

# SYLVIA SNOWDEN ENGAGING EXPRESSIONISM

by ALICE THORSON

*It began to seem that one would have to hold in the mind forever two ideas which seemed to be in opposition. The first idea was acceptance, the acceptance, totally without rancor, of life as it is, and men as they are: in the light of this idea, it goes without saying that injustice is a commonplace. But this did not mean that one could be complacent, for the second idea was of equal power: that one must never, in one's own life, accept these injustices as commonplace but must fight them with all one's strength. This fight begins, however, in the heart. . . .*

—James Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*

The first painting I ever did was a social statement," says Sylvia Snowden, looking back on her 25-year career as a Washington painter. In a city that rewards a low-key approach, Snowden makes art that perturbs—dynamic, paint-laden, expressionist works, dripping with emotion and angst.

Since that first painting—a view of laundry lines stretched across the back porch of a decrepit tenement (1962)—Snowden has experimented with still life, landscape, and interior scenes. But her signature work is figurative, record-

ing in agitated strokes of ink, pastel, oil, and acrylic her response to the human struggle.

Among contemporary artists, Snowden perhaps has no peer in meshing style and subject matter into a seamless whole. Clashing colors, furious distortions, and turbulent brushwork give visceral expression to her subjects' innermost longings and fears. "Feelings

The movement of the brush nearly engulfs her subject matter, challenging its claim to an existence apart from the eye of the painter.

are more important to me than anything else," said the artist from the kitchen of her brownstone in Washington's "Shaw" neighborhood, where pockets of artists, dealers, real-estate agents, and architects are interspersed with some of the city's more impoverished residents. "I see things in other people that are reflected in me."

A sense of identification with her subjects gives Snowden's work a rare

conviction. Few painters have peered so deeply into the human heart, or proved so adept at divulging its secrets. Over the years her work has probed and exposed the human drama at all levels, from familial love to racist hate, from women abused by men to men abused by a system that allows them no voice. Among her salient themes is that of the battle of an entire race to wrest a positive self-image from a culture that persists in according it second-class citizenship; but it is her preoccupation with our shared humanity that forms the bedrock of Snowden's complex and challenging oeuvre.

Born of academic parents in Raleigh, North Carolina, Snowden spent her childhood in New Orleans. The family moved to Washington when she was 14 years old, and several years later she entered Howard University's art department. It was the early '60s, a time of sit-ins, strikes, mass demonstrations, and heightened racial tensions. Martin Luther King Jr. bounced in and out of Southern jails; the Freedom Riders were beaten, even murdered, as they journeyed through the South demanding equal rights and integrated service at lunch counters and bus terminals. As the political fight for civil rights intensified, black intellectuals grappled for a positive

This is the twentieth in a continuing series of "Critic's Choice" articles. These have included Jane Allen on Tony Giliberto, Joanna Frueh on Robert Lostutter, Devonna Piexzak on Margaret Wharton, Buzz Spector on Dan Ramirez, Wendy Hoffman-Yuni on Frank Pannier, Holliday Day on Dennis Kowalski, Michael Bonesteel on Nicholas Africano, Jack Burnham on Michael Brakke, Franz Schulze on Richard Loving, Mark Michael Leonhart on John Breitweiser, Eleanor Heartney on Tom Rose, J.W. Mahoney on Thomas Downing, Kerstin Rost on Norbert Tadeusz, Sue Taylor on Christine O'Connor, Tom Lachman on John Hull, Jeff Abell on Robert Daulton, Miriam Seidel on Lowry Burgess, Joyce Fernandes on Michiko Itatani, and Claire Wolf Krantz on Claire Prussian.



black identity inside an American culture steeped in prejudice and negative stereotypes.

One of a series of major black colleges founded during the Reconstruction period, Howard University has been and continues to be a mecca for the black intelligentsia. Throughout the years, the art department, founded during the '20s at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, has attracted some of the premier black artists of the twentieth century.

At Howard, Snowden studied with James Porter, Lois Mailou Jones, and James Wells, artists whose works have drawn from the black American experience and African roots and traditions. "They thought I had talent," she recalls, and no one attempted to stand in her way when, as a young artist, she rooted her aesthetic firmly in the Western tradition of expressionism, according primacy to color, gesture, and emotion in the spirit of Munch, Nolde, Soutine, and de Kooning.

