



Currently Hanging



MARIO NAVES

Duke Ellington's Legacy Inspires Painters' Moody Blues

By all rights, I should be getting on my high horse to excoriate *Mood Indigo: The Legacy of Duke Ellington*, an exhibition at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. Centered on the white baby-grand piano upon which Ellington composed many of his signature songs (the gallery breathlessly informs us that it's valued at a million bucks), the exhibition employs works of art as thematic auxiliaries and ornamental addendum. You'd almost think the folks at Rosenfeld were taking a cue from the Brooklyn Museum—placing pic-

tures by Burgoyne Diller, Hans Hofmann, Norman Lewis, Romare Bearden, William H. Johnson, Lee Krasner and Stuart Davis on walls painted with a "follow-the-bouncing-ball" motif, trivializing them for the sake of a condescending, feel-good populism.

Then again, the pictures are top-notch—the Bearden is *great*—and their relationship to jazz (or the blues) is far from arbitrary. Just ask Stuart Davis, who felt that "jazz was the only thing that corresponded to an authentic art in America." When a pictorial link to the music doesn't exist as an image—as it does in the Bearden, Johnson's funny picture of jitterbugs and Jan Matulka's *Jazz Band* (circa 1925)—form does the trick. Hofmann and Diller provide the punch, Lewis the passion and Krasner the tight-knit orchestration.

Why *First Rhomboid Column*

When a pictorial link to the music doesn't exist as an image, form does the trick.

(1976), a sculpture by the underrated American painter Ilya Bolotowsky, merits inclusion is a question that's left unanswered; that goes double for Norman Bluhm's splashy Ab-Ex canvas. Making up for the lapse is Gjon Mili, whose photographs of Ellington pro-



Romare Bearden's *Of the Blues: Kansas City* (1974).

vide documentary evidence and aesthetic reward—their burnished tonality and stylized artifice capture Ellington's innate elegance. Then there's the music that filters through the gallery; at this point, critical dudgeon succumbs to pleasure. *Mood Indigo* is a light treat—let's just hope Rosenfeld doesn't make a habit of it.

Mood Indigo: The Legacy of Duke Ellington is at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 West 57th Street, until July 30.

COURTESY OF MICHAEL ROSENFELD GALLERY, NEW YORK