

A Soaring Spirit: Artist overcame kidney disease to fulfill her creative dream

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Photo Courtesy of Delta Fine Arts Center

“Majestic Women: Paintings by Tamara Natalie Madden” Delta Arts Center

When Tamara Natalie Madden came down with a rare disease, her kidneys failed and she underwent dialysis three times a week. The dialysis sessions began around 1997, shortly after Madden gave birth to her daughter. Each one kept Madden hooked to a machine for three or four hours -- and wondering how to keep sane in the process. She did so by drawing sketches for a children's book and by developing ideas for her paintings.

Madden's struggles with kidney disease ended happily in 2001 when a half-brother from her native Jamaica gave her one of his kidneys. And shortly thereafter, she entered some of her artwork in an exhibition, making good on a promise she had made to herself long ago, namely to become a professional artist.

Madden, a single mother in her early 30s, was born and raised in Jamaica. During her teenage years, she began living with her mother in the United States. The positive outcome of Madden's disease -- coupled with an unusual way of portraying everyday folk on canvas -- can be seen in "Majestic Women: Paintings by Tamara Natalie Madden," an exhibition that Winston-Salem Delta Fine Arts Inc. is presenting through July 25 at the Delta Arts Center, 2611 New Walkertown Road.

Madden now considers her half-brother her "brother." But she barely knew him when, "on a whim," she and her mother traveled back to Jamaica to reunite with family. "He thought I looked ill," Madden said recently on the telephone from her home in suburban Atlanta. "He asked me what was wrong, and I told him. He offered a kidney to me.... That's the kidney I have right now, that's keeping me alive."

Madden the artist has never forgotten this unexpected gesture of benevolence. In each of her works, there's a bird that represents what her artist statement calls "a sense of freedom."

"Dialysis ... made me feel as if I couldn't budge (and) I felt imprisoned by my illness," the statement reads. "When I received my transplant I no longer felt like a caged bird. I was free to pursue my joys and my passion. Each bird represents that sense of autonomy, that feeling that you can achieve anything through hard work and dedication."

The other singular thing about the work in Madden's Delta Arts exhibition is the way she has transformed the everyday folk in her portraits into what she calls "kings and queens." The portraits' subjects run the gamut, from homeless people to modestly paid workers at a variety of companies. All of the subjects in "Majestic Women" are black, and despite the show's title, a few are men.

For "Majestic Women," Madden has painted portraits derived from photos she took of each subject -- and then "clothed" the portraits with colorful patches of fabric in such a way that each has taken on a regal air. This process depended on the cooperation of the portraits' subjects -- something that Madden wasn't always able to secure for a variety of reasons, including their desire not to be photographed.

One person who did agree to be photographed for a portrait in the exhibit was Nicole Pritchett, 37, who works as a fabric developer for a clothing company in the Atlanta area. She said that Madden wants to "uplift with her work" -- a goal she seems to have fulfilled with Pritchett.

"I felt, 'Wow. Maybe, I could become a queen in my next life,'" she said.

The idea of transforming everyday folk into kings and queens came to Madden after she discovered that people "weren't moved by the images" in her paintings of everyday Jamaican folk.

She came to believe, thought, that if you "take a person you might overlook (and) put them in these clothes, then they become acceptable."

"You're forced to sort of look at them and appreciate them," she said.

Dianne Caesar, Delta's executive director, agreed, saying, "You're compelled to come look at them."

Sharif Bey, an assistant professor of art education at Winston-Salem State University, also sits on Delta's board. He said he recommended a Delta exhibition of Madden's work, after seeing it in a show at Syracuse University.

"It deviates from conventional portraiture by incorporating several media," Bey said.

"Majestic Women" has also reminded him of similar developments in the Harlem Renaissance, when artists worked to "combat negative images of blacks from the 19th century."

Curiously, Madden has never received any formal training in art beyond a few classes in high school. She is finishing work toward a bachelor's degree in business management, believing that talent in art only gets you so far, that "you have to understand the business of art" to make it as an artist as well.

Though she acknowledges that school can be helpful for an artist, she seems content to remain largely self-taught.

"I feel I can really express myself without limitations. I don't feel like I have to follow in anyone's rules and guidelines. I'm free. I'm not limited."