

## ART

# Comparing the Black Artist in the United States and Brazil

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

**I**NTROSPECTIVES," a show by Americans and Brazilians of African descent, comes to the Bronx Museum of the Arts from the California Afro-American Museum in Los Angeles. There, it was organized by Henry J. Drewal, a professor of art history at Cleveland State University, and David C. Driskell, professor of art at the University of Maryland. The curators contribute essays to the catalogue, so do Sheila S. Walker, an associate professor in the department of Afro-American studies at the University of California at Berkeley, and Luiza Balfros, who is research coor-

## Bronx Museum show celebrates black resilience.

ordinator for the Department of Labor in Brazil.

The curators' overall mission is to acquaint the black community in the United States with the existence of its counterpart in Brazil and with the similarities and differences between their cultures. This is enlightenment that Americans of all backgrounds could use but the question is whether an exhibition of contemporary art can provide it. Well, "Introspectives," with paintings and sculpture from 18 Americans and 14 Brazilians, does its best.

Among the Americans dominating the first part of the show is Sam Gilliam, with a triptych covered by red acrylic and enamel — poured, impasted and slashed on. An incandescent sea with "flotsam" of white, yellow and blue, it is canceled, as it were, by a collage of wood shapes, one of them suggesting a large exclamation mark. Mr. Gilliam's art was never placid, but now it gives the impression of barely contained fury.

Occasionally, the tarry surfaces of Jack Whitten's canvases are pierced by flashes of color. But the interest is in the material embedded overall —

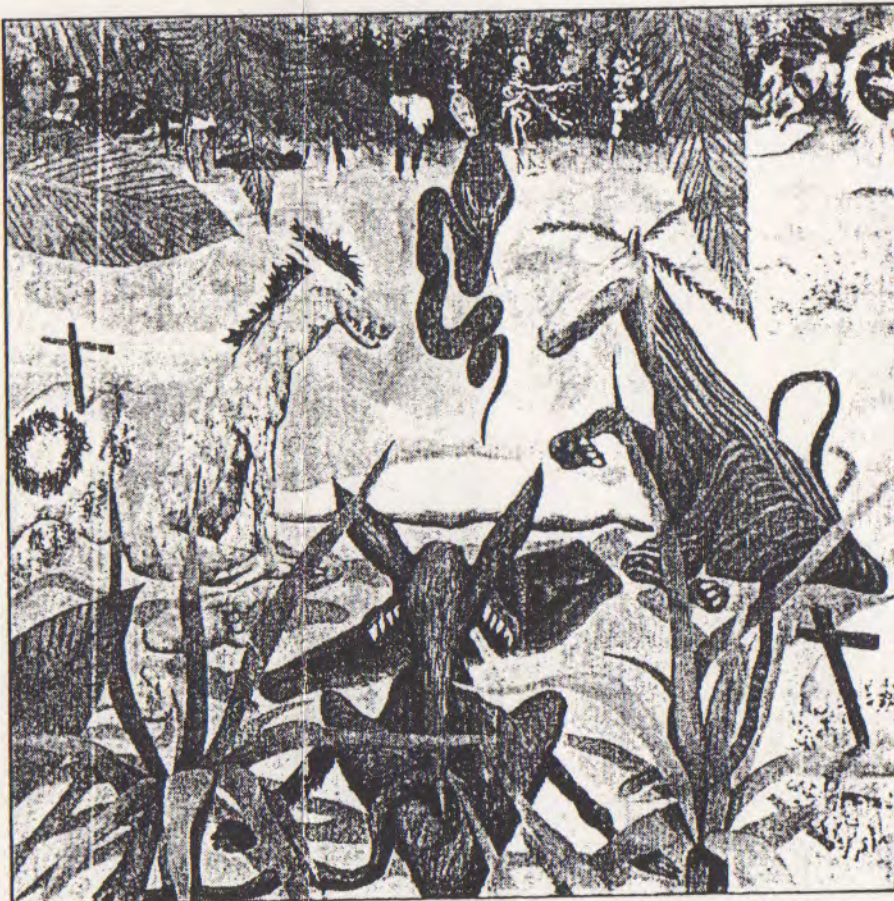
small pieces of whitish corrugated material, stretches of screening with circular holes and similar items. The results are reminiscent of a landscape seen from the air on a moonless night.

