

# FAITH

## AMIRI BARAKA\*

Faith Ringgold's works have existed within the parameters of "American Art" but have never been squashed by the exclusion and denial of reality that American art sometimes is. Faith's work is not the art of the drawing room, so that you have to ask those coming in and out of the drawing room (the servants) where stuff is "really at." Faith is able to be in the drawing room; that is, to be included in the spectrum of what exists, from the bully's point of view, as far as that is ever possible. Their seeing on the one hand is itself a kind of diminution of the world—like they want us all to think our real role models are beasts and murderers, talentless pimps on loan from scary movies. Yet, Faith is coming and going, marching through the drawing room, not waiting on the guests—though some of that is absolutely obligatory . . . for instance, if someone mentions your name up under the latest talentless nepotistic or screw-famous phenom to grace the pages of the most recent white racist Lie. No, she, Faith, is marching back and forth, on the way in and out of the drawing room, in and out of the house. She, when we can get close enough to check what she's about, is carrying news of the Field.

That is the shock of Faith's work, that she has elaborated the art of the Field (the widest range, the unkept slaves' open-air studio, where the research is, etc., *not* the way the house slave might, from an unblinded window, see down, and just off, the small figures of the field slaves breakdancin' with that cotton). We get the sense—it is brought up to and by our senses—that Faith has actual news. Word from Bird. The sight, the sound, the breathing, the blood, the mind set of the rebellious field slave.

This is what the political posters and paintings create for us: a connection with the insurgents, the insurgency to come. This is why her early *Die*, a violent confrontation between slave and slavemaster in the modern American streets (which has come, is coming, will come again), terrorized gallery directors and house *nogrews* too. They didn't want to be associated with such violence. They certainly did not want to be the objects of it.

This is why figurative, realistic, expressionistic work, such as Faith's, and that of so many other progressive artists whose approach and theme is critical realist (the real and its willed change), is opposed by the rulers of the society (the shapers of the "aesthetic"), because it reveals too much of the actuality of this place, the terrors of its relationships.

America has always been *violence* and *blood* for Africans and African Americans! So Faith's Atlanta chess pieces, evoking the never really solved murders of twenty-eight black children a few years ago, speaks of the present (and, unfortunately, the future) and obviously about the past. Any piece of it. You mean slavery? The Klan? The Destruction of the Reconstruction? American Apartheid—Separate

But Equal? Lynchings? Segregation? Race Riots? Red Summer? Don't Buy Where You Can't Work? David Walker—Murdered? Fred Douglass, an escaped Slave? Du Bois, indicted as an Agent of a foreign power? Or Malcolm, Martin, Fred Hampton, Medgar, Ralph Featherstone, Bobby Hutton—All Murdered? What are you talking about? These are the questions the politics of these paintings and posters keep marching past us. Word from the field. How that life of rhythm and blood is being fought for and against. How that life is struggle and that struggle, life.

Like the historical circumstance of the whole of the African-American Liberation Movement, we can learn by the confrontation, if we are not consumed (as its enemy or as the mind of its enemy). The Black Movement, basically a struggle for democracy within a hypocritical racist society, has continuously linked itself up with the "suffragette" movement, the fight of the women of this society for equality. And like Harriet Tubman or Fred Douglass raising those two questions, anti-slavery and anti-women's oppression, together (as they should be), as two parts of the struggle for democracy, Faith's work has long included the substance and strength of the Women's Movement, particularly from a black woman's perspective. And this is important, because the black woman remains at the bottom of the bottom, "the slave's slave."

Faith's political posters *Free Angela/Free Women* and *Woman Free Yourself* should have the status of modern classics by now. Long before the current craze of the moneymakers to "help the struggle" by making money from it, Faith was on it!

*The Flag is Bleeding* and *Flag for the Moon: Die Nigger* are paintings that speak of the real U.S.A. (No, not the Union of South Africa, the other one!) And Faith can be and usually is very wry and sardonic in her informed graphics and in her Idea Painting. *U.S. Postage Stamp Commemorating the Advent of Black Power*, like all of her reflections on The Flag, is precious. They must be preserved. They should be in the schools, so that the real U.S.A. emerges. Instead of school prayer, let Americans have their children contemplate *Die* or *Black Power* or the terrifying poster *Save Our Children in Atlanta*. Then they will be raised on the real side.

