



THE ART OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

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INTRODUCTION/FORWARD

The 1960s Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. witnessed artists' active engagement with politics on an incredible scale. This is of course not a new phenomenon: from ancient totem to the infamous style of Socialist Realism, for those in power, artistic expression has always been a convenient means for blatant yet highly effective propaganda. On the other hand, subversive groups also find their weapons in the infinite space for imagination and creation offered by both making and seeing art.

Yet for Americans in the 1960s, there is something especially fitting about approaching politics through art. For a movement about fighting for the fundamental rights of being a human, which involved so many tragedies and heroic moments beyond description, words were no longer adequate. "I felt that only physical evidence, actual materials from the people and the place and time could claim to embody to some degree, and only some, the truthful representation of this segment of history"¹ and that is where art came in: the Civil Rights Movement activists knitted their stories in artworks of

various forms and media, which today in turn talk to us vividly, unaffected by the course of time.

Naturally, the artworks that I selected only represent a tiny part of the huge amount of artistic expression created during this period. Yet they are powerful representatives to give the audience a good overview. I categorized the artworks roughly into three themes: Integration: Crisis and Progress; Conflict and Confrontation: To the Lost Lives; Defiance and Resilience: People's Power. The categories do not, however, denote any chronological order, as the issues and agendas from these three topics were entangled with each other throughout the whole Civil Rights Movement, and all evolved and underwent different stages, as the Movement did. Their significance does not wane with the passage of time, either. More than half a century later, the need for civil rights fighters is still acutely felt all over the world.

¹Teresa A. Carbone, "Exhibition A: Evidence and the Art Object," in Teresa A. Carbone and Kellie Jones, *Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 2014), 81.



INTEGRATION: CRISIS AND PROGRESS

1. EVE ARNOLD, INTEGRATION CRISIS (DURING THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT IN AMERICA. A PARTY TO INTRODUCE BLACKS TO WHITES, VIRGINIA, 1958), PHOTOGRAPHY 1958

Probably most famously known for her photographs of Marilyn Monroe, Eve Arnold also portrayed the lives of 'ordinary people', and some works of the Civil Rights Movement serve as intriguing examples. Photographic images were an important weapon for civil rights fighters during the 1960s. Armed with the authority lent by photography's verisimilitude, these activists found their messages voiced with much more power and persuasiveness.

Here however, the images serve less to persuade, but as a muted witness of those years. Focused on the younger generation in this party that introduced black and white people to each other, this set of photos reveals some of the more positive side of the Movement. The genuinely happy faces of black and white children together almost belie the fact that there was deadly racial conflict and comforts us that there is still hope to be found.

Yet the title "Integration Crisis" refers not only to the turbulence outside this party. If we look closer, we will find the sinister twist within these images. In one of them, for example, two girls are both applying make-up. While such a scene greets the audience with the sweet reassurance that we share the pursuit for beauty across 'races', Arnold's reflection in-between the girls reminds us that what we see is but a manipulated photograph, not transparent truth. Underneath this moment of seeming harmony and peace, Arnold appears to suggest, the crisis is still very much present, and would need civil rights activists' continuous effort to overcome.

2. NORMAN ROCKWELL, THE PROBLEM WE ALL LIVE WITH, OIL ON CANVAS, 1963

In November 1960, escorted by four armed U.S. federal marshals, the 6-year-old Ruby Bridges went to William Franz Elementary Public School in New Orleans, becoming the first African-American child in an all-white elementary school. Based on a well-known photograph recording this historical moment, the painting by Norman Rockwell is itself an iconic image of the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.

Rockwell focuses his attention on representing Ruby's profound courage. Stained with smashed tomato, the wall in the background is also scrawled with "Nigger" and "KKK" (Ku Klux Klan). Such an environment underscores the impressive bravery of Ruby: she keeps her body upright, and her face shows no trace of fear, but an unflinching determination to continue the journey on which she has embarked.

Also noteworthy is Rockwell's perspective, which cuts the image around the shoulders of the marshals, so as to enable the audience to take the view point of Ruby. We can better imagine, therefore, the fear she went through walking towards the school with white people's vicious protest surrounding her, for though protected, she cannot even see the faces of the marshals, and their stature only makes her little body appear to be all the more small and vulnerable. Again, it is precisely in contrast to what she had to face that the heroic nature of Ruby's action is powerfully highlighted.





