

SYLVIA SNOWDEN

ENGAGING EXPRESSIONISM

by ALICE THORSON

It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart. . . .

—James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

The first painting I ever did was a social statement," says Sylvia Snowden, looking back on her 25-year career as a Washington painter. In a city that rewards a low-key approach, Snowden makes art that perturbs—dynamic, paint-laden, expressionist works, dripping with emotion and angst.

Since that first painting—a view of laundry lines stretched across the back porch of a decrepit tenement (1962)—Snowden has experimented with still life, landscape, and interior scenes. But her signature work is figurative, record-

ing in agitated strokes of ink, pastel, oil, and acrylic her response to the human struggle.

Among contemporary artists, Snowden perhaps has no peer in meshing style and subject matter into a seamless whole. Clashing colors, furious distortions, and turbulent brushwork give visceral expression to her subjects' innermost longings and fears. "Feelings

The movement of the brush nearly engulfs her subject matter, challenging its claim to an existence apart from the eye of the painter.

are more important to me than anything else," said the artist from the kitchen of her brownstone in Washington's "Shaw" neighborhood, where pockets of artists, dealers, real-estate agents, and architects are interspersed with some of the city's more impoverished residents. "I see things in other people that are reflected in me."

A sense of identification with her subjects gives Snowden's work a rare

conviction. Few painters have peered so deeply into the human heart, or proved so adept at divulging its secrets. Over the years her work has probed and exposed the human drama at all levels, from familial love to racist hate, from women abused by men to men abused by a system that allows them no voice. Among her salient themes is that of the battle of an entire race to wrest a positive self-image from a culture that persists in according it second-class citizenship; but it is her preoccupation with our shared humanity that forms the bedrock of Snowden's complex and challenging oeuvre.

Born of academic parents in Raleigh, North Carolina, Snowden spent her childhood in New Orleans. The family moved to Washington when she was 14 years old, and several years later she entered Howard University's art department. It was the early '60s, a time of sit-ins, strikes, mass demonstrations, and heightened racial tensions. Martin Luther King Jr. bounced in and out of Southern jails; the Freedom Riders were beaten, even murdered, as they journeyed through the South demanding equal rights and integrated service at lunch counters and bus terminals. As the political fight for civil rights intensified, black intellectuals grappled for a positive

This is the twentieth in a continuing series of "Critic's Choice" articles. These have included Jane Allen on Tony Giliberto, Joanna Frueh on Robert Lostutter, Devonna Piexzak on Margaret Wharton, Buzz Spector on Dan Ramirez, Wendy Hoffman-Yuni on Frank Pannier, Holliday Day on Dennis Kowalski, Michael Bonesteel on Nicholas Africano, Jack Burnham on Michael Brakke, Franz Schulze on Richard Loving, Mark Michael Leonhart on John Breitweiser, Eleanor Heartney on Tom Rose, J.W. Mahoney on Thomas Downing, Kerstin Rost on Norbert Tadeusz, Sue Taylor on Christine O'Connor, Tom Lachman on John Hull, Jeff Abell on Robert Daulton, Miriam Seidel on Lowry Burgess, Joyce Fernandes on Michiko Itatani, and Claire Wolf Krantz on Claire Prussian.

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Snowden bridges this gap by infusing the voice of "the Other" into the tradition of Western Modernism. She speaks with uncommon eloquence, and in a voice that all can hear, of the struggles and triumphs of the human spirit. Celebrating our common humanity even as she vigorously protests and exposes the myths that keep us apart, Sylvia Snowden is a great American painter, whose fight, as with Baldwin's, begins "in the heart."

Snowden is a stranger to the cynicism and rarefied introspection that infects so many of her "mainstream" contemporaries. Her works evince an unshakable conviction that art can communicate, that it can heighten awareness, that society does have something of value to gain from the artist, and that the artist does have a responsibility to society. But her particular genius resides in the powerful amalgamation her works effect between the traditions of Western art and the black American experience and culture, a culture historically ignored, plundered, or patronized by proponents of the Western traditions.

This is a timely painting, but clearly one which reaches beyond its particular moment in media-saturated '80s America. From the very beginning of her career, Snowden has acknowledged the workings of myth and history and dealt unflinchingly with the world they have wrought. Finding relevance in the past and urgency in the present, this is in many ways "old-fashioned" work. Despite her stylistic concurrence with recent Neo-expressionism, there is nothing "neo" about Snowden's expressionism.

The tension injected into black culture by the omnipresence of white "norms"—particularly in regard to female appearance—is a commonplace in the fiction and autobiography of black woman authors such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou; *Cheryl* offers a visual exegesis.

One piece in particular in this exhibit offered a summation of Snowden's efforts thus far. Titled *Cheryl*, it depicts a snowy white odalisque above three gesticulating vamping figures. In *Frances and Milton*, the artist relegates the red pigment of passion to the perimeters. A gulf of thickly impastoed yellow—the glare of proximity and conflicting expectations—separates the man and woman, who struggle to maintain their individuality against the constrictions posed by togetherness.

The couple is black and, as with so many of Snowden's works, there is a political comment embedded here. For within this piece is a recognition of the particular kind of assault individuality suffers within oppressed minorities, where there is an internal pressure to conform—to suppress individual differences of opinion in order to present a cohesive opposition to the empowered majority.

Amid this array of women, a rare double-figure painting makes a symbolic comment on male/female relationships. In *Frances and Milton*, the artist relegates the red pigment of passion to the perimeters. A gulf of thickly impastoed yellow—the glare of proximity and conflicting expectations—separates the man and woman, who struggle to maintain their individuality against the constrictions posed by togetherness.



SYLVIA SNOWDEN, "Magaline, Bryson's Mober," acrylic on canvas, 7' x 6 1/2", 1976. Photo courtesy of the artist.