



Abandoned Carnival

SURFACE TREATMENT

With COVID-19 rebounding and slowing gallery openings, we will keep your art experiences alive by looking back at some more memorable shows/reviews. Today we re-visit Charles Criner's comprehensive 2008 IMAS exhibition, "Where I'm From".

A Life Story

A story-telling vision through printmaking, painting, and watercolor, fifty works express the beauty of an artist's life lived.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

"Those are people going up into the sky," explained Charles Criner, Houston artist. "I do that with a lot of Hispanic people and Black people that work in the field. A lot of times we don't go anyplace but up from working so hard." "Where I'm From" at IMAS is a comprehensive exhibition of Criner's works; it is also a testimony to the artist's life and social environment. His inspirations, as seen through the rich tapestry of his imagination, offer a bountiful viewing experience.

There are about fifty works in this show, including paintings, watercolors, and original prints. Developing his story-telling vision through printmaking, Criner moves the graphic images into his paintings, often using different media as a medium to express a story that he wants to tell. He includes a paragraph with each work. "I just want you to see and know what it is," he professed, "and then you read the paragraph and you know why it is. I'm just a storyteller." Criner believes that we, as a species, have story telling wired into us.

But these works go far beyond the engaging narrative. Criner's handling of the human figure is expressive and compassionate, his media fluid and descriptive. In

the large, vividly painted work from his "Catching Freedom Series", a female figure leans across the canvas symbolically supported by cotton bolls. It's a position typical to a quarterback catching a pass, but in this image the receiver is a sharecropper and a metaphysically glowing boll is suspended between her large hands. Her eyes are closed, and she almost has it. Behind her are rows of sharecropper houses, and, further up on the picture plane, a row of figures "going up."

Criner's works reflect sharecropping days, socio-political days of the sixties, and times of natural disasters such as Katrina. Influenced by his mentor-teacher, John Biggers, Criner draws and paints what is familiar and meaningful to him, and has produced not only powerful and beautiful images, but also documents important aspects of Americana. When Criner first arrived at Texas Southern University as a student and saw the collection of drawings that Biggers had produced as a result of a trip to Ghana, it changed his life. "I had never drawn a Black person in my life," exclaimed Criner. "And when I saw those drawings, it just completely changed me. And it's been that way ever since; that was enough information for me."

"I think a lot of artists miss out;" opined Criner, "because if a style is popular, they'll go to where it is, and when they get there that style is no longer popular. A lot of artists have stories to tell and if they use their techniques and their medium to tell that story, their art is going to be much more meaningful; he believes an artist should be personal rather than imitate someone else. "I picked peas and cotton with my grandmother and we fished anyplace that had water in it." "Abandoned Carnival" symbolizes the loss people felt as the result of Katrina. Here, the cries of the abandoned carousel fall on deaf ears.

This artist feels blessed in that he can afford to paint and draw what he feels. "If painting and drawing was my only income, I would have to paint things that people want me to paint, rather than painting what I want to paint," he says. "More White people buy my art than Black people. You know everybody else that sells work, they paint jazz. They paint happy people all the time. Not everyone wants to have a person picking cotton in their living room."

Charles Criner is the long-time resident artist at the Museum of Printing History in Houston.

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