3. CHARLES HENRY ALSTON, BLACK AND WHITE NO. 7, OIL ON CANVAS, 1961

4. NORMAN W. LEWIS, UNTITLED (ALABAMA), OIL ON CANVAS, 1967

The significance of the self-image of African Americans during the Civil Rights Movement cannot be underestimated. Having control over one's own identity was essential and many artists sought to create works in a naturalistic style, or at least with figurative representation, which help construct a more positive image of African Americans.

Yet these two images found their way of expression in the style of the abstract. On the one hand, this defining modernist style may be chosen as a way of asserting that black artists are able to match their white peers on an aesthetic level. On the other hand, as both works' emphasis is not on any specific portrayal of individuals, but convey the sentiment during this critical decade, abstract art can indeed be more advantageous. Both artists choose to focus on the interplay between black and white to make crystal clear their political references to the racial conflict, but the formalistic features of the works vary significantly.

Alston's expressive and swirling brushstroke creates a dynamic infusion of black and white on the canvas. While there is indeed a certain degree of integration between the two colours (and hence the two 'races'), and the contours of the colour patches are soft, the distorted forms that seem to explode outwards nevertheless confront us with hostility and agitation.

This sense of conflict is even more obvious in Lewis's jarring pattern. The title *Alabama* refers to one of the most repressive states in the US and the immersive blackness around it evokes the oppression. The image becomes even more disturbing when we look inside *Alabama*: bold strokes conjure up the apparition of a Klansman's hood, while on the left, faceless figures walk with their arms in the air, as if they are being persecuted by the KKK.





5. JACOB LAWRENCE, DIXIE CAFÉ, INK ON PAPER, 1948

On February 1st, 1960, four black students sat at the 'white's only' lunch counter in Woolworth's, Greensboro, North Carolina until the shop closed, in protest against segregation. They were soon joined by students of all ethnicities across the country, pushing forward the legal realization of desegregation.

An avid recorder of the life and history of his fellow African Americans, Jacob Lawrence responds to this issue using his signature expressionist style of flattened and simple forms characteristic in his famous Immigration series. The jagged vertical pattern at the bottom of the image and the stiff movement of the figures both reinforce the tension of the depicted scene. The stark contrast of black and white resulting from the use of woodblock print style highlights the racial conflict, and all the more importantly, makes it impossible for the audience to tell white from black, without the labels.

Such confusion is Lawrence's powerful response to segregation and its ridiculousness: as his art reaffirms, despite their superficial appearance, all people are the same, sharing the need for food and company, as well as the habit of ordering a drink or hanging coats on a hook. The awkwardly restrained space and artificial divisions are dehumanising for all. While conveying essentially the same message, compared to Arnold's photographs, 10 years later, Lawrence's work has a much more poignant tone, which from another perspective also confirms the progress made by the Civil Rights Movement.

CONFLICT AND CONFRONTATION: TO THE LOST LIVES

6. MERTON D. SIMPSON, U.S.A. '65, OIL AND COLLAGED NEWSPRINT ON CANVAS, 1965

While the photographic image was viewed as authoritative evidence by some during the Civil Rights Movement, many also found this medium highly problematic. Such images were constantly subject to wilful manipulation, making their claim for truth often unreliable. Also, photographs, however violent or tragic, were always neatly arranged in a simplified visual ensemble in press coverage of events, conforming to the etiquette of the middle class.

It was under this background that artists started to explore ways of combining journalistic photographs with paint and other materials, forging an artistic surface on which conflicts exploded with full force, making it no longer possible for the public to look away.

In *U.S.A. '65*, Simpson used this style to address the state of the American racial conflict, when non-violent marches in Alabama were met with violent oppression. The clipping titled "Tension focuses on Alabama and Washington" hints at the events behind the work, and grounds it firmly on a factual basis.

The surge of powerful emotion, on the other hand, is enabled by the horrified hollow eyes, gasping mouth, and blue-black colour of the figures, all of which intensify their profound agony and anger about the events; while the mounting size of the faces makes it impossible for the viewers to avert their gaze. The oil paint and newspaper collage therefore appear to complement each other in their expressive capacity, and enriches the expressive potential of the work.





