

washington review

Sylvia Snowden: *Painting and Works on Paper*. Brody's Gallery, 1706 21st Street, NW, Washington, DC. Sept. 10-Oct. 5, 1985

Sylvia Snowden: *Nathan Jackson*, 1983
Oil on canvas
Courtesy: Brody's Gallery
Photo: Robert Over



SYLVIA SNOWDEN's portraits have the exuberant, contorted vitality of boogiemen dancing in the shadows, although they represent real people—Snowden's friends and neighbors. Each work is titled after the person portrayed, but they are less individual likenesses than intuitions of the inner workings of human beings. Snowden is a sympathetic painter. Her love for people shows, as does her optimism for their fate.

Heavy whorls of brilliant paint, reminiscent of Karel Appel, give astounding visual detail in both color and texture. Picking up edges and extra texture by drawing over the dry paint, juxtaposing such unlikely hues as turquoise, indigo and orange while somehow avoiding muddiness, Snowden, after twenty years of painting, handles color with unfailing sensitivity. The color matches and intensifies the energy and tension of the writhing, big-handed bodies that press against the boundaries of the canvases. Their twisted distortions and wildly unnatural color make the images quite unreadable up close. Without distance, they become convincingly abstract.

As an example, the figure in *Nathan Jackson* (1983) shares the active crouch of many of Snowden's subjects. The exaggerated, undulating fingers and toes are as much emblems of physicality as the unseeing stare is an allusion to the unknowable. The sharp contrast of the vigorously painted figure and the bare ground on two sides reinforce the sense of duality.

The skull-like stare is shared by Neo-expressionist style figures, but Snowden's are real and specific, while the Neo-expressionist witnesses to cultural decline are theoretical inhabitants of a theoretical world where the devaluation of life, death, culture and art is a foregone conclusion.

Snowden's people are intensely personal. Their lively, troubled souls make psychological mirrors of their bodies, but where trouble, fear and pain are much in evidence and the knowledge of death permeates the visible psyche, life unflinchingly dominates. These people's intimate acquaintance with the dualistic forces of life contorts but does not defeat them. The pain of mortality only charges them with life. Snowden's optimism sets her outside the cynical realm of Neo-expressionism.

—MARY McCOY