



Kerala Lalithakala Akademi

To Be Human: An artist's perspective

The unbelievably beautiful color spectrum seen on one side of the prism can be just one colorless ray of light on the other side. The humanity across globe can be seen as one ray which is impregnated with the wide range of people belonging to innumerable race, tribe, religion, cast or sub-cast! Some section of the society always felt privileged to discriminate on the basis of physical appearance. The color of the skin becomes the blue print of one's entire life.

Who else, other than the artist will know better, the significance of colors? On one hand the natural color of the skin of African people determined the course of their life filled with sufferings, torture, discrimination and humiliation and on the other hand, when a black color was used to create artworks by the artists belonging to the African origin, it resulted in revolutionary change in their lives. It was a matter of time! The ancestors of today's African Americans could not even dream of life of dignity. The history of slavery & discrimination in America is now a part of collective subconscious memory of the entire nation itself. The artistic skills of the artisans from Africa became the reason for their being in America brought as slaves. Some of the subsequent generation of those artisans became renowned artists of Modern America. One of biggest revolution in the history of World Art was Harlem Renaissance of 1920's and 30's, which changed the course of the entire Nation's culture! Not only the African Americans managed to change the fabric of the society but they gifted some of the most amazing artistic creations to the entire world. It will not be an exaggeration to say that the greatest contribution to the American culture is substantiated by the African culture. Since the time of Civil Rights Movement many organizations emerged with the aim to participate in the protest as well as express their anguish about inhuman treatment meted out by their fellow citizens for centuries through the medium of Art. The establishment of Black Colleges and Universities was one of the major steps towards transforming the lives of this community through education.

Arthea B. Perry says, "Art is about inter-cultural communication and educational reform, designed to forge new alliances, heal and spark conversation about social issues within the communities I serve, relying on the supreme kinetic energies of the universe & ancestors to direct my path in creating sacred art". Her digital print 'Yemoja', a homage to one of the mother goddesses from Africa has a combination of formal features from different cultures.

Many members of the group emerged as the first generation in their families to graduate through prestigious universities and also get the teaching jobs. Alma Woodsey's painting 'Glimpse of Jupiter' from Henry Clinton collection at the North Carolina A & T state University

painted in 1970 invokes the meditative aspect of abstract expressionism. 'Diva' a collage by Benny Andrews from the same collection is a tribute to the black women musicians. He is known for his collage technique and socio-political satires. Claude Clark (1915-2001) chose to express the agony of his ancestors working on the barren land in rural Georgia and the much-awaited moment of freedom in his paintings, 'The trouble I have seen' and 'Freedom morning'. The portrait of his grandmother is like an epic story of never-ending sufferings of the entire race! Clarence Tally sr. pays tribute to Dr, Martin Luther King through his paintings "I may not get there with you" and "Thank you Dr. King". It was a phase when collage and mixed media paintings emerged as a new artistic trend where by intelligently chosen image from the domain of pop culture served to have a greater impact.

Ricky Calloway expresses his gratitude to the first generation of artists from Harlem to challenge the existing tradition and create a platform for new generation through his painting 'Pioneers of Harlem Renaissance'. He even invokes the legacy of artisans who must have built great Egyptian pyramids, temples and sculptures.

Marvette Pratt Aldrich has a painful memory of not being allowed to go on the seashore to play during her childhood because of the racial discrimination. Her painting 'Building sand castles at the beach (Cherie)' of her innocent little daughter engrossed in her play on the same beach Myrtle in South Carolina is the mixture of feeling of joy and sorrow. The sea and the sand stand witness through the changing times of her suffering of deprivation and her daughter's joy.

