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GALLERIES

Feeling and depth beyond her years

Soulful, sophisticated portraits reflect a young artist's respect for her heritage



Introductions 2006:

Lorna Williams and George Rosa

At: Judi Rotenberg Gallery, 130 Newbury St.,
through Jan. 28. 617-437-1518,
www.judirotenberg.com.

By Cate McQuaid

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Look out, art world, here comes Lorna Williams. Her story, even now — at its very beginning — is the stuff of myth. She's only 19, a sophomore at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts. And already a commercial venue — the Judi Rotenberg Gallery, which under the stewardship of Abigail Ross in the last few years has become progressively more fresh and daring — has plucked her from the masses and given her a show.

Williams spent the summer preparing for the show in her father's garage in her hometown of New Orleans. Then Katrina hit and ruined most of the work she'd made. So Williams feverishly spent the fall creating more of her labor-intensive pieces. Her collages on plywood are soulful, visually dense, and as bright as kaleidoscopes. Many of the images, portraits of musicians or of her friends listening to music, are simple and accessible, but there's always a twining of pain and rapture in them. How bluesy. How New Orleans.

Williams's technique is sophisticated and exacting. She starts with a photo, which she manipulates digitally to achieve particular tones. Then she draws it on tracing paper, holds it against the wood to see where the image fits against a ground of grain and knots, and stencils it on. The collage of fabric, metallic thread, sheet music, and other paper within each figure is plotted, cut, and fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. The artist also gouges and burns into the wood.

Wood is crucial to Williams as material and as metaphor; every figure has a root system. "Willow Weep for Me, for Wild Is the Wind," a portrait of Nina Simone, shows that system twisting through the singer like bright veins; she seems on fire with it. Williams lightly carved the bare board around Simone's head so she appears to have an aura.

Williams, who is African-American, uses her work to celebrate and come to grips with her heritage; one image of feminine-shaped musical instruments appears fanciful until you see the nooses around their necks, a reference to lynching. In its canonization of some figures, such as Simone, and its holding of others to account, this work has a youthful zeal that can sometimes feel simplistic; a 19-year-old can be forgiven for that. There are enough riches and nuances in this work to suggest that this artist will go far.

Also at Judi Rotenberg, George Rosa shuffles together pop-culture images, such as a pinup model or pictures on fliers torn from walls in New York, in paintings that are heavily built up and covered with slick resin. "Anti-Hero" shows a black-and-white soldier painted with a black bar over his eyes, and two posters with masks — one reads "authentic," the other "counterfeit." The content here is slim and evasive, although the paintings themselves are imposing and suggest, wrongly, that they have something important to say.