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Body Language; In 'The Figure Interpreted,' Artists Place Messages in the Medium

by Ferdinand Protzman, February 12, 1998

"Black Art" is a provocative - and uniformly excellent - group exhibition of 31 artists curated by artist Manon Cleary at Rockville Arts Place. Cleary, an art professor at the University of the District of Columbia for 24 years, confronts the loaded connotations of "black" when applied to art by giving us four distinct takes on the idea.

There are works by black artists - among them Sam Gilliam, Lou Stovall, Sylvia Snowden, Keith Morrison and Franklin White. But these are not paintings about race or ethnic background. For the most part they are represented by strong, often abstract, celebrations of color, light and shadow - what's often derisively termed "European" painting by the politically correct.

There are also paintings, photographs, video and sculpture done predominantly in black, contributed by artists including Gay Glading, George Lorio, Doug Brown, Mindy Weisel, Chris Gardner and Jane Margaret Dow. The third "black art" group contains depictions of black men and women by white artists - Robyn Johnson-Ross, Fred Folsom, Stuart Gosswein, Sueraya Shaheen, Paul Feinberg.

Finally, there is "black humor." Bebe Williams, Michael Clark, Lisa Brotman and Sidney Lawrence are among those who offer darkly humorous approaches to racial issues, stereotypes of women, and antebellum history.

To thwart any tendency to ghettoize the work of black artists, Cleary has hung the show with all of these "black" arts intermingled, so that the art - not the maker's race - is the focus. Her careful "disorganization" of the show breaks down perceptual barriers that might segregate and demean.

There are many high points. Glading's "Black Lines" is a vertical white canvas striped by black strokes that fuzz at the edges like kitten fur; it has the ethereal quality of Japanese ink painting. Folsom's "Shadows and Green Glass" is a surreal slice of life: Black and white men cluster around a kitchen table littered with beer bottles, accompanied by a numb-looking nude woman. The violent glee on the men's faces is bathed in a livid light emanating from the open refrigerator. What bizarre interaction is taking place is unknown - but Folsom depicts physical and psychological squalor masterfully.

White's abstract still life "Fabiola" consists of built-up strokes of paint so thick and lush you could break them off and eat them. The individual acrylic brush strokes are three-dimensional, yet fit together like a puzzle - occupying a place between painting and sculpture.

Lawrence's "Rosemount Antebellum," like White's painting, is neither strictly sculpture nor painting - but is great fun. The artist has constructed a large, cartoonish plantation facade, complete with pillars and three Southern belles. Cotton balls adorn the lower edge, fans decorate the corners, and an outsize "hospitality pineapple" crowns the structure. Only by looking close and low do we see the figure of the black field hand, eyes and muscles bulging, supporting this Southern fantasy.

Doug Brown's haunting photographic close-up of a fire-blackened wall and mantel records the ghostly white shapes and outlines of lost objects. Details like the thick soot settled into patterns of wall plaster give specificity to the image. Yet the picture's abstract elegance transcends the tragedy of fire that produced the scene.

Feinberg's "Hunger in Washington" series documents human beings in reduced circumstances who retain a resigned dignity.

The serigraph by Gilliam, "Chehaw 17/40," is a dark trompe l'oeil. The complicated print seems to be a collage, with circles and triangles subtly patterning its surface. "Flowers" of aqua and rose blossom through the rich veil of black, giving the piece a lyrical quality.

The "12 Tondos" of Carol Brown are small, round clay-and-graphite relief sculptures that seem like petri dishes populated by odd organisms. And Gardner's complicated abstract bronze, "Last Resort," is small, but imbued with personality.

Finally, there's "Black Snapper," by J. Byron Durham and Jim Sottile Jr. This impressionistic video traces the odyssey of a "fish vagrant," from the time he breaks into a car to steal a fishing pole, through his idyll on the banks of the Potomac - yielding the black snapper of the title - to his wanderings through Dupont Circle, flaunting the fish but ignored by passersby. Someone named Sedge plays the vagrant with an exuberant swagger. It's an artful, ironic candid-camera examination of Man, Fish and the City.