

Painting the Social Landscape

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January 31, 2008

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Beauford Delaney (1901-1979), *The Time of Your Life*, 1945, oil on board, 33 3/4" x 53 1/2", signed

Alma Thomas (1891–1978) was committed to creating art that transcended social issues, and she believed that, by 1970, African-Americans had already made the necessary political assertions to do so. "Now it's time that they get down to work and produce art they can really be proud of," she stated. The "African American Art: 200 Years" exhibition at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery is a tribute to the number of African-American artists who have done just that over the span of 200 years.

On view are 41 works, from between 1810 and 2000. Among the artists featured are Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden, John Biggers, Aaron Douglas, Elizabeth Catlett, Benny Andrews, Hughie Lee-Smith, Beauford Delaney, Archibald Motley Jr., Horace Pippin, Augusta Savage, Thomas, and others.

The main gallery contains more modern, predominantly abstract painting and sculpture. Earlier pieces, clustered in a smaller room, represent the unselfconscious art that Romare Bearden, writing in 1934, dismissed as "poor echoes of the work of white artists."

His was an unfair dismissal that placed racial polemics ahead of aesthetic worth. This entire exhibition is a vital one, rich in association and filled with diverse pleasures. Yet this understated historic section is, in its way, the most exciting and instructive. It validates black scholar Kenny J. Williams's assertion that "there is no such thing as the black experience."

Joshua Johnson's "Girl Wearing a Bonnet" (1810) earns its place in the history of American folk art alongside portraits by Ammi Phillips, one of the most important native portraitists in 19th-century America. Biographical information about Johnson is sparse and contradictory. The earliest known professional painter of African heritage, he was most likely a half-white indentured servant when he first arrived from the West Indies.

There is no record of his training, though formal affinities between his portraits and those of Charles Willson Peale's family suggest acquaintance. This "Free Householder of Colour," as he was listed in a Baltimore directory, made his living painting wealthy plantation owners and their families.

Edmonia Lewis (1843–1909), a leading half-black, half-Chippewa sculptor, grew up among the Chippewa near Niagara Falls. After attending Oberlin College, she studied with sculptor Edmund Brackett in Boston at the behest of William Lloyd Garrison. Her early sculptures earned her enough to move to Rome, where she presided over a busy studio and acquired aristocratic patrons in Italy and England.

Her marble "The Old Arrow Maker and His Daughter" (1872), carved in her characteristic Neoclassical style, is indebted to Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha," as it celebrates the familial piety of Longfellow's pastoral elegy for the "Noble Savage." Tastes changed and Lewis died in obscurity, probably in Rome. Little of her work survived.

Against the wishes of his father, an African Methodist Episcopal bishop, Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859–1937) chose painting over the ministry. He studied with Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy but, fearing the weight of racism, left for the Académie Julien in Paris, where he prospered. He was inducted into the French Legion of Honor and later became the first African-American member of New York's National Academy of Design.

If he suffers neglect today, it is likely due less to prejudice than to the religious themes that typify his work. His "Sodom and Gomorrah" (c. 1920–24) is a stirring testament to his brushwork and sumptuous coloristic agility. Keeping anecdote to a minimum, the work depicts Lot's wife as a simple white form, brilliant against a brooding, agitated sky of variegated blues scumbled and glazed to perfection. Tanner's near-contemporaneity with Monet is visible in the delicate tonal range and shifting hues of his "Birthplace of Joan of Arc" (1918), a plein air gem.

Hale Woodruff (1900–80) studied with Tanner in Paris. His shimmering watercolor, "Les Bords de l'Eure, Chartres" (1928), is a poignant illustration of what was surrendered in his eventual move from realism to abstraction. His study for "Celestial Gate" (c. 1967), cousin to Adolph Gottlieb's pictograms, hangs with the modern work in anticipation of the Swann auction, which will include the finished painting.

Bob Thompson's expressive, semi-abstract figuration hangs in the side offices. A small, characteristic riff on a classical theme is in one; a large 1963 Nativity scene is in the other. Both leave you respectful of how much originality a brief life could accomplish. In 1966, he died suddenly in Rome at the age of 28.

"Carnivale del Sol" (1962) shows Norman Lewis (1909–79) at his most lyrical. Fluid calligraphic markings dance across a yellow field that migrates upward from a saturated yellow toward a cool, mottled white.

Lewis acted as an organizer for the Artists Union that —



John Biggers (1924–2001), *Family Circle*, 1997, acrylic on canvas, 60" x 35 3/4", signed

together with teamsters, autoworkers, longshoremen, and entertainers — was part of the broad social movement of the 1930s called the Popular Front. Despite his political engagement, he insisted that "the goal of the artist must be aesthetic development."

As for Thomas, she came late to abstraction. Like Lewis, she adopted a style of accumulated gestures that read as a kind of handwriting. "Early Cherry Blossoms" (1973) is an airy, kinetic movement of white marks that flutter in formation across an uninflected field of cool pink-violet. Thomas was the first African-American woman to be granted, in 1972, a solo exhibition at the Whitney.

Norman Cousins (1916–1992) left for Paris on the GI Bill and stayed. His aerodynamic sculpture, "Aviatrix" (1969), is an ascending series of bronze plates and steel rods welded to suggest the wings of a biplane. The piece widens into an abstract evocation of a bird taking flight. It is an exhilarating metaphor for the exhibition itself.

Until March 8 (24 W. 57th St., 212-247-0082.