Undergraduate design classes with Lois Mailou Jones honed Snowden's natural instinct for composition and color. "My mother always wore bright colors," recalls the artist, suggesting the personal significance of her strident expressionist palette. Working from models, she executed a series of figurative works, titling many after specific individuals—a practice she would maintain through the years. She received her B.A. in 1963, the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation and the year civil rights activist Viola Liuzzo



SYLVIA SNOWDEN, "Untitled," from "Multiple Figure" series, oil on canvas, 6' x 8", 1968. Photo courtesy of the artist

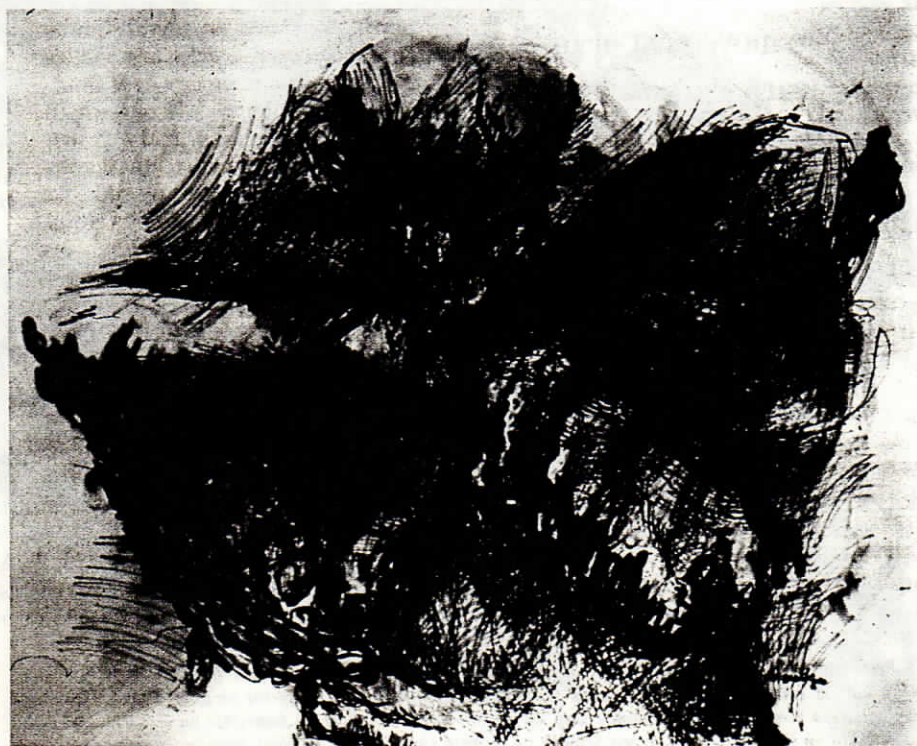
was shot to death by white supremacists on U.S. Highway 80. In Washington, one-quarter of a million people mounted the largest civil rights demonstration in history.

The impact of these events on the young student was not to surface immediately; but in the works from her

M.A. thesis show (1965), we witness the birth of one of her most potent symbols: the white woman. Red-haired and dressed in white, seated at cluttered tables, she appears in these graduate works in a series of interior scenes, rendered as cacophonies of pattern and color. At this point, several years before Snowden was to embark on a series of provocative paintings that unreservedly cast the white woman as the personification of racist oppression, it was not yet apparent what a powerful conflation of myths this image would sustain.

What was clear was her growing authority and dexterity as a painter. Here, the vestiges of naturalism visible in her undergraduate works have already disappeared. The movement of the brush nearly engulfs her subject matter, stamping it with her invention, challenging its claim to an existence apart from the eye of the painter.

Shortly after her graduation from Howard, Snowden moved to Dover to teach at Delaware State College. After a period of experimentation, during which she moved back and forth between abstraction and figuration, she launched into the first of her several series exploring racial themes. This was the "DAR"—Daughters of the American Revolution—series, comprising some 20 paintings mocking the self-satisfied patriotism and exclusionary and special claims of these white female descendants of the Founding Fathers. Many have been painted over, but



SYLVIA SNOWDEN, Michelle Haberon, mixed media, 50" x 48", 1982. Photo courtesy of the artist



among those that remain is a satirical depiction of three beaded and evening-gowned old crones, their blood-red lips mouthing a fervent pledge of allegiance before the American flag.

