

Hayti celebrates fourth annual Black History: Artists' Perspectives Exhibition

By Sabrina Berndt
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Four years ago, the first Black History: Artists' Perspectives exhibition was presented at Hayti Heritage Center to honor African-American artists. Now an annual event, Hayti opened the 2019 exhibition on Feb. 1.

The exhibition began in 2016 when Willie Bigelow, an artist and Durham resident, realized Hayti Heritage Center did not have anything planned for Black History Month. He coordinated with Angela Lee, the executive director at Hayti, to bring an event to the Center that would recognize African-American talent, especially young talent.

"I found that these great African-American artists aren't showing their work because they don't have a venue for them to show," he said.

Bigelow is included in the list of 20 participating artists, with two pieces in the exhibition. "At The River's Edge – A Black Migration" is a memorial to his wife, Irene Bigelow, who was a quilter. She had planned to quilt an image of Harriet Tubman and asked her husband to sketch the image for her. Irene passed away April 8, 2018 before she could start the project, and Willie painted the image in her honor.

The second painting, "A Durham Great Gospel Leader," shows his father surrounded by his achievements as a pastor and member of the Durham community. His father, Rev. Dr. Willie T. Bigelow, was known for his role at Saint Paul Baptist Church, where he witnessed growth from 200 members to over 4,000. He was also known as the "Radio Pastor" for his services on the station WSRC.

Most of Bigelow's art has a personal connection, except for six paintings featuring classic cars at Mark Jacobson Toyota dealership.

Bigelow found all of the participating artists through personal contacts, including Olivia Gatewood, who became familiar with the Hayti staff after a one-woman exhibit 25 years ago. An artist residing in Rougemont, North Carolina, she has participated in the exhibition since the beginning.

"I found it to be a good way for the community to stay abreast about what local artists are doing and it's also a good way for local artists to share their work," Gatewood said.

Gatewood is known for her textured acrylic paintings, some of which appear in the personal collections of Oprah Winfrey and Suzzanne Douglas. For the Black History exhibition, she wanted to express the connections between the United States and Africa.

"If you see my work, you'll see it's not



Willie Bigelow with his paintings titled "At The River's Edge – A Black Migration" and "A Durham Great Gospel Leader." To encourage his art when Bigelow was younger, his uncle would pay him for matchbook drawings. (Staff photo by Sabrina Berndt)

necessarily typical Afrocentric scenes. I think my work probably shows more of my background," Gatewood said. "Each person's work reflects on their personality and what influences them in life, and I think the work that I do shows who I am, which is kind of weird and strange and abstract."

Her paintings, "Aya" and "Gye Nyame," both represent Adinkra symbols from Ghana. Aya represents growth, as it portrays a fern that can endure turmoil despite its circumstances. Gye Nyame is a way of expressing that God is everywhere.

Along with paintings, Gatewood sells jewelry at affordable prices. She wanted to find a way for everyone to acquire a piece of artwork despite financial means. Each piece is individually made, including earrings, and therefore unique.

Her work is found in four other local exhibitions – all of which are listed on her website – and she will be honored at the North Carolina Executive Mansion for her contributions in the arts on Feb. 14.

Although the Hayti exhibition features established artists such as Gatewood, Bigelow makes an effort each year to find new, upcoming African-American artists. Crystal Carter, a newly exhibiting artist

residing in Durham, had a unique style that immediately stuck out from the pieces surrounding her drawings. Instead of bright colors and acrylic-covered canvases, Carter's work simply used pencil with a pop of purple for accent – the purple representing royalty.

A peer approached Carter at the Southside Church of Christ who knew of the exhibition and began communicating with Bigelow and Lee. She noted their willingness to answer all of her questions before the event.

Carter wanted to express her heritage and culture in her drawings. Her first two exhibited prints are of her father in his cook uniform from the Army and her mother. The third, a 13-by-36 canvas print titled "We Are Wonderfully Made," is meant to represent the beauty in typical African-American features.

"Art is such a global thing, but it's also such a personal thing as well," she stated "My perspective is on a smaller scale – what was it like in my family; what was it like growing up black or in the projects? The smaller stories are what connects us."

Carter said she plans to expand her website by allowing online purchases. For now, she wants potential customers to experience it in person.

The exhibition will run until April 14.