

ART

Galleries: High-Voltage Intensity In Paintings From the Inner City

By Benjamin Forgey

There is much to surprise and to please in Sylvia Snowden's recent paintings, on view simultaneously at the Howard University Gallery of Art and the Zenith Gallery downtown.

To describe work of such high-voltage, expressionistic intensity as *pleasing* in itself may be something of a surprise, especially to the artist. Yet in the end that is what the paintings are, in addition to being much more, because the artist has managed to avoid so many disastrous esthetic pitfalls along the way to a complex, cohesive artistic statement.

For the past two years, Snowden has lived in an inner-city Washington neighborhood in the process of being torn apart. She has made this process, and its effects upon inhabitants of the neighborhood, the subject matter of her art. Contrary to conventional expectations and, indeed, contrary to the description of the work in the brochure accompanying the Howard show, Snowden's paintings are not conventional social-protest paintings, laden with the clichés of that genre. Neither do they derive from the convenient example of much contemporary, self-consciously black-American art, with its own fully stocked bag of clichés to lure the unsuspecting or undiscerning artist.

In short, Snowden doesn't merely describe or depict abrasive, inequitable social conditions, nor does she embark upon a spurious search for sources in art of the African past. Like the genuine expressionist that she is, Snowden has tried to penetrate and express the essence of the experience, and in her best works she has succeeded astonishingly in creating a gallery of figures that are both prototypical and, paradoxically, highly individuated. Her "Bones," "Paulette," "Charles," "Barbara Pregnant" and "Steve" hang next to each other on one superb wall in the Howard Gallery. They are not likely to be mistaken for one another, even though they obviously come from the same source.

With one major exception (the huge triptych with multiple figures on view at the Zenith Gallery), Snowden's paintings are limited to a single figure which often seems pinned in by the edges of the canvas (actually, a hard-surface board), so that their skeletal frame is being broken and restructured before your eyes: limbs



From Janica Yoder's "chicken series" at the Corcoran.

exaggerated and mangled, joints distorted, heads crazily bent out of shape.

OBVIOUSLY, THERE is a tremendous, painful weight being displayed in these paintings. However, there is also the vibrancy of life. The willful anatomical rearrangements are accomplished with a vigorously loaded brush, and Snowden's sense of heavy, impastoed texture and of powerfully counterbalanced, emotive colors can be uncannily unerring. The result, in her best works, is one of an extravagant sensibility kept precariously under control; and her subjects, instead of being sorry speci-

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mens, are involved in an eerily existential dance of life. These figures are authentic inner-city blacks, all right, but they also occupy another time zone altogether, like ghosts or spirits.

Not surprisingly, Snowden's temperament (and her talent) sometimes gets out of hand. The tall, dancing figures in the Howard show, "Robert" and "Christine," come perilously close to trite stylization. Some of the paintings, too, are marred by a sort of patently in-fill (see, for instance, "background" passages in the otherwise admirable Howard wall starting, on the left, with "Tyroue").

And then, there is a whole series of works where she replaces the loaded brush with a sort of drawing with

thin skeins of black paint; and these, for various reasons, are not nearly so fresh. Not incidentally, these paintings seem like enlargements of smaller drawings on paper where the black skeins are highlighted with colors in pastel, oil crayon or paint; and the drawings of this type are better than the paintings.

Still, Snowden has created something that is undeniably her own, from her own feelings and an aesthetic heritage that includes, at the top, Ensor, Nolde and de Kooning. It is instructive to look at her master's thesis, available at the Howard office, because it demonstrates that her search for a personal, authentic mode of symbolic figuration has been going on for 15 years.

The Howard Gallery is located on the first floor of the College of Fine Arts (at the northern edge of the Howard campus at College Street and Georgia Avenue NW) and the show there continues through March 26. The Zenith Gallery is located at 1441 Rhode Island Ave. NW (rear entrance) and the show there continues through March 17.