

African Mirror

by Miriam Brumer

Donald Locke, May 8-June 12, 2004, at Skoto Gallery, 529 West 29th Street, New York, N.Y. 10011.

Bending the Grid: Modernity, Identity and the Vernacular in the Work of Donald Locke, Apr. 15-June 30, 2004, at Aljira, 591 Broad Street, Newark, N.J. 07102

The African-American artist Donald Locke, who was born in Guyana in 1930, studied in England and Scotland and now lives in Atlanta, brings an unusually rich and varied sensibility to his art. Indigenous South American rock carvings, Abstract Expressionist painting (especially the Rauschenbergian school of collage on canvas), southern U.S. folk art and collaged photographs of Africans and African art alternately combine and jostle each other in Lockes paintings, sculptures and works on paper. Both of the current exhibitions, one at the Aljira contemporary art center in Newark and the other at Skoto Gallery in Manhattans Chelsea art district, have been organized by Aljira co-founder Carl E. Hazlewood.

In his primarily black and white paintings, Locke often juxtaposes elegant areas of intense red, yellow or blue with sections that are gouged, layered and collaged. Into this distinctively elemental, painterly mix, Locke inserts signs of media culture (and the very contemporary global economic and political regime that media implies) -- photos and photo-transfers of his own abstract-primitive (but modernist) sculptures, or death notices taken from Guyanese newspapers.

One series of works depicts *Brer Anancy*, a spider who in West African and Caribbean lore is a trickster, outwitting his enemies. Lockes paintings are alternately spiky, bristly, agitated, graceful, calligraphic and organically evocative, an impressive amalgam of mythological subject and expressionistic painting.

Lockes mixed-media sculptures, figural constructions of wax, roots and other organic materials, are clearly meant to have magical, fetishistic overtones. His *Ceremonial Figure* from 2002 is an evocative, chocolate-colored wax model of a partial African figure, wearing a shiny copper ring around its neck and perched atop a nest of gnarled, golden yellow roots. Attached to the back of the figure like a heavy burden is a formless, dark mass covered topped with some kind of hair or fur. Humor, elegance, technical finesse and mystery are combined here.

Other sculptures contain bush rope from Guyanas forests along with exotic woods and ceramic. These works, which resemble ritual personages, are at once quizzical, dynamic and assertive of the intention to convey several worlds at once. Indeed they breathe, grimace and challenge us to investigate their meanings.

Lockes plurality of cultural sources results in vigorous drawings, paintings and sculptures that pulsate with structural and conceptual ambiguities. They engage us, compel us to study them closely and leave us wanting to see more. Lockes drawings start at \$1,800 and his paintings range from \$7,000-\$15,000. His sculptures are priced between \$1,200 and \$8,000.

MIRIAM BRUMER is an artist who also works at the Queens Museum of Art, where she presents The Looking Series, a program of slide talks on art.