

Tradition Refined: The Thompson Collection

Rice University is hosting the traveling exhibition "Tradition Redefined: The Larry and Brenda Thompson Collection of African American Art" in conjunction with the university's Centennial Celebration. The exhibition, which opened Sept. 13 in the Rice Gallery, is organized by the David C. Driskell Center for the Study of the Visual Arts and Culture of African Americans and the African Diaspora at the University of Maryland at College Park. "Tradition Redefined" features 72 works by 67 artists drawn from the Thompsons' extensive collection.

The collection came to the attention of Rice when Janice Cornell Doty '60, centennial commission co-chair, and Paul Allison, director of development, met with Brenda Thompson in her Connecticut home. "It was a 'wow' experience," Allison said. "The variety and quality of their personal collection was stunning." Allison had the idea to feature the collection as the university's centennial art exhibition and brought Rice's senior administrators — including Dean of Humanities Nicolas Shumway, who traveled to Connecticut to view the collection — on board. The Thompsons have a close Rice connection; they are the parents of Rice chemical engineering grad Larry Thompson Jr. '98.

Adrienne Childs, an independent scholar and fellow at Harvard's W.E.B. Du Bois Institute for African and African American Research, curated the exhibition. For Childs, it was meaningful that the Thompsons were not only culturally vested in the art, but also personally connected to those living artists whose work they collect. Childs sought to work within the Thompsons' vision: "I made my selections based on their priorities and sensibilities as collectors and my judgment as an art historian and curator as to what artists are important."

The resulting exhibition is an eclectic blend of works by well-known and established artists, as well as lesser-known and

unknown artists whose work the Thompsons champion. There are works by renowned historic figures like Henry O. Tanner and Romare Bearden as well as acclaimed contemporary artists like Radcliffe Bailey and Howardena Pindell. There also is an emphasis on Georgia artists — the Thompsons spent 30 years in the state.

Childs says she found some real gems by lesser-known artists. She highlights "Still Standing" (2007), an abstract work on canvas by Maria-Lana Queen that employs a complementary color vibration of green and red. Queen is a former fashion model who began painting to cope with the death of her brother.

Childs was also struck by Ealy Mays' "The Last Vernissage" (2004), a thickly painted black and white work that shows a high-ceilinged gallery drawn with an exaggerated perspective. Gestural black and white paintings hang on the walls, and there are the remnants of the opening's bar in the foreground. The art looms large in the room, dwarfing the figure of a black man pushing a broom, sweeping up the postopening debris.

"I chose a couple of almost unknown artists," Childs said. "I wanted to put in people who I'd never heard of but whose work I liked."

Although the exhibition title includes the phrase "African American art," Childs points out that this commonly used phrase isn't completely accurate. It's really "art by African Americans," Childs said. "The notion that somehow the art object is inherently raced is a flawed concept. Even if the object or image represents black subject matter, it is much more than that." The varied works in "Tradition Redefined" speak to artists defining themselves.

"Tradition Redefined" will be on view in the Rice University Art Gallery exhibition space through Nov. 18, 2012. Rice Gallery will feature a project by Korean-American artist Soo Sunny Park in January 2013. ■

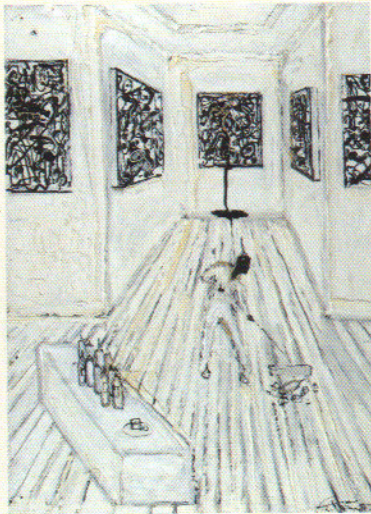
—Kelly Klaasmeyer

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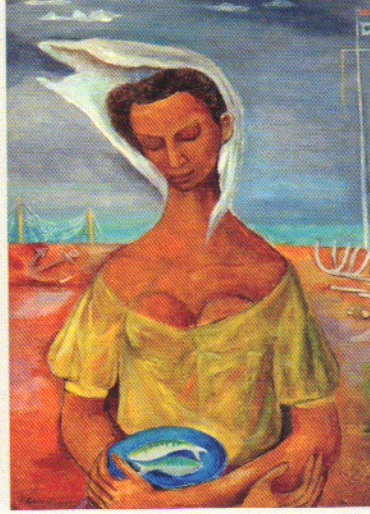
Preston Sampson, "Guardian Series" (2005)



Ealy Mays, "The Last Vernissage" (2004)



Ellis Wilson, "Dusk" (1950)



Frederick D. Jones, "Female Figure at Shore" (1950)