No doubt, Snowden's choice of this subject was conditioned by her early experiences in the South, where such claims to illustrious ancestry have always been dear to the hearts of the white middle class; indeed, a DAR affiliation is considered a badge of Southern womanhood. But it has also functioned as a badge of racism. Inherently biased toward whites—by virtue of the historical circumstance that, as black writer Pearl Cleage points out, "All black culture begins at the slave ship," the organization erupted into overt bigotry in 1939, when it barred black singer Marian Anderson from performing an Easter Sunday concert at Constitution Hall.

If the "DAR" series marked her plunge into the turbulent racial waters of the time, a second series, executed concurrently, inaugurated the celebration of female strength and endurance that was to form another recurrent theme. The fierce and instinctual atavism in her explosively worked paintings of a female bird protecting her eggs or devouring a rabbit in a flurry of painterly predatoriness presages the raw drive that comes to inhabit her figures in works like the 1973 painting of a black woman protecting her child from a rat. The primal mother—protecting, sacrificing, devouring—is a theme to which Snowden returns throughout her career.

**D**uring the late '60s, a tumultuous courtship and unhappy marriage formed the backdrop for some of the most powerful and angry works the artist has ever executed. The most salient theme of Snowden's "Multiple Figure" series is the plight of the black woman in a world where the standard of beauty and desirability is white. Reviving the red-haired woman of her M.A. show, these lushly executed paintings in earth- and flesh-toned oil depict white women fondling, even raping, black men, often as black women look on. In *Betty*, a white woman grasps a black man's penis as another black man clutches her breast. On the far right, the artist has included a self-portrait: "I'm screaming," she says.

The black woman is not always an impotent onlooker in these works. In one, she flexes her muscles in the company of two white women and a black man, whose exaggerated penis highlights his sexuality, just as the artist's placement of colored pinwheels over the white women's vaginas highlights theirs.

Much of the shock of this series



SYLVIA SNOWDEN, "Deborah Carrington," acrylic on paper, 112" x 39", 1987. Photo by Edward Owen, courtesy of Brody's Gallery.

derives from the artist's deliberate exploitation of racial and sexual stereotypes: the liberally endowed, virile black man, the impotent but brainy white man, the white woman's whorish attraction to and forbidden attraction for the black man. Stereotyping to the point of excess is a familiar tactic of rebuttal in the works of black artists such as Robert Colescott (whose efforts in this vein Snowden anticipated by several years), but in Snowden's work we find no mitigating humor.

Although completed during the early '70s, the "Multiple Figure" series was not exhibited until 1978. During its only showing—in Baltimore's Gallery 409 (now part of the Eubie Blake Cultural Arts Center)—the racial and

sexual subject matter proved too much for one Baltimore critic, who labeled the paintings "nasty." The epithet is fitting, not for the works per se, but for the racial dynamic they force us to confront.

In his landmark book *Sex and Racism in America* (1965), Calvin C. Hernton argues that America's "race problem is inextricably linked with sex." In individual chapters devoted to "the white woman," "the Negro male," "the white man," and "the Negro woman," he chronicles each group's history of sexual relations with members of the opposite race, assessing their psychological motivations as well as the consequences of each group's behavior on its own and other groups.

Hernton frankly discusses controversial notions such as the white man's fear of "the so-called superior, savage sexuality of the Negro male," which, he notes, historically has co-existed with the white man's own exploitive relations with black women. He theorizes that it was the white man's sense of guilt and fear that gave birth to the myth of "sacred white womanhood," a rallying point and ostensible justification for more than three centuries of white discrimination against and oppression of blacks.

As Lerone Bennett explains in his celebrated history of black America, *Before the Mayflower*:

With the introduction of slavery in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, it became a matter of public policy to use every available means to create an unbridgeable chasm between blacks and whites.

The focal point of this new policy was the colonial white woman, who became the primary instrument for organizing the color perceptions of whites and for extending the economic exploitation of blacks. Defending her honor and purity now became a collective imperative. Through her, sex became politics, and bodies became counters in a surrealistic game. This had little or nothing to do with the white woman, who was a mask for a deeper purpose, which was the strengthening of slavery and the complete subordination of blacks.

While the "Multiple Figure" series portrays the real consequences of this myth, simultaneously, all of these paintings work to subvert it. Snowden here sullies the white woman's "sacredness" (as earlier she sullied her privilege in the "DAR" series), by portraying her as sluttish and promiscuous in her relations with black men.



