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A Black World Of Ins and Outs

Michael Kimmelman – April 26, 2002

"BLACK ROMANTIC," a much-anticipated, mixed-bag gamble of a populist theme show by the Studio Museum in Harlem, will give people who don't ordinarily go there pleasure and some people grief -- including its curator, to judge from what she has written about it.

It's a survey of figure paintings by 30 black artists from across the nation. In case you need to be reminded how big the world of art is and how small the art world is, take a look at what's here.

These artists are virtually unknown to what you could call the white mainstream, but several are familiar to a vast black public, which admires and buys what they make. Many of the paintings you'll find reproduced as posters and postcards in stores and at sidewalk stands on the streets in Harlem, Atlanta, Chicago and Oakland.

Much of the art is portraiture. There are also religious allegories, uplifting fantasy scenarios and Norman Rockwellian vignettes of children playing and grandmother sewing a quilt -- a mishmash of good and bad that betrays distressing curatorial disregard for bedrock quality and style distinctions, ostensibly held together as an overview of feel-good pictures extolling black culture. The work traverses the gamut from fine art to soft-core schlock.

At the high end are artists like Dean Mitchell, Leroy Allen, Jonathon Romain, Alonzo Adams, Oliver B. Johnson Jr. and Leslie Printis. Mr. Mitchell's works are subtly tuned character studies with an eye toward abstract form and charismatic light. Mr. Mitchell is a virtual modern-day Vermeer of ordinary black people given dignity through the eloquence of his concentration and touch.

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Jules R. Arthur, also excellent, is an adept draftsman of what seem like second-hand images from the 1930's (smiling children, a chain gang). Philip Smallwood represents the show's prevailing strain of social pride, painting sun-drenched scenes of quaint humanity. Kadir Nelson, maybe the most commercially successful artist here, comes closest to Rockwell's anecdotal charm.

All this is thrown together with equally diverse paintings like Cal Massey's black "Messiah" and Keith J. Duncan's collages of dead gang members receiving God, messages of spiritual deliverance and self-help, which find their unlikely correlatives in the erotic camp of Gerald Griffin's winged nudes and Toni L. Taylor's angels.

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One young artist, Kehinde Wiley, comes from the art world (he's a Yale graduate). A theatrical self-portrait nods to the work of fashionable painters like Kurt Kauper and John Currin but doesn't seem out of place here, proving that inside-outside distinctions can evaporate if the context shifts.

The show is put together by Thelma Golden, the museum's deputy director, who admits she had to learn about what was for her a new universe. She searched the Internet for names and galleries that specialize in black artists. She checked out the Black Expo and the Kwanzaa Fest at the Jacob Javits Convention Center. She issued a flier, scoured slides and Polaroids submitted to her, and sent out a few invitations to painters whom, she gathered, once she began to talk to people, she ought to think about including.

She chose a cross-section, young, old, mostly men, as it turned out, self-taught as well as trained.

The result is an equal-opportunity Rorschach test. Everyone will bring his own prejudices and neuroses to the table, starting, evidently, with Ms. Golden. Her conflicted attitude is both fascinating and politically indicative.

I wonder whether Ms. Golden knows the extent to which she comes across as sabotaging her own artists in an accompanying catalog? It may help to recall that as a young black curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1994, Ms. Golden organized "Black Male," a high-concept exhibition of some interesting work but also of often appalling stereotyped images (street thugs, the homeless, sex machines and pimps) that justly enraged blacks and many others.

Its tricky premise was that it wasn't actually about the character of black men; it was about the character of art about black men, that art being a slice of 1990's ironic button-pushing and arch political posturing targeted narrowly at the mandarin art world. The show raised the question, but declined to answer, why negative stereotypes of blacks make such fashionable art these days.

"Black Romantic" seems as if it were Ms. Golden's response to the attacks on "Black Male." I'm quite sure she wouldn't put it that way, but you don't need to be Freud to diagnose denial when she writes in the catalog that the new show is not "a corrective or a compensation."

