

GALLERY

Black and Abstract

A Black History Month Exhibit and Others

BY MIKE GIULIANO

Group exhibitions of African American art usually have a collective story to tell, and they usually tell it through representational art in which the cultural narrative comes through loud and clear. There's nothing wrong with such shows, of course, but too often they have no place for black artists working in an abstract mode.

Now, however, artist Angela Franklin has curated a show at the School 33 Art Center, *Abstract in Black*, that lets artists Sylvia Snowden, Frank Bowling, Kevin Cole, Frank Smith, and Clayton Evans freely fling paint and mix media without feeling the need to make every brush stroke a social statement.

And do they ever let loose. Cole's mixed-media, constructed painting "When the Blues Walked In" is like a cousin to Frank Stella's recent baroquely swirling shaped canvases. Colors explode across the surface of Cole's paintings as if controlled chaos were the goal. The paintings themselves project into space just enough to give them a quasi-sculptural presence.

In mixed-media paintings such as "Beyond the Inner City Streets," Cole incorporates a busy color scheme with an underlying layer of news clippings about urban violence. Although Cole is not particularly distinctive as an abstractionist, this painting's fusion of abstraction and bluntly realistic subject matter suggests the sort of creative friction that may lead to a personal style. The energy of the paint application not only verges on the musical, but almost becomes a soundtrack for the human stories being told.

Something similar seems to be going on in the mixed-media paintings of Frank Smith. In "Counterpoint Improvisations," the sudden shifts in pattern and color are like a jazz piece that's really cooking. Indeed, the shaped canvas itself has a zigzagging shape that makes it seem to dance along the wall. What's also percolating here is the artist's message that African and African American art is not just representational. The abstract patterning in this painting is strongly evocative of designs found in African textiles. Smith heightens

this connection by supplementing his paint with string and other applied materials—even, in "Boarders," generous samples of his own hair.

Think, then, of a quilt of cultural references, not the least of them the patterning that Picasso and other modernists derived from African art. As an African American artist, Smith is pointing out that abstraction is as much his artistic inheritance as anybody else's.

Relying on paint and paint alone to make her abstract statements, Sylvia Snowden makes large paintings in which she lays the acrylic paint down so thickly that it piles up here and forms pools there as if she'd willed an abstract topography into existence. Her palette ranges from hot reds to pitch blacks, with the latter often predominating. It's the black of Clyfford Still and other mid-century abstractionists. Her work completely resists representational images, but does evoke postwar abstract art, New York division.

Although Bowling and Evans don't register as strongly, the bright curatorial premise makes this show one of the better exhibits mounted with Black History Month in mind.

Upstairs at School 33, photographer Tom Nyerges has an exhibit he calls "Camouflage Envelopes." If you're wondering why the artist has cut each photograph into several pieces and then reassembled it to resemble the back of an envelope, he contends in a statement that there are "similarities between the envelope and the photograph. The lens of the camera is used to look through to see and compose a picture. An envelope is opened up and one looks into it for information: a letter from someone we love, or a bill from Visa. In both cases one is using one's eyes to perceive information."

His theoretical connection between photography and envelopes seems arbitrary, though he at least scores some points for tactical novelty. The photos themselves are spare, often tightly cropped black-and-white views of old cars, trains, cafes, signs, and other at times overly familiar images of the well-worn American landscape.

