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Galleries: At Fleisher, 'All Different Colors' of art

Edith Newhall for the Inquirer

If you walked into Fleisher/Ollman Gallery's summer exhibition "All Different Colors" unaware that its 19 artists share various developmental disabilities and behavioral health disorders, you might not recognize what they have in common until a third of the way through the show. Several works incorporate a kind of naive expository writing, and many contain repetitions of shapes and lines that might suggest an anxious state of mind. Otherwise, much of the work looks like what it is: the contemporary art you encounter in galleries and art fairs around the globe. That's a tribute to the skill and imagination of these artists, but also to the three local art centers that have cultivated their creative potential: the Center for Creative Works in Wynnewood; the Creative Vision Factory, Wilmington; and Oasis, Philadelphia.

Every artist in this show has a strikingly individual style.

This is particularly obvious in the works of its three portraitists: Dwayne Boone, Alonzo Troy Humphrey, and Samuel Abu Sesay.

Humphrey has an affinity for life's tough survivors. His small, intensely rendered ink drawings on paper of unsmiling women and men exaggerate the depth of lines around their eyes and mouths, making them appear more like carved-wood sculptures than living humans.

Boone's confrontational pencil drawings of the faces of African warriors are made up of hundreds of densely lined squares that suggest the textures and compositions of textiles. Shapes left undrawn and white pop out from the monotone dark graphite hair and skin as headdresses, the whites of eyes, and ornate white body paint decoration. Boone is also represented by a drawing of studies of the faces of bats that use their natural skin and fur patterning and eerie resemblance to humans to powerful effect.

At first glance, the distinctively curved faces of Modigliani and Matisse's models would seem to have inspired the look of Samuel Abu Sesay's simple watercolor portraits. Then you realize that Sesay has added on a Cindy Sherman strategy. These portraits, based on photographs of deceased well-known men and women, are actually paintings of Sesay impersonating Carroll O'Connor, Grover Washington Jr., President John F. Kennedy, and Joan Crawford. Each dead celeb is posed



Geraldo Gonzalez's drawing "Flying Bus With Traffic," 2013, colored pencil and graphite on paper, in Fleisher/Ollman Gallery's "All Different Colors."

against a vivid background color, takes up approximately the same amount of space in the picture, and has the same long nose and bow-shaped lips.

There are artists here, too, who would seem to qualify as true visionaries.

"Queen" Nancy Bell's gouache paintings of eccentric but carefully organized agglomerations of forms that might be derived from such diverse sources as the joker's hat with bells attached to it, sunflowers, or a party plate composed of sliced ham, deviled eggs, and olives clearly have to have emanated from a mind that accepts all possibilities in the service of art.

I'm guessing someone introduced Arthur Eric Stewart to the work of the self-taught artist Henry Darger and his warrior girls and Indian painting, but the self-awareness of the characters in his colored-pencil drawings of scenes describing contemporary domestic strife between Muslims and Christians also reminded me of images from ancient Greek theater. However these images came about, they seem to have arrived straight from the heart.

The takeaway from this show is not how "outside" the canon contemporary non-art-school-trained artists with mental or physical impairments can still be, but the polar opposite: how remarkably connected they can be to official art-world trends and parallel art histories if they so choose.