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Newport *this week*

ART SCENE: The Artist and the Importance of Memory

By John Pantalone on September 28, 2023



Bob Dilworth, whose latest exhibition takes up both gallery spaces at the Newport Art Museum’s Cushing building, has known few material restrictions as an artist. A painter first and foremost, he has worked at it for more than 50 years, employing techniques of drawing, collage, textiles and painting with numerous materials as he chases contemporary notions of identity by pursuing memory. It’s his own embrace of the idea that history repeats itself.

The exhibition at the Art Museum, entitled simply, “Backyard,” focuses on his relatives and close friends, usually rendered amid backgrounds and foregrounds bursting with flowers and plants. It’s sort of like his memory of people important to him resting in his own garden of Eden.

In that context, he suggests the human tendency to memorialize and to think sweetly about the personal past. We look nostalgically at our childhood and idealize it in ways that focus on comfort and joy, and that appears frequently in Dilworth’s work.

Stunning, shimmering color hits you as you open the door to the gallery. The color draws you in, but close inspection reveals the complexity of Dilworth’s method. “Paintings aren’t just paintings,” he says.



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He proves it in each piece, using acrylic and enamel paint here, printer's ink and cloth there, to make layered images that create interplay between figures, flowers and thick vegetation.

Some of the figures he renders seem almost sculptural, as if they were monuments to the formative relationships he enjoyed in his younger days. They share some similarity of purpose to the characters created by Black artists who preceded him, such as Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence, both of whom showed African Americans at leisure, a subject generally not shown in American art before them.

While much of their work cast Black figures in generic but lyrical and culturally noble exuberance that countered historical stereotypes, Dilworth strikes a balance that reflects the racial history of the country and the struggle for survival endured by strong men and women.

His work at the Art Museum is colorfully uninhibited and honest. Each piece tells a different story through the people who populate the paintings rendered as fond memories in the same way that we would perceive them in our mind's eye. Dilworth has written that his work tackles "issues of race, culture, ethnicity, family, myths, folktales, and religious beliefs through metaphor and allegory." All true, but he also deals with what he calls "moments in history that run parallel to current times, often intersecting and exploring hidden and deeper meanings of my experience as an African American male."

His protean figures appear in these works, most of them in the range of 8-by-12 feet, almost as dream figures caught in a moment. But there are politically charged, and art historical references, here as well, from foreshortened figures that recall historical paintings where Africans are cast as servants or afterthoughts to a Black Madonna holding a restless child who reaches to caress her chin.

In another painting of an older child giving a younger one a piggyback, he recalls the work of Alma Thomas, a pioneering Black artist whose abstract work sometimes referenced Van Gogh. The colorful background swirls and whirls around the children, like moving stars in the night.

Born in rural Virginia in 1951, Dilworth remembers his neighborhood's lush forest, where he played with friends as a child and the comfort and adventure it provided. Most of the paintings in "Backyard" combine that memory with the soothing effect his family and friends provided in a period when racial segregation ruled. He deals directly with that in an abstract depiction of the forest from within, leaving a slight opening that reveals a row of outlined houses. It is his recollection of the view from the woods.

There is an element in the paintings in "Backyard" that seems to confront the dual nature of a society that still has not come to terms with its own contradictions. For instance, on one of his



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visits home, he saw two nieces playing a game he did not understand. Relatives explained that they were going through an active shooter drill taught to them at school. The consequent painting shows one girl feeling for a pulse on the neck of another who is prone. It is a painful image despite the brilliant color surrounding the children.

Lawrenceville, his tiny hometown south of Richmond, made possible a day-to-day life with limited contact with white people. Dilworth attended segregated schools and was part of the last all- Black high school graduating class in the region. “An all-Black school was not a bad thing,” he recalls. “There were issues about resources, but the most important aspect of education is having mentors who care about you and want you to learn.”

For the paintings in this show, which he began in 2014 and has expanded in the past few years, Dilworth returned to Lawrenceville, population 1,100, to interview family and friends and to take photographs of them and their surroundings. The artwork directly mimics, if that’s the right word, the colors, patterns and styles of his subjects’ homes, clothing and environment. Only close looks at these large paintings reveals the minute details he employs, from bits of colorful cloth to paint markers he often uses to draw hard outlines on his characters. Look closely to see if you can find the specks of rhinestones in one of these works shimmering like distant stars.

Dilworth, a professor emeritus at the University of Rhode Island, transported himself to a radically different world when he enrolled at the Rhode Island School of Design at age 17. He earned a master’s degree at the Chicago Art Institute and remained in that city for nearly two decades before returning to teach first at Brown University, then at URI, where he served as chair of the Art Department as well as the Africana Studies Department.

He maintains a studio in a garage at the rear of a house near Providence’s Elmhurst neighborhood, a part of the city that once would likely not have allowed him to reside.

Nationally recognized and exhibited, Dilworth’s works have won many awards, including the 2014 Rhode Island State Council for the Arts Fellowship in painting, and grants from the Rhode Island Foundation, the University of Rhode Island Center for the Humanities, the National John Biggers Award in drawing and the Virginia Commission for the Arts. He has received numerous fellowships including the African American Master Artist in Residence Program at Northeastern University and Le Cité International des Artes Artist Residency in Paris.

His work is in corporate and private collections, as well as many Chicago libraries and public institutions.

The exhibition remains at the Newport Art Museum through December.