Curator’s View: Celebrating the Cultural Heritage of African Americans through Art

January 12, 2018
by John Cino

Any work of art can be considered the sum of all the creator’s experiences. Those experiences include both uniquely personal and archetypical common histories, life events and relationships. It is from these that an artist’s particular voice emerges. A variety of experiences are common to some, but not all, artists.

We continue to see that people of color experience our nation in many ways that differ from the majority. Artists of color will then include these experiences in the production of their work. However, it is not safe to assume that all will respond similarly, nor that all people of color have had the same experiences. While sharing a common bond of racial discrimination, African-American artists differ in sex, generation, location and other variables.

The sum of these experiences leads each artist to choices of technique, material, form, and subject; some have embraced their heritage, others seek to address social concerns, and still others look to universal themes. These divergent experiences and concerns were utmost in curating “Variety of Experience” for the Patchogue Arts Council Art Gallery on Eastern Long Island. The exhibition features work by Romare Bearden, Faith Ringgold, Howardena Pindell, Emma Amos Robert, Robert Carter, David Byre-Tyre along with artists from the collection of Robert Carter.

“Varieties of Experience” opens on January 13, 2018 and continues on view through February 25, 2018. An Opening Reception will be held Saturday, January 13, 2017 from 5 to 7 p.m.

Drawing on her heritage, Faith Ringgold finds inspiration in the tradition of quilting. Through her story quilts she offers biographies of prominent figures and commentary on them, such as *Mahalia, We Love You*. Born in the later days of the Harlem Renaissance, Ringgold’s childhood among that neighborhood’s creatives is recounted in *Tar Beach #2*.

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“Mahalla We Love You” by Faith Ringgold. © Faith Ringgold, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York.

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“Tar Beach #2” by Faith Ringgold. AP 2 of 7. © Faith Ringgold, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York.

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Less than a decade later, Robert Carter was born in Kentucky. Working in realism on a par with Dutch Baroque painting and an assemblage technique developed in the 1950’s, Carter recalls the archetypal figures of his youth. In *Back Next Week* he presents one of his many figures of matrons, who were often the binding forces of his community.

Collage is an art form dating back to the early 20th century with an acknowledged influence from the art of Africa. Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, 2004 MacArthur fellow, combines everyday materials, buttons and fabric, with drawing for *The Millennium Series #7: Tonight, A Life Spent in the Shelter.* The work is a commentary on homelessness and poverty, which are so much greater in populations of color. The same issues are addressed by Emma Amos, whose work often combines painting, collage, and photo transfers. In *Stars and Stripes* she references an American flag and a group of 1950s-era African-American children. An ‘x’ across the flag seems to suggest that the American Dream might not be available to these children.

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“The Millennium Series Number 13 People Get Ready” by Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, 2011. © Aminah Brenda Lynn Robinson, Courtesy ACA Galleries, New York.

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Howardena Pindell’s work came to maturity during the 1970s and suggests the Pattern and Decoration movement with an emphasis on women’s craft works elevated to a fine art status. However, Pindell crosses movement lines by also referencing decorative qualities and collage techniques often associated with African design, as in *Untitled #50 and Untitled #51*. These works eschew the narrative tradition and communicate through pure form.

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“Untitled #51” by Howardena Pindell, 2010. Mixed media collage on board, 10.5 x 10.5 inches. Courtesy of Garth Greenan Gallery.

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Laurence Lee also eliminates narrative in his sculpture. Again, using techniques in his wood carvings developed in the early 20th century that borrowed heavily from forms in African sculpture,

Lee presents works, *Tao*, which appeal to the shared humanity of all peoples.

Cheryl McBride employs an art making strategy first developed in the 1960s. Conceptual art, often considered an 'art of ideas,'addressed difficult social issues through a display of data. The data were often recovered from deep layers of bureaucracy. In her works *17-31-14-2-3-473* and *38%-7%-22%-26%-7%-520*, McBride examined the distribution of faculty and students by race, gender, and other variables and published statements concerning them at Nassau Community College where she teaches.

The concept of Identity politics has recently become a major trend in art making. In his challenging works David Byre-Tyre asks us to contemplate whether we are looking at a person or a color in *Imported from Africa – Made in America*. DeWayne Wrencher conducted an experiment in the series "Hair Theory," in which he presented himself in five different hair styles and observed responses to each. *Hair Theory VI* presents a composite of all five images.

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"Hair Theory VI" by Dewayne C. Wrencher, 2017. Linocut, 26 x 29.5 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

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"Varieties of Experience" is rounded out by works from the collection of Robert Carter and includes works by Ramona Candy, Panchita Carter, Patricia Coleman Cobb, James Denmark, Frank Frazier, Lafayette Robinson, and Emmet Wigglesworth. Together, they celebrate the cultural heritage of African-American artists.

BASIC FACTS: "Variety of Experience" is on view January 13 to February 25, 2018 at the Patchogue Arts Council Art Gallery. An Opening Reception will be held Saturday, January 13, 2018 from 5 to 7 p.m. The gallery is located at 20 Terry St., Suite 116, Patchogue NY 11772. The gallery is open Thursdays through Sundays. www.patchoguearts.org.

John Cino is a sculptor, art professor and independent curator who frequently curators shows on Long Island. His art has been exhibited in New York, Long Island, New Jersey and elsewhere. To see his sculpture, visit www.johncino.com.

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