Art Review

Jarring, joyous works from black artists

By Christine Temin
GLOBE STAFF

"One of Many Horsemen" by John Keys.

The casual observer walking into the Rose Art Museum might well wonder what the 10 artists in the current show have in common. It's not medium: They work in everything from clay to found wood to paint. It's not subject or style: There is both representational and abstract work here, and techniques both traditional and not. What the artists share is race. They are all black.

Yes, this is another Black History Month show, and how you feel about it depends partly on whether you think of Black History Month as a ghetto or as a celebration. The Brandeis show doesn't sink to the level of political expediency and cynicism of the 1988 "Massachusetts Masters: Afro-American Artists" at the Museum of Fine Arts, which

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rounded up as many black artists as possible in order to deal with the "problem." But the show at the Rose does seem somewhat contrived. It made me eager to see Tsuya Chinn's luscious raku sculpture in the context of a contemporary ceramics show, not a "black" show, and Robert Freeman's big figurative paintings in the context of his entire career, instead of mixed with work by so many unrelated artists.

It's important, though, to realize the Rose's good intentions, and the background of this exhibition. Since 1976, the museum has mounted annual group shows of work by Boston-area artists. Since 1984, those shows have been called the Lois Foster Exhibition, in honor of the patron who has done so much for contemporary art around Boston. The artists in the Foster shows are selected from among the hundreds who send in unsolicited slides every year. Somewhere along the line, someone noticed that the Foster shows had never included any black artists, because black artists hadn't submitted their slides – a sign that they feel out of the loop. So this year the museum decided to rectify matters by seeking out black artists and devoting the entire exhibition to them.

The Foster shows always include from six to 10 artists and never have themes, unless you call a category as broad as "painting" a theme. This current show merely follows the standard Foster format. Yet it inadvertently comes off as slightly condescending. I wish it had been limited to, say, painting by black artists or sculpture by black artists instead of any medium at all, and that it had been six artists in greater depth, instead of 10. And I wish it had been done in *any* month except February.

On the other hand, in terms of quality of work, this edition of the Foster show is a striking success, and its curators – Cynthia Hymes Bell, Carl Belz, Edmund Barry Gaither and Susan Stoops – have tried hard to hang the diverse work to create correspondences. So Freeman's large, bold, colorful paintings are hung across the room from those of Bryan McFarlane, and Cheryl

AFRICAN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES
The Lois Foster Exhibition of Boston-Area Artists
At: *the Rose Art Museum, Brandeis University, Waltham, through March 14. The museum will hold two free, public panel discussions on aspects of the show. On February 19 at 12:30 Dessima Williams and Bryan McFarlane discuss cultural identity. On March 4 at 7:30 Pamela Allara, Susan Stoops, Tsuya Chinn, Ellen Gallagher and Cheryl Warrick discuss how gender and race inform art*

Warrick's cool abstractions are opposite the equally gauzy and introspective paintings of Ellen Gallagher.

Freeman's work is likely to be the most familiar to many visitors, as it was to me. He has long since been "mainstreamed." The paintings in the Rose show are based on both the "Angel" section of Blake's "Songs of Experience" and the Ifa, a West African system of spirituality. They're powerful works, filled with angels, warriors and shadows. The immense, five-part "I Armed My Fears With Ten Thousand Shields and Spears" is congested and exciting, with willful distortions, so that oversize fingers resemble palm fronds and the brilliant carmine of the shields looks ready to leap off the canvas.

McFarlane's inspirations, like Freeman's, come from different parts of the globe and various belief systems. Some of the huge paintings are cathedral-like, with glowing passages that read as stained glass. A large work on paper, "Ascent," is a jumble of heads and legs – like parts of department store mannequins – in a brushy cloud of gold. The body parts appear to be ascending into heaven. The lower part of the paper is blank, except for a few drizzles of pigment, perhaps the trail of glory the figures have left behind.

Edward McCluney and Joseph Norman both focus on faces of black people. McCluney's series of linoleum prints, "Nine American Masters," are blunt to the brink of caricature, depicting Bill Cosby's smugness, Lena Horne's mile-long smile, James Baldwin's introspection and Alice Walker's extraordinary ordinariness. Norman's faces aren't famous, but they're powerful – lithographs in an Expressionist vein, with close-ups so close that the top and bottom of the face are sometimes sliced off. The faces look wary and cautious, and Norman has battered them with slashing strokes, specks of ink, cruel hatchmarks.

Cheryl Warrick layers paint, then sands and washes the canvas. The result suggests deep spaces filled with floating, bobbing orbs, quavering lines and imprints. Ellen Gallagher's ethereal paintings are composed of hundreds of uneven lines of dots that look like doll's eyes – little black circles inside white circles, creating a mosaic effect. These works in oil and paper on canvas have a waxen fragility, a slightly faded look. They're hung very low on the wall, so you see them at eye level.

Chinn's ceramics read like collaborations with the natural world. Based on circle and spiral forms – some of them look like sections of an inner tube – they have a satisfying roundness and crackled, richly glazed surfaces. Some works are on stone pedestals, as if to keep them from contact with artifice. Chinn's "Moon Flowers" is a series of round forms lying on a bed of Black Beauty slag – sparkling coal crushed to sugary fineness. The "flowers" are oddly formed, with dented middles, gleaming with threads of gold or, in one case, a whole surface of opulent gold leaf.

Both Lawrence Sykes and Ah John Keys make mixed-media wall reliefs; both are true "finds," artists whose work hasn't been shown enough and who deserve to have in-depth solos. Sykes fills elegant wooden boxes with printed papers, ribbons, shells, twigs, leaves and more. The exquisiteness only underlines the poignancy of works like "Goree III," named for the infamous island off West Africa where slaves were held prior to being shipped to the United States. "Goree III's" images include chains and empty handcuffs, a rusting lock, and a dim photo of a perversely graceful staircase in the building whose function was so evil. Bordering the central, symmetrical scene are bands of hundreds of tiny black stick figures, crammed together the way slaves were crammed into ships. The symmetry of the piece is a horrible symbol of the rationalization that made slavery acceptable to so many for so long.

A lot of found object art looks like the artist found the objects and then called it a day. Not Keys' work, though. His compositions are tightly composed and refined, making the most of the visual and textural possibilities of hardware, metal letters and numbers, cloth, stones and scraps of wood.

And, finally, Kofi Kayiga's paintings and pastels are joyous, juicy, and alive with dots, circles, chevrons, spikes and zigzags. Woven into the patterns are human faces – pointy purple or Cubistically fractured – and animals. This is work to lift the spirit on a winter's day.

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