She then labors to distance herself from the work in the exhibition, seemingly worried about displaying unfashionable artists without establishing her art world bona fides and without pigeonholing what these painters do as outsider art or acceptable kitsch or a conceptual conceit.

While organizing the exhibition, Ms. Golden writes, she was "physically unsettled" by what she perceived to be the "overwrought sentiment" of the art. She "shuddered at the crass commercialism" and the "bombastic self-promotion."

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The "absence of irony," she adds, "was profound." So the challenge for her was "the suspension of judgment -- not curatorial or aesthetic judgment -- but the suspension of value judgment."

How's that for an endorsement? I admire her honesty, although skeptics will prefer to see it as cynicism. Ms. Golden writes from so far inside the art world that she apparently can't see how parochial and closed-minded it looks from the outside.

Inside-outside: that's the leitmotif of the show. Since the Studio Museum was founded in 1967 as a place for black artists ignored by the big museums, it has largely defined itself in relation to the white mainstream, which is to say the inside. Its identity and prestige have derived from the exhibition of high-art figures like Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence.

But there have always been black artists who had success among a wide black audience. Ms. Golden describes their careers, obligatorily separate from the art world, in terms of black self-determination. Some of these artists think of Rockwell and Thomas Kinkaid as role models.

After Ms. Golden arrived at the Studio Museum, she began to hear from many black people wondering when museums like hers would pay attention to "real" black art, the kind these artists make. She met black collectors who don't want to live with sculptures of gold-plated sneakers or headless mannequins of black museum guards, chic though that art was. They prefer Mr. Mitchell and Mr. Adams and Mr. Nelson.

Ms. Golden in her catalog describes this division of taste as having parallels in the rift between fans of Toni Morrison and Terry McMillan, or between Wynton Marsalis and hip-hop. It's the high-low battleground, where her show, groundbreaking for the Studio Museum, now begs to be contested.

On these grounds, "Black Romantic" will be lambasted, I'm sure, by people who thought that "Black Male" was progressive. They'll say "Black Romantic" replaces one set of stereotypes (negative) with another (positive).

Black artists who despised "Black Male," on the other hand, will no doubt think this show panders to middlebrow taste, devaluing the museum as the Guggenheim Museum's detractors thought Rockwell's show there did. If Ms. Golden were looking for under-recognized black artists, they'll argue, she ought to exhibit black abstract painters, as she has promised to do.

She should do that show. Meanwhile, maybe what's worse, she has lumped together diverse figurative artists whose only link, as far as I can see, is that they aren't embraced by the white art world. Artists like Dean Mitchell and Toni Taylor don't have anything else meaningful in common. I doubt Ms. Golden would fail to make distinctions for a show of what she respects -- the art of Kara Walker or Glenn Ligon, "the vanguard of post-conceptual interrogations of race, gender and identity," as she calls it.

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But unruly, even annoying, though it is, "Black Romantic" willy-nilly offers up some persuasive art and raises genuine, important issues: why wouldn't some of what passes for art in Chelsea be interchangeable with what's here? Why is one (white) figurative artist awarded points for imitating an old master and another (black) artist dismissed for doing that? Whom does a place like the Studio Museum serve?

To snicker at the exhibition would be patronizing. To brush it off as a hoot would be worse. Much hoop-jumping will be required by those who embrace well-connected white figurative painters like Elizabeth Peyton and Lisa Yuskavage to reject some of the unfashionable artists here -- or to say that an artist like Rockwell is lousy but these artists are not. Or vice versa.

The art world co-opts what's useful (outsider art is only outside if you think of yourself as inside), but it also ignores its own uncomfortable contradictions.

"Black Romantic" forces all this into the open, where it should be. For that, and for giving painters like Dean Mitchell a wider audience, we should look on it more kindly than Ms. Golden seems to.

"Black Romantic: The Figurative Impulse in Contemporary African-American Art" remains on view at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 144 West 125th Street, (212) 864-4500, through June 23.