



ART REVIEW: African-American Artists Draw on Realism's Aesthetic Strengths

February 21, 2017

by Charles A. Riley II

Timed to celebrate Black History Month, [Grenning Gallery](#) has assembled a group show of contemporary African-American artists working in the realist mode for an exhibition that is long on the traditional portraiture for which the gallery is renowned. The exhibition is co-curated by Andree Michelle, the first gallery director for Grenning Gallery, with Laura Grenning. It features the works of seven artists, most of whom are new to the gallery's exhibition roster.

"Expanding Tradition: The Journey of the African-American Artist" relies on aesthetics rather than politics to make its mark. The most edgy of the works are the "lifescape" watercolors of [Philip Smallwood](#) (whose work is in the collection of the [Parrish Art Museum](#) in Water Mill). Two portraits of young men in what the gallery press release calls their "natural environment" depict moments in their day-to-day urban lives captured by the artist.

Flavas, one of the two Smallwood portraits, includes telling details such as graffiti tagging on the window and labels on two-liter soda bottles in the bodega where the young man who is the subject is posted as a lookout, with bargain brands featured more prominently than the mainstream Pepsi. This kind of specificity speaks to the degree of familiarity that these large and provocative watercolors depend upon for their veracity, delivering blunt messages. The details exemplify what Robert Hughes called the "shock of recognition," but in a genre more typically associated with understatement.



"Flavas" by Phillip Smallwood, 2016. Watercolor, 28.5 x 21 inches. Courtesy of Grenning Gallery.

Speaking equally loudly is a distinctly different group of watercolors by [Mario Robinson](#), one of several artists in the show who are regulars in the Grenning Gallery lineup. Robinson, a graduate of Pratt Institute, applies a restrained classicism to his subjects, including the whispered linear language of the shingles and architectural details in a lovingly brushed portrait of his childhood church in rural Oklahoma. The same visual vocabulary is evident in the spokes—there and not there, as they vanish with his light touch—of a cruiser bicycle parked by the beach.

Moving away from the obvious to the mysterious is *Elegy for Ethan* by [Jas Knight](#), a brooding

portrait of an elegant and beautiful woman evidently in mourning. While the title prompted curiosity about the cause and circumstances of the woman's mourning, its solid technique and haunting, tenebrous palette commanded more of my attention. Like a Whistler tone poem in blacks and greys, Knight's painting rang the change on a range of greys from pewter to lead, descending to a heaviness of heart that was more than enough to carry the burden of the title.



"Elegy for Ethan" by Jas Knight, 2017. Oil on linen, 28 x 24 inches.
Courtesy of Grenning Gallery.

Another enigmatic work was [James Hoston's](#) *Adam and Eve in Brooklyn*, a large (40" by 60") allegorical painting on two interlocked canvases of equal size that made significant use of two types of support. On the left, where Eve assumes the pose, arm raised above head, that Jan Goessart and others usually attribute to Adam, the support is stretched canvas; on the Adam side the "hard" support is canvas laid down on board.

Using the medial edges as a guide to the two sides' differences rather than the continuity, a more dramatic spotlight is on the upper torso of Eve, while Adam slips away into dappled forest shadow. According to Adrian Cooper, a friend of the artist and husband of exhibition co-curator Andree MiChelle, the background owes a great deal to Prospect Park, while the obelisk at Eve's left elbow is a nod to the artist's Freemason affiliation and an allusion to the art of ancient Egypt.

Hoston is another of the Pratt graduates in the show, and also studied at that bastion of classical realism, the New York Academy of Art. Born on Long Island, in Freeport, his art has been exhibited at Hirschl & Adler Modern, the Society of Illustrators, the Atlantic City Museum Gallery and he was an assistant to Jeff Koons on his "Celebration" series of paintings.



"Adam and Eve in Brooklyn" by James Hoston, 2016. Oil, 40 x 60 inches. Courtesy of Grenning Gallery.

A wedge of mid-afternoon sunlight during my visit fell serendipitously on the most brightly colored passage in [Irvin Rodriguez's](#) *Doppelganger*, inviting a close examination of the brushwork. The different ways the downward and sideways strokes held the light, along with the weave of hot and cool tones from a palette that moved from cerulean blue to ruby red, made this circular painting a particularly rewarding example of the classical technique that the Grenning Gallery champions.



“Doppelganger” by Irvin Rodriguez, 2016. Oil on linen, 20 x 20 inches.
Courtesy of Grenning Gallery.

BASIC FACTS: “Expanding Tradition: The Journey of the African-American Artist” is on view February 4 through March 5, 2017 at the Grenning Gallery, 17 Washington Street, Sag Harbor, NY 11963. www.grenninggallery.com

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