

Immerse yourself in the fifth annual Black History: Artists' Perspectives Exhibition

Local black artists showcase their work at the Hayti Heritage Center



Willie Bigelow created a new painting titled "Gospel Legends" that honors four gospel singers from North Carolina. This will be featured in this year's Black History: Artists' Perspectives Exhibition at the Hayti Heritage Center. (Photo by Gianna Tahan)

By Gianna Tahan

The Hayti Heritage Center presents its fifth annual Black History: Artists' Perspectives Exhibition to bring African American artists together and honor the black experience.

Five years ago, curator Willie Bigelow, who is a Durham resident and artist, came to Hayti Heritage Center Executive Director Angela Lee to design an exhibition that pays tribute to Black History Month. He also said he wanted to create a space for African American artists to show their work.

"Another one of the reasons in doing this is that as an artist, I grew up painting and drawing," Bigelow said. "I always had a difficult time finding places to exhibit my art."

Bigelow said the exhibition, which runs from Feb. 7 to March 27, has not undergone many changes since it began in 2016.

"We keep the same theme, Black History Month: an Artist's Perspective, which kind of leaves the door open for artists to actually do what he or she feels is something related to black history or the black tradition or black culture," Bigelow said.

In the exhibition, Bigelow is showing

a new piece titled "Gospel Legends." It depicts three of the gospel legends that come from Durham: Shirley Caesar, Joseph "JoJo" Wallace and John P. Kee. It also features Luther Barnes, an artist from Rocky Mount, North Carolina.

"Most of my art is related to Durham's black historical people—history-makers," Bigelow said.

The Black History: Artists' Perspectives Exhibition features the work of more than 10 artists who reside in North Carolina. Bigelow said they show new artists each exhibit and have several loyal exhibitors who have shown their artwork in the exhibition since its creation.

Wade Williams, a Durham native, has always participated in this exhibition.

"I thought it was my duty since I am from this neighborhood," Williams said. "This is what I do. I always start off the

year exhibiting here. They see my work first."

Williams creates figurative art that depicts people who have brought joy to the world. At the exhibition, he is showing a new piece titled "A Quiet Moment." The piece centers around a jazz musician who just finished a five hour gig in Las Vegas, Williams said.

"The painting takes place in his dressing room," Williams said. "It's very dark... and he is kind of slumped... You can tell he's been sweating... So he is just taking a quiet moment."

Williams said he is working on a series of paintings that depict the African diaspora, featuring African Americans at play and at work.

Clarence Heyward, who hails from Brooklyn, New York and now lives in Clayton, is a new addition to the Black History: Artists' Perspectives Exhibition. Around a year and a half ago, he quit his job as a route manager and became an artist full time.

"The job wasn't that bad, but I felt like I wasn't serving my purpose," Heyward said. "I've always been an artist. I went to school for art."

Heyward said he paints what he knows. "I'm black, and I have experience with the black experience," Heyward said. "So it wouldn't feel right for me to paint someone else's experience... I speak to narratives that I know."

He said he has made it his goal to showcase more African American art in museums and galleries. He has shown his work in venues such as the 21c Museum in Durham.

Concerning the future of the Black History: Artists' Perspectives Exhibition, Bigelow said he hopes it will keep going.

"The traffic is good," Bigelow said. "A lot of events happen here at Hayti and people get to see an artist's work."

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— Clarence Heyward