7. JACK WHITTEN, BIRMINGHAM 1964, ALUMINIUM FOIL, NEWSPRINT, STOCKING, AND OIL ON PLYWOOD, 1964

Birmingham 1964 deals with the May 3rd events in the Birmingham campaign a year before, and the centre of the work is one now famous photo from the series taken by Bill Hudson. The young man in the image was Walter Gadsden who was a bystander drawn to the street and attacked by a policeman with a German shepherd dog (although the full story is more complex than what we see).

Whitten consciously chose collage in representing this event. For him, this medium is “two-pronged,” having both “plastic dimensionality and an immediate quality of communication,” and his work reflects his observation sufficiently. The unevenly painted black background and the crushed aluminium foil materialise the sense of aggression and destruction imbedded in the represented event, which are bursting out from the open “wound” and speaking directly to the viewer.

In the centre of the work, the interaction between the stocking mesh and the photograph brings out even more forceful dynamic. Whitten remarks that he was inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois’s notion of the “Negro having been born with a veil,” which compelled them always to look at themselves through others’ perspective.

The stocking mesh is thus such a veil that represents the current situation of black Americans in a tangible way. In the meantime, it also blurs the image and makes our reading of the represented event difficult. With this effect, Whitten also questions the proclaimed objectivity of photographs and the messages they carried.

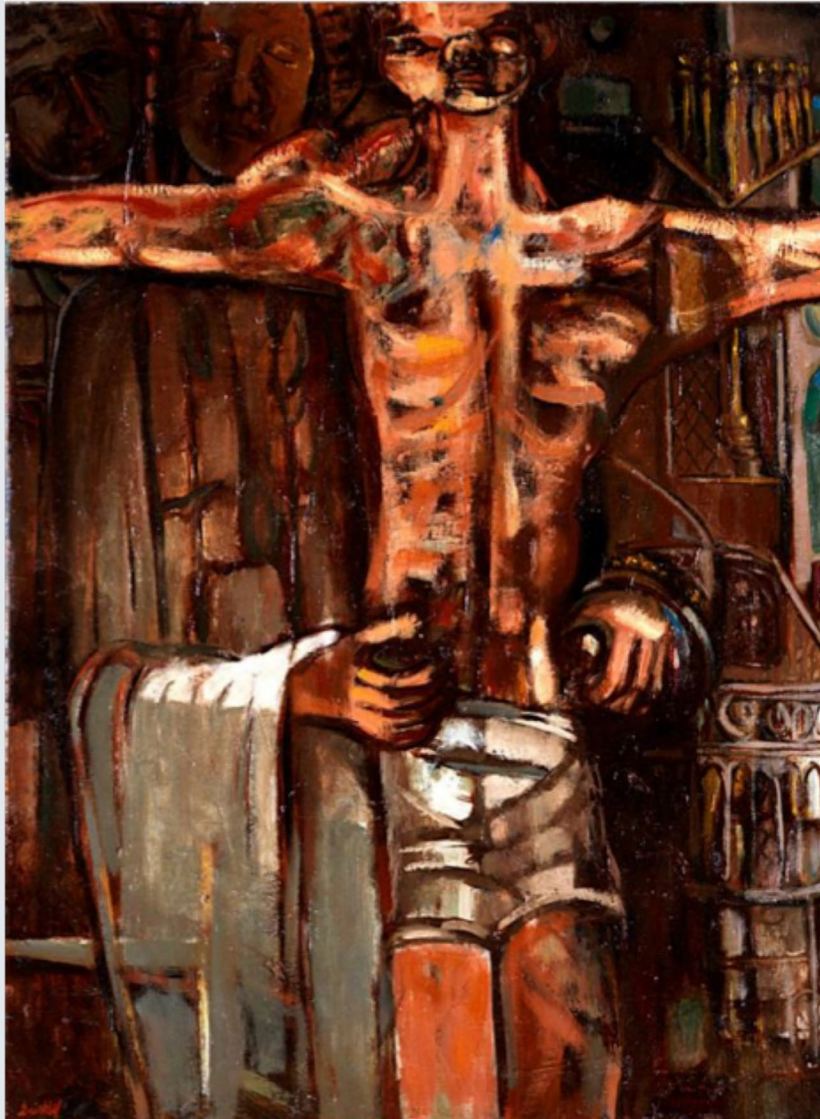
8. DAVID HAMMONS, UNTITLED, PIGMENT ON BOARD, 1969

One of the artist's signature body prints, this piece shares the collage works' distrust of the truthfulness of photographic image. Hammons' working method is to use his own body: after smearing his skin and clothing with grease or margarine, he would press against a support to create the image. The urge to bypass any intermediate medium in the creation of the image of black people is pushed to its extreme. By employing his own body, Hammons wants to ensure that the truth in the representation is not compromised by any external agency, and at the same time highlight the physicality of the black body and its significance.