The painting *Rape* (1974), depicting a blond-haired, blue-eyed woman raping a black man, brings this series to a blunt crescendo. The strident blue sea that laps below and beyond the precipice to which she has forced her victim makes clear his fate should he refuse her advances.

In fact, *Rape* reverses the accusation that through the years has impelled the lynching of so many black men. Against a fear that has reached mythic proportions among whites, it points up in oft-suppressed fact, that the white woman, not the black man, is often the aggressor in sexual situations. Hernton's book details numerous cases in which a white woman forced a black man to have sex with her, threatening to claim "rape" if he did not. And claim, not proof, was generally sufficient. In his play *Blues for Mr. Charlie*, James Baldwin dramatizes how the very mention of black-on-white rape spells doom for the black man, to the point where, in Richard Wright's view, the charge of rape has become the "representative symbol of the Negro's uncertain position in America.

It is in this painting also that Snowden's central image most obviously admits of another historical link: the fish-scale decoration of her dress, combined with her insatiable sexual desire, marks her as a descendant of the sirens of old, and as well of the destructive and irrepressibly sensual *femme fatale*—part of the nineteenth century's legacy to twentieth-century expressionism.

In this respect it is significant that so many of Snowden's white women sport flaming red hair—the archetypal attribute of the fatal woman as we have come to know her through the paintings of Edvard Munch and the whole of nineteenth-century symbolism. The red-haired woman as *femme fatale* is a staple in the iconography of Fernand Khnopff, Gustav Klimt, and Gustave Moreau; she recurs in the plays of Strindberg and Ibsen.

As Reinhold Heller pointed out in his provocative study on the subject, *The Earthly Chimera and the Femme Fatale*, the fatal aspect of the *femme fatale* inheres not only in her destructiveness toward men, but in her own fatedness as a woman, a primarily instinctual being in the thinking of the time, wholly at the mercy of her own sexual drives.

Heller recognizes this motif as a patriarchal fiction, a cultural response to nineteenth-century woman's increasing and male-threatening demands for equality. Snowden, by layering racial politics into a symbol previously connotive of sexual struggle, doubles its power. By incorporating as well her recognition of the white woman's

In her use of the red-haired woman as the white *femme fatale*, Snowden cements her identification with the early twentieth-century expressionists.

"fatedness" to be used to prop up a racist (and sexist) system, she exposes the myth of "sacred white womanhood" as yet another invention of patriarchal culture.

Thus, the extraordinary tension of the "Multiple Figure" series resides not only in its explicit sexual subject matter, but also in the multivalence of its central symbol. In her choice of the red-haired woman, Snowden seemingly cements her identification with the early twentieth-century expressionists and the iconographic traditions of Western art. But by conflating the *femme fatale* image with a symbol that carries a particular significance in the history of American racism, she in essence appropriates it into a weapon of black struggle. Throughout this series, a virtuoso execution reinforces her impassioned testament. Whorls and swirls of thickly impastoed oil crash and boil like waves on a stormy sea, yielding a surface as explosive as her subject matter.

The year after she completed *Rape*, a close friend and mentor, Professor E.T.C. White in London, arranged for Snowden to serve a one-year appointment as artist-in-residence at the



SYLVIA SNOWDEN, "Vulture IV," from "Birds of Prey" series, oil on canvas, 40" x 36", 1966. Photo courtesy of the artist.

University of Sydney. She departed for Australia, leaving her three-year-old daughter and infant son with her mother in Washington.

In Australia, Snowden mounted two one-person shows. She also turned to working with acrylics, due to the limited availability and prohibitive drying time of oils. Working constantly, she executed a series of single-figure paintings on unprimed canvas, developing her signature iconography of contorted bodies, flailing extremities, and huge groping or covering hands. The space her figures inhabit becomes increasingly cramped as the artist "moves in" on her subject, pressurizing the already explosive emotional realities that have emerged as her salient preoccupation. Perhaps reflecting her own sense of uprootedness but also liberation at being in a foreign country, she locates these lone, heavily impastoed figures in indeterminate environments—devoid of "props" and all references to external reality.

The same is true of a series of works utilizing oil pastel and ink over a masonite support (a combination of media the artist developed in the early '70s and continues to employ, although very few of these efforts have been shown). Executed in Australia, works such as *Man Crawling* (1975) exemplify the singularly frenetic tone Snowden achieves with graphic media. Worked over a ground prepared with gesso, then washed with burnt umber, a calligraphic stroke replaces the sweep of the brush; a network of inky black lines laid under and over furious, multicolored scribbles of oil pastel composes the figure.

