

The many shades of diversity

By Nancy Stapen
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

February is Black History Month, and like clockwork it signals a proliferation of shows by African-American artists. Each year during that one month Boston's art world is transformed from its business-as-usual display of largely white artists into a showcase for works by artists of color.

Although black artists appreciate the opportunity to show their works, many resent a system that shunts them into a monthly slot. Many also dislike being classified on racial, as opposed to artistic, grounds. Although some black artists address issues related to African-American culture, many do not. Black artists - even those whose images and techniques allude to black culture - repeatedly express the desire to be judged as artists first.

Given this history, an unplanned but no less welcome phenomenon is occurring this month in Boston. Three galleries are presenting first-rate shows by African-American artists, and the diversity of their offerings supports the idea that art is not racially determined - that art by black artists comes in many colors.

Robert Colescott rose to prominence in the early to
GALLERIES, Page 101

Shows feature the many shades of diversity

■ GALLERIES

Continued from Page 97
mid-'80s. Although Colescott, 65, has been exhibiting since the early '50s, his imagery - figurative, painterly and topical - only gained major acceptance on the wave of neo-expressionism, which lent art-world credibility to figurative painting after years of abstract dominion.

Colescott created a series of paintings in the late '70s and early '80s that attracted considerable attention. In them he inserted black characters into all-white icons of Western art history - a black George Washington crossing the Delaware, a black female nude substituted in Manet's famous picnic scene "Dejeuner sur l'herbe," a black Aunt Jemima head on the body of a de Kooningesque nude.

Cartoon-like, brilliantly colored and replete with political-cultural resonance, Colescott's imagery packs such a wallop that it's easy to overlook its formal strengths and sophisticated art historical references. His figures occupy a fractured, cubist space, and their heroic proportions recall the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera. The rich painterliness as well as the distorted caricature of late Philip Guston is very much in evidence, as is the rowdy urban satire of Red Grooms.

This new work is an increasingly personal exploration of the black male's position in society. Colescott captures the contradictions of the current moment, when substantial numbers of blacks have assimilated into the middle class, only to be torn between their adopted milieu and their cultural origins.

"Haircut," a parody of the Samson and Delilah legend, focuses on a suave, middle-class male with long wavy hair. On the painting's lower right the rungs of a staircase mark



Bryan McFarlane's "Towards Tr..."

the American black's ascension to "slave, worker, boss, capitalist." Personifications of these roles ring the central figure's (the capitalist's) head. To the left a black woman with a white arm wields scissors, while to the right a white, blond seminude suggestively clutches a phallic sword. The painting suggests emancipation at the hands of white males; the hero's red power tie dissolves into a bloody scarlet pool.

Colescott's portrayal of women as grossly sexualized stereotypes lends a jarring note to these otherwise astute, funny and highly subjective observations.

Bryan McFarlane also addresses the meeting of diverse cultures. In his work, while Colescott's groups are caught in an uneasy mix of black and white male and female, McFarlane e-



explores the integration of supposedly irreconcilable forces.

McFarlane, 34, was born in Jamaica and has lived in the United States since 1980. The diverse elements within his work, which has been exhibited in the Boston area since the early '80s, reflect the multicultural Jamaican society, a blend of Indian, Chinese and African peoples. His latest series of paintings and works on paper is based on McFarlane's experience on a six-month Ford Foundation Fellowship in Bahia, Brazil. There McFarlane became absorbed in the Condombale region, a derivative of Yoruba, West African principles and Portuguese Catholicism. Remarkably, these two belief systems were able to synthe-

RECENT WORK
Robert Colescott
Howard Yezerski Gallery
186 South St., Boston
Through Nov. 7

VISIONS AND INSPIRATIONS FROM BAHIA (BRAZIL)
Bryan McFarlane
Wendell Street Gallery
17 Wendell St., Cambridge
Oct. 20 through Nov. 17

NEW WORKS
Ellen Banks
Akin Gallery
207 South St., Boston
Through Oct. 27

size, primarily because they share similar saints and deities.

Yoruba religion differed in one key respect. Instead of Catholicism's hierarchy of priests, Yoruba has a sisterhood of priestesses. Known as the Orixas, or goddess mediators, they reflect the Yoruban view of women as powerful rulers of nature and the source of procreation.

The Orixas's mystic ceremonies form the iconography of these paintings and works on paper. In dark, cavernous spaces illuminated by arched windows, or in vast stretches of ocean, groups of female figures huddle in a mass embrace. The water and light suggest purification and divine illumination, while the embracing figures allude to acceptance and inclusion.

Known as healers, the Orixas organized to raise money to buy black male slaves from the Portuguese. This male-female bonding is paralleled by the drawing together of Africans, Portuguese and Indians on common religious-humanitarian grounds. Similarly, McFarlane's representation of these blended cultures

corresponds with his introduction of Western art historical allusions into a Third World tale - dramatic Rembrandtesque and lively, Matissonian colors animate this vision.

Ellen Banks has exhibited in the Boston area since the early '70s. Banks fractures the cliché that all art by black artists is racially oriented: Her work has always involved an abstract interpretation of music, a universal language.

Banks has quietly and consistently pursued an idea through multiple permutations. Over many years she has developed a visual equivalent for passages of music, a translation from note to canvas. Whether inspired by Bach, Beethoven or Scott Joplin, Banks' imagery has been structured on a grid, with small squares and triangles forming cool, Mondrianesque geometric patterns.

The current work retains that gridlike structure but invests it with a novel warmth and sensuality. Specific works of music have also become less important; the series is collectively titled "Improvisation BR" and is loosely based on the music of Brahms. The work is concomi-

tantly freer and less mechanical.

Three years ago Banks working with handmade paper, she has glued these crusty paper large-scale canvases, adding natural quality hitherto absent, many as 30 layers of thinned, acrylic paint is stained into the sorptive surface. The resulting paintings are extremely beautiful with low-relief crevices and passages accented by subtle passages of bronze, gold and silver paint.

The sensuousness of these works suggests that the years invested in disciplined pursuit eventually unforeseen riches. This work a breakthrough for Banks, who she complements the purely mathematical and rational with the sensual and intuitive.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITY

Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary: Volunteers are needed to work in patient-care areas as well as in front reception duties, social and administrative projects. Ruth Doyle, 573-3340.

COPLEY PLACE 100 NORTH ST. AVE. 305-1200 WELCOME HOME BOB CARMICHAEL (P. 11) * 11:00, 1:15, 3:30, 5:45, 7:45, 10:00	LOEWS BARGAIN MATINEE TODAY FIRST SHOW ONLY AT STARRER FEATURES FREE PARKING AT COPLEY PLACE	CHERI JULY 27 OPP. SHERATON BOSTON MEMPHIS BELLE * 1:10, 2:20, 3:30, 7:40, 9:50
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