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**Emotional signposts**

**Rhode Island College's 'Untapped Territories' showcases African-American art  
by Johnette Rodriguez, Providence Phoenix Art Review, October 2008  
IN TRANSIT: UNMAPPED TERRITORIES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN ART  
At Rhode Island College's Bannister Gallery through October 28.**

Although none of the pieces in the current exhibit at the Edward Mitchell Bannister Gallery -- *In Transit: Unmapped Territories of African American Art* -- would be labeled abstract, the true nature of the artists' intentions would not be so clearly revealed were it not for the informative statements they have provided to accompany their work. **Donnamaria Bruton**, Bob Dilworth, James Montford, Arnold Prince, and Keith Washington have given us signposts to the emotional content in their paintings as well as, in some cases, a verbal work to accompany the visual one. Dominating the new gallery space by its placement is Arnold Prince's hovering "Hawk," an oversized representation constructed from wood shingle pieces for feathers, large yellow glass orbs for eyes. The ferocious hawk has been caught on guard, looking over his shoulder, his wings half-way up, his talons ready to strike, his tail splayed. An edgy energy emanates from this bird, a sense of staying ready in the face of attack.

This is in sharp contrast to the calmer tone of Prince's other two pieces, nudes carved from black Vermont soapstone, one standing, one horizontal. In both, however, the face is turned at an oblique angle, as if looking away from something. In September, Prince was presented with the Bannister Society's Lifetime Achievement Award at the unveiling of a bust he created of the Reverend Arthur Hardge, founder of URI's "Talent Development Program." For sheer visual power, Bob Dilworth's four works draw you in and keep you looking at them. Boldly classical nudes in each, two male figures, they are executed in striking reds and blacks in "For Your Love" and "You Wonder, You Love." The latter is a tender testimony to the power of two people to support each other, as one figure crouches on the other's shoulders. The other two pieces, in charcoal and chalk, are haunting images of death. In "When Truth is Dangerous," one man holds another man's body in front of him; in the other, "In Your Place," a man holds another, Pieta-like, in his arms. These evocative images are accomplished with tension in each curving line and power in each stroke. Dilworth says these figures are about "the African-American male's self-destruction and about a society that continues to assault African-American males." These images, which often come to him from dreams, are first sketched, then sculpted and then painted or drawn.

**Donnamaria Bruton's mixed media works are less immediate, less accessible. But on close examination, there is humor, anger, longing. "Premonition of a Dishwasher" shows parts of that machine at odd perspectives, with here a spoon handle projecting from its partitioned holder, there a plate and there a piece of the rack. "Black Wife/White Mother" portrays the frustration of living in a white world, as a blond-wigged woman throws a goblet. "Ye Shall Know Them by Their Fruits" brings together some very personal childhood memories, with a floating drumstick, a banana, a toaster and a little girl's dress in luminescent green with a lace collar.**

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**Bruton layers decorative patterns and textures -- fleur-de-lis in one place, lace in another -- and they add a layer of consciousness as well, reminiscent of that daydream state you can find yourself in, staring at a textile or wallpaper pattern while someone talks to you or events swirl around you. Later that pattern can call up what was going on while you gazed at it.**

Coupled with their texts, James Montford and Keith Washington's works are the most overtly provocative in the show. From a series titled "Human Sacrifice in the Landscape of the United States of America," Washington presents two large canvasses from '98 and '99: "Norris Bandy, Sardis Church Site," a representation of a dead tree trunk in a yard; and "Benny Thompson, Roadside 96, South Carolina," an idyllic bend-in-the-road landscape. Washington's words banish any innocence from these images, however, as the stories are told: the murder of an African-American truck driver found hanging from the tree; the lynching by four white men, in complicity with the chief of police, of a young African-American man, whose body was found next to Highway 96.

Washington's text labels the ongoing murders of black or gay men as "the practice of human sacrifice" and "a public social ritual." He calls for a healing of those who see themselves as potential victims or potential victimizers by facing the past and acknowledging the atrocities that have been committed. His charcoal, acrylic and ink figure, "Invisible Man I," more directly points to the violence he describes: an almost faceless, footless man, his navel and jeans visible, looks bound and beaten just by the strokes across his chest.

Montford's "Buckwheat Constellations" give us faces that are all red lips and arched, shaggy eyebrows rotating around black planets or bursting forth nova-like, their faces coming out at you, with eyes that look alternately surprised and terrified. These representations of the typical "mammy" minstrel face are accompanied by a text that satirizes the low status of black performers and entertainers and explains the metaphor behind these constellations.

*Montford will present a performance piece, Nigger Speaks, on Friday, October 13 at 7 p.m. in the gallery. Several of the artists will speak about their work in a panel discussion titled "Relocating cultural traditions: Re-examining issues in regional African American art," on Wednesday, October 18 at 12:30 p.m. in the gallery.*