

Visions of Life, Built From Bits and Pieces

By ROBERTA SMITH

Romare Bearden (1911-88) spent more than 30 years striving to be a great artist, and in the early 1960s, when he took up collage in earnest, he became one. A small exhibition at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, organized to celebrate the centennial of Bearden's birth, delivers this message with unusual clarity. It contains only 21 collages, all superb, in an intimate context that facilitates savoring their every formal twist and narrative turn, not to mention the ingenious mixing of mediums that takes them far beyond collage.

The works at Rosenfeld were made from 1964 to 1983. Some are not much larger than sheets of typing paper; others are more than four feet on a side. Their suavely discordant compositions involve both black-and-white and color photographs and occasional bits of printed fabric; almost all depict some scene of black life, past or present or imagined.



Illusionists at 4 PM, 1967, mixed media collage on board, 30" x 40", signed

Their varied subjects include jazz musicians bent over their instruments; rural families cooking or eating dinner; and a dressmaker who, with the nude figure of her client changing clothes, offers a wry variation on the artist-with-model theme. There is also a radiant storybooklike rendition of the fall of Troy, with black-skinned soldiers. And amid the prevailing, exquisitely nuanced complexity there are moments of utter and serene simplicity, like "La Femme de Martinique," on her way to market, all but filling a narrow strip of masonite with her regal Egyptian stance.

The colors in these works are sometimes bright and flat in the manner of Matisse's papier-collés, which were a clear influence. Sometimes they have been sanded away, distressed in ways that conjure both the urban poverty Bearden frequently depicted and the fading Italian frescoes he so loved. And sometimes, as in a worn and rosy work titled "The Tenement World" (1969), crumbling architecture, frescoes and Matisse all come to mind.

As historical shows go, this one feels unusually of-the-moment. For one thing the improvisational cross-fertilizing of art mediums that Bearden helped pioneer via collage is more and more the norm; for another, paper has probably never been more popular as an art material, for work in both two and three dimensions. Most obviously the scaled-up version of collage that he favored and his propensity for pieced-together, abstraction-infused figures have many echoes in the work of contemporary artists, from Mark Bradford to Anya Kielar to Matthew Monahan.

Bearden took up collage sometime in the late 1950s, after a relatively fallow period during which what little painting he made was mostly abstract. A trip to France and Italy with his wife in 1961, to see many of the museums and churches he had visited 10 years before while studying painting on the G.I. Bill of Rights, may have reconnected him to figuration.

In 1963 he helped organize Spiral, a group of African-American artists interested in finding new ways to portray black life in America. Bearden suggested that the group collaborate on collage, an implicitly collaborative medium. This didn't happen, but evidently he found his métier in the process of demonstrating the possibilities.

By then Bearden was in his early 50s, a late bloomer by most standards. But as the Rosenfeld show demonstrates, his collages have a pictorial sophistication, cultural erudition and emotional wisdom that it is hard to imagine in a younger artist. They are full-flavored distillations of the culturally rich, occasionally privileged life Bearden had led up that point:

his experience of black life growing up in the South and then in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance; his immersion in jazz and African sculpture; his study at the Art Students League with George Grosz; his stint as a political cartoonist with a Baltimore newspaper (during which he did extensive research on the history of cartooning); his friendships with artists white and black, including Stuart Davis, Jacob Lawrence, Norman Lewis, and William H. Johnson; his familiarity with the evolution of the New York School painting and its Cubist roots; and his experience, stretching over more than 30 years, of observing urban life up close while supporting himself as a social worker in New York City.

Bearden's canvases from the 1940s — which deftly juggle aspects of Social Realism, Cubism, folk art and Renaissance painting — are less-original rehearsals for the collages. What was lacking was the visual and social specificity provided by images cut from magazines and newspapers (and possibly copied, using a photostat machine, from art history books) and the physical specificity of his particular approach to collage.

