

Black Artists: A Matter of Identities

By Benjamin Forgey
Washington Star Art Writer

"Rock came from black people but Presley is crowned king. Cubism came from Africa but Picasso is crowned king. . . . So long as whites claim ownership of black values, blacks will always be second best."

These statements by critic-curator Keith Morrison form the ideological background to "Alternatives by Black Artists," the exhibition he organized for the Washington Project for the Arts (1227 G St. NW).

The exhibition is interesting — despite Morrison's penchant for angry oversimplification and distortion. For one thing, it brings together a body of good work by a dozen Washington artists (plus one guest), some famous, most virtually unknown.

For another thing, it raises a provocative, inherently fascinating issue concerning the degree to which art made by black artists reflects their racial identity and experience, even when it is abstract and therefore not conventionally labeled as "black art."

Morrison himself writes that "Afro-American abstraction today clearly shows the extent to which its strongest impetus — indeed the very stamp of its singular character — is from Africa, rather than from Europe as so often assumed in the past."

Morrison vastly underestimates the degree of cultural interaction that has taken place, both ways, between whites and blacks. Nonetheless, by pointing to several more or less specific instances wherein African motifs and modes of thought appear in more or less "abstract" works by black artists, he has enriched our understanding of them.

In some cases, these borrowings across space (the Atlantic Ocean) and time (the temporal distance separating the black American experience from the black African one) are clearer than in others. Lois Maillou Jones, for instance, uses African and Caribbean motifs rather directly in her works. In addition, Morrison says, her paintings are characterized by an inherently African mode of patterning.

Joyce Scott's iconic dolls and wall pieces are on one level clearly involved with her experience as a black American (by dint of old photographs incorporated into the works). Morrison relates them as well to fetish objects from the African tradition and to age-old African handling of fibers and found materials. David Driskell's free-standing piece, with hanging pieces of cloth as well as carved snakes, clearly if unspecifically relates to an African sense of ritual.

In other cases, the relations to Africa are less distinct. Sylvia Snowden's figurative paintings clearly are screeching interpretations of life on the streets of the urban ghetto, in its joyous and tragic dimensions. Terry Adkins' active, rhyth-

mical abstractions in watercolor with pastel do indeed utilize mask-like or shield-like forms as a central organizing motif, but it is indeed quite abstracted.

Lorenzo Pace's mummified figures are hauntingly horrific; Morrison relates them to the "desert culture" and to "the spiritual attachment so many Black peoples have for the life and death cycle." Martha Jackson's ceramic and sand installation piece, quite provocative on its own, is related (by Morrison) to the "pronounced importance of starchy foods of the [African] drylands."

Sam Gilliam's powerful installation — a room-size piece made of draped and elaborately painted and folded materials titled "I Made It Round" — is extremely and effectively complicated in color, rhythm and structure. I have no doubt that in making it Gilliam, perhaps even consciously, was pulling something out of his prenatal past. The piece is evocative of many times and many places. It is African, and American.

In a nutshell, this characterization of Gilliam's piece sums up my differences with Morrison regarding the impetus and the effect of most of these works of art. If they are related to African roots, they are not so different, in many ways, from works by contemporary white American artists. They are, in the end, demonstrably the products of their time and place, which is, after all, late 20th-century America.

The show continues through Saturday.