Compared to other images of conflict in this category, Hammons' work conveys the sense of confrontation in a more muted, but no less powerful manner. Violence does not come from any historical event but is embedded in the act of art-making; yet somehow we find a resemblance between the artist's body, pressed against the support and that of an activist attacked by high-pressure water.

In a more general sense, this constrained body, erased of individual features, can also symbolize the sufferings of all African Americans. The gravity of their situation is further enhanced by the shadow of the figure, whose praying pose, with tightly clasped hands and upward-looking gesture, creates a poignant sensation that haunts the audience.





9. DAVID C. DRISKELL, BEHOLD THY SON, OIL ON CANVAS, 1956

This painting portrays an outrage so heinous it is seen by many as the catalyst for what became known as the Civil Rights Movement. In the summer of 1955, on his way to visiting relatives in Mississippi, fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was kidnapped, tortured, and eventually murdered for allegedly flirting with a white woman.

After receiving Till's mutilated body, his mother insisted the world needed to know what had happened to her son. She held an open casket service for him, and provided a gruesome photograph of Till's body which was circulated in the U.S., and abroad. The sensation caused by the image, as well as the outrage sparked by the two murderers' acquittal, laid bare the savage brutality of white supremacy and was a catalyst for the modern Civil Rights Movement.

Painted in heavy outlines and brushstrokes, the image is loaded with poignancy and anger. The roughly applied dark paints on the orange body effectively evokes the mutilation Till endured and by pushing the body excessively close to the audience, Driskell confronts them with the brutal truth from which they cannot look away.

Yet it seems that this work is not entirely devoid of hope. The boy's outstretched arms and white undergarment link him to the crucified Christ. This connection is further enhanced by the mother's long white robe and embracing gesture which reminds us of another related theme: the Pieta. By linking the murder to the theme of religious sacrifice and salvation, Driskell not only transcends the significance of the painted subject from an individual incident to the struggle of the entire black community, but also indicates that those who suffered would not die in vain.

DEFIANCE AND RESILIENCE: POWER OF THE PEOPLE

10. CHARLES HENRY ALSTON, WALKING, OIL ON CANVAS, 1958

While the giant figures of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks, continue to inspire thousands today, the countless anonymous participants were often overlooked. The series of works in this section aim to acknowledge the power of grassroots activists, starting with Alston's celebration of the women in the Montgomery Bus Boycott.

While the style of the image differs significantly from another of Alston's work that we have seen before, both evoke the abstract techniques that bespeak the artist's modernist training. The sturdy slabs of vivid colours highlight the women's robust bodies marching forward, which echoes the monumental nature of their protest. Compared to the loose brushstrokes depicting the sky in the background, the opaque colours add further weight to the figures, rendering them as if rooted to the ground, immovable with their determination. On the other hand, through the contrast between the stream of women on the left with their

backs turned to us, and the women facing forward on the right, Alston suggests the sense of ceaseless movement.

The angular lines portraying the figures' faces may remind us of techniques of Cubism, and they also blur the appearance of the individual represented, again stressing the anonymity of the group and drawing the viewer's attention to the overlooked heroism in their action.





11. CHARLES WHITE, MOVE ON UP A LITTLE HIGHER, CHARCOAL AND WOLFF CARBON PENCIL ON BOARD, 1961

White's work takes inspiration from Mahalia Jackson's bestselling gospel song in 1948, *Move On Up a Little Higher*. As a tradition of African Americans that dates back to the period of slavery, gospel songs serve as a symbolic icon for their culture, and also played a significant role in helping to strengthen and unify the civil rights fighters. Jackson's gospel songs were also performed at civil rights demonstrations and protests.

Similar to the previous two works, White's piece focuses on the power of anonymous people. The background is extremely simplified, composed of lines that construct the impression of light, and symbolically, hope radiating. The lack of specificity in the location also extends to the figure in the foreground. Apart from her gown which looks like a choir robe, there is hardly anything to suggest her identity. All these pictorial features emphasise that such a performance of gospel song that helps people so central to the Civil Rights Movement – can be anywhere and everywhere.

