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Small but Sumptuous: The Watercolors of Romare Bearden

By MAUREEN MULLARKEY | September 11, 2008

PRESS RELEASE



Romare Bearden, 'Narrow Sky Line' (1978-79).



Romare Bearden, "From The Waterfront" (1979-80)

Born in Charlotte, N.C., Bearden (1911-88) grew up in Harlem at the zenith of the Harlem Renaissance. His parents were prominent figures among Harlem's creative aristocracy. Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, and other well-known artists, writers, and musicians were frequent visitors to the Bearden home. Young Bearden studied at the Harlem Recreation Arts Center, where black students were tutored exclusively by accomplished black artists. It was here that the teen met sculptor Augusta Savage, who let him hang out in her studio and fired his passion for craft.

A creative giant who portrayed the African-American experience in a narrative idiom that extended the range of modernist technique, Bearden started down a very crooked path. He wandered through a brief stint playing professional baseball in the Negro League; rejected an offer to join the Philadelphia Athletics by refusing to "pass as white"; he performed in jazz bands, designed stage sets, and published illustrations in popular magazines. Bearden graduated from New York University with a degree in education in 1935, becoming a caseworker for the New York City Department of Social Services (a position he did not fully relinquish for decades). In the same year, he took night classes at the Art Students League with German émigré painter George Grosz.

After serving three years in the military during World War II, he studied part-time at the Sorbonne on the GI Bill. Home again, his art career in stasis, he took up songwriting, partly as a way to finance his way back to Paris. (His composition "Sea Breeze" was recorded by big-band leader Billy Eckstine and salsa king Tito Puente.) Not until he married in 1954 did he return single-mindedly to his art, dedicating himself to a three-year study of the Old Masters.

Galvanized by the civil rights movement, he co-founded the Spiral Group in 1963, an association of African-American artists who sought ways to further the momentum of civil rights. It was during those years that Bearden devised his signature improvisational collage technique.

Bearden's magnitude as an artist is evident in the grace of his hand, an artist's most distinguishing gift. That hand is the enlivening agent of this exhibition. Celebrated as a collagist, Bearden is less well recognized as the master watercolorist that he is. An inherently luminous medium, watercolor is also the most difficult. Painterly impulses undergird his collages, their fluidity informed by a consummate command of watercolor.

His photomontage collage technique re-created the sensuous beauty of liquid color soaking the paper surface. Six of the paintings on view include collage elements, each one worked so seamlessly into the flow of color that they appear part of the same tactile reality.

An untitled image of a nude woman leaning her arms on the back of a wooden chair illustrates the unity of Bearden's paint and collage method. One arm drapes across the chair back; the other drops downward at a realistic angle. The pendant arm, a separate piece of paper toned to the figure, ends in a hand cut from a color magazine photograph. The tiny hand, appropriately scaled, wears a wedding ring, an anecdotal detail that establishes the domesticity of the nocturnal setting.

"City Lights" is DC Moore's highlighted season opener, yet the gallery chose to showcase the ensemble in its smaller wing. It was a splendid decision. Grouped as the paintings are by theme and format, the sensation of place — their common possession — is underscored. The subtle play of Bearden's watercolor techniques, the exquisitely controlled pooling and eddying, invites intimacy. At close range, the eye does not glance over them but sinks into the surface together with the color that animates them.

The latticework of "Narrow Sky Line" is a shimmering evocation of slender buildings reaching skyward. Its color and design are visible at a distance. But only up close can the lyricism of it — that delicate threading at the edges, similar to the burr of a drypoint line — be seen and allowed to work its magic. Warm colors, translucent oranges and yellow green, rush upward into the dense ultramarine of a nighttime sky.

Here, and throughout the series, Bearden shifts deftly between graded washes and speckled wet-in-wet effects, between the brush and the sponge. His facility beckons the viewer to come close. "New York, New York," worked on soaked paper in sumptuous blues and greens, is a miracle of small, spreading accidents that know just when to stop.

Look at "Night Sky" and notice how critical to the composition are the placement and sharp, clean edges of the exposed white paper that signals lighted windows etched into the building facades. While his brush seems to move instinctively, without premeditation, that precision indicates careful deliberation. The paper itself is an active part of the overall design. For added animation, some "windows" were overlaid with a quick splash of color after the initial wash dried.

Analogies between Bearden's technique and jazz go only so far. Evident in these watercolors is the discipline and obedience to process that prompted Degas's admission that the appearance of spontaneity requires as much cunning as the commission of a crime. It is Bearden's color sense that is the freest element of these works. An exemplary colorist, he refreshes the urban scene with the radiant hues of the French Caribbean.

St. Martin was his wife's ancestral home, and where Bearden lived part of every year in the last two decades of his life. "City Lights" presents a New York electrified by an Antillean current.

Until September 27 (724 Fifth Ave. at 57th Street, 212-247-2111).