

December 23, 1987

Since seeing Sylvia Snowden's paintings at Brody's Gallery last month, James Baldwin has died. Reading Toni Morrison's tribute to this great writer one realizes that her words about James Baldwin's prose could equally apply to Sylvia Snowden's paintings. She talks of Baldwin's use of language, his courage and his tenderness. In the same way that Baldwin was able to reinvent the English language to "bear witness to the truth", so Snowden uses the vehicle of abstract expressionism with commanding power to express her view of the inner and outer struggles of the human condition. Baldwin has courage to go out into a world of people estranged by color and transform the distances between them. In the same way Snowden goes out into the street, finds the sources for her titles in the human beings she is acquainted with, and makes the human struggle for freedom accessible to the viewer, in their name. Baldwin in the midst of anger expresses tenderness. He writes through the voice of Tish, a character in his novel "If Beale Street Could Talk" "...the baby, turning for the first time in its incredible veil of water, announces its presence and claims me; tells me, in that instant, that what can get worse can get better.... in the meantime - forever - it is entirely up to me." Snowden's disorienting figures are made tender by their struggle to be born, like Tish's infant tapping on the womb. Her creatures are defiantly irrepressible in their determination to improve their situation.

The first impression of Snowden's show is of huge figures, grappling to free themselves from their surroundings, to which they seem to be attached by umbilical cords, painted on vertical towers of paper. The 4'0" wide paper is loaded with strands of visceral color in a wash of light and dark, out of which emerge defiant human figures pushing against the edges that confine them. The containment is claustrophobic but it is also the way in which tension is built - the narrow canvas is used to symbolize the human condition of being captive and of desiring to be free. It takes intrepid nerve to paint these figures. It requires fortitude on the part of the viewer to view them. To use Morrison's words describing Baldwin's prose, these paintings are "stripped of ease and false comfort", they go straight to the heart of undecorated truth. What is the reality of the condition so vigorously depicted in these works? The reality depicted here is a blast of pain and anger at the awful experience of slavery which is in the history of every Afro-american. For americans who came from other parts of the world under different circumstances, denial has numbed comprehension. So the fact of slavery exists like an invisible wall that divides us - evasion makes us strangers. James Baldwin first began to transform this distance by describing clearly what it was. Alex Haley's "Roots" was another more popular step in the direction of revealing the issue. This year Toni Morrison's powerful book "Beloved" based on the true story of a slave has strongly effected and sometimes terrified her readers. The ability of artists of color to find a language for this pain deserves gratitude and respect from all of us. The experience of enslavement inflicted a terrible wound. The fact that it happened so brutally, in a country whose reason for existence was stated to be that of achieving freedom for its people, was a shocking and hurtful irony. It is similar to the experience of a child born into a family full of great principles and high ideals - non of which apply to

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this particular child. For some reason this child cannot be part of that family, and is made to feel that there is something terribly wrong with him. The feeling lingers on until the family as a whole recognises the great injustice that has been done, and makes amends.

Sylvia Snowden's figures battle for their freedom, and by naming them as portraits we as viewers are brought into and recognise their struggle. We cross the bridge between the particular and the universal and are able to find courage to enter the limbo with them. We understand that the condition of being confined is experienced by both the oppressor and the oppressed, that, as Sylvia Snowden writes, "As human beings we are all placed in confinements, either by nature, or social mores, or beliefs, etc."

Another thing occurs which relieves the pressure of these emotions and gains the viewers involvement - that which has already been mentioned - the analogy of birth. Gloria Steinham writes that there are two primary emotions, that of giving birth and that of killing. Snowden paints birth or rebirth in the raw colors of primary experience - vibrant reds and greens, rich oranges, yellows and blues - in such a way that the viewer participates in the birth of the new being, and feels the presence of that tenderness which is an essential part of making truth tolerable. We understand that the human being will break out - there is no stopping it. As in Toni Morrison's "Beloved", the human spirit cannot be suppressed.

These paintings are important. They deal with a human condition which demands attention. They reverberate with defiance, fear, vulnerability and tenderness. They are a warning. They could be interpreted as depicting the Furies of ancient legend, which, like Beloved, are demanding to be born. Like the Furies and like Beloved, if they are not allowed to be born and to live in freedom, they will exact a terrible price. The price is a failure of human potential and a likelihood that human beings will end up destroying themselves. As James Baldwin wrote, "It is terrible to watch people cling to their captivity and insist on their own destruction".

SAR
Dec 1987