The woman's furrowed eyebrows and downcast eyes portray a sense of melancholy that reminds the viewer of the price paid for realising civil rights for all. Yet her raised arms, the movement of which is echoed by the vertical lines, inject an uplifting mood into the image, and reaffirm in us that hope still lies ahead.

12. RUPERT GARCIA, NO MORE O' THIS SHIT, SILKSCREEN PRINT ON PAPER, 1969

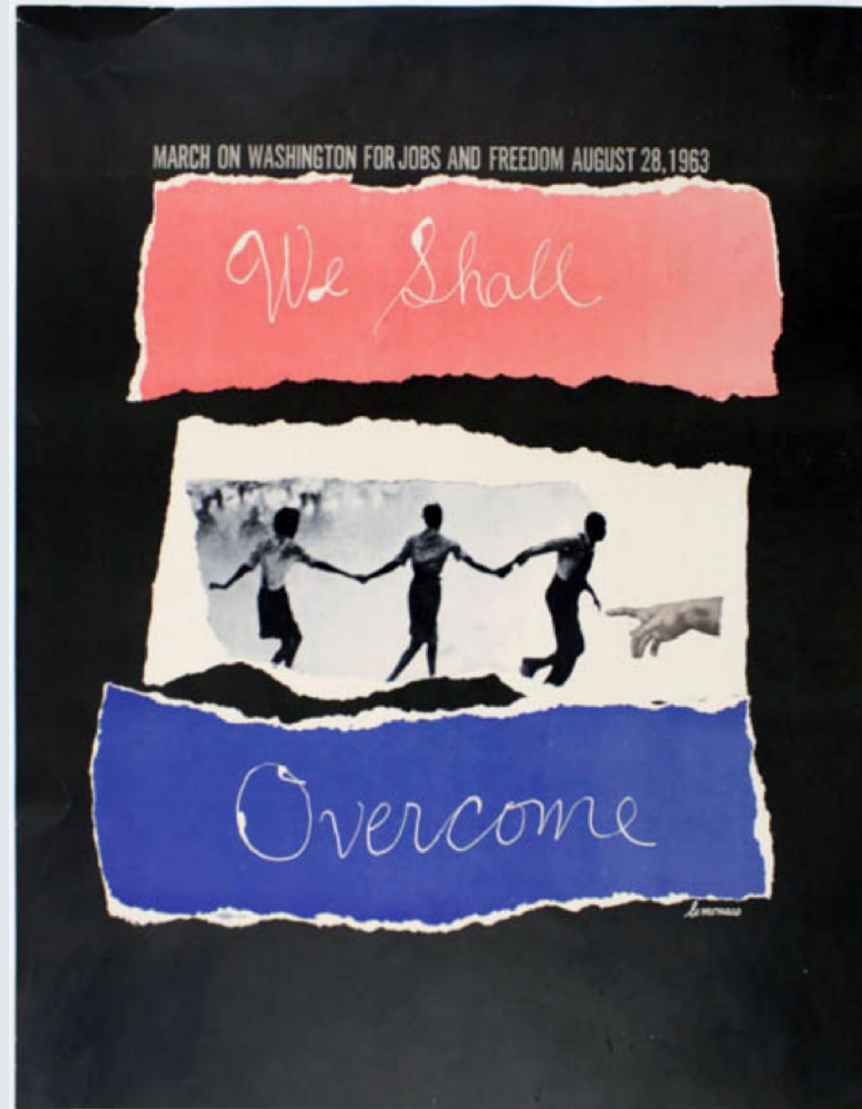
Different from other works that we have seen so far, this print is a rework of images of African Americans that denied their full civil rights in the country. At first glance, the print may remind the viewer of mid-twentieth-century posters that reconfirm black people's servitude. Although freed from slavery, African Americans were nevertheless portrayed as servants of the white household, grateful and content for the "raise" of their status.

Here in Garcia's work, such an icon of the black people's subjugation is cleverly appropriated, and transformed into an image of subversion and resistance. The man's toque clearly indicates that he is a professional chef not a domestic servant, and the caption "No more o' this shit" loudly pronounces his, and his fellow African Americans defiance to years of suppression and discrimination.

The use of the medium of poster also brings to mind the role images play in shaping prevailing social ideas and stereotypes. By choosing this kind of popular image form, Garcia exemplifies that in an age which witnessed the rise of television and other forms of visual mass media, how a simple "picture" can also be used as mighty weapon in the Civil Rights Movement.



