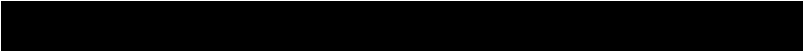


Artist explores, embraces unknown

KEITH BUCKNER, Special to Go Triad

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GREENSBORO — Singer-songwriter Iris Dement has a great little song called "Let the Mystery Be." This song title could be used to describe the visual mysteries imbedded within Joyce Wellman's multi-layered abstract paintings at N.C. A&T's University Galleries.

Born in Brooklyn and now based in Washington, Wellman is an artistic sojourner both literally and figuratively. A 2003 trip to Kenya was an inspiration to the artist and surely will inform her teaching as she begins a fall semester residency at A&T.

In Kenya, Wellman was the only American woman joining 20 East African female artists in a three-week think tank and exhibition at the National Museum of Kenya's Gallery of Contemporary Art. A work she created during the African residency called "La Escalera a la Luna" was selected for the permanent collection at the U.S. Embassy in Nairobi.

Back home in Washington, Wellman was among a group of artists selected by the D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities to paint either a concrete donkey or an elephant. Wellman chose to decorate a donkey. The result: "Yellow Dawg Party Animal."

This lighthearted piece was something different for Wellman but still related to her two-dimensional abstract offerings. The bright yellow donkey decorated with patriotic stars and stripes also contains concentric circles in red, white and blue. These circles, painted in the national colors, symbolize what Wellman calls "the soul's spiritual unfolding as the individual interacts with our ever-evolving world."

The idea of an "ever-evolving world" is on my mind as I mull over hurricanes, wars and other stressful stuff. These troubling

thoughts are soothed by the sight of Wellman's colorful, contemplative pictures in this current exhibit. When the real or conscious world isn't treating you right, head on over to the unconscious, I always say.

Checking out paintings such as "667" or "Untitled X," I find myself admiring the artist's courage to embrace the unknown and to explore the mysteries of non-material or spiritual existence. These two tondo, or circular, paintings bear little resemblance to familiar round pictures from the Italian Renaissance. In contrast to the earth-toned Madonnas, these symbolist abstractions are painted in sunny hot reds and yellows and greens.

Wellman makes the intelligent decision to apply her colors in a loose, brushy manner, giving these pieces emotional warmth. Cryptic symbols and numbers added to the layers of bright translucent hues pique my interest without describing anything specific.

In a review from the New York Times, art writer Grace Glueck says Wellman's work "speaks a language we can't fathom, but there's substance to it."

Part of this substance and fascination with numbers comes from watching her Brooklyn mother play bolita, a gambling game that pre-dated the New York State Lottery. As she tells this story, it brings me back down to earth and helps me understand the sources that inspire her pictures.

"Global Blues" is another example of Wellman's merging of the earthly and the nonmaterial. Painted with richly layered primary colors, this work refers to the earth as seen from space. The artist smartly avoids a literal interpretation of the oceans and continents. Geometry and symbols are combined with vivid color to describe our planet in a fresh way.

The treatise of the abstractionist is to work from the inside out, expressing the subconscious and the unknown.

Joyce Wellman's embrace of the mysterious is anything but an

escape from reality. Instead it is a courageous, headlong life exploration of truth, beauty, and the unconscious — an enticing destination in these uncertain times.

Keith Buckner is a freelance contributor who earned his master's degree in fine arts from UNCG in 1983. His column appears every other week in See This. Got news on an exhibit or artist? Contact him at Keith_Buckner@uncg.edu