

IN THE GALLERIES



“Campinho de Terra” by Werllayne Nunes, included in his “Palace of Power” exhibit.

## Four artists’ concepts of Black identity

BY MARK JENKINS

In an impressively detailed painting by Werllayne Nunes, a Black Brazilian girl spreads her arms jubilantly in front of a hillside slum the artist has exalted by adding gold-leafed domes to the tiny shacks. Black men and women are shadowed by pop-culture fantasy figures in E.L. Briscoe’s portraits, which are highly realistic aside from their comic-book sidekicks. Bennie Herron’s expressionist style turns Black faces into complex patchworks embroidered with symbols. And Nyugen E. Smith, employing a style of portraiture that’s cultural rather than individual, makes collages that include artifacts from his travels in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

All four of these artists, in separate but thematically overlapping shows, depict Black identity as part dream and part reality, and simultaneously contemporary, historical and mythic.

Nunes is a self-taught D.C. painter whose style draws on European neoclassicism as well as pop realism, and whose topics are mostly derived from his formative years in Brazil. To embody the contradictions of the artist’s homeland, a battered metal shed stands beneath an ornate chandelier at the center of “Palace of Power,” his Mehari Sequar Gallery show.

The people and places in Nunes’s paintings are rendered with photorealist exactitude, yet the artist includes magical touches. His subjects, often children, play on brightly colored decorative backdrops. A boy kicking a soccer ball is ringed by dozens of gold-leaf circles, and three children stand below a dangling elephant embellished with a sumptuous gold-on-red pattern. Nunes’s stated goal is to counter the notion that disenfranchised people are helpless by depicting them in visually potent scenarios. In his pictures, the fusion of naturalism and fabulism suggests that the greatest superpower is imagination.

Batman’s cowl and Iron Man’s mask appear in Briscoe’s paintings, but another sort of comics character especially haunts “Thought Bubbles,” the

artist’s DC Arts Center show. Appearing as a silhouette, or sometimes merely as a gloved hand entering from outside the frame, Mickey Mouse features in more than half the pictures. In one, a woman drives while the shadowy rodent sits in the passenger seat. In another, a silhouetted cartoon hand stretches toward humanity in an apparent parody of God’s reach toward Adam in Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel fresco. (A more modern art-history reference is the Andy Warhol banana from the cover of the first Velvet Underground album, which floats above the head of a person with hair styled in the chaotic manner of the Joker.)

Briscoe, who teaches at Morgan State University in Baltimore, contrasts his comics-derived whimsies with realistic depictions of Black men and women. Clad in sneakers, T-shirts and blue jeans with torn knees, the artist’s subjects appear grounded and natural. A Briscoe protagonist may reside on the edge of the wonderful world of Disney, but he always has one foot planted in reality.

The outside world becomes interior in Herron’s impassioned neo-Cubist paintings, which fill Black men’s faces with signs, patterns and painterly gestures. The Northern Virginia artist’s “Origin Stories,” at Mason Exhibitions Arlington, combines pictures that Herron calls “mirrors” — because they reflect history and emotion — with the artist’s own poems. (He has published three books of verse.) If the entire visages are mirrors, so in particular are the eyes, which gaze powerfully at the viewer from the mixed-media renderings.

Herron’s paintings are not literally historical, but titles such as “Scottsboro Men” invoke infamies of the African American past. Perhaps the most striking picture portrays a man with black, spiky symbols protruding from his head and is called “Middle Passenger,” a reference to the transatlantic trade in enslaved people. Yet there’s a sense of triumph in these portraits, represented by the crowns Herron sometimes positions on or over his subjects’ heads. As one painting’s title puts it, “Kings Are Everywhere.”

Faces are rare, although not altogether absent, in Smith’s “Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory,” an exhibition in the CulturalDC Mobile Art Gallery. The New Jersey artist, who spent part of his childhood in Trinidad, evokes the African diaspora as much with totems as with images. Smith’s collage-drawings and 3D assemblages incorporate soil, scraps and small objects he collected in Congo.

Central to this show are lukasas, or memory boards, made by Congo’s Luba people. The lukasas map territory both literally and figuratively, and Smith uses them to illustrate the concern of his larger “Bundlehouse” series: forced migration of Africans and people of African descent. Smith’s found objects, including a section of a blue tarp wrapped below a wooden doll’s head, refer to homemade shelters in a Uganda refugee camp that the artist saw in photos. Smith’s artistic method poignantly recalls the ingenuity of Black people under duress.

**Werllayne Nunes: Palace of Power** Through March 12 at Mehari Sequar Gallery, 1402 H St. NE.

**E.L. Briscoe: Thought Bubbles** Through March 12 at DC Arts Center, 2438 18th St. NW.

**Bennie Herron: Origin Stories** Through March 11 at Mason Exhibitions Arlington, 3601 Fairfax Dr., Arlington.

**Nyugen E. Smith: Bundlehouse: Ancient Future Memory** Through March 28 at CulturalDC Mobile Art Gallery, First and M streets SE.

### New. Now. 23

Twigs, plaster and road signs are among the mundane things repurposed or reimaged in “New. Now. 23,” Hamiltonian Artists’ showcase of its latest quintet of artistic fellows. All the contributors live in the Baltimore-to-Richmond corridor, but most hail from distant climes, including Russia, Israel and Pakistan.

Many of the images are photographic but presented in unusual formats. Edgar Reyes pixelates photos to near-abstract and prints them on chiffon or polyester sheets; Misha Ilin’s everyday domestic interiors materialize on slabs of white plaster. Madyha J. Leghari’s multilingual interactive video mixes pictures and text in a bid to illustrate the inadequacies of language.

Abed Elmajid Shalabi and Isabella Whitfield both adapt and emulate commonplace stuff. Shalabi overlaps text in Arabic and English on a custom-made reflective aluminum sign but also uses glazed ceramic to simulate a mass-produced rubber mat. Whitfield places tidy circles of leaves, twigs, bark and such on the floor, and on the wall a tiny basin that holds water from both the Atlantic and the Pacific oceans. Juxtaposition is key, even when the ingredients are visually indistinguishable.

**New. Now. 23** Through March 11 at Hamiltonian Artists, 1353 U St. NW.

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NYUGEN E. SMITH/CULTURALDC

“Bundlehouse Lukasa Study One,” by Nyugen E. Smith, part of the “Ancient Future Memory” show. His works include artifacts from his travels in the Democratic Republic of Congo.