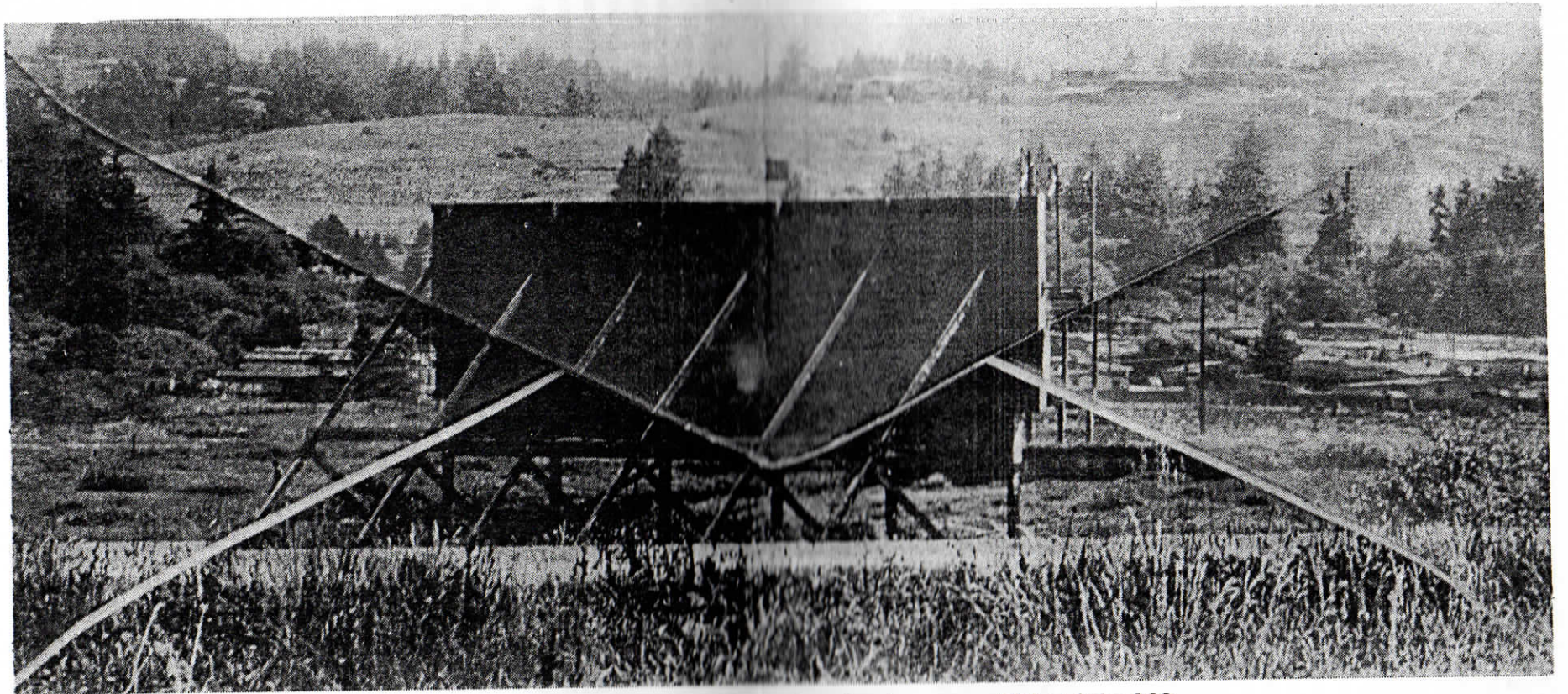
His "Self Portrait," a picture of his own shadow against the ground, so closely resembles a 1983 shot by Lee Friedlander that it becomes revealing in ways beyond those intended.

On the positive side, Nyerges knows how to astutely frame his on-the-road views. He also occasionally makes his photograph-as-envelope format seem appropriate and not just a gimmick. In "Wrapped Window," a paper-wrapped store window is thus enveloped and conceals its contents much as the photograph-as-collaged-envelope itself gives us some but not all of the visual in-

formation to be had. And by cutting into his photograph of "Venetian Blinds" in order to create the photo-envelope's back flap, Nyerges cuts diagonal lines into the horizontal lines presented by the blinds.

Also upstairs at School 33, an installation by Jennifer Lynn Stewart Watson, "Body Series: Vanity," doesn't amount to much more than hair dryers on the floor that are activated when you walk into the room. The dryers inflate attached clear plastic bags and then deflate with monotonous predictability. Her artist's statement says her installation refers to female body parts, media images, domestic environments, and more, but the thoughts in her mind haven't translated very cogently to the few objects before our eyes. It seems unintentionally fitting that her statement uses the word *elude* when she means to say *allude*.

Abstract in Black, photographs by Tom Nyerges, and an installation by Jennifer Lynn Stewart Watson remain at the School 33 Art Center, at 1427 Light St., through March 3. Call 396-4641.



"Billboard" by Tom Nyerges from *Camouflage Envelopes*, an exhibit at School 33