NO MORE O' THIS SHIT.



13. LOUIS LO MONACO, WE SHALL OVERCOME (MARCH ON WASHINGTON FOR JOBS AND FREEDOM), PHOTO-MECHANICAL PRINT, 1963

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was one of the largest, and arguably the most famous of all rallies for civil rights in the U.S. history. It was during this march that Martin Luther King Jr. gave his "I Have A Dream" speech. The exhibited artwork is the cover of its official portfolio "We Shall Overcome," which was created as a "memento for those who participated in the historic March," and intended to "inspire [people] to assert man's decency and goodness through an understanding of anguish." The portfolio consists of five collages by Lo Monaco, and an introduction with six facsimile signatures of leaders of the Civil Rights Movement.

Yet again Lo Monaco's focus is less on the famous figures than those unidentified participants who made it possible for the March to make its impact. Three anonymous figures holding hands emerge in the photograph in the centre, and the whitened background highlights their silhouette. The hand of the man in the far right is connected by God's finger in

Michelangelo's Creation of Adam. This imaginative use of the masterpiece brings to mind how Christian belief fortified those who joined the March, and also extols their strength and courage.

14. ELIZABETH CATLETT, NEGRO ES BELLO II (BLACK IS BEAUTIFUL), LITHOGRAPH, 1969





15. JAE JARRELL, URBAN WALL SUIT, DYED AND PRINTED SILK WITH PAINT, 1969

Our last two works, produced at a later stage of this period, continue the theme of resistance against negative stereotypes of African Americans. Compared to Garcia's work, they focus even more on constructing a positive image of the Black community.

In Catlett's print, two African American faces are juxtaposed with a series of logos of the Black Panther, bearing the phrase "Black is Beautiful." The woodblock print texture renders the characteristics of the two faces all the more prominent and is a statement of African Americans' growing strength and pride.

Jarrell's work chooses something that is also distinctive about African Americans' identity. Most white people's appreciation for African clothing had mostly been mixed with Orientalism, regarding it as some kind of exotic product served to refresh the world of industrialised urban garments. Jarrell undoes just that.

The work's title, the graffiti style of the painted images and the brick pattern allude to an urban landscape, asserting the relevance and contribution of Black culture to the urban space and explicitly link the piece to the Civil Rights Movement.

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IMAGE SOURCES

1. Eve Arnold, *Integration Crisis (During civil rights movement in America. A party to introduce blacks to whites, Virginia, 1958)*, Photography, 1958 (Source: Magnum Photos; Deborah)
2. Norman Rockwell, *The Problem We All Live With*, Oil on Canvas, 1963 (Source: Berger)
3. Charles Henry Alston, *Black and White No. 7*, Oil on Canvas, 1961 (Source: Carbone and Jones)
4. Norman W. Lewis, *Untitled (Alabama)*, Oil On Canvas, 1967 (Source: Carbone and Jones)
5. Jacob Lawrence, *Dixie Café*, Ink on Paper, 1948 (Source: Smithsonian)
6. Merton D. Simpson, *U.S.A. '65*, Oil and Collaged Newsprint on Canvas, 1965 (Source: Carbone and Jones)
7. Jack Whitten, *Birmingham 1964*, Aluminium Foil, Newsprint, Stocking, and Oil on Plywood, 1964 (Source: Carbone and Jones)
8. David Hammons, *Untitled*, Pigment on Board, 1969 (Source: MoMA)
9. David C. Driskell, *Behold Thy Son*, Oil on Canvas, 1956 (Source: Smithsonian)
10. Charles Henry Alston, *Walking*, Oil on Canvas, 1958 (Source: Smithsonian)
11. Charles White, *Move On Up a Little Higher*, Charcoal and Wolff Carbon Pencil on Board, 1961 (Source: Smithsonian)
12. Rupert Garcia, *No More O' this Shit*, Silkscreen Print on Paper, 1969 (Source: Berger)
13. Louis Lo Monaco, *We Shall Overcome (March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom)*, Photomechanical Print, 1963 (Source: Berger)
14. Elizabeth Catlett, *Negro Es Bello II (Black is Beautiful)*, Lithograph, 1969 (Source: Berger)
15. Jae Jarrell, *Urban Wall Suit*, Dyed and Printed Silk with Paint, 1969 (Source: Carbone and Jones)