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### **Uneven show by 3 African-American women offers food for thought at Community Folk Art Center in Syracuse**

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There are themes that resonate throughout the history of art and literature. One's place in the world, the dynamics of family and the role history plays in shaping a culture influence the visual narrative and story lines of many a work of art. Among specific communities, the ethnicity of an artist adds to the individual voice by coloring the work in profoundly personal ways.

A three-person exhibition on view at the Community Folk Art Center through May 2 examines these issues in distinctly different styles and media. The show, titled "Three Sisters: The Art of Robin Holder, Sonya A. Lawyer and Tamara Natalie Madden," features the works of these three unrelated, contemporary African-American artists, who engage collaged prints, photographic transfers and mixed-media paintings, respectively, as their form of visual expression.

The success of each of these artists' bodies of work depends upon the range of her artistic voice as she explores her individual themes. One-note themes and interpretations can become monotonous over the course of an exhibition, which is where this show separates the interesting work from the not-so-memorable work. If an artist doesn't recognize when he or she has maximized an idea, then the artist and the viewer pay the price.

Such is the case with Lawyer's photographic transfers. Lawyer employs vintage photos as her subject matter and as a vehicle for reclaiming lost identities. She appropriates portraits of unidentified African-American men and women whose individual photos have been ripped from albums and then resold as individual images. Lawyer transfers these images onto squares of multihued fabrics, often hand-dyed, and then arranges them in formal and usually symmetrical configurations as a way to piece back their identities.

They suggest a Warhol-like treatment of the portrait, but they lack the imagination and variety of Warhol's approach. With a few exceptions, most of Lawyer's works seemed to be singing the same predictable song.

Holder's works, although providing more visual and narrative interest than Lawyer's, aren't without drawbacks. Her series of mixed-media collages titled "Behind Each Window, A Voice," explores the personal histories of her Brooklyn neighbors. Through the combination of painting, collage and printmaking techniques, Holder recounts tales of victimization, child rearing and assimilation by the first- and second-generation immigrants she encounters.

While I found her inspiration and much of her execution to be commendable, Holder's use of cutout flaps as window shutters on some of the pieces seemed trite and diminished the work's aesthetic and conceptual effectiveness. I also wanted the presentation of the 17-by-11-inch pieces to be taken more seriously. The works are unframed and without glass (due to the cutout flaps, I assume), which gives them an unfinished quality.

Madden's regal portraits provide the most consistent and satisfying read in the show. Here again we see the idea of identity, or lack of it, serving as the springboard for an artistic voice. Madden engages unidentified "everyday folk" and raises them to the stature of "kings, queens and warriors who never had a chance to shine."

She does this by ornamenting them in gold, a la her inspiration Gustav Klimt, effectively dressing them in patchworks of fabric, situating them in mostly soothing environments and bestowing some of them with Mannerist qualities elongated and exaggerated arms and legs. Other subjects stand as metaphors for larger concerns. While Madden approaches her figures reverently, she is not afraid to use them as a tool to point a finger at the barbs of racism.

This show, while uneven, does offer some interesting ideas to ponder. It also provides viewers with an opportunity to compare how three artists handle a body of similar themes. It's disappointment is that some of the artists don't push their media or their ideas far enough.

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