



Sojourner Truth

SURFACE TREATMENT

What: "Earth Amma Series" by Lenard Brown
Where: www.themonitor.com/art

History with Soul

Paintings and drawings speak of outlining a spiritual journey and its place in a modern secular world.

BY NANCY MOYER

SPECIAL TO THE MONITOR

Creating canvases of powerful beauty, Houston-based artist, Lenard Brown, weaves together stories, legends, and history with acrylics and charcoal. His "Earth Amma Series", currently on view at www.themonitor.com/art employs Adinkra colors and symbols to tell Judeo-Christian stories, African diaspora history, and women's rights. The physicality of Brown's images engages instantly; intellectually, they insist on more from the viewer. The imagery is cloaked in the language of Ghanaian icons and pictographs. Maintaining a fine blend of knowledge and passion, Brown speaks of personages and events that have ultimately shaped our contemporary lives.

Biblical passages, African history, and historically significant individuals comprise Brown's "Earth Amma" world. According to Brown, "Earth Amma" (mother) is a series of icons and pictograms that tell stories about important people and events. Pictograms are visual words and he has delved into the culture of Ghana for the Adinkra symbols and colors with which he builds his imagery. Originating from the legendary African king, Adinkra, the symbols are small,

symbolic pictures primarily used to decorate colorful patterned cloth in Ghana. They can depict historical events, human behavior and attitudes, animal behavior, and plant life forms, as well as shapes of objects. Adding colors inspired by the Rio Grande Valley, the paintings explode with codependent meanings of color and beauty. The large-scale works allow full focus on the embedded information.

Biblical passages are frequent. "Ruth and Naomi" is a foretelling of Christ's relationship to humanity through Ruth's pledge to her mother-in-law, "Where you go, I will go, and where you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God, my God." In the painting, Brown symbolizes the two women with the Adinkra Duafe symbol, a wooden comb representing feminine virtue and everlasting love. They reference the frontal pose of the Virgin of Guadalupe, and white shapes symbolize peace, purity, and sanctity. "A lot of these works are about little stories of women in the bible," explained Brown. "Some of them relate to the Virgin of Guadalupe." The symbolic shape repeated throughout the series is the feminine Duafe symbol.

The paintings, "Esther" and "Queen Nzingha" offer comparisons of the power of the symbols to evoke a sense about the subjects. The former tells a story of a queen with dual roles who was able to vanquish enemies before they killed her. The painting superimposes the symbol for strength and concealment, the Rams Horn, upon the Duafe symbol. We also see hypocrisy and multiple role-playing symbols combined into the complex depiction of her personality. "Queen Nzingha" is simple and direct. A circular symbol of greatness and royalty is the central part of her image.

With "Two Sisters", it's the two countries of the Rio Grande Valley. The vivid primary and secondary colors convey the lushness of the area. The foreground Duafe, festive with reds and yellows that either flow or create sharp boundaries, is South Texas. The secondary Duafe with the green, white, and red coloration is Mexico. "Yellow Rose" adds a background element to a migrating Duafe in the way the Adinkra patterns are used as background in African textiles, but here, it is a collaged map of the US-MX border, which reinforces the story. The African Adinkra symbol at the top of the canvas comments on her resourcefulness and adaptability.

Repurposed University of Texas architectural blueprints collaged as background for some of the drawings reinforce meanings. "Sojourner Truth", an American abolitionist and women's right activist, was the first African American to go to court, in 1928, to recover her son after escaping slavery. Brown juxtaposes her with the symbol of fortitude, against a blueprint showing tiny symbols of an institutional building, which she overpowers. A profound tonal contrast creates a dynamic spatial illusion giving the impression of an image carved from stone. The first black woman to win such a case against a white man, she is the first African American to have a statue in the Capitol building.

"The "Earth Amma Series" is also about people who move around, the diaspora, migrant workers," Brown concluded. "That's the issue." The take-home reminder in this complex exhibition is the desire for stability and personal security through personal development.

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