

Review/Art

The Role of the Blues in Defining a Genre

By MICHAEL BRENSON

Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON — "The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism," which is on view at the Washington Project for the Arts through Dec. 9, is a celebration of black culture and an attempt to define Afro-American art. Its strength is its ability to demonstrate that the blues has played a key role in the art of many black Americans and that it has been a source of fascination and inspiration for many other modern artists.

Why an art show about the blues? Richard J. Powell, the institution's director of programs and the show's curator, maintains that the blues, as the main form of black music, is what he calls a "cultural ethos." He says it provides what is needed to make an art form "intrinsically 'Afro-American.'" The implication that work by a black artist is not Afro-American unless it contains a sign of the blues suggests how polemical this exhibition is.

There are about 90 works on view, most but not all of them by black artists. They are all related, sometimes obscurely, to some way of thinking, feeling or making that can be identified with the blues. The works may refer to it directly, like Archibald J. Motley Jr.'s 1929 painting "Blues," where the compositional pattern is keyed to the color blue; they may be tributes to black musicians, like Douglas Bourgeois's 1981 painting of a cool yet fiery Aretha Franklin; they may be studies of black musicians, like Diane Arbus's 1966 photograph of James Brown, or they may be pictorial testimonies to the vitality of jazz and black culture, like Romare Bearden's 1964 collage "Sermons: The Walls of Jericho."

But the exhibition is too shapeless and diffuse to pin down any esthetic or sensibility. And it makes a crucial error by treating components of the blues — like bittersweet tone, belief in the unity of form and content and respect for everyday life and for memory — as elements apart from the larger modern artistic traditions in which they play essential roles. What makes the blues so powerful and distinct is the way everything within it blends. When the exhibition breaks the blues down and selects artists because their work reflects one of its components, the distinctiveness of the blues is lost, and any argument for its decisive effect on the visual arts is unconvincing.

Among the works in the exhibition are a handful of installations, three of them concerned with myth and stereotype, that were commissioned not only for the galleries but also for a nearby display window and street. The institution is waiting for Wash-



A detail from "Blues," by Archibald J. Motley Jr., in the show at the Washington Project for the Arts.

ington's Bureau of Housing and Commercial Development to rule on whether one of the three can be installed as a billboard across from the National Portrait Gallery. For the moment this work, David Hammons's "How You Like Me Now," a portrait of Jesse Jackson with white skin, blond hair and blue eyes, is the centerpiece of the ground floor gallery.

There are also revealing but minor works by influential black artists like Jacob Lawrence and Mel Edwards, and minor works by white artists like Stuart Davis, Arthur Dove and Jackson Pollock, who were influenced by black music.

There are small sculptures by Houston Conwill and Terry Adkins, who are beginning to receive national recognition, and funky down-home folk-based sculptures by lesser-known artists like Ke Francis and Camille Billops. Robert Thompson and Jean Michel Basquiat, two black artist stars who died young, are represented by strong works.

On the ground floor of the exhibition, the art has room to breathe; upstairs on the main floor, however, art

is treated essentially as documentation. The exhibition pieces together paintings, photographs and sculptures. With each work there is a point to be made, but the installation is often extremely hard to follow.

Part of the problem is that the blues is never clearly defined. The catalogue, with 11 essays, 2 by Mr. Powell, provides plenty of information about the blues and some penetrating insights, particularly by Dwight D. Andrews, a scholar of music and a Congregational minister, but the information is scattered. Because there is no working definition and because the components of the blues are not clearly spelled out, the question constantly arises, "Why is this particular work here?"

What emerges from the catalogue is that the blues is a development of the late 19th century, when, Mr. Powell writes, "recently emancipated black Americans began to develop their own communities, travel in wider circles and enter the economy as free agents." At the same time they experienced discrimination, intimidation and violence. The blues, Mr. Powell says, is "apparently born

Next year "The Blues Aesthetic: Black Culture and Modernism" will visit these museums:

California Afro-American Museum, Exposition Park, Los Angeles, Jan. 12 to March 4

Duke University Museum of Art, Durham, N.C., March 23 to May 20

Blafler Gallery, University of Houston, June 8 to July 31

Studio Museum in Harlem, New York City, Sept. 16 to Dec. 30

out of this double moment of opportunity and denial."

Part of what defines the blues as a musical form is its ability to swing between despair and exhilaration, producing notes that can be both heavy and light, aggrieved and indomitable. Oral tradition is important. "Clearly," Mr. Andrews writes, "the African-American has retained"

Continued on Page 19

Role of the Blues in Defining a Genre

Continued From Page 17

from African music the "notion of the metaphysical powers of sound."

Among the works on view, Alison Saar's "Black Snake Blues" and Robert Colescott's "Pac-Man (The Consumer Consumed)" are both bitter-sweet narratives. Ms. Saar's painted relief, inspired by a Bessie Smith song, combines fresco, a medium identified with the Italian Renaissance, with tile, a common medium in black folk art. It shows a reclining Gauguinesque black woman dreaming of a man who is present only in the form of a ghostly hat.

In his unmistakable tone of "I don't know whether to laugh or cry so let's do both," Mr. Colescott paints an angry, antic image of black women engrossed in video games, eating fast food and being devoured by the demonic face and sharklike jaw of white business.

Another characteristic of the blues that emerges in the exhibition is that it is very much about present everyday life but it is also rooted in tradition and memory. In almost all the work on view, memory is crucial. Many of the works are a kind of commemoration. There are photographs of James Baldwin and Miles Davis. There is a tribute to Malcolm X by Keith Haring, a tribute to the rock-

and-roll singer Thurston Harris by Archie Rand and a tableau tribute to Basquiat by Margo Humphrey. William Christenberry's "Homage to Stephen Sykes" commemorates a humble Mississippi man whose life and times were reflected in the objects with which he lived.

As much as anything, the blues has to do with feeling, with an identification with sound so total that when the song is sung, body and mind are one. Here the contrast between the form and the content of the exhibition is unfortunate. Few of the works have the sweep of the blues.

Philip Mallory Jones's videos, "Dreamkeeper" and "Footprints," are exceptions. Both are nocturnal, ritualistic, visual streams in which images come and go and flow in and out of pattern and rhythm. In both videos, there is a search for a visual language that — like the blues — can cross cultures and encourage just about anyone anywhere to respond.

For the most part, however, the exhibition tries to make a major statement using minor work. And because the show is perceived more as information and documentation than as visual experience, there is a collision between the nature of the blues, which has to do with intimacy and participation, and the installation,

which is disjunctive and didactic. If the exhibition had placed the components of the blues within a broad artistic context and concentrated on works that could suggest the fullness of a sensibility, it would have had a better chance of succeeding.