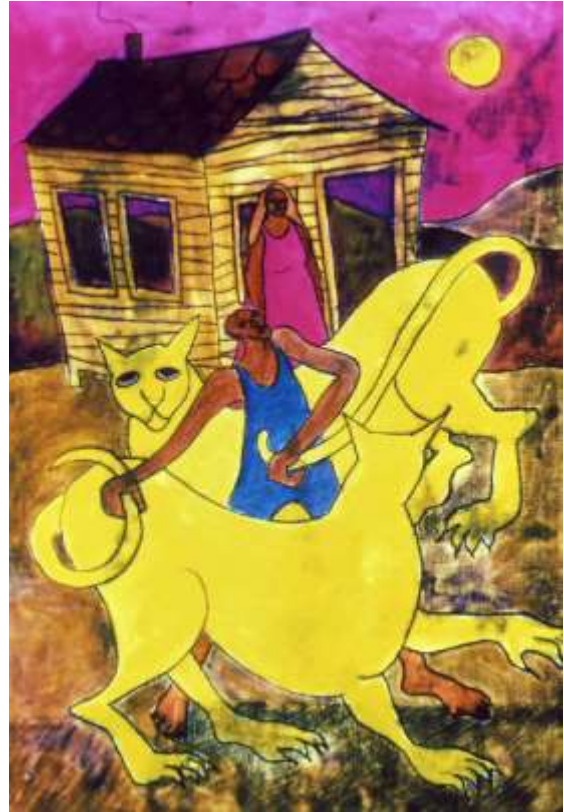


Ann Tanksley at The AC-BAW Center

By RAYMOND J. STEINER
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AC-BAW Center for the Arts, Gallery 1, 128 South Fourth Ave., Mount Vernon, NY. “Zora: A Visual Interpretation of Zora Neale Hurston: Prints by Ann Tanksley” (Jan 15-Mar 15). Some 60-odd prints—the majority, black and white monotypes—comprise what, for this viewer, is one of the most visually stimulating exhibitions I’ve seen for some time. Although, as the title implies, derived from the writings of Hurston, the powerful imagery of Tanksley stands quite well on its own—one need not make reference to any of the several texts upon which this series is based. Drawn from the black experience in America (as does also Hurston’s writings), the show in its totality embraces a nearly universal view of the human condition: isolation, alienation, love, spirituality, joy, fear, sorrow, and the mundane business of day-to-day living, common and recurrent themes in these works. This is strong stuff. As noted, the majority are statements in Black and white (a philosophical comment?)—and as only black and white can be (cf. Goya, for example—or any good photographer), explosive on the retina, its stark contrast etched in the memory. As a boy, I remember receiving as a prize in my box of crackerjacks a black and white picture of Abraham Lincoln. Instructions told me to stare at the picture for a full minute and then look up into the sky—lo and behold! there was a ghostly Lincoln floating in air.



Ann Tanksley, *Joe Returns Home*, 1991, monoprint.

As I drove back to my office from the AC-BAW art center—about an hour and a half drive—a great many of Tanksley’s images, like Lincoln’s, hung suspended before my eyes. This is unforgettable work—not shocking as many of Goya’s were (and thus held psychologically as well as physiologically), but aesthetically so: sinewy, tough, linear. Tanksley is a master of line, able to bring forth imagery that is clear, concise and freighted with meaning. No literal representationalist, Tanksley distorts, exaggerates, tilts perspective, flattens space and generally plays fast and loose with her motifs to such a fine degree that it is often difficult to discern (as it should in all good art) whether it is the subject matter or the presentation that is holding you fast—and there is a wide range of subjects here with very few that are unarresting, including scenes from everyday life to quasi-mystical “interpretations” of folk beliefs and sayings: Some seem almost stereotypic renditions (as found in say, the work of white artists) —“Strutting”, “Checkers”, “Muttsey”, for instance. Others such as “Hanging on a Tree Limb”, “Life Cycle” (there are two so titled) or “Corralled”, go far beyond any ethnic limitations, speaking to the precariousness, repetitiveness or utter isolation experienced by us all at one time or another. A few, like “Twelve on a Hill” (a stylized depiction of mules) or “Toe Party”, are,

though visually engaging, somewhat enigmatic and, at least for this viewer, did necessitate reference to the works of Hurston for full understanding. On the whole, however, it is still my judgement that these works can stand on their own and need no “outside” propping. From the homely “Courting” to such homilies as “Backsliders”, Tanksley manages her communication masterfully. Just how much is owed to the skill of Tanksley’s art and personal vision can be gathered by reading Hurston’s work (perhaps the *only* reason for going outside the work itself). As visually imaginistic as Hurston’s short stories and novels are—Tanksley claims that she “never cease[s] to run out of material to draw from”—it must be remembered that this is still Tanksley’s visual interpretation and owes as much to her own experience as an artist as it does to of the writer. She easily moves from the dark and the moody “Tell My Wife” to the delightful “Jumping at the Sun” with the sureness of accomplished stroke and can handle figure, landscape and design with equal facility, often combining them all in

memorable compositions. As noted, this is a print show (monotypes, collagraphs, drypoints, transfers and etchings) and Tanksley, I am led to believe, is primarily a painter—a sense we get a hint of in the few hand-colored collagraphs, etchings and transfers included in the show. These few, however, are enough to show that not only is she a strong linear artist but an accomplished colorist as well.



Ann Tanksley, Spunky Woman, 1989, monotype.

In “Joe Returns Home” (a hand-colored transfer), the earthy browns and yellows alongside the purplish pink generate a veritable “heat” that can almost be felt while the “coolness” of “The Catfish” (a hand-rubbed monotype) in its greens and blues offers a near-tangible opposite reaction. Color—and in one case, a reversal of image (#13)—in the six prints entitled “Jesus and Two Marys” show just how she can use the medium to advantage, giving off different “moods” in each. (A seventh “Jesus and Two Marys”, a drypoint that is both smaller and has some slight variations, again offers another mood, another “interpretation.”) In only one instance did I find this alternative

treatment of a single motif unsuccessful: “In the Muck” and “In Love” are the same image, i.e., two figures side-by-side and embracing, the former in black and white, the latter in brown and white. I could not detect enough of a difference on my sensibilities to warrant the use of different titles. On the other hand, the two prints of “The Last Supper”, identical mandala-like compositions of exquisite balance, one sepia-silver the other, gold and copper on black, are different in impact as they are similar in design.

This is AC-BAW’s first solo show by Ann Tanksley and we can only hope for more of the same. Tanksley, incidentally has had a number of previous solo shows both here in New York and in Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. She has also shown in a great many group shows in Manhattan (Christie’s, Salmagundi Club, Savacou Gallery, Bratten Gallery, etc.) and elsewhere throughout the U.S. (Chicago, Ill., Oakland, CA, Lafayette, IN, college Park, MD, Norfolk, VA, Storrs, CT, South Hadlet, MA, Pittsburgh, PA) as well as in Nairobi, Kenya. Still, she deserves to be better known.