Reginald L. Jackson, *Things Go Better?*, c. 1970. Gelatin silver print. Courtesy the artist. © Reginald L. Jackson

AROUND THE CORNER

The African American Master Artists' in Residence Program, in Transition.

FORTUNATELY DIGITAL: SWARM

Words by Alula Hunsen.
Interview with Reginald Jackson
Photography and art by Reginald Jackson.

The African American Master Artists in Residency Program (AAMARP) holds a storied history that spans nearly 50 years of supporting Black and Brown arts in the City of Boston and beyond. Founded by Prof. Dana Chandler, Jr., the organization operates a residency program at their building at 76 Atherton Street in Jamaica Plain. Black and Brown artists based in Boston selected for the residency receive access to studio space and are able to show their work in the attached galleries, as well as in communities worldwide. Artists are invited to join the residency via relationships built with current residents and through an application process run by AAMARP's Membership Committee. Inside their building, flyers and promotional materials from the past half-century of arts and cultural organizing in Boston adorn the walls.

Across two of the building's four floors are the studios, each a veritable reserve of work from some of Boston's most lauded artists, including James Reed (initially a co-director of the group), John Wilson, Theresa India Young, Allan Rohan Crite, Barbara Ward Armstrong, Arnold Hurley, Milton Derr, and Stanley Pinkney. Recently, AAMARP has come into conflict with Northeastern University, which owns the building and has not met expectations as a landlord. This made it difficult for new artists to join the residency. In response, AAMARP is adapting: opening itself up to the community once again after Covid-19 with events and programs, while adjusting the collective's leadership structure and re-dedicating its strategies for stewarding its legacy into the next half century.

Editor Alula Hunsen spoke with Reginald L. Jackson, the current director of the collective, speaks about the organization's recent transition towards a different leadership model, and about how AAMARP hopes to carry itself into the next 50 years.

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Alula Hunsen: Within AAMARP's changes and transitions, one big change has been in its decision-making model: shifting from top-down to a consensus-building model. Could you tell me more about how that works, and about why this shift occurred?

Reginald Jackson: Consensus-building is a model that works: it's more community-oriented. And, as a collective of artists and creative folk who operate mostly outside the box, we really need to be able to hear everyone's voice. It's a model that I had heard about and to some extent participated in via the community organizations I've been involved in. I was president of the United Neighbors of Lower Roxbury for maybe 10 years or so, and consensus-building was a style that we used there. People need to feel like they have some ability to participate directly in making decisions.

As a director at AAMARP, people will often ask me, "Well, what did you decide?" I usually reply, "I didn't decide anything!" We have an Executive Committee and several other committees, and I'll ask them how they feel; I usually vet things with them to find a solution, then I can say, "Okay, this is what the Executive Committee thinks or this is the recommendation from this or that committee. Now, what do you all think?" If we follow this process, then nobody comes back later on and says, "Well, hey, why are we doing this or that? I think we should be doing 'XYZ'!" If you come to meetings, if you read and approve the minutes, and vote, then you know what's going on and can be an integral part of the decision making process.

It sounds like transparency and a collectivization of responsibility have strengthened the governance of this space.

Yes, I think so. It's really important. You know, as Black and Brown artists, we have been so marginalized that any little thing can get under our fingernails. We don't want to be fighting internally because it gets in the way of maintaining and developing an organization, fast!

In the next iteration of AAMARP, I think there needs to be a little more interdependence and accountability to each other.