Collage enabled Bearden, a consummate synthetic artist, to present his synthesis in a raw state, with its ingredients distinct. The notion of disparate elements forming a whole without dissolving is of course a wonderful metaphor for America at its best. It also created the risk of sentimentality, which Bearden routinely avoided.

This exhibition traces his rapid expansion of the medium. The profuse closely knit motifs of "King and Queen of Diamonds" are all cut from magazines and newspapers, as are those in the relatively spare "Illusionists at 4 PM," of 1967. The title and open architectural space of this work seem to pay homage to Giacometti; the figures combine Egyptian postures with African-mask faces and hands that are both Caucasian and black. The suggested source material makes its own point about race and class: newsweeklies, National Geographic, lily-white magazine ads.

But by the late 1960s Bearden was subjecting collage to various mechanical and hands-on manipulations. These included rephotographing (via photostat) and enlarging his own collages for further use, a practice pursued by artists from the outsider Henry Darger (whose work had not yet been rediscovered at the time) to budding appropriationists like Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger, starting in the mid '70s. "Watching the Good Trains Go By," from around 1969, with its group of colorfully clothed figures, is actually a collage on top of an earlier rephotographed collage. If you look closely, images that appear to be pieced together lack the telltale seams.

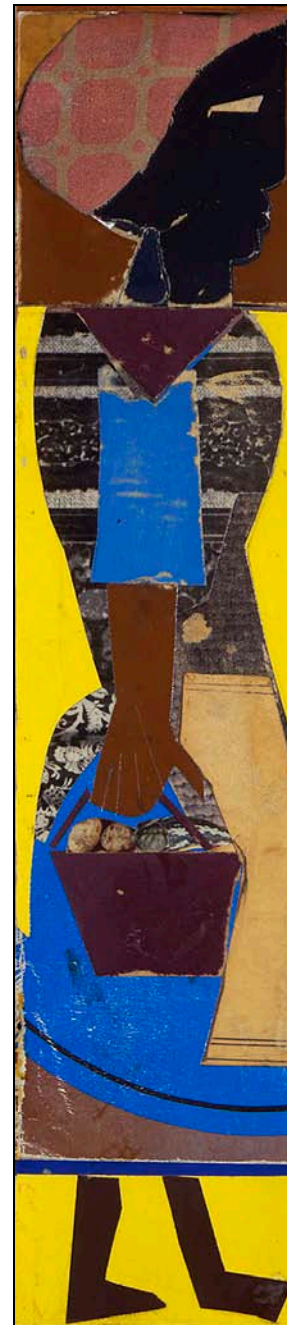
Parts of the jangled group of horn players depicted in the much larger "Savoy" of 1975 are similarly seamless. Sharp-edged collage elements — especially eyes — have been added, jolting the softer faces enlarged from earlier collages out of their reverie. Various almost wizardly manual processes contribute: the photostats' gray tones appear to have been splashed away and then spray-painted with color. The image exudes a reddish irradiated haze, backed by hints of yellow and orange, that in and of itself suggests a brassy sound.

In other works Bearden achieved irresistible effects simply by scratching the surfaces of the collages, most memorably perhaps in the rarely exhibited "Untitled (The Family)," from around 1969. Here a series of cascading white incisions define the folds of a black suit worn by a man who stands with his wife, a child in his arms, as if before an itinerant photographer.

Working and reworking his motifs and materials in ways at once extravagant and economic, Bearden synthesized not only his own visual and lived experience but also great chunks of 20th-century art and the cultures that fed it. His collages point to our present, and beyond, in ways that still, 23 years after his death, we barely know.

"Romare Bearden Collage: A Centennial Celebration" is on view through May 21 at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, Manhattan, (212) 247-0082.

http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/02/arts/design/romare-bearden-at-michael-rosenfeld-gallery-review.html?_r=1&scp=4&sq=Romare%20Bearden&st=cse



La Femme de Martinique, 1970, mixed media collage on Masonite, 16" x 3 1/2", signed and dated

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