

On Exhibit

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Singularly Like Snowden

SYLVIA SNOWDEN is not one of those contemporary artists whose paintings look, well, *contemporary*. You know, vaguely like those of whosit and whatsisname. A person who comes upon a Snowden painting—right now you can come upon 10 brand-new ones at the National Museum of Women in the Arts—will say, “That is a Sylvia Snowden painting or I will eat a rosebush right down to the ground.”

This is partly because Snowden paints with passion and in passionate colors and paints largely and lays it on thick; nearly an inch thick in some places on her 60-square-foot canvases. But there are plenty of me-too abstract expressionists out there hurling buckets of acrylics at acres of canvas.

What makes Snowden’s work so distinctive is the absolute rightness of nearly every swirl and dash and drip and blot. You don’t have to like modern art to like a Snowden painting. You don’t even have to like art, hardly. These works are so vivid and lively and compelling that they pull the viewer right past questions of meaning and purpose.

They have meaning and purpose, of course. Snowden, who lives and works in Washington, has long been an activist in African-American issues, and her paintings, the museum says, “though abstract, are often somewhat figurative in nature, depicting struggles with classism, racism and sexism.”

I was doubting this somewhat until I came upon Snowden’s “Marriage” (1992), a 6-by-10-foot canvas hung on the wall that is paired with another lying on the floor. At first glance they are mirror images; then they are seen to be echoes of each other, with many small differences that made me vaguely uneasy. After a while they began to seem antithetical. I had a growing sense that Snowden was telling me something I didn’t want to know.

“Do you find this painting scary?” I asked a

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Sylvia Snowden's 1992 "Baton Rouge/New Orleans," a large acrylic on canvas.

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woman who had also been studying the painting.

“No,” she said. “But I’m not surprised that a man would.”

I didn’t ask the woman what she meant by that, and if I ever meet Sylvia Snowden I’m not going to ask her, either.

A lot of people are going to meet Snowden over the coming months, because this exhibit marks her selection as the first “Artists + Community” representative of the museum. It’s an outreach program that will take her not only into area schools but into halfway houses and other centers serving parolees, drug and alcohol abusers and the homeless.

— Hank Burchard

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