

## Galleries

# The Strength Of Sampson

By Ferdinand Protzman  
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The Arts Program Gallery at the University of Maryland University College occupies a long, wide, windowless hallway with light-absorbing gray carpet in the basement of a campus building. Despite the institutional ambience, Preston Sampson's figurative paintings of African American history and culture are putting life into the walls and stopping traffic.

"Explorations and Celebrations" is a mini-retrospective of Sampson's work since 1985. Almost all the paintings in the show were lent by private collectors in the Washington area, including Peggy Cooper Cafritz. The exhibition is the latest in a series by Maryland artists at University College in College Park, which is not to be confused with the adjacent University of Maryland, where Sampson, a 36-year-old Silver Spring resident, earned a degree in fine arts in 1984 after studying with Patrick Craig, David Driskell and Sam Gilliam.

Sampson's first retrospective does not cover every aspect of his career. It's more of a greatest-hits compilation featuring works from his series of acrylic-on-canvas paintings showing players from the Negro Baseball League, African American boxers and life in the ghetto in the 1930s and '40s.

"I always wanted to see my best pieces in the same place," Sampson says. "But I didn't know UMUC had a gallery, even though I went to Maryland. So when they contacted me, I went over to check out the space and as soon as I saw those long walls, it was a done deal. It's perfect for a retrospective."

The richness of African American cultural history is the theme of all Sampson's paintings, which are bursting with brilliant colors, free-flowing movement and vitality. While the figure is the focus of everything in the show, some works, like "Ascension," a figure study from 1990, are so loosely brushed that they are almost abstract. That painting's complex, sonorous colors and shadings call to mind John Coltrane's brilliant 1965 album of the same name.

Other pictures, particularly of the ballplayers, are so tightly composed and carefully painted that they could have been based on photographs, although they were not. "Turning Two" shows a runner sliding into sec-

ond base trying to break up a double play, one of the most dangerous and balletic moments in baseball. It is a beautiful study of athletic grace and concentration, but also a pointed reminder that just 50 years ago, black athletes were not allowed in the major leagues.

Figurative painting has enjoyed a minor renaissance in recent years, but it was not popular with Sampson's teachers in college, he says. "Everyone thought the figure was kind of boring, but it was what I always wanted to do. I just thought it isn't all about conceptual or abstract art. My feeling was if my mother didn't get a painting, then it didn't work."

Finding his way to the African American themes took a bit longer. "When I graduated, I wanted to be colorless. I didn't want to be labeled an African American artist," Sampson says. But he quickly realized his work was "really about myself in some form or another. Eventually, I felt comfortable enough as a person to interject what was on my mind into my work, and my perspective is definitely that of a black male."

Following that course has had its ups and downs. Sampson was recently chosen to do an Absolut Vodka ad and also painted the cover for the Book-of-the-Month Club edition of Terry McMillan's novel "Mama." Some prominent people, such as actor Samuel L. Jackson and poet Maya Angelou, have collected his paintings.

But Sampson's work has not been seen in a Washington commercial exhibit since 1995, when some of his paintings were included in a group show at Ascension Gallery. He is currently represented by the Camille Love Gallery in Atlanta.

"It's tough for a gallery showing African American artists to stay in business here," Sampson says. "And I'm a painfully shy person and have a hard time approaching galleries with my portfolio. So I guess that leaves me out of it here in D.C., at least commercially. That's another reason why this retrospective means a lot to me. Like any artist, I want people to see my work."

### Drawing Samplers

Drawings are the current attraction at Addison/Ripley Fine Art and Marsha Mateyka Gallery. Addison/Ripley's "Drawings 1856-1996" features works by some of art's immortals, including Henri Matisse,



A personal perspective: Preston Sampson's "Keeper of the Gate," at the University of Maryland's University College gallery.

Pablo Picasso, Edouard Vuillard, Paul Cezanne and Edgar Degas, as well as local artists like William Dunlop, Manon Cleary and the late Gene Davis. Prices range from \$750 to \$165,000.

Both shows are basically samplers, in which a bunch of artists have been thrown together. In such cases, it is best to avoid comparisons and to try to take each work as it comes. Addison/Ripley has some sublime pieces, like Matisse's pen-and-ink "Still Life With Fruit," from 1944, and a Cezanne self-portrait.

But some of the locals hold their own. One of the most striking pictures in the exhibition is Cleary's brand-new graphite-on-paper "Portrait of Justine," which shows Justine Addison, the 13-year-old daughter of the gallery owners. Cleary, who teaches art at the University of the District of Columbia, is an extraordinarily gifted draftsman. But she had not done a commissioned portrait in 25 years.

"It was scary. I'd been drawing myself for all these years and only worried about whether or not I liked it," Cleary says. "This was a commis-

sion. When you are doing something to please someone else there is an entirely different kind of pressure. But I think it works." Indeed it does.

Mateyka's second annual drawing show features works by the gallery's stable of artists—William T. Wiley, Nancy Wolf, Nathan Oliveira, James Drake and Stephen Talasnik. There is a lot of interesting stuff, but Wiley's huge, multifaceted drawings are overpowering. He crams so much imagery—some of it grotesque, some lyrical—and so many words, phrases and homages to other artists into each piece that it is tough to pull yourself away.

**Preston Sampson, at the Arts Program Gallery in the UMUC Inn and Conference Center, corner of University Boulevard and Adelphi Road in College Park. Open daily from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., 301-985-7822. Through March 16.**  
**Drawings 1856-1996, at Addison/Ripley Fine Art, 9 Hillier Ct. NW, Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., 202-328-2332. Through March 4.**  
**Drawings, at Marsha Mateyka Gallery, 2012 R St. NW, Wednesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m., 202-328-0688. Through March 1.**