HYPERALLERGIC



Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Requiem for a Daffodil, 1997
Photo: Boesky Gallery

WHAT MARY LOVELACE O'NEAL LEFT BEHIND

By Stephanie Wambugu
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Upon her death in May 2026, the abstract painter Mary Lovelace O'Neal left behind a monumental body of work. Her oeuvre includes signature large blackened canvases, marked by fluid, ecstatic gestures in neon paint that resemble the glowing afterimages of a moving flame. O'Neal's first posthumous exhibition, Requiem, is a fitting self-elegy for the painter precisely because nothing about it feels mournful.

The work could not be more vital, and in it one feels the artist's energetic and intuitive handling of paint as a kind of physical charge. O'Neal's compositions transmit a powerful sense of presence and force, as though inviting viewers into the vicarious experience of an artist grappling with the formal concerns of color and line before transcending them.

The result is an almost oceanic feeling, one I imagine is equally profound in the making of a painting as staggering as the intense, cascading standout “Requiem for a Daffodil” (1997). The black, fingerlike marks that protrude from the surrounding deep navy seem to be reaching for the floral clusters and reeds in the painting’s top half, like a perpetual grasping at splendor in the shadows.

Though non-representational, these works continually approach figuration, filled with partial outlines of human and animal forms. These half-figures peer through their dark surroundings, like the pink mass in the center of “What’s Time to a Pig” (c. 1990s), and are caught in a constant state of emergence. Like an act of divine creation, O’Neal captures the transformation of raw material into something seemingly miraculous through the hands of a master craftsman.

During this formative and fruitful period between the 1970s and 1990s, when her visual language and iconoclastic artistic sensibility crystallized, O’Neal was also coming into her own as an artist. She was a groundbreaking student, becoming the first Black woman to receive an MFA from Columbia University in 1969, and in 1985, she became the first African American professor to receive tenure in UC Berkeley’s Department of Art Practice.

The back room offers a rich sketch of the painter’s life as it intersected with both world history and art history. Born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1942, Jim Crow was fully in place in the American South during the artist’s childhood. She attended Howard University in 1960 alongside David Driskell and Lois Mailou Jones, dated the activist Stokely Carmichael, and was an activist in her own right.



Mary Lovelace O’Neal, *What’s Time to a Pig*, 1990s
Photo: Boesky Gallery

The archival materials reveal the cultural and political concerns of O'Neal's time. It's all the more remarkable that she navigated these constraints while retaining the verve and genuine, delightful strangeness these paintings must have necessitated. "Untitled" (n.d.) gets at the humor and irreverence of O'Neal's style. An Uncle Sam-like figure, half-covered in chalky white paint, evokes a satirical Ralph Bakshi cartoon, with many identifying features erased. It has a winking quality. Though political in nature, it foregrounds O'Neal's formal concerns, which circle mainly around the possibilities of certain pigments (like the enveloping darkness of lampblack contrasted with punchy neons) and the permeable boundary between abstraction and figuration. It is this formal rigor that made O'Neal trailblazing in more ways than one –– both as a Black American shattering institutional barriers and as a woman painter making important interventions into the inherited, lionized artistic movements of the Color Field, Abstract Expressionism, and Minimalism.

"Race Woman Series #7" (1992–93) dramatizes the tension between the structural or compositional and the political, suggesting that it was an enduring preoccupation for the artist. A dazed face vaguely springs up from a prominent green being, which could just be read as an indecipherable scrawl, while a white specter at the top of the canvas drips over it. O'Neal's use of color is frenetic and instinctive, resulting in a painting that is too varied to slot into a clear interpretation. Like the Klannish chiaroscuro of Norman Lewis' "Alabama" (1960), the legibility of "Race Woman Series #7" relies on the light its instructive title sheds on it.

But unlike Lewis, when we search for correlation between O'Neal's caption and the canvas, we are pulled deeper into her self-reflexive, numinous and unrepeatable idiom, which makes its own intuitive sense and, anyway, seeks to go beyond sense-making into the terrain of near-mystical experience.