



Click Here to check out  
IKEA's  
Monthly Calander of Events

MAIN FEATURE

NEWS

VIEWS

VISUAL ARTS

MUSIC

LITERATURE

ON STAGE

ON SCREEN

SPORTS

FOOD & DRINK

SAVAGE LOVE

EVENT LISTINGS

CLASSIFIED

CP EXTRA

SEARCH

CONTACT

ADVERTISING INFO

650 Smithfield Street  
Suite 2200  
Pittsburgh, PA, 15222  
Tel: 412.316.3342  
Fax: 412.316.3388



## ART PREVIEW ARCHIVES

10/13/2005

### Identifying Colors

Writer: [JANERA SOLOMON](#)

Beautiful work and inherent contradictions make fascinating the current exhibition at the Society for Contemporary Craft. *Colors: Ten African American Artists* features 38 works including craft, painting, sculpture, and conceptual and installation art by artists from across the country. Much of it moves beyond traditional craft materials, structure and process to blur the line between art and craft, traditional and contemporary.

Sharif Bey's sculptural "Black Ice" series explores ideas of commodity and value in popular urban youth culture; it's "bling" at a new level. Using the beaded form as a visual metaphor (beads are the earliest form of human adornment and currency), Bey's work asks us to consider material culture and questions of worth and value.

His "Ivory Bling," a ceramic sculpture of oversized, roped white beads, and "Bling Black" -- a cylindrical piece consisting of roped, dark-colored beads -- challenges our notions of human value, compounded by issues of race and class. Precisely manipulating weight and scale, Bey humorously cautions against the artificiality both of chasing wealth and of wealth itself. Taking it a step further, Bey's "Combative Black Men" -- a sculpture of beads, fists and heads, roped together -- powerfully suggests ideas of maleness, race and value.

These sculptures intuitively raise questions of human value -- How much are you worth? How do you know? -- whose answers are more complex than the exhibition statement's suggestion about "African-American unity."

Sculptor Lydia Thompson, meanwhile, explores identity by manipulating the human form. She beautifully blends adobe architecture and African sculptural techniques to capture the complexity of racial and cultural identity. It's hard to draw the lines between her cultural influences: Her ceramic human figures look and feel *African* in some ways, yet clearly also feel like something else.

If *MTV Cribs* is any indication, home and identity remain inextricably linked. We're judged by our neighborhoods as well as by the type of structure -- house or mansion, apartment or loft? Beverly Buchanan's cabin-like wooden "shacks" are carefully constructed, much like architectural models. With plain labels such as "Untitled (Red Shack)," Buchanan celebrates the roughly built structures (home to the world's poorest) as symbols of human innovation driven by the desire for survival.



Work by Lydi

Contrary to mainstream ideology, the people, places and experiences that form our identity are often too many to identify. Capturing this complexity are Cheryl Riley's "totems." Inspired by the writings of James Baldwin, and adorned with a range of materials -- from seashells and beads to Indonesian pebbles and jade -- the box-like structures are intoxicatingly detailed and really amazing.

Other artists, inspired by African-American history, use narrative to explore identity. For example, Pittsburgh-based Tina Williams Brewer offers "I came from a long line of big boned women," a layered quilt inspired by the eponymous Marta Effinger poem; it's a beautiful piece celebrating family traditions and personal pride.

Still, there are contradictions. "Color" shows -- as exhibits featuring minority artists are disrespectfully called -- are typically perceived as harboring work of lesser quality. Developed presumably to provide exposure for work by artists of color, such shows instead often encourage narrow and shallow readings of the work and its implications. Rather than understanding the work as contemporary art, such shows relegate it to functional traditions, emphasizing the autobiographical and denying the intellectual, creative and technical expertise of the artists.

Refreshingly, the work in *Colors* outpaces the limitations of the exhibition statement and title. The collection clearly speaks to a contemporary sense of black identity -- one that moves beyond the politics of difference of the 1990s -- and defies categorization. The work reflects the diversity of responses to questions of identity, and makes it clear that ideas of movement, adaptation and transformation, regardless of race, are universal.

**Colors continues through Oct. 22. Artist Lydia Thompson lectures at 6 p.m. Fri., Oct. 14 (\$5) and hosts a studio workshop on paper-sculpture narrative from 9 a.m-4 p.m. Sat., Oct. 15 (call for more information). Society for Contemporary Craft, 2100 Smallman St., Strip District. 412-261-7003**



[Printer-friendly version](#)



[E-mail author](#)

[Home](#) [Cover Story](#) [News](#) [Views](#) [Visual Arts](#) [Music](#) [Literature](#) [Performance](#)  
[Film](#) [Food](#) [Savage Love](#) [Event Listings](#) [Classifieds](#) [CP Extras](#) [Search](#) [Contact](#)