There was one draconian law then which prevented black men from looking or talking to white women. This can be observed in two artworks which refer to that aspect of the social discrimination. One is a sculpture 'Black man looking through a white world during 1960 Civil Rights movement in America' by Willie Hooker and the other one is a painting, 'Influence of the Life of Emmett Louis Till' by Phillip Dotson. A 14-year-old boy Emmett Till was brutally lynched on 28th August 1955 in Mississippi because he was allegedly accused of whistling at a white woman. This incident shook the nation and sowed the seeds of revolt. The red, green, brown and black colors in Dotson's painting symbolize the Mississippi river, greenery in the surrounding area and bloodshed. Hooker's sculpture has a male face, a victim of clear polarized approach to life symbolized by the Confederate Flag at the background and Black & White color.

Kelvin Cole's conscience was shaken up listening to his grandfather's narration of the lynching of Black men with their necktie on the tree in his property whenever they would be on their way to voting. Kelvin has created several series of abstract sculptures using metal sheet, rugs and paper immortalizing the shape of necktie and noose.

Dr. Peggy Blood's oeuvre of paintings has a reference to the sufferings of poor women, their socio-cultural life and the pristine nature in different seasons of the year. Her rich color palette and the thick layers of paint built up layer by layer create a visual experience of a thick forest spread miles and miles across the vast land in her landscape paintings.

Louise Delsarte's painting, 'The Garden' expresses a struggle of the artist's mind. The painting at first glance appears to be chaotic, random application of color and the scribbling of lines but as the eyes rest for a while, the surface starts revealing its mystery! Roymieco Carter's concern is the Language as the essential tool of communication. The visual counterpart of the language is the script, calligraphy and if further stylized it can become a design as we see in his painting 'Looking towards a borderless future'. He makes a very strong statement through his artwork, an aspiration for a utopia!

Dwight Smith says, "I express certain social realities concerning the world while exploring aesthetic qualities of being Black in America and addressing the literal symbology of contemporary blackness there by creating a pliable structure for intuition, improvisation and chance in creating my work."

Jacob Lawrence an internationally acclaimed artist has immortalized the everyday activities from the lives of common people through his art. The painting 'Windows' is an allegory in many ways about immigration. 'Jazz homage series' by Terrance Robinson is an expression of his love for Jazz which can be considered as a symbol of revolution in the music field. Elizabeth Catlett portrays the beauty of a young black girl from Mexico as if she is in action of turning her face away from the onlooker.

Johnnie Mae Maberry, Varnette Patricia Honeywood and Lee Ransaw bring a touch of humor & social satires through their paintings about the compulsions of fashion that women folk imbibe. Maberry's two paintings are about the superficiality of the religion and church atmosphere. The high seat which the toddlers are supposed to climb appear as colorful waves indicating the ups and down in their future. Honeywood has chosen to portray the humorous side of life with exaggerated facial expressions of two women engrossed in gossip in the silent atmosphere of the Church, in the painting, 'Gossip in the Sanctuary'. Lee Ransaw's 'Ms. Foxx and Mr. Hare' is an amazing observation of romantic ideas of the young minds who try to win over the other by various means - women choose fashionable clothes and men their talents! Although his painting 'Heading North' is inspired by the personal story of his family who had migrated to Chicago 'the promised land' during the second great migration which took place at the time of second world war, it speaks of the courage gathered by the millions of suffering families to escape from the engulfing darkness towards the hope of better living. The dark color of their skin synonymous with the dark night symbolizes their sufferings.

Danis R. Winson's woodcut print 'Going Home' is an amazing expression of simple mundane act of travel by bus but impregnated with layers of deep meaning to be deciphered by the viewer. Winson imagined the thoughts in the minds of "Freedom Riders" who travelled to south for the struggle for equality. Bryan Wilson's 'Portrait of a native black melanin' is a simple portrait but a significant statement. The new Melanin theory changed the entire argument of the discrimination of the entire race based on the color of the skin. It claims that the higher level of melanin in skin is the cause of intellectual, physical and spiritual potential of the person!

Some of these paintings remind me of Van Gogh's paintings of the lives of coal mine workers.

