to also truly listen to these voices and what they have to say about the photography spaces they are occupying." What do you think dealers and collectors can do to amplify the voices of emerging artists?

There is so much they can do. Broadly, they can make a concerted effort to expand opportunities for people of color to promote their careers, to encourage their practices. And, it isn't just about promoting visual artists, but also working with writers, curators and gallerists of color. It takes focused effort and a willingness to participate in this dialogue and expand opportunities for people of color to interact with professionals who can help promote careers.