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ART REVIEW

'Something Over Something Else: Romare Bearden's Profile Series' Review: Bright Reflections

Inspired by a magazine profile, the artist created a two-part series of collage-paintings documenting his childhood in North Carolina and experiences as a young artist in Harlem.



Romare Bearden's 'Artist with Painting & Model' (1981) PHOTO: ROMARE BEARDEN FOUNDATION/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

By Peter Plagens

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Atlanta

Romare Bearden (1911-1988) is an intriguing anomaly rife with contradictions and combinations that fade in importance because his art is so profoundly good. He was a black artist depicting black subjects, yet his works have nearly universal appeal. His only formal art education was a brief encounter, in his 20s, with the German Expressionist George Grosz at the Art Students League in New York, but he became an art-savvy autodidact by copying oversize reproductions of paintings by Old Masters. "Something Over Something Else: Romare Bearden's Profile Series," the current Bearden exhibition at the High Museum of Art here (it

then opens at the Cincinnati Art Museum on Feb. 28, 2020), is an artist’s aesthetic reaction to a piece of journalism about himself.

Something Over Something Else: Romare Bearden’s Profile Series

*High Museum of Art
Through Feb. 2, 2020*

To explain: In November 1977, the *New Yorker* magazine ran a profile of Bearden by Calvin Tomkins. The artist was inspired by the essay to embark on a two-part

series of collage-paintings—Part I about his childhood in North Carolina in the 1920s, Part II concerning his experiences as a young artist in Harlem in the 1930s. The works were shown in two exhibitions, in 1979 and 1981, at the now-defunct Cordier & Ekstrom Gallery in New York.

“Something Over Something Else,” a partial reprise of those two shows, is small and modest as major museum offerings go—just 33 over-the-couch-size works—but remarkably complete. Only about a dozen of the 47 collages Bearden originally made in the combined series are not in the show. (Collectors can have any number of reasons, ranging from fear of damage to avoidance of publicizing their holdings, to demur from lending works to an exhibition.) Moreover, the show retains Bearden’s narrative sequence, and many of the collages are displayed in their original gallery frames.



Romare Bearden’s ‘School Bell Time’ (1978) PHOTO: ROMARE BEARDEN FOUNDATION/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

Because they’re about long-ago boyhood memories, the 20-plus works in “Profile/Part I, The Twenties” are generally smaller than those in “Profile/Part II, The Thirties.” Rendering the meaning of the exhibition clearer is an informative but hardly galvanizing ancillary film showing Bearden and a close friend, the writer Albert Murray —whom the artist met in Paris in

1950—conversing with some jocularly (Bearden is a particularly unpretentious artist) at the second New York show. Bearden says to Murray, who had titled the works in the exhibition, “All I had to do was wait for you to do it.” One of the most synoptically elegant titles ever, “Slapping 7th Avenue With the Sole of My Shoe,” demonstrates the wisdom of Bearden’s choice.

Monographic museum exhibitions usually have a dual purpose. The first is to give us an overall picture of the artist’s life, career and—most important—oeuvre. This the High Museum does in visual synecdoche with a modest show that manages to convey the major virtues of Bearden’s art: inventive composition; a personal color palette waxing toward beautiful blue; a method, collage, that he practically came to own; and a convincing but reserved emotional rendition of an important subject—early 20th-century black life in America.



Romare Bearden's 'Johnny Hudgins Comes On' (1981) PHOTO: ROMARE BEARDEN FOUNDATION/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

The second is to provide the audience with an aesthetic experience. For me, the peak from Part I is “Mecklenberg County, Sunset & Moonrise With Maudell Sleet” (1978), in which, with a feeling not unlike Jean-François Millet’s “The Gleaners,” Bearden uses oversize hands to remind us of the surfeit of manual labor American blacks have always performed. It encapsulates black experience in America—disrupted, often painful, but with dignity maintained, and therefore beautiful in its own way.

In Part II, the featured work is 1981’s “Artist With Painting & Model” (captioned by Bearden, “Every Friday Licia used to come to my studio to model for me upstairs above the Apollo Theater”). It’s the largest piece in the exhibition, as well as its capstone. The High Museum acquired the picture five years ago, and the list of participating purchasers is as long as the line of cars on Peachtree Street at rush hour. “Artist With Painting & Model” earns its place of honor, and is one of Bearden’s best pictures. It’s marked by a juxtaposition of a patterned floor and a plaid rug on which the model (who appears as a plain rich brown silhouette with one pink foot sole) stands, along with some smaller more articulated shapes. The work also contains a

rare Bearden self-portrait, achieving a startling likeness with just a few drawn lines on a cut-paper head.



Romare Bearden's 'Maudell Sleet's Magic Garden' (1978) PHOTO: ROMARE BEARDEN FOUNDATION/VAGA AT ARTISTS RIGHTS SOCIETY (ARS), NEW YORK

My personal choice in Part II, however, is the humorously bouncy “Johnny Hudgins Comes On” (1981). The comedian’s visage veers toward blackface (in which Hudgins sometimes performed) and the theater’s name (“Lafayette”) is prominent. The spirit of the piece is oddly uplifting. The artist, in fact, said: “He was my favorite of all the comedians. What Johnny Hudgins could do through mime on an empty stage helped show me how worlds were created on an empty canvas.” This is precisely what Romare Bearden could do with pieces of cut paper and a little paint applied to board, and “Something Over Something Else” helps show us—poetically—the poignancy and triumph of black life in the South and in Harlem during the fraught third and fourth decades of our previous century. If you’re anywhere near this show, it’s required viewing.

—*Mr. Plagens is an artist and writer in New York.*