'Nine Golden Rings' by Vandorn Hinnant is the only painting in this exhibition based on sacred geometry. Three sets of color-coded concentric circles symbolize the efforts of uniting the African Americans across the Globe. The colors in the painting are the identity of the African American liberation movement but in this painting, it signifies the unity defined by the enclosed forms. Cleve Webber's 'Tribute to Gregory Hines' is an attempt to capture the rhythm of a dancer; it is a frozen moment in dance.

Our identity is determined by various factors either by choice or by compulsions such as our birth in particular geographical location, in particular race/religion/cast/tribe. One can create an identity intellectually uniting both the factors. A quilt titled 'This is it' by Tracie Lee Hawkins is a tribute to American Pop music legend Michael Jackson. The title is also taken from his last series of concert. This piece of art has hand sewn applique, 200 Swarovski crystals, the black and white fabric design is native of African traditional craft.

Marcella Muhammad's painting 'Maruvian Harvest Mask' is a statement on the world crisis of hunger. She freely combines the formal elements from the ancient mask from Indonesia, forms of sugarcane and paddy harvest seen around and the art of Modern European masters of cubism.

One of the important features of the entire process of creating an identity for themselves in America has been that the African American artists have reclaimed the legacy of African culture.

Neeta Omprakash

A Brief History of NAAHBCU:

The National Alliance of Artists from Historically Black Colleges and Universities (NAAHBCU) was founded in 1999 with the mission to bring Art and Art Education to the forefront, provide expressive dialogue, and opportunities to exhibit Visual Arts. It was founded by Dr. Lee Ransaw, then Dean of Arts & Letters, and Chair of the Fine Arts department of Morris Brown College in Atlanta and the twelve charter members Dr. Peggy Blood, Chair of Art at Savannah State University and first African American to graduate with a Master's of Fine Arts from University of Arkansas in Fayetteville; Phillip R. Dotson, Professor of Art and Program Director of Le Moyne Owen College in Memphis, Tennessee; Marvette Pratt Aldridge, Assistant Professor of Art at Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina; Prof. William Anderson, Morehouse College in Atlanta; Prof. Hassan Kirkland, Johnson C. Smith University; Associate professor Charnelle

Holloway of Spelman College and Anita B. Knox of Talladega College in Alabama. In 2002 they held a first major travelling exhibition entitled "Visions From Within" at the James Kemp Gallery at The Black Academy of Arts & Letters in Dallas, Texas. This remarkable exhibit allowed more than 30 members to make expressive statements using their craftsmanship, and to be seen at the national level. In 2004-5 this exhibition travelled to the APEX Museum in Atlanta, The National Center for the Study of Civil Rights at Alabama State University in Montgomery and the Arthur Rose Museum at Claflin University in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Another important thematic exhibit, entitled "Prevalence of Ritual" traveled to West Virginia State University and to New York.

Members of the NAAHBCU include outstanding artists and educators who have since become the backbone of the organization. Among this group are legends such as the late Benny Andrews, who attended Ft. Valley State College and wrote the introduction to "The Visions From Within" catalog; Dr. Leo F. Twiggs, the first African American Art graduate from the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia; Dr. William Colvin Colvin, first African American graduate from the doctoral program at Illinois State University and Chairman of the Art Department of Alabama State University for many years. One artist of note, Louis Delsarte, who many critics believe to be one of the most important contemporary African American artists working today. The current list is exceptionally long with more than 70 artists and art educators exhibiting their works. Many NAAHBCU artists have roots in the South and feel strongly about issues that affect everyone such as racial justice, law & order, social welfare, education and Civil Rights which have prominently surfaced through their works. The National Study of Civil Rights, The APEX Museum, The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, North Carolina State A & T University in Greensboro and The Beach Institute African American Cultural Center in Savannah have showcased notable travelling exhibits such as: "The Quest for Black Citizenship in the Americas", "Civil Rights: A 50 Year Reflection", "Bloody Sunday on the Edmund Pettus Bridge" and "Coming by Force: Overcoming by Choice" and other major exhibitions at Historical Black Colleges and Universities.