



THE ESTATE OF ROMARE BEARDEN, COURTESY ACA GALLERIES, NEW YORK

Romare Bearden, *Mysteries*, 1964 photo-montage 28 1/2 x 35 1/4" detail

Romare Bearden

ACA GALLERIES

—K.K. KOZIK

Romare Bearden once said, "I felt that the Negro was becoming too much of an abstraction, rather than the reality that art can give a subject. What I've attempted to do is establish a world through art in which the validity of any Negro experience could live and make its own logic." Perusing "The Human Condition," a sampling of Bearden's work from mid-century through 1988, the year of his death, the integrity of Bearden's vision is again apparent. A complement to the grander retrospective organized by the Studio Museum of Harlem, this show's 40 pieces manage to neatly demonstrate Bearden's assimilation of the modern and the antique.

Born in Charlotte, North Carolina to intellectual parents, Bearden harked every experience from the earliest rural ones, to the lively Harlem renaissance ones, to the post-war continental ones. Synthetic cubism fused with jazz, civil rights offset classicism. Bearden's mining of experience for the purpose of art was evident early in the social-realist-related paintings of the '60s, with their straight-ahead posterialism and simple scenes of folk at work in paintings. But

knowledge of the course of modernism is likewise manifest in *Seaside* (1941) in the Nubi-like faces echoing Picasso's *Dramatelles*, the irony lying in the difference between the Spaniard's relationship to his source and Bearden's.

Bearden is quoted in the catalog: "I seek connections so that my paintings can't be only what they appear to represent. People in a baptism in a Virginia are linked to John the Baptist, to ancient purification, and to their African heritage. I feel this continuation of ritual gives a new dimension to the work so that [it is] something other than mere design."

This nimble navigating of disparate channels simultaneously is the *je ne sais quoi* of Bearden's genius while his collage and photo-montage work are its epitomization. The patchwork acquisitiveness of his thought processes is here made literal. Freshly inspired by civil rights, Bearden turned from general subject matter in quest of themes that would sound the chords of the "black experience." Works such as *Recluse to the Moon* (1971) focus on the impact of the urban scene, the cutouts heaped on each other in visual exophony as if to evoke the simmering street which might combust. Gone is the lyrical ease of much other work. Instead there is a starkness of black-and-white vision while above, in a serene sky, targeted by a pencil cutout cum rocket, beams the moon.

MARCIA GYGLI KID

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