

David Driskell at DC Moore

by Eleanor Heartney, March 2007



Dance of the Masks, 2000, collage, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 x 48 in.

The influence of tribal art on the early modernists is well known. David Driskell, who is both an artist and a leading authority on African-American art, takes the mix a step further, blending the visual language of modernism with forms, colors and images drawn from his own African ancestry. The result is a remarkable synthesis, in which echoes of Matisse, Gauguin, Picasso and Rouault resonate in multilayered works that draw equally from African masks, totem figures, textiles and the intense spirituality of African-American Christianity.

Driskell was raised in rural North Carolina in the foothills of the Appalachian mountains. The catalogue accompanying this show recounts a childhood in which the disadvantages of poverty and segregation were offset by an immersion in craft and handwork by people for whom self-sufficiency required the making of things. Driskell first attended Howard University and then the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., where he became acquainted with both African culture and modern art.

Now 75, Driskell here presented work from 1996 to 2006 that included paintings, prints and other works on paper. He moves easily between these mediums, incorporating, for example, bits cut from magazines and from his own prints into collages. His paintings have something of the quality of batik fabric. Suffusing all the works are rich, earthy colors that describe a universe in which human beings and abstracted tropical foliage seem to spring from the same pantheistic spirit.

One of the largest works here was *Dance of the Masks* (72 by 48 inches), 2000, in which a gathering of African masks floats amid spreading green and blue leaves beneath a bloodred moon looming in a red sky. Toward the bottom of the canvas a pair of collaged snakes defines a border between the upper and lower worlds. The work pulses with patches of brilliant color that seem to have been pulled out of an enveloping darkness.

Dance of the Masks evokes ancient African rituals, but the presence of the snakes also points to the Christian myth of the Fall. Indeed, many of the works here draw in part on the narrative of Eden, which seems to merge with utopian visions of an Africa unmarred by the ravages of colonialism and the slave trade. *Temptation in the Garden* (1999) is a smaller (30-by-22 1/2,-inch) work on paper in which the undulating foliage nearly masks a snake and a human hand respectively biting and gripping apples. *Angel in the Garden* (2005) is a totemic figure, again partially obscured by leaves, who seems to be holding not a sword, as is typical in Edenic iconography, but a flute. *Angel of Peace* (2005) is even more beneficent. This haloed figure, whose white wings fill the frame, grasps a white dove and a frond.

Driskell's complex compositions reward prolonged observation. They demonstrate the pleasures of a cultural hybridity in which diverse traditions are made to enrich each other.