In some of these works she abandons the figure entirely to the evocation of a primordial, cataclysmic reality of clashing washes and angry, seismographic lines. In others, such as *Man Running*, the figure is barely discernible amid its chaotic surroundings.

In Snowden's "Australia works," the consciousness of race induced by the American environment appears to subside somewhat, surfacing overtly only in several works on the theme of aborigines—Australia's oppressed minority. But, upon her return to the U.S., it inevitably quickened.

Reunited with her children, Snowden returned to the theme of the protective mother. Echoing the earlier painting showing a black mother protecting her child from a white rat, a 1976 painting depicts a black woman shielding her child's face from a nearby white woman. "Don't be fooled by the media and what white is all about," says Snowden, articulating the mother's concern.

It is a telling comment, disclosing



her personal preoccupation at the time, but also pointing up the black artist's highly developed awareness of the insidiousness of media representation—long before it became the common currency of Postmodernism.

Another 1976 painting—of a black man and woman watching a white couple on television—directly addresses negative impact on the self-image of blacks exerted by the media's treatment of white culture as the norm, despite the fact that, by this bicentennial year, blacks accounted for more than 11 percent of the American population.

The purchase of a house in D.C.'s Shaw neighborhood prompted a shift in subject matter in Snowden's work of the late '70s. At the time, gentrification of the historic area was only a gleam in a real-estate agent's eye. An abundance of liquor stores and rooming houses kept outsiders at bay. "The poverty was unbelievable," recalls Snowden, who did what she could on a human level, feeding, clothing, and providing "taxi service" to the doctor for the wave of immigrants from the Carolinas who had settled the area. Many had never used a telephone; some found themselves living in the nation's capital without gas, electricity, or running water. Their troubles were not helped by speculators, who began buying up property, displacing black residents.

Snowden's "Displacement" series commemorates their plight. Encompass-

ing acrylic-on-canvas paintings as well as oil-pastel-and-ink works, all of these pieces are titled after specific individuals: the proud young girls, worn-out women, and jobless men who formed the daily parade outside the artist's window.

These are not, properly, portraits, however, but tributes to the human spirit—its strength in adversity, its kindness and despair. Female endurance is a particularly persistent theme, and most, such as *Theresa Edelson*, "who raised nine boys and one girl by herself,"

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or *Francine*, "who sold everything she could sell," are of solitary figures. But the series includes a large four-panel piece of children, two sisters, and a friend who regularly visited the artist's home. Snowden's rendition of the trio is a testament to youthful energy and resilience, the persistence of life amid poverty.

A series of "Displacement" works was exhibited in D.C. at Zenith Gallery and Howard University in 1979 under the title "M Street Part I"; the following

year, "M Street Part II" appeared at Washington's (now defunct) Tent Street Gallery. This second set of work on the theme is markedly different from the first. Here, full figures splay against white housepaint background evoke refugees set adrift in an indifferer white world.

The "Displacement" works signal a break with the narrative emphasis that had formed a more-or-less constant strain in Snowden's work since the "Multiple Figure" series. But more importantly, they established the form—wildly distorted single-figure pairings, pulsating with color and emotion that the artist would continue to favor over the next decade.

From 1980 to 1985, when she mounted a one-person show at Brody's Gallery in Washington, Snowden worked a number of formal and symbolic variations on the theme of the struggling individual. Although she continued to base her figures on black-skinned subjects, during this period the artist expanded her conceptual framework beyond the specific socio-economic realities of M Street.

Her focus shifted from the environmental conditions occasioned by race, to race as a wellspring of inner awareness and identification. Thus, in *Fay Tony*, for example, we find the figure's entire head executed in viscous, tarry black. The omnipresent white backdrops of the later "Displacement" works are here impinged on by heavily impastoed areas of rich, variegated color. Strategic areas of white serve to define the figure as a formal entity as well as a psychological entity. In numerous works of this period, the artist used thick black strokes to define her figures from within, anchoring and heightening the brilliant colors that coalesce into bodies and limbs, counterpointing the areas of white.

Snowden's 1985 show at Brody's comprised a selection of her efforts from the previous four years and capped off her appearance in some 20 area group shows, including numerous exhibitions devoted to black and women artists. She emerged somewhat weary of being pigeonholed by her subject matter, and frustrated, like so many black artists, at the American cultural establishment's persistence in treating art dealing with black subjects and black issues as a subcultural product—according it separate but not equal footing with mainstream "white" art.

