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News for Harlem and the Harlems of the World...

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Harlem's Renaissance Man, by Kimberly Chou

To mark a century since the birth of Romare Bearden, the artist and writer deeply involved with the founding of the Studio Museum in Harlem, the uptown institution assembled a year-long tribute to showcase the breadth and depth of his influence. Launched last fall, "The Bearden Project" features work by 100 contemporary artists, inspired by or made in response to Bearden, shown in three exhibitions at the museum. The pieces include painting, photography, sculpture and video, though the majority are in Bearden's best-known medium of collage. The third and final installment of the exhibition series opened Aug. 16 and runs through Oct. 21 in the Studio Museum's lower-level gallery.

Bearden (1911-88) was born in Charlotte, N.C., and settled shortly thereafter with his parents in Harlem, where he would live and work for the rest of his life. A cultural renaissance man, he studied art and art history (for a time with German expatriate painter George Grosz at the Art Students League), but also philosophy at the Sorbonne. He also worked as a songwriter and a caseworker for the Department of Social Services. But it was his work as an artist and activist who pushed to establish a home in the art world for other black artists that cemented his legacy.



"It was important," said Studio Museum assistant curator Lauren Hayes, who organized the exhibition, "to have a large group of artists at all different ranges in their careers, to think about what Bearden's influence has been on people who were his colleagues and friends and these younger people who studied his work in school."

To that end, included among the 100 participating artists is Emma Amos, a contemporary of Bearden and a member of his art collective, Spiral, as well as younger, emerging artists like Lorna Williams and Noah Davis. For "The Bearden Project," the Studio Museum sent each artist sheets of 22-by-30-inch paper and asked them to make collages. Some tethered their responses to specific Bearden works. Iona Rozeal Brown's mixed-media collage, "(we've) harshed the ancestors' mellow (after Sunset Limited)," takes the lines and shapes of Bearden's 1975 collage "Sunset Limited" and transfers them from fields to ocean waves.

While the majority of the artists met the museum's invitation head on, some eschewed the sheets or chose to send older pieces that resonated with Bearden's themes. William Cordova and Leslie Hewitt—alumni of the Studio Museum's artist-in-residency program, as are about half the participants—submitted a collage they made together in 2006, which is now on view. Keisha Scarville's "Passports" is a continuation of another project of hers, involving collage work and a passport photograph of her father as a teenager. In small, separate frames, the headshots are seen covered in pearly seed beads, or with rice, or with a cartoonish painted-on red pout. One of Ms. Scarville's early references for the project, Ms. Hayes said, was Bearden.

"As curators we can say it's clear to us that Bearden had an influence on people's work," Ms. Hayes said. "But to actually hear the artists in their statements and to see it in all these different works has been one of the most exciting things about this whole exhibition."

"The Bearden Project" also includes artists whose signature work isn't easily shown in a conventional gallery exhibition—like Clifford Owens, who works in photography, video and performance art. For this show, he created a collage of images from photographic contact sheets used in his performance piece, "Photographs With an Audience."

"Bearden's work is a kind of visual African-American history that I was very interested in," said Mr. Owens. "It goes back to Bearden's interest in social documentary photography and raising a certain kind of awareness."

Beyond a shared social interest, Mr. Owens said exploring the artist's medium was revelatory in other ways. "It slowed me down but also freed me up," he said, referring to collage versus his usual performance work. "The process of making collage—why he put so much time and effort into everything he made was not just [because it was time-consuming], but he had to be sure what he was saying about black people."

Perhaps most important, the exhibition furthers a goal that champions of Bearden have long sought: a greater recognition of the artist in the pages of art history—not just African-American art history or New York history.

"One of the things we have tried to do with the centennial, the point that we've tried to get across, is Bearden's enormous influence—placing him as a master of the 20th century firmly in art history," said Diedra Harris-Kelley, the co-director of the Bearden Foundation. "It's a wonderful way to spread the influence of Bearden and also talk about how relevant his work still is. These artists are still mining his work for ideas in their own work."