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'Black' – and beautiful

40 Acres exhibit of locally owned art is a revelation

By Victoria Dalkey - Bee Art Correspondent
Published 12:00 am PDT Friday, July 11, 2008

Looking at "Black: A Celebration of African American Art in Sacramento-Area Collections," you see strong evidence of the sleuthing skills of Kim Curry-Evans, director of the 40 Acres Gallery in Oak Park.

With Felicinne Ramey, professor and dean emeritus at Sacramento State, she assembled and installed this stunning show of works by 43 notable African American artists, owned by collectors from the Bay Area to the foothills, including several with local connections. In the process, she discovered a treasure trove of artworks from private collectors such as Shirley Leonard (see story, Page 9) and institutions such as the Sojourner Truth Multi-Cultural Art Museum in South Sacramento.

It comes as a surprise to this reviewer that there are so many strong works by black artists in local collections – ranging from Jacob Lawrence and Lois Mailou Jones to Ernie Barnes and Carrie Mae Weems. While the Crocker has a relatively small but interesting collection, including works by Romare Bearden and Betye Saar, Curry-Evans said, most of the blue-chip artists in the show are 60 or over, while younger artists such as TWIN (identical twins Jerry and Terry Lynn, who collaborate on their works) and Jessica Wimbley, a recent UC Davis graduate, may be less familiar to local viewers.

Arranged loosely thematically rather than chronologically so that you can make comparisons between artists of different generations, the show ranges from edgier works such as internationally renowned artist Robert Colescott's "Life Class," which addresses racial, social and political stereotypes, to pure abstractions by UC Davis professor Mike Henderson and Jamaican-born East Coast artist Peter Wayne Lewis, who grew up in Sacramento.

Other works by less familiar names are exhibited alongside works by such giants of African American art as Aaron Douglas, who died in 1979, and Jacob Lawrence, who died in 2000. William Pajaud's "Baja Clouds," a soft and radiant abstracted landscape with figures, for example, is placed near "Wax and Gold," Berkeley-based artist Wosene Kosrof's sophisticated, richly textured, cubistic figure with submerged text in Aramaic, the language of his homeland Ethiopia.

Similarly, Brenda Joysmith's charming "Bumpin,'" an image of a quartet of little girls, is placed near Harry Evans' "Row Houses," a bright and lushly colored watercolor of big-city houses, tinged with nostalgia. Both celebrate the joys of African American life, as does TWIN's scene of a girl wading in the water on Sunday morning, though there is a dark edge to the expressive use of color and line in the latter.

Evans' emotive use of color is echoed in the works of Richard Mayhew, who offers a pair of gorgeous abstracted landscapes reminiscent in their use of passionate, richly saturated hues of works by both the Fauves and the Impressionists. The former, "Obsession," resonates with Romare Bearden's atypical acrylic and collage on paper, "Lady With the Blue Face," while the latter, "Santa Cruz Serenade Series Opus 6," seems to chime nicely with David Driskell's gutsy gestural abstraction, "Cathedral." All make strong formal statements, as do John Scott's "Mixed Tower – Morning" and Kevin Hellon's "The Gathering." While some works seem to celebrate the strong values of the multicultural experience – Elizabeth Catlett's maquette "Standing Mother and Child," which is part of the city's public art collection, and Larry Love's whimsical ceramic sculpture "Transition," addressing rebirth and transformation – many more are hard-hitting looks at the racism that still exists in American culture.

Among these, Marie Johnson Calloway's "Civil Rights March, 2000" with its ironic use of color and Milton Bowens' text-based "Hello: My Name Is Racism" stand out, as does Jacob Lawrence's brilliantly colored "The Migrants Cast Their Ballots." These and other works in the show are right up to date and reflect the challenges facing our country today.

Black: A Celebration of African American Art in Sacramento-Area Collections

WHEN: Noon -6 p.m. Tuesday -Friday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturday; exhibit up Tuesday through Aug. 12; reception 5-8 p.m. Saturday

WHERE: 40 Acres Art Gallery, 35th Street and Broadway, Sacramento

HOW MUCH: Free

INFORMATION: (916) 456-5080 or www.40acresartgallery.org

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