

Sylvia Snowden's Local Color

By Paul Richard
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Those attracted—or even those repelled—by the Expressionist revival ought to pay a visit to Sylvia Snowden's exhibition now at Brody's Gallery, 1706 21st St. NW. Her show crackles with intensity. And its timing is just right.

While "German Expressionist Prints From the [Washington] Collection of Ruth and Jacob Kainen" at the National Gallery of Art explores the movement's sources, and "Susan Rothenberg" at the Phillips Collection (just down the street from Brody's) offers an instructive glimpse of one of its Manhattan manifestations, Snowden's here presents Neo-Expressionist paintings with a Washingtonian spin.

What makes them feel so local is their unrestrained (and part-Parisian) color. Perhaps it is this city's light; or the influence of the great Impressionist collections of Duncan Phillips and Chester Dale, those lovers of French art; or the example of the Washington Color School. Whatever the reason, most painters here paint colorfully. Snowden does so, too.

Rothenberg likes black and white. But Snowden—a graduate of Howard, who received her masters of fine arts degree there 20 years ago, and who has also worked in Paris—prefers yellows shot with white, deep maroons and crimsons, orange and sky blues. Her figures twitch and writhe, and leap out at the viewer, but even as they go about their agitated business, they feel drenched with sun.

They are named for real people, for neighbors she encounters near her studio at Fifth and M streets NW, but the thickly painted figures are

not exactly portraits. All of them are bald, and most have screaming mouths, their hands are big and clawlike, and the twisting of their legs and arms suggests flesh that has been boned. Her images, at times, appall. But her colors do the opposite. They fill the room with light, they entertain the eye.

Her brush moves, as her figures dance, with musical abandon. But behind their restlessness one feels a sort of rigor—at least one feels its ghost. Some of Snowden's paintings, "Ethel Moyd" for instance, have the centrality of targets. Others, such as "Michelle Haberon," are based on strict diagonals. Snowden's edged and relatively flat passages of color, and her geometric compositional skeletons, also give her pictures a Washingtonian feel. Often as one views them one forgets that one is seeing images of people. Snowden's paintings are an outgrowth of—rather than a retreat from—wholly abstract art. They will be at Brody's through Oct. 5.



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"Michelle Haberon," by Sylvia Snowden.

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