



Equals, 1992, by Emma Amos

Equals
1992

Acrylic on linen canvas
with African fabric borders
6 ft 4 in x 6 ft 10 in
(193 x 208.3 cm)

Emma Amos
(American, 1937–2020)

Private collection © Emma Amos;
Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York



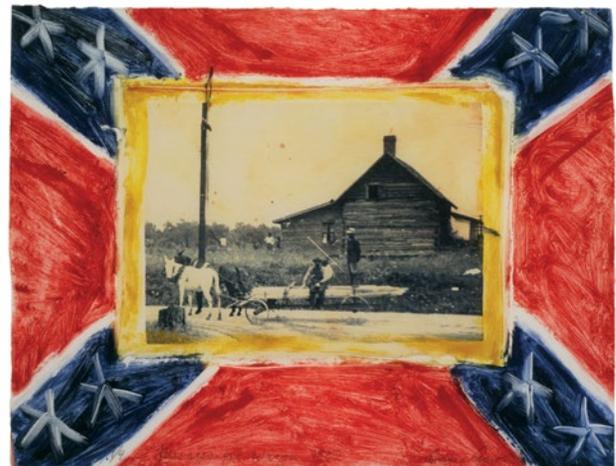
About the Artwork

A lone female figure, arms extended out from her body, stares out at us from a sea of stars and stripes. Is she jumping up to reach us? Is she reaching out to us as she falls? Or is it something else altogether? While we may not know exactly what is happening in this picture, we do know who she is.

This is a self-portrait of the artist, Emma Amos. She depicts herself barefoot, knees bent, arms outstretched, looking up toward the viewer, while the American flag swirls behind her as if blowing in the wind. Echoing the background, she is dressed in the colors of the flag; she wears brilliant white pants, a red shirt, and a blue coat that billows out behind her. Though most of the background is taken up by the stripes of the American flag, below her feet is a field of blue, speckled with scribbles of gold. In the top left corner, there is a black-and-white photograph. Superimposed over all of this are intricately patterned stars, some of which have eyes staring out from their centers. A slim brown and yellow border made from African textiles frames the entire composition, with a repeated image of civil rights leader Malcolm X. A large red equal sign, which lends the artwork its title, is at the center of the composition.

This artwork, which combines textiles, photography, and paint can be interpreted in many ways. Emma Amos's artworks from the 1980s and 1990s often depict people falling or flying through the air. While flying may be interpreted to express a feeling of freedom and liberation, falling might suggest something quite different, like a loss of control. The American flag is one of the most recognizable symbols in the world, but here Amos juxtaposes the stars and stripes with African textiles and the repeated image of Malcolm X, encouraging viewers to make connections between these elements.

The black-and-white photograph was taken by Amos's godmother's husband during his travels in Mississippi and Tennessee in the 1930s. The photograph shows Black laborers in the rural south during the Great Depression. The same photograph appears in another artwork by Amos called *Mississippi Wagon*, 1937, in which the photograph is superimposed over a roughly painted Confederate battle flag. While we don't know the identities of the workers in the photograph or their specific working conditions, Black workers in the south at this time were often tenant farmers and sharecroppers, which meant that in exchange for farming someone else's land, they had to pay the landowner with a percentage of their crops. The system of sharecropping, which developed in the United States after the Civil War, has been called by many "slavery by another name."



Mississippi Wagon, 1937, 1992, by Emma Amos (Collection of Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson) © Emma Amos; Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York



Let's Look

- Look closely at how the woman in the picture is posed. How would you describe her pose? Do you think she is flying or falling? Or doing something else altogether?
- Use your own body to try to copy the way she is standing. Hold the pose for a moment. How does it feel?
- Take some time to look at the American flag in the background of this image. How is it different from an American flag that you have seen before? What do you think Emma Amos is trying to express by making these changes?

Let's Look Again

- This artwork is full of many different repeating patterns. How many patterns can you find? Now compare the patterns to each other. How are they similar? How are they different?
- Look closely at the black-and-white photograph. What do you notice? What do you think is happening in the photo? What connections can you make between the photo and the self-portrait of Emma Amos?
- Amos uses many different materials and techniques in her artworks. In *Equals* she combines textiles, paint, and printmaking techniques in a single work of art. Can you find places where she uses different materials and techniques in this artwork?each other. How are they similar? How are they different?

