

Art Snowden's Local Expressions

By Mary McCoy
Special to The Washington Post

There is nothing timid, pretty or polite about Sylvia Snowden's paintings. A no-holds-barred expressionist whose colors startle and compositions burn, Snowden is one of Washington's strongest and most original painters. She has exhibited internationally, but her current show at the National Museum of Women in the Arts marks the first serious recognition she has received here at home.

Dedicated to her parents, George and Jessie Snowden, the show's 10

huge canvases were completed during Snowden's year as a visiting professor of painting at Cornell University during 1991-92. With swirling masses of color and heavily impastoed acrylic paint, their style is consistent with her figurative works of the past several years, but the new works are totally abstract.

Snowden has alternated between figurative work and abstraction throughout her nearly 30-year career, but until recently, she was best known for her contorted portraits of her friends and neighbors in Shaw. These paintings were not intended as physical likenesses, but their gaping faces and huge, straining hands convey the turbulence of their subjects' lives and emotions. Then in 1989, Snowden entered a transitional phase when she put aside her figures to make paintings whose loose squares of color were inspired by her grandmother's handmade quilts. Snowden's work always has a subject and although abstract, the paintings in this exhibition are about her parents and specific events and places from their 55 years of marriage.

Abstract and passionately expres-

sive as Snowden's paintings are, they bear only a superficial resemblance to the work of the abstract expressionists of the 1950s. As an African American woman, her feelings about her work have more to do with family and community than with the heroic individualism of Pollock, de Kooning or Kline. Her work is and has always been about people.

The visual differences between her work and classic abstract expressionism are subtle but unmistakable. Like Pollock's drip paintings, Snowden's work is intensely physical. With her canvas spread on the floor, she splashes on thick clumps of color using two-foot-wide hardware store brushes, scoops out troughs with her fingers, then scrapes crooked swaths through the paint. Her colors are unfailingly fresh and vigorous, and the multitude of details created by layers of frenetic activity tease at the eye.

Yet there is something about her works that is more ragged and searching than Pollock's or his contemporaries. These paintings just won't let you rest. They are filled with jerky, tortuous movement as seemingly molten orange-reds crowd up against luminous blues and angry knots of purple and black writhe underneath. Snowden never indulges her canvases in uplifting harmonies of color and form. The raw edges of her work are as plentiful as the raw edges in real life.

Born in Raleigh, N.C., Snowden is a longtime resident of Washington. She earned her BA and MFA from Howard University in what she still considers the region's most well-rounded and demanding art program. The discipline she learned there persists in the structure underlying her tumultuous paintings.

Snowden bases her compositions on geometric shapes. There's a rectangle behind the sweeps of flame red in "Jessie," and a circle edged with a straight line lends unity to "No. 13." Taking color theory to the extreme, Snowden's hues, brilliant in the foreground, grow abruptly cooler and darker as they recede. In the deep background space, they fade away to sooty stains.

There's no need to be familiar with the stories behind these paintings. They stand on their own as powerful works of art. But a little background adds to the richness of the experience.

There's "Baton Rouge/New Orleans," with its claustrophobic, deep blue gateway, which Snowden painted in remembrance of a terrifying race to find a hospital that would admit black patients when her father was danger-

ously ill. And "Southern" grew from her memories of her first taste of class prejudice within the community at Baton Rouge's Southern University, where her mother served as chairman of the English department.

Although the intensity of her work has always derived from her experiences with racial, gender and class discrimination, these paintings don't fit into the wave of social commentary currently fashionable in the art world. They have no specific message. Snowden prefers that viewers see them from their own perspectives.

"Marriage" invites the most speculation of any of these paintings. A two-part work, half of it hangs on the wall in the normal fashion, while the

other half, peeled up from its backing, lies on the floor beneath. This unusual treatment makes the horizontal painting look uneasy and vulnerable, inspiring all kinds of conubial interpretations. It also suggests that the emotions conveyed in these works exist in real space as well as in the painted environment.

The two halves are near mirror images, each with a field of white edged on one side with clusters of color. The operative word is "neat," as Snowden sees the work as implying the give and take between husband and wife, and the convergence of their thinking over a period of years. While other marriages, including her own, have dissolved, Snowden's parents'

marriage remains the most stable part of her life.

This show kicks off the museum's new educational outreach program, "Artist + Community," which features exhibitions by area artists whose work addresses the concerns of the community. As part of the program, Snowden will serve as a visiting artist in local schools and give painting workshops for rehabilitation programs. In her essay accompanying the show, curator Angela Adams wrote that this series is intended "to reconnect contemporary art with real people." Given the real people and places that inspired her paintings, Snowden is a natural first choice. The show will continue through Jan. 31.



Sylvia Snowden's visceral expressionism: "1937," acrylic on canvas, at the National Museum of Women.

The Washington Post

Style

5 Art: Painter Sylvia Snowden's visceral expressionism