



Romare Bearden, *Of the Blues: Mecklenburg County, Saturday Night, 1974*, mixed-media collage on Masonite, 50" x 44". Michael Rosenfeld.

Romare Bearden

Michael Rosenfeld

With their patterns of brilliant colors, the collages of Romare Bearden (1911–88) have the strength and poetry of stained-glass windows. To celebrate Bearden's centennial, this stunning show presented some of the artist's finest works—collages that recall African American life and culture with zest and reflect the eye of a modernist. Bearden, who didn't begin working in collage until the mid-'60s, halfway through his career, found that the medium allowed him to fuse the perspectives of many masters—from medieval altar painters to the sculptors of West Africa to Picasso, Matisse, and George Grosz—and to come up with his own visual idiom.

His haunting *Watching the Good Trains Go By* (1969) shows five figures lined up, as if in a portrait studio. Their poignant faces are black-and-white photographs, balanced on small, paper doll-like bodies. Dressed in scraps of bright-colored gingham, the five stare out stoically at the Jim Crow world, while behind them a steam locomotive rushes north across a swath of green. It's a brilliantly conceived piece that lingers long after the viewer's eye moves on.

Equally unsettling is *Untitled (The Family)*, 1969, in which the somber,

sculptural faces of a man and woman contrast with their snipped paper garments, cardboard house, and the ill-proportioned, medieval-looking baby the man holds in his arms. We feel the agony of three-dimensional people trapped in a two-dimensional plane.

Other pieces here were celebratory and very seductive. The silhouettes of two women in *The Dressmaker* (1983) gesture so gracefully they might have danced off a Grecian urn. *Of the Blues: Mecklenburg County, Saturday Night* (1974) captures the energy of country folk letting loose after a long week's work. Overlap-

ping shapes of musicians and dancers explode in a hallelujah of oranges, cobalts, yellows, and greens. Bearden may have worked with scissors, paper, and glue to create these pieces, but all the time he was thinking like a muralist, philosopher, and bluesman.

—Mona Molarsky

Soutine/Bacon

Helly Nahmad

This intense, ambitious show pairing Chaim Soutine and Francis Bacon—who was drawn to Soutine's paintings of flayed beef carcasses early on and considered him a formative influence—offered many pleasures. Curated by Soutine scholars Maurice Tuchman and Esti Dunow, the exhibition represented the artists with some extraordinary paintings, installed so that you could almost press your nose against them. This intimate town-house setting was not the least of the exhibition's pleasures. Many works were without protective glass so there was no need to peer past your own reflection to get at the brushwork, color, and texture—visceral in the Soutines. The density of the display (32

canvases) was ultimately a plus, creating vibrancy rather than clutter, ratcheting up the excitement of already souped-up paintings: Soutine's reverberating, restless surfaces versus Bacon's morphing contours and shapes. Each artist was fairly equally represented, but it was Soutine who prevailed here. While the artists' portraits, still lifes, and landscapes were often hung side by side for comparison—in some instances provocatively—the paintings were more satisfying when viewed individually or in the context of an artist's own production and progressions.

The portraits and still lifes were the most psychologically compelling, as in Soutine's *Old Actress* (ca. 1922), where the quick, squiggled smear of red paint for the woman's mouth is pitch-perfect and poignant. Then there were Bacon's elegant grotesqueries—part fleshy figures, part dismembered still lifes—such as *Triptych: Three Studies of Henrietta Moraes* (1966), *Lying Figure* (1969), and *Study from the Human Body—Figure in Movement* (1982). And there were Soutine's bloodied *Flayed Beef* (1925), via



Chaim Soutine, *Old Actress*, ca. 1922, 36 1/4" x 25 1/2". Helly Nahmad.

Rembrandt, and his *Still Life with Ray Fish* (ca. 1924), via Chardin. Both artists' work presented irrefutable evidence that painting can still astonish. —Lilly Wei