The paintings in her second and most recent one-person show at Brody's (1987) relinquish the defining black strokes and white backgrounds that provided the structural and symbolic armature for so many of her works from



SYLVIA SNOWDEN, "Cheryl," acrylic on paper, 74" x 90", 1987. Photo courtesy of Brody's Gallery.



the early '80s. Once again, the bulk of works feature single figures—all women, some black, some white. But in contrast to the somber mood of her first Brody's show, here we encountered an array of attitudes and moods, from jubilation to despair, envy to self-possession.

The familiar space-on-figure compression is relieved in several works where the figures seem to loom larger than life, filling up the space rather than struggling against it. The palette is as rambunctious as ever, and a return to colored backgrounds means every inch of surface is covered with ebullient brushwork. Executed on sheets of paper tinged together to achieve the desired 3' x 7' dimension, these writhing, sinuous bodies burst and brim with life and "womanness," some sharing their power, others revealing their despair.

Amid this array of women, a rare double-figure painting makes a symbolic comment on male/female relationships. In *Frances and Milton*, the artist relegates the red pigment of passion to the perimeters. A gulf of thickly impastoed yellow—the glare of proximity and conflicting expectations—separates the man and woman, who struggle to maintain their individuality against the constrictions posed by togetherness.

The couple is black and, as with so many of Snowden's works, there is a political comment embedded here. For within this piece is a recognition of the particular kind of assault individuality suffers within oppressed minorities, where there is an internal pressure to conform—to suppress individual differences of opinion in order to present a cohesive opposition to the empowered majority.

One piece in particular in this exhibit offered a summation of Snowden's efforts thus far. Titled *Cheryl*, it depicts a snowy white odalisque above three gesticulating vamping figures. "Cheryl" is Cheryl Tiegs, the "Great White Model." "They're holding her up and tearing her down at the same time," explains Snowden. "That's what we're striving to look like because men appreciate women who look that way." But *Cheryl* is much more than a damning indictment of the culture of simulation.

Reminiscent in theme of her 1976 painting showing a black couple watching whites on television, *Cheryl* finds the artist simultaneously stepping back from, yet entering ever more deeply into, the specificity of the black experience. Painted in white, black, and brown, the three women below on one hand

represent a kind of "Family of Woman," united in the struggle against the standard of female beauty defined by patriarchal culture. On the other hand, the artist acknowledges the particularity of this struggle with regard to skin color.

In a culture where, if white is "best," then brown is better than black, the light-skinned black woman finds herself in a peculiar predicament—privileged by whites, for proximity to the "norm," yet at various points in history reviled by those who are darker-skinned, as a kind of living proof of white sexual exploitation of their race.

The tension injected into black culture by the omnipresence of white "norms"—particularly in regard to female appearance—is a commonplace in the fiction and autobiography of black woman authors such as Toni Morrison and Maya Angelou; *Cheryl* offers a visual exegesis.

This is a timely painting, but clearly one which reaches beyond its particular moment in media-saturated '80s America. From the very beginning of her career, Snowden has acknowledged the workings of myth and history and dealt unflinchingly with the world they have wrought. Finding relevance in the past and urgency in the present, this is in many ways "old-fashioned" work. Despite her stylistic concurrence with recent Neo-expressionism, there is nothing "neo" about Snowden's expressionism.

Snowden is a stranger to the cynicism and rarefied introspection that infects so many of her "mainstream" contemporaries. Her works evince an unshakable conviction that art can communicate, that it can heighten awareness, that society does have something of value to gain from the artist, and that the artist does have a responsibility to society. But her particular genius resides in the powerful amalgamation her works effect between the traditions of Western art and the black American experience and culture, a culture historically ignored, plundered, or patronized by proponents of the Western traditions.

Snowden bridges this gap by infusing the voice of "the Other" into the tradition of Western Modernism. She speaks with uncommon eloquence, and in a voice that all can hear, of the struggles and triumphs of the human spirit. Celebrating our common humanity even as she vigorously protests and exposes the myths that keep us apart, Sylvia Snowden is a great American painter, whose fight, as with Baldwin's, begins "in the heart." ■

Alice Thorson is managing editor of the New Art Examiner.



SYLVIA SNOWDEN: "Magaline, Bryson's Mother," acrylic on canvas, 7' x 6 1/2', 1976. Photo courtesy of the artist.