About the Artist

Emma Amos was born in Atlanta, Georgia, in 1937. Her family owned and operated Amos Drug Store in Atlanta and her grandfather was the first Black pharmacist in the state. Amos's parents, India DeLaine Amos and Miles Green Amos, were active in Atlanta's thriving Black intellectual circles, which gave Amos and her brother the opportunity to meet notable people like author Zora Neale Hurston and scholar W.E.B. Du Bois. As a child Amos expressed an interest in art, and at age 11 she began taking formal art classes. By the time she was a teenager Amos had artworks displayed at Atlanta University (now Clark Atlanta University). Amos would go on to major in Fine Art at Antioch College in Ohio, where she learned weaving, and to study abroad at the Central School of Art and Design in London, where she pursued her interest in printmaking techniques. She received a degree in etching, a kind of printmaking, in London, and her Masters in Art Education from New York University.

Throughout her education and training, Amos became not only an expert painter, but also a skilled weaver and printmaker. Her skills in these areas made her a true innovator in the art world as she continuously pushed at the boundaries of what was considered acceptable, both in terms of her chosen materials and her subject matter. Throughout her career as an artist, Amos maintained a long and impressive teaching career as a professor, most recently at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University. Amos died in 2020, but her legacy lives on not only through her incredible body of work, but also through the students she taught and mentored throughout her career.



Emma Amos with paintings, 2011; photo by Becket Logan (Amos Family; Courtesy RYAN LEE Gallery, New York)

Activism and Art

“It’s always been my contention that for me, a Black woman artist, to walk into the studio is a political act.”

Emma Amos’s career spans decades, starting in the 1960s and continuing until her death in 2020. Amos faced many challenges being a Black woman artist working in the predominantly white male artworld. Her presence alone was enough to disrupt the status quo. More than that, her work directly foregrounded her identity as a Black woman, both through its imagery and her chosen materials. Fabric arts, like weaving, which Amos incorporated into many of her artworks, have traditionally been categorized as “craft” and “women’s work” and are often considered less important than painting or sculpture, for example. Amos challenged that very idea by centering these techniques in her work and combining them with more traditional fine art media.

Amos was also heavily involved in activism throughout her career. In 1964 she joined a short-lived collective of Black artists called Spiral, which had formed in response to the March on Washington. Members included artists Romare Bearden and Hale Woodruff, who were already well-established artists at the time. Amos was the only woman and the youngest member of the group and though they would disband only two years later in 1966, Amos was an

important part of discussions about the political role of Black artists. Amos did not have any formal involvement with feminist groups until the 1980s, but her artwork throughout her career often explored and centered Black women’s experiences. She joined the feminist group the Heresies Collective in 1984 of which she said it was “the group I had always hoped existed: serious, knowledgeable, take-care-of-business feminists giving time to publish the art and writings of women.” Amos would also go on to join the anonymous art-activist group The Guerrilla Girls, a group of feminist, female artists, who formed in 1985 to advocate for gender and racial equality in the art world.

Unfortunately, inequality still exists in the art world, and even though Amos achieved great success and recognition as an American artist, it’s only been in the last few years that she has achieved recognition from major museums around the world. This year will bring Emma Amos’s first major retrospective, featuring works from throughout her decades-long career to three museums in the United States, including the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

This artwork is featured in the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s exhibition *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey* (October 11, 2021–January 17, 2022). The exhibition surveys, for the first time, Amos’s body of work from the 1960s to the 2010s, spotlighting her inventive approach to printmaking, painting, and weaving, and her signature practice of combining distinctive materials and artistic techniques.

The exhibition is organized by the Georgia Museum of Art, University of Georgia. This program is supported in part by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Willson Center for Humanities and Arts, University of Georgia.

Support

In Philadelphia, *Emma Amos: Color Odyssey* is made possible by the Kathleen C. and John J. F. Sherrerd Fund for Exhibitions, the Lenore G. Tawney Foundation, Emily and Mike Cavanagh, and other generous donors.

Curators

The organizing curator is Shawnya L. Harris, PhD, the Larry D. and Brenda A. Thompson Curator of African American and African Diasporic Art at the Georgia Museum of Art.

In Philadelphia, the exhibition is curated by Laurel Garber, the Park Family Assistant Curator of Prints and Drawings. (Credits as of August 5, 2021)