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ART PREVIEW ARCHIVES

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Re: Generations

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To some, "African-American art" refers to paintings, sculptures, graphic arts, crafts and architecture created by North Americans of African descent -- a purely racial fact.

For others, however, this definition fails to account for artists of non-African descent but whose work is shaped thematically or stylistically by black culture.

The African American Cultural Center's exhibition *Generations: Six African American Artists* is caught somewhere in the middle. Although the exhibition places race and tradition -- typical African-American curatorial themes -- front and center, fortunately there's much more to be found here. Immersing us in work that shares an attention to detail and mastery of technique that's typically underscored, or simply overlooked in such exhibitions, *Generations* is far more promising than its title suggests.

The premise of the exhibition is universal enough: "[G]enerations of artists have come before these six ... and generations will continue to emerge," reads the exhibition brochure. Curator Grace Stanislaus selected three respected Pittsburgh artists, sculptor Thad Mosley, fabric and textile artist Tina Williams Brewer and printmaker Jo-Anne Bates, to choose an artist whose work each admired. Except for the brief reference in Thad Mosley's statement to "talent," we are not told the criteria for selection, but the work is truly impressive.

Brewer, whose "story quilts" are known nationally, found inspiration in the work of multifaceted artist Mary Martin. Martin's work includes ceramics as well as prints using a variety of materials and techniques. Martin's work pulls you in with its obsessively detailed patterning, "coded" symbols, contrast and vibrant color.

In a series of five prints titled "The Description of the

Indescribable,” Martin presents images of finely scripted phrases embraced by imagery and colors that catch your attention and draw you closer. Her work is beautifully clean, due in part perhaps to her architectural and design background as a graduate of the Rhode Island School of Design. Though Martin and Brewer’s work is clearly distinct, they share a use of traditional African and African-American symbols, which makes their work beautifully rich.

Bates, meanwhile, chose the work of photographer and installation artist Lonnie Graham. Some might remember Graham’s work from a series of community-inspired installations commissioned some years ago by the Three Rivers Arts Festival. Graham’s “A Conversation with the World” series of large black-and-white photographic prints portray individuals from Senegal, Mexico and elsewhere. His subjects are selected randomly, “without reference to social status, political or philosophical predilection,” the label tells us, though only a partial transcript of the conversations is presented.

Bates’ own embossed and monotype prints are inspired by everything from music and popular culture to religion and personal freedom. She impressively uses color and type, as in her “Hip Hop” and “Different don’t matter,” to convey complex ideas.

Sculptor Thad Mosley selected an artist whose work he knows very well, his son Anire Mosley, and we can feel the synergy between the two. The elder Mosley’s wood-and-metal pieces, paired with the younger’s lithographs and paintings, conjure a sense of calm. Anire Mosley’s individual portraits of members of hip-hop group Run-DMC are poignant, while in his “Lynching” series, pen, charcoal and chalk prints sensitively depict individuals and moments in time embedded in our collective memories.

While these artists share a commitment to artistic knowledge and practice, how they inspire each other’s work, if at all, is less clear. Perhaps if the young/emerging artists had selected artists whose work inspired their “own aesthetic,” as the brochure puts it, *Generations* might have reached a more exciting pitch. Instead I found myself wanting more from this show -- visceral reactions instead of intellectual inspiration with little emotion.

Yet interestingly enough, the comment I heard most often murmured in the gallery was a surprised “Wow,” as in “This is *really* good.” And perhaps that illustrates why such shows are important.

**Generations: Six African-American Artists continues through Aug. 20, 2009,
209 Ninth St., Downtown. 412-258-2700**



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