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Art & Artists

By David Barrows

SYLVIA SNOWDEN

Sylvia Snowden says she likes people, she feels for people and so the subjects of her paintings are human beings. Her paintings, which now tend to be of acrylic, are either figurative or abstract depending on the intensity or complexity of feeling toward the person being described in subjective rather than physical terms. The volume of her work cyclically wavers between figurative and abstract expressively painted out of the tube, often with traces of alternative colors worked into broad, strong sweeps of a brush. Sometimes the density

writhing and serpentine upon it embodying her passion, her personal understanding, embedded both with the warmth or cool of color, and in a sea of energy.



of paint is as thick as the German abstract expressionist Hans Hoffman, but sometimes she plays with the alternative negative space leaving it barren with the shape

Proportion yields to import of content. "The hands and eyes are the most expressive parts of the body. Hands, therefore, are often far larger than feet, and can sweep forward in colors independent from the rest of the color scheme."

One of her most impressive series, based on her immediate neighborhood people in Shaw, *The M Street People*—yes, Sylvia Snowden is a fellow Intowner!—show such expressive re-proportionings as in the man who once having done his weekly celebration of wine, would go down her block giving away nickels and dimes to neighborhood children. His face stares toward you, his hands come forth, and he seems to reach out from a crouched position. "People are people are people no matter where they live. A poor person's pain is the same pain everyone is going to feel. Everybody is going to get peace of mind; happiness will come to everyone."

Her figures, as in this series, are nude, although highly abstracted and have no hair or clothing. Sylvia is after the essence of the natural figure. "You can always buy hair and clothes."

Even knowing they were being painted unconventionally, described subjectively instead of by superficial appearance, unrecognizable except to their recreator-painter, flesh of many writhing or flat-area colors applied by oil pastel and acrylic, accented with lines of brush and ink, the 40 people of M Street were so excited at being so imaginatively depicted that they lined the sidewalk the day her paintings were being shipped to a show. As each canvas with the name of the subject painted on the back was recognized by name, a comment like "That's me!" would be shouted enthusiastically. Not only was the *M Street People Series* a triumph for multi-media abstract expressionist figure painting but for neighborhood pride and imagination.

But, her latest project is a cruel challenge. Her teenage son, Malik, was recently gunned down. As she tells it, she and the police know who the murderer is, and the murderer knows that she knows. The evidence is there, but no witnesses are willing to come forth, and there were witnesses, she said, because her son did not go around the neighborhood alone. But they will not testify due to fear or due to relationship to the man who fired the gun. And, this person who Sylvia is convinced is responsible for taking her son's life is a frequent visitor to her neighborhood. She has written letters, even sought to confront the killer himself. What has happened to her own fear? It's not so much anger and rage as grief, and not so much grief as her love for her son. To her it is an affront to her

son's honor to let his killer skip around town and her neighborhood free, with so many people knowing full well the crime he is guilty of.

She says so many people ask her why she doesn't move away. No, this is her home and here is where she will honor her son by pouring her feelings toward him in this new series, a highly energized one that will take all her knowledge of experiential painting and the feelings of a strong woman. That is the honor for Malik, that only someone like Sylvia Snowden could deliver. It's a push that can reach any angel and goes beyond our crippled world of justice. We cannot fail to recognize that this is a very hard effort.

Sometimes the arts can reach us when the same old sad newspaper headlines leave us numb. Let's keep our eyes and ears open for when and where her project,

a series of paintings and artworks, *Malik, Farewell 'Till We Meet Again*, appears and give her all the encouragement we can.

Sylvia Snowden studied with such artists as Ben Shahn and Lois Mailou Jones, got her masters in fine arts from Howard University and certificates from Showhegan School of Painting and Sculpture as well as from Le Grand Chaumier in Paris, France. In turn, she has been resident artist in such places as the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia, California, and at the University of Sydney in Sydney, Australia, and has taught at the University of the District of Columbia and Cornell University, among others.

One of Sylvia Snowden's paintings, *Mamie Harrington*, an acrylic on masonite, is part of the recent gift from Thurlow Evans Tibbs, Jr. to the Corcoran Gallery of Art's permanent collection. □