

Spiral and the March on Washington

'During the summer of 1963 at a time of crucial metamorphosis just before the now historic March on Washington, a group of Negro artists met to discuss their position in American society.'¹ Thus opens the jointly authored artists' foreword for the small catalog that accompanied *First Group Showing: Works in Black and White*, the 1965 exhibition mounted by Spiral in their Christopher Street space in New York. Spiral was a group of fifteen artists who met between 1963 and 1965. Many had known each other for some time, and had faced different opportunities and challenges, but they assembled in the context of the Civil Rights Movement to discuss how to respond. Some attended the March on Washington together and heard Dr Martin Luther King Jr's famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. Hale Woodruff named the group Spiral 'because, from a starting point, it moves outward embracing all directions, yet constantly forward.'² The group's logo would feature this symbol with fifteen numbered points, signifying each of the original members: Charles Alston, Romare Bearden, Calvin Douglass, Perry Ferguson, Reginald Gammon, Felrath Hines, Alvin Hollingsworth, Norman Lewis, William Majors, Richard Mayhew, Earl Miller, Merton Simpson, Hale Woodruff, James Yeagans and Emma Amos, the youngest and only female member of the group.

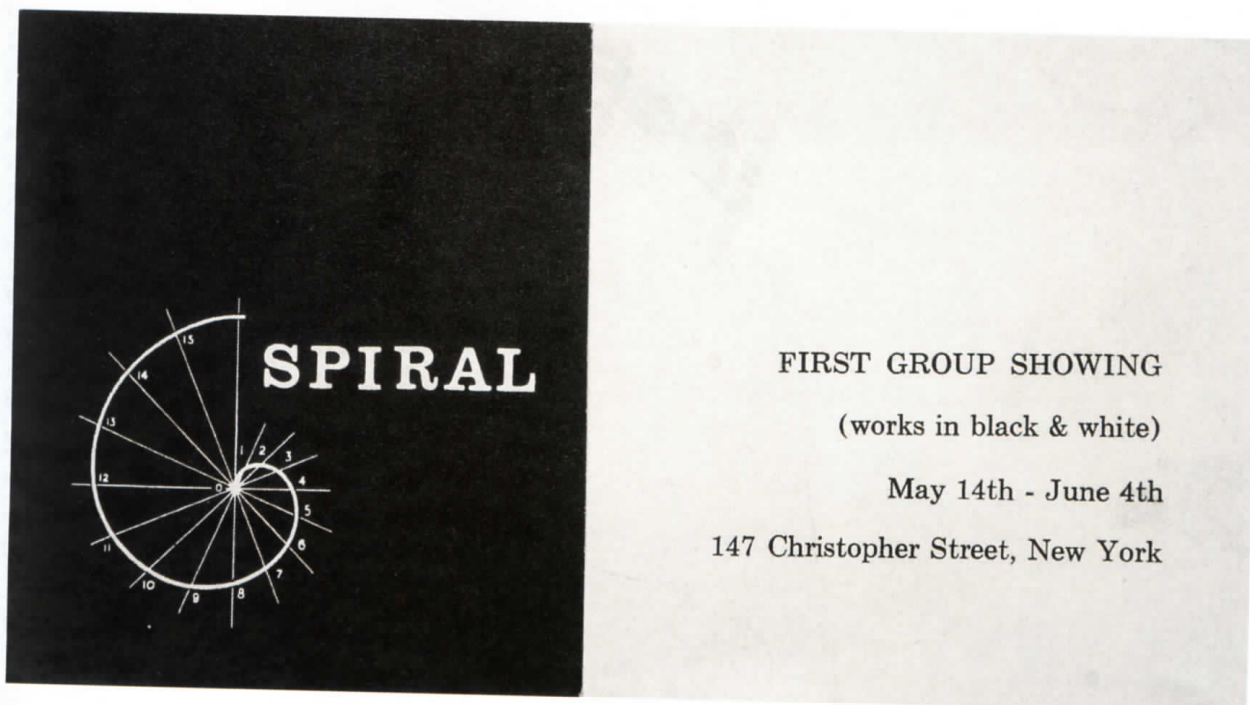
When they began to meet in 1963 in his studio, Romare Bearden's initial proposal was that in a time of collective action, the artists should similarly work as a group and produce collages collaboratively. Although this idea was rejected, Bearden nevertheless embarked on a series of collages that he intended to display as enlarged Photostats. The conversation about what the artists should do together took a different route and the idea of a joint exhibition was proposed. Originally they considered 'Mississippi 1964' as the theme, in reference to the Ku Klux Klan's summer of murderous attacks in the southern state. When some members expressed concern about surrendering aesthetic considerations to political protest, the idea of a group show of black and white works prevailed. The requirement that all works in the exhibition be restricted to a monochrome palette had ambiguous political significance, and might be alternatively seen as encouraging integration or reflecting on the segregation that led Black artists to be largely neglected in the collections and exhibitions of major art institutions.

The artists discussed terminology and the relationship between politics and aesthetics, with Lewis posing the question 'Is there a Negro Image?'³ No consensus was reached about this, nor about any aesthetic approach, and at the 1965 show the diversity of aesthetic positions was apparent. Reginald Gammon's *Freedom Now* is a dramatic figurative painting showing a crowd of marchers pressing together in the foreground, their placards cropped by the borders of the painting. Lewis exhibited *Processional*, an abstraction that linked to black and white paintings he had already been making before the inception of Spiral (p.152). *Processional* was partly inspired by images of the Selma marches that took place two months before the Spiral show opened. Bearden, having already determined to create Photostats of his collages, chose *The Conjur Woman* for the show, a collage based on the folkloric tradition that certain women possess supernatural powers capable of conjuring healing or harm, who would be called upon by community members in times of need. Although the collective dissolved later that year, the time working together was important to each artist later on, and the coming-together of such significant figures inspired other artists to organize exhibitions and publications in the years that followed.



Dr Martin Luther King, Jr at the Civil Rights Movement's March on Washington, 28 August 1963

Spiral exhibition invitation card, 1965



Norman Lewis at the opening of the Spiral exhibition, 14 May 1965