

# Eye Wash

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Sylvia Snowden, JESSIE, acrylic on canvas, 72x120 inches

## SYLVIA SNOWDEN

October 12 - January 31  
The National Museum of  
Women in the Arts  
1250 New York Ave, NW  
202-783-5000

Sylvia Snowden's paintings are like powerful elemental forces. Continents of color collide and uneasy residues seep up through the cracks. Snowden is the first artist featured in the National Museum of Women in the Arts' "Artists + Community" series. The program highlights Washington-Metropolitan artists "who are addressing the needs of the local community through their artwork."

In her curator's statement, Angela Anderson Adams writes that "this series is a testament to Snowden's innate ability to capture the psychological essence of her subjects." Certainly, these are landscapes of the psyche, where masses of paint become metaphors for repression and - pain. On these canvasses, emotions are unremittingly crushed but refuse to submit.

Her dense and thickly clotted paintings are the stuff of emotion and memory — places (the South), people (her mother and father), dates — but instead of nostalgia, she gives us hot coals burning in the ashes.

In "G," for instance, a stallion of spinning black paint stampedes over a fiery red field, trying to beat it down with its hooves and failing. In "Jessie," a cloud of thick, choking red suffocates a more reflective, bruised field of greens, purples and a deep blue-black zone. Despite its sheer mass, it cannot overpower them.

Here is a struggle for dominance, a war between repression

and anger. In one, pain tries to numb a deep rooted rage. In the other, rage tries to engulf pain. As much as they struggle, both find room on the canvas.

Even as I respond to Snowden's metaphors, I feel cautious about my psychological readings. What can I say if I see struggle and resistance in these paintings, and then discover that they refer to the artist's parents? Am I stumbling into the treacherous territory of family relations? The problem with sticking too close to biography is that we may get the story wrong — the artist has dedicated this show to her family "with appreciation for their continuous love and support."

Or maybe the artist has entered a special, vulnerable place, where the love and respect she feels for her parents allows her to openly explore unsettling, ambiguous emotions. Then again, Snowden is an African-American artist; maybe the repressive force is a racist society. These are just two possibilities that the work calls up when I put it into a wider context.

The social concerns of "Artists + Community" raise another question. With so many social issues staring us in the face, can we afford the luxury of abstraction? I think artists want to reflect society, but how can we do that without creating propaganda? The power of abstract art, I think, is its ability to create emotional complexes, the way music does, to represent inner struggle, inner resolution. As artists, we are not expected to give answers; instead, we can offer ways of seeing and understanding, ways of making the unknown come up to consciousness, and I think this is what Sylvia Snowden does.

Contributed by George Howell, sculptor