

Galleries

Caribbean Color At the Parish

By Michael Weizenbach
Special to The Washington Post

It's all too seldom one gets the chance in Washington to see the work of Jamaican or other Caribbean artists in the intimate setting of a private gallery. It's therefore a treat to get acquainted with the works of Cecil Cooper, Kofi Kayiga and Bryan McFarlane at the Parish Gallery this month.

Among them, these three artists represent a broad spectrum of approaches to imagemaking, yet all exhibit a kind of sun-drenched exuberance, in color, subject and stylistic approach, that one might associate with the music of their part of the world.

Cooper offers small ink-and-watercolor-wash drawings of faces and figures of a highly sculptural nature. Each is elegantly simplified into rounded masses, carefully shaded and highlighted to appear almost three-dimensional. His palette is mostly blue, violet and black, but the images are vibrant nonetheless. His portraits and nude figures alike exude a voluptuousness that's very attractive, reminiscent of Picasso's later ink-and-wash drawings.

Kayiga is evidently the most dedicated abstractionist of the bunch, and his pictures most resemble African art with their echoes of pottery and textile designs. These also are mostly quite small: little windows, it seems, that might be stained glass. Rendered in brilliant red, blue and yellow oil crayon and mixed media, they have an intimate power derived from a careful balancing of whimsical scrawls, geometric forms and the odd figurative reference or hint at landscape elements.

In all, this artist's works are the most intriguing, most densely layered of those on display.

McFarlane, who in terms of the number of works exhibited is underrepresented, strikes a stylistic balance about midway between the two. His large, colorful oil on canvas "Bahajia Rite," a highly gestural and evocative picture, while plainly figural, is very similar to Kayiga's little studies. It, too, has a very African feel to it and many bold abstract elements expressed in brightly colored, vigorous brush strokes. It's full of movement and tension.

His lovely mixed-media drawing "Spiritual Union," on the other hand, more closely resembles Cooper's sculptural nudes. This powerful, moody image depicts a huddle of nude figures, male and female, against a background of dark grays and blacks. Like a small school of silvery minnows hovering over the abyssal blackness of a deep sea, this graceful clutch of limbs and heads looks utterly lost in a corner of the composition. It's a picture that lingers in the memory.

In all, this small exhibit, which includes some ceramic works by the artists, is a nice sampler—one hopes—of what's to come.

Toby Mason and Alfredo Ratinoff

The Strathmore Hall Arts Center this month is featuring "The Cosmos Reflected," silvered glassworks by Toby Mason, and "Centuries," ceramic and stained-glass pieces by Alfredo Ratinoff.

Of the two rather gift-shoppy collections, Ratinoff's is certainly the less offensive, as this decorative craftsman is justified in harboring some pretensions to fine art. The same cannot be said of Mason, although he also is obviously



Detail from Bryan McFarlane's mixed-media drawing "Spiritual Union," a moody image that lingers in the mind.

Where does one draw the line between what ought in good conscience be billed and exhibited as fine art and what is patently the sort of thing that integrity would dictate be for sale at a boardwalk stall? Admittedly, in these post-post-modern days of the ascension of the likes of junk peddler Jeff Koons, it can be hard to distinguish the two. But visitors to this show should have no problems.

Ratinoff, at least, has some themes in mind, and when he sticks to the ceramics and lithos he is best at, the results are occasionally quite striking. His lithograph "Last Moments in Greece" is a lovely piece, really, and certain ceramic compositions—both wall constructions and traditional table-top pieces—achieve a kind of quiet dignity that belies the disappointing tackiness of his stained-glass things. The wall "murals" "The Early Condos" and "Have You Ever Seen the Paradise Doors?" for example, make good economical use of suggestive, crudely fashioned clay forms, variously glazed or decorated with colored glass. And some of his conventional tableware is very good, original and designed with a Mediterranean flair.

But what can we say of Mason's shiny, garishly colored and monotonous lead-lined mirrors? Frankly, the highfalutin title of his collection notwithstanding, you see one, you see 'em all.

Mason's designs, with painfully few—and by dint of that, notable—exceptions, might have been concocted with one of those "Biro-gyro" pen sets so popular back in the '60s. Consisting of loops of colored glass mounted in gaudy mirrored frames and endowed with titles having nothing detectable to do with their composition—such as "The Gift of Atmosphere" or "Phoenix Rising"—these articles would look a bit much even in a barroom.

Strathmore Hall has sponsored and mounted some exceptionally compelling, insightful and rewarding shows. And the greater Washington-Baltimore area is positively bursting with compelling, insightful and rewarding artists who are serious about making fine art, and know the difference between serving the market and serving the Muse. More's the pity they couldn't have come up with two more of them.

Three Jamaican Artists, at the Parish Gallery, 1054 31st St. NW, through Sept. 12.

The Cosmos Reflected and Centuries, at Strathmore Hall

Backstage

At Scena, New Eye On Ireland

By Jeanne Cooper
Washington Post Staff Writer

There are two common views of Ireland, according to Scena Theatre's Robert McNamara: the "mental, jaundiced view" dating to the 1920s, and the modern perspective provided by U2's "Commitments" and "My Love" on the heels of U2's concert at RFK Stadium this weekend. McNamara plans to present the world's take on contemporary Ireland with six new plays at Mammoth.

The repertory, which opens Wednesday with Graham "The Death of Humpty Dumpty" should be an antidote to the Irish drama of Synge and Shaw. "You have the backward look, then what I call the forward look that Ireland is a member of the European Community, with its middle class, and it's overshadowed by another country," McNamara says. "These plays show a new Ireland, with a different view on old situations."

In "Humpty Dumpty," the production is sectarian strife in Ireland; Michael Russotto directs drama, which runs through Sept. 2. "It's a far play about what it means to be an Irishman in the English-language world," say McNamara. Characters include the famous Nazi propagandist "Lo Hawn" and Churchill's minister of formation.

McNamara, who is producing Irish shows as part of Scena Theatre's New European Plays, is directing with "Faith Healer" playwright Brian Friel. Friel's "Faith Healer" will run through Sept. 27 in repertory with the comic "I Do Not Like I Fell" by Bernard Farrell. Mammoth actor Michael makes his directorial debut with "Faith Healer," which deals with the