

Beauford Delaney

Born: Knoxville, Tennessee 1901

Died: Paris, France 1979

Active In: New York, New York

Biography

In 1929 aspirations and the energy of the Harlem Renaissance drew Beauford Delaney—trained in Knoxville, Tennessee, and Boston—to New York. By the mid 1940s he had forged close friendships with novelists Henry Miller and James Baldwin and gained wide recognition for his pastel portraits of well-known African Americans such as W. E. B. Du Bois and Duke Ellington. As comfortable with artists as with his neighbors in Harlem or Greenwich Village, Delaney conveyed his abiding love of mankind in paintings and drawings that ranged from the representational to the abstract.

As for many artists of his generation, New York's urban scene attracted Delaney's eye. In *Can Fire in the Park*, [SAAM 1989.23] anonymous men gather near a source of heat, light, and camaraderie. This disturbingly contemporary vignette conveys a legacy of deprivation linked not only to the Depression years after 1929 but also to the longstanding disenfranchisement of black Americans, portrayed here as social outcasts. At the lower left and upper right, objects that suggest street signs also function as arrows symbolically pointing the way up and out of desolation. Despite its sober subject, the scene crackles with energy, the culmination of Delaney's sharp pure colors, thickly applied paints, and taut, schematic patterning. Abandoning the precise realism of his early academic training, Delaney developed a lyrically expressive style that drew upon his love of musical rhythms and his improvisational use of color. Works such as

Smithsonian American Art Museum: <http://americanart.si.edu/collections/search/artist/?id=1186>

Can Fire in the Park hover between representation and abstraction as that style evolved during the 1940s.

Neither early success nor gracious spirit spared Delaney from the obscurity and poverty that plagued him, particularly after he moved to Paris in 1953. In 1978—a year before Delaney died in a French asylum—the Studio Museum in Harlem initiated its Black Master series with a retrospective of his work, the first attempt to restore his forty-year career to public light.

Lynda Roscoe Hartigan *African-American Art: 19th and 20th-Century Selections*
(brochure. Washington, D.C.: National Museum of American Art)