

GreenHill exhibits Romare Bearden prints with works by Beerman

Tom Patterson/Special Correspondent | Posted: Saturday, May 24, 2014 11:00 pm

The three artists whose works are now in the galleries at GreenHill represent three different but equally confident approaches to figurative art.

One of them is North Carolina's most famous 20th-century artist, Romare Bearden, whose printmaking work is sampled in a solo show. The other two — John Beerman and Noé Katz — are contemporary artists living in North Carolina, lesser known than Bearden but well-established.

“Select Collection: Prints of Romare Bearden” consists of about 30 prints and a couple of other works by the widely known Charlotte-born modernist. These and about 50 unframed prints by Bearden (1911-1988) have been made available for viewing and sale by Lou Milano, a former Charlotte resident now living in Naples, Fla.

Most of these works play variations on Bearden's favored themes — black American domestic life and music. Many are based in the patchwork collage style that Bearden developed in the 1960s. They hint at how prolific he was, and they show how consistently good he was.

The show includes two versions on a well-known collage print, “The Train,” in which a distant locomotive is visible out the window of a weathered, wood-plank house crowded with mask-like cutout photos of black faces. It's a poignant image, hinting at the potential for escape from oppression and poverty — the visual equivalent of a blues song.

Another mask-like black face cut from a photograph serves as the head of the central figure in the foursome gathered around a kitchen table in an aquatint titled “The Family.” The haunted-looking young man's face is one of two focal points that give this scene its powerful, psychological charge.

The setting is the interior of a humble dwelling, but in this case the window view of the train has been replaced by an open doorway revealing a full frontal view of a nude woman provocatively seated in the next room. Viewers are left to wonder whether she's a family member, or perhaps a family member's



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John Beerman, Autumn Memory, Toxaway, 2013, oil on canvas.

girlfriend, and the attendant sexual intrigue ratchets up the tension in this compelling piece.

African influences are present in almost all of Bearden's work, but direct references to Africa and African cultures seem to be rare. A few examples are included, notably the lithograph "Dreams of Exile (Green Snake)" — a jungle scene alive with reptiles, birds and other fauna — and "Sorcerer's Village (African Fantasy)."

The latter piece, a silkscreen print lacking any photo-sourced imagery, juxtaposes masked figures with African fabric patterns and a yellow full moon above a row of houses. The lone bird perched on the pitched roof of one house recalls the roof-walking birds in paintings by Bill Traylor, a black American folk artist.

Also outstanding, and outside the parameters of Bearden's most familiar subject matter, are several other high-contrast silkscreens referencing classical Egyptian and Greek sources. And outstanding for their rarity, at least, are two works that aren't prints — a small, music-themed, one-of-a-kind collage, contemporaneous with the prints, and a very early, gestural drawing, "Sword Fighters," from 1948.

While the Bearden show occupies the smaller galleries through which viewers enter the exhibition area, the larger, 7,000-square-foot gallery beyond them is shared by Beerman and Katz, in what looks like two solo shows that meet in the middle of the room. That's basically the idea with GreenHill's "Two Artists/One Space" series, in which this is the third exhibition.

Both artists were born in the 1950s, both are representational painters and both now live in North Carolina, but that's about the extent of their similarities. Their respective bodies of work could hardly be more different from each other.

Beerman has made his reputation mainly as a landscape painter. He's got great technique, a strong sense of composition and a poetic feeling for the play of light and shadow. His paintings are contemplative, suffused with an atmosphere of quiet solitude.

This is to be expected in scenes of apparently unspoiled nature, such as his views of mountains, lakes, trees and clouds in the Blue Ridge. But it's equally true of his paintings of a church, a coastal condo building, the interior of his studio and the view from the back porch of his house in Hillsborough.

In three paintings from his "Church series," a brick church is depicted from the exact same vantage point across the street, but at different times of day. These paintings aren't about the church or the big oak trees in its yard; they're about subtle changes in the qualities of natural light, and the impact such differences can have on one's mood.

When he's not painting the landscape, Beerman focuses tightly on the details of the world as he experiences it day to day — in and around his own home, his studio and the town where he lives. His

simplest, most straightforward painting is “Long Yellow Block,” a small still life of what looks like a stick of butter on a counter-top.

In a bit of self-referential playfulness, the same painting can be seen hanging alongside a doorway in another still life, “Studio Interior, Afternoon Light,” which hangs nearby in the exhibition.

Unlike North Carolina natives Bearden and Beerman, Katz is a newcomer — not only to the state, but also to the country. He was born and has spent most of his life in Mexico City, where he built his career, attracting commercial and critical success with his distinctively satirical paintings and sculptures. He moved to Greensboro in 2010.

Katz has refined a singular brand of highly stylized imagery emphasizing the postures and actions of sharply outlined, cartoon-style figures often wearing conservative business attire. He typically employs this imagery to create satirical commentaries on the corporate world, social conformity and various forms of self-deception.

At GreenHill he’s represented by paintings, drawings and hybrid works that combine painting and sculpture. Stylistically his art has affinities with Rene Magritte and the Chicago Imagists, especially Roger Brown and Karl Wirsum.

The figures in Katz’ works all wear identically impassive facial expressions that reveal no hint of their emotions, no matter how difficult, painful or absurd their circumstances.

There’s the buttoned-up office worker in “The Bureaucrat,” who gives no indication that he’s uncomfortable even though he’s bending backward. And then there’s the man in “Homage to Franz Kafka,” holding himself up on all fours while he supports what appear to be several scale-model skyscrapers stacked up sideways atop his back, like the carapace of a giant cockroach.

There are actually two pieces with this title — variations on the same image in different mediums. One is a small, unpainted wood sculpture, while the other is a painting.

In Katz’ painted wood sculpture “Modern Times,” a gray-clad businessman type has been turned upside down so that the front of his face is mashed up against the gray wheel-like form at the bottom. It makes for a succinctly literal interpretation of the phrase “nose to the grindstone.”

Katz directs his satire at himself in two small paintings, “Self-Portrait” and “My Other Self,” both of which show cutaway views of his head, revealing it to contain a dense tangle of what could be either electrical cables or snakes.

Bearden and Beerman have long been well-known quantities on North Carolina’s art scene. Katz, apparently well-regarded in Mexico, is just beginning to make a name for himself here. Given the

strength of his work and the universal social relevance of his favored themes, he won't have too much trouble doing so.