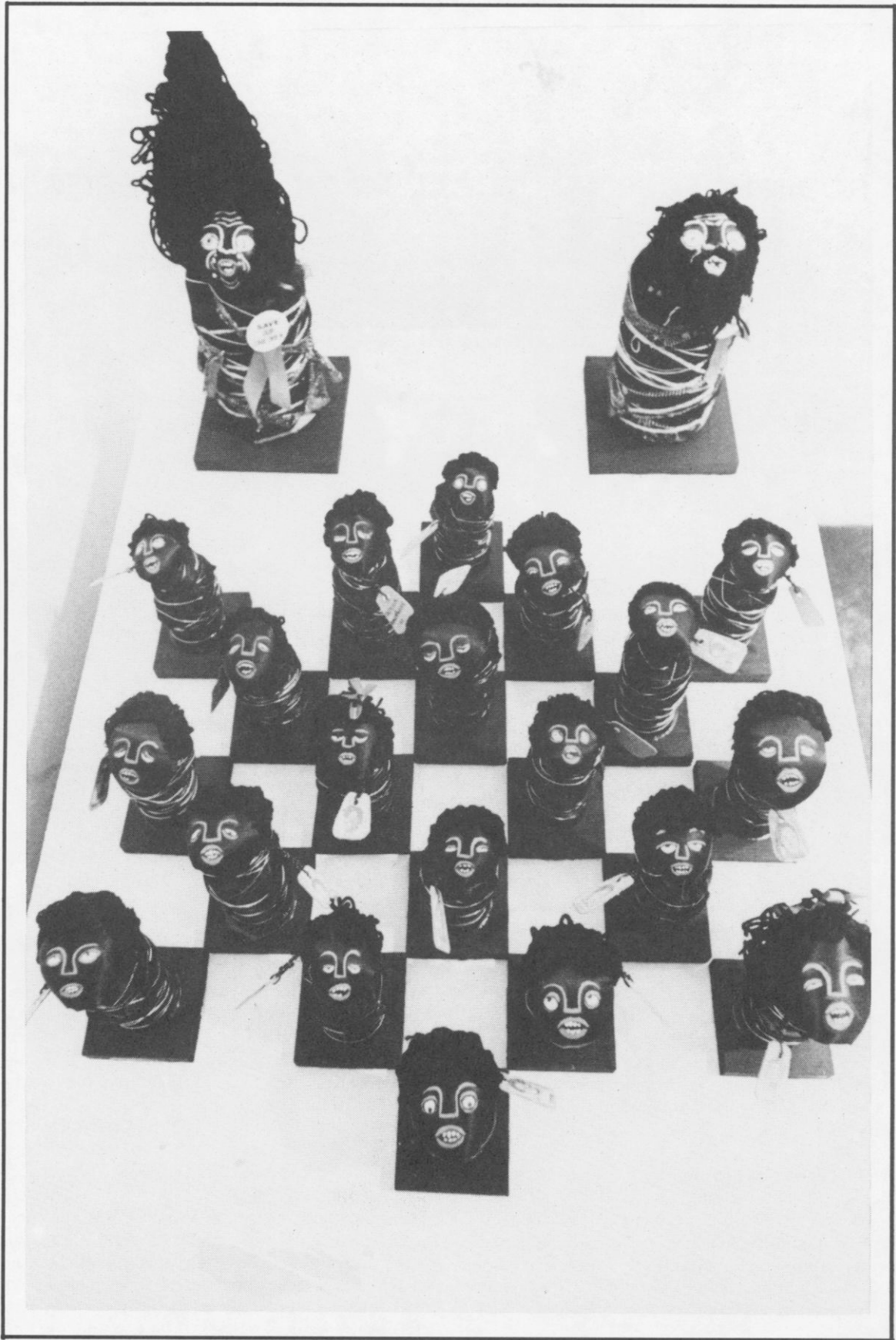
The substance of these works is political because this is the real substance of all our lives. Particularly for the oppressed, politics is an overriding passion, because finally, it is the will to change, the sound poet Margaret Walker speaks of in "I Hear a Rumbling . . .":

There's a rumbling in the air  
There's a lightning in the skies  
There a rumbling and a grumbling  
And the walls of prisons breaking

Faith's political posters and paintings always bring us that rumbling. That is the word from the Field. It is, in fact, a Field rumbling.

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**Atlanta (1981) by Faith Ringgold, mixed-media sculpture, 40 x 30 x 15"**