But a cross-section of the American work would include the luxuriantly impasted figures of Sylvia Snowden; Claude Clark's gestural Abstract Expressionism; the mythical figures and animals that Emilio Cruz imagines, with some help from the art of pre-Columbian, Egyptian and Pacific Northwestern cultures; and Keith Morrison's "Zombie Jamboree," a landscape inhabited by bizarre animals and at least one skeleton. With "An American Rescued in the Desert by the Mahdi and Emperor Haile Selassie," Robert Colescott is in a class by himself, as usual. The Moslem leader wears robes and a turban and the Lion of Judah a bush jacket with what looks like an ermine collar. But the American who faints in their arms is clad, reassuringly, in sneakers, slacks and a Hawaiian shirt.

Viewers expecting exotica from the Brazilian painters may be disappointed, for as a group they are quite subdued. Sidney Lizardo is an abstractionist who works with mostly biomorphic shapes in rich flat colors; José Barreto fills the canvas with geometric shapes that are patterned and solidly colored and edged with thick black lines. In Siron Franco's "How Many People Fit Into a Head," stick figures, each with a single eye, are joined at the hands to make a geometric structure.

Another figural painter, Maria Magliani, is quoted in the catalogue saying she doesn't know "how to paint blackly." But it would seem, from her blue-purple image of a woman standing akimbo in front of a bowlegged chair, that she has a fair idea of how to borrow mannerisms from Francis Bacon. Octavio Araújo, an artist who has spent time in Europe and Russia, offers monochromatic lithographs of Surrealist compositions incorporating classical and African motifs. His painting of a fantasy landscape pays homage to the proto-Surrealist, Hieronymus Bosch, and one of its many entertaining details is the figure in a ladybug's carapace, scaling a broken ladder in the foreground.

If the show is a reliable guide, the Afro-Brazilian sculptors are more adventurous than the painters. Juarez



"Zombie Jamboree" by Keith Morrison from show at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Paraiso, for example, piles large golden gourds into three totems averaging eight feet in height, hollowing some out to accommodate shells, spiny fish and other objects. The tallest of them is turned into a crucifix by the addition of bones, but the head is a human skull driven into that of a bovine. It is hard to decide if the work attracts or repels, but there is no doubt about its power.

Genilson Soares, a quasi-Conceptu-

alist with a touch of humor, contributes an installation of four pieces, two of them subtle arrangements of wood and brass rods, one a square column painted blue with a red crack running from top to bottom and the other a pair of rocks that would be on top of each other were it not for the pane of glass separating them. Working with vines and sticks, Edison Da Luz, coils them into the shape of a woman giving birth, making her look as if she

had grown of her own accord.

Inevitably, the American sculptors look more sophisticated than the Brazilian. Martin Puryear is his enigmatic self with an Egyptian-looking chair, cast in bronze, and a smooth shape in cast iron that resembles a falcon perched on a rock. Tyrone Mitchell is on hand with two of his obsessively finished wood abstractions — the one that is a triangular slab embellished on both sides with

olive green, yellow and gold leaf and crowned with a bifurcated prong is especially handsome.

But the sculptor who gets to the heart of the matter is Mel Edwards, with a line of "Lynch Fragments" — the spikes, chains, horseshoes and other metal detritus that he welds into tense knots. These intimidating black shapes are appropriately placed outside a section devoted to slavery that includes chains, leg irons and other Edwards-like devices, as well as blow-ups of engravings. Slavery — the reason for the African presence in the Americas — becomes, through this display, the one thing that the artists can be sure they have in common.

Although the colonial powers might have "mined" the living gold, each in its own African territories — Portugal's were Angola, Mozambique and what is now known as Guinea-Bissau — a map shows that the traffic was multinational. Thus, descendants of the Yoruba, who inhabit Nigeria and Benin, are to be found throughout the Americas. Their religion, Candomblé, has taken especially firm root in Brazil, with its spirits called orishas, thinly disguised as Catholic saints, and African customs and food are part of daily life for all. The show, by the way, includes photographs of street scenes in Brazilian cities and in their nearest equivalent here, New Orleans. It also features orisha dolls and figurines, along with other folk material.

In her catalogue essay, Ms. Walker indicates that this influence, coupled with the longer duration of slavery — the traffic stopped in 1863, the custom was abolished in 1888 — may account for the relative lack of racism in Brazil. Although the aim was to compare and contrast the African contribution to the arts of Brazil and the United States, the result is a celebration of black resilience. The show that examines both Africa and South America country by country is long overdue. Viewers are bound to enjoy "Introspectives." It's a good-looking display; still, the viewer will leave it impressed by the accomplishments of the black Americans but not much the wiser about the black Brazilians.

On view through May 28, the show can be seen Sunday through Friday, 11 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. The museum is on the corner of Grand Concourse and 165th Street in the Bronx. ■

Auctions

ANTIQUES Exhibitions