

Power of figure evoked to reveal truth

Four painters offer own take on African aesthetic

By Kay Kooninger
For The Dispatch

The large exhibition "Blues 'n the Ab-strike Truth" in the King Arts Complex was inspired by "an ever-evolving passion and commitment to the furthering and cultivation of the African aesthetic in the diaspora," curator Napoleon Henderson Jones said.

The exhibit features works by painters Carlos W. Byron, Milton Derr, Paul Goodnight and Bryan McFarlane.

That the improvisations of contemporary painting can be compared to those of music is reflected in the exhibition's title. To Jones, each artist is "an individual with his own voice and palette of visual notes for the expression of his unique melody."

The four artists, though they differ in medium and approach, are all nourished by the emotional power of the figure.

Byron paints in an academic style. His *Lucy*, executed in oil on paper, is a figure study of a young woman. Many areas of the figure are sketchy, establishing dramatic contrast with the face, which is realistically finished. This emphasis on the face creates a profound vulnerability; the viewer senses that "Lucy" is uncomfortably aware that she is being watched.

Malcolm X depicts only the head of the Black Muslim leader. Even so, Byron's superb technical abilities express the leader's power and intensity. *Laughing Man*, another portrait head although this time anonymous, presents both the physical depiction of the human head as well as the contagious power of laughter.

Goodnight also explores the



Victory Within by Paul Goodnight

portrait, in single figures and groups. In the mixed media *Nigomas*, a powerfully built woman is shown on bended knee. The green of her dress jarringly contrasts with the rich red background. Although realistically drawn, parts of the figure, including the woman's overlarge hands, are exaggerated

to produce a dislocation of scale. Overall, the composition produces a body and spirit that are poised and controlled, on the brink of movement.

Other works by Goodnight include a spent boxer, resting against the ropes in *Victory Within*, and a group of traditionally clothed women whose white dresses and blouses look like angel's wings, in *When Angels Whisper*.

Derr employs a wide variety of media, and often combines the figure with abstraction.

Homage to South Africa is one of the exhibit's most powerful paintings, a large triptych that combines contemporary oil painting with medieval-like layering of gold leaf. Two anonymous black figures stand in the center panel. In the right panel is a white figure, and in the left, a black figure emerges from what appear to be smoke and flame.

Derr poetically expresses the complexities and tragic history of the country, as well as the redeeming promise of present and future. He uses printmaking to craft different views of Martin Luther King Jr. In *The Dreamer*, the weary subject rests his head on his hand. *Postcard USA* is a large collage papered with small, artist-made stamps that include anonymous ink figures and designs from a \$20 bill as well as depictions of Louis Armstrong and King. The background is patriotically red and blue, but with splotches of black paint, a powerful reminder that while some black leaders and artists are elevated to the status of

icons, racism still is a reality and a challenge in the United States.

McFarlane also uses abstraction and the figure in his dreamlike paintings. His *Drawing From Brazilian Series*, while large in scale, preserves the intimacy of a smaller drawing. In it, remnants of human heads and legs are informally stacked. One hopes these are mannequins but wonders whether they could also be testaments to bloody violence or the outlines of a terrifying hallucination. Paint drips from these body parts, and gold paint has been used to abstractly sketch flame-like areas of color on the left side of the drawing.



Homage to South Africa by Milton Derr



By Carlos W. Byron: left, *Malcolm X*; right, *Lucy*

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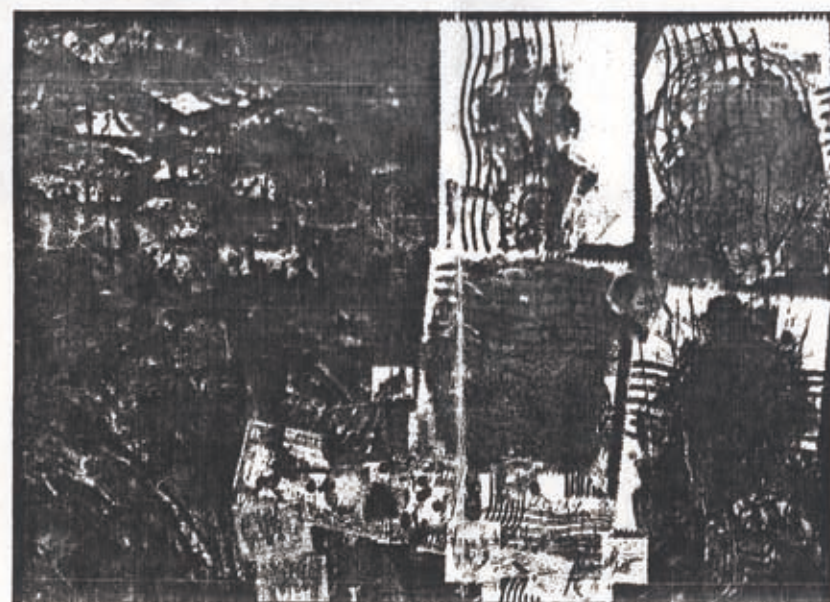
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Drawing From Brazilian Series by Bryan McFarlane

Murky, dark church interiors are found in two McFarlane paintings — *Exvotive Souls*, which is enlivened by stained glass, classical columns and floating flames recalling candles and spiritual presences, and *Interior for Yarsa*, with its tribal sculpture that could also be a gargoyle.

These four artists take widely divergent, individual paths to create complex, dramatic and energetic compositions. As Jones reiterates in both the exhibition title and his statement, and as viewers will discover, they do "Strike Truth."



Postcard USA by Milton Derr