

Bearden's Collages Encompass Bruegel's Babel, Harlem Blues

BY MARIO NAVES

In his essay *What the Sixties Meant to Me*, the painter Rackstraw Downes writes of an encounter with a painting by the Flemish master Pieter Bruegel. Mr. Downes describes *The "Little" Tower of Babel* (c. 1563) as "densely legible, a thousand stories in every square inch" and "equivalent to two or three books of the Odyssey."

He goes on to praise "Bruegel's alert curiosity and relish for the whole observable world," characterizing Bruegel's vision as one "in which the minute is the natural component, not enemy, of the grand." In the picture he sees "fusing and playing against each other ... the contemporary and the mythical, the literary, and the pictorial."

For Mr. Downes, direct contact with *The "Little" Tower of Babel* was a revelation: It opened up unexpected possibilities for painting and confirmed an already developing disenchantment with modernist orthodoxy—and not only modernism. Taking into account the work's pictorial and narrative richness, Mr. Downes dryly observes: "How lazy painters subsequently became."

What a wonderfully shocking statement: Western culture has suffered almost 500 years of "lazy" art? Wow.

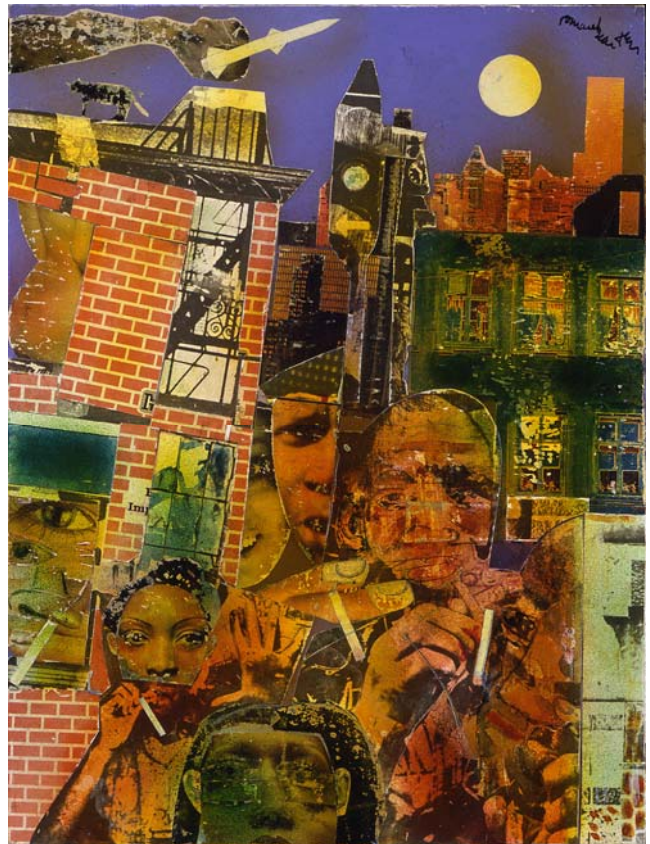
There are undoubtedly some not-so-lazy artists who have come down the pike since Bruegel's time. All the same, Mr. Downes flings this offhand provocation like a gauntlet in the face of contemporary culture. By urging artists to ask more of themselves, he implies that audiences should ask more of artists as well.

Mr. Downes' essay came to mind while visiting *Romare Bearden: Fractured Tales: Intimate Collages*, a small and exquisitely arranged exhibition in the back room at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery. Whether Bearden (1914-88) was aware of Mr. Downes' writings is less important than the values the two men shared.

Toward the end of Bearden's life, an interviewer remarked to him that it is "the artist's mission to make sense of the chaos in the universe." "That's what I think!" Bearden replied with palpable joy.

But making sense of the universe, let alone chaos, is an old nostrum. How can anyone give order to such a huge thing? Most artists *are* too lazy to tackle that question.

Not all art need conquer the universe all at once, though. Bearden's corner of it was rooted in the African-American experience—itsself no small subject. History permeates the art, as does biography. In the few choice pieces at Rosenfeld, Bearden explores rural life in the South, the Caribbean landscape and Harlem streets.



Romare Bearden (1911-1988), *Departure From the Planet Earth*, 1975
mixed media collage on board, 24" x 18", signed and dated

Every culture should have an artist who chronicles its people, customs, culture and sense of place, both geographic and spiritual, with as much rigor, generosity and compassion. Yet Bearden's art encompasses so much more than one people's experience: It amplifies why that experience is part and parcel of our collective humanity.

Bearden, like Mr. Downes, was a fan of Bruegel—his admiration was such that fellow students at the Art Students League nicknamed him “Pete.” Bearden's ambition was to “paint the life of my people as I know it ... as Bruegel painted the life of the Flemish people of his day.”

Bearden was acutely aware of his “dual culture”: He belonged to the urban life of Manhattan's Harlem and the artistic heritage of Holland's Haarlem, to blues laments and Byzantine reliquaries, to African masks and the paintings of Giotto, Veronese and Matisse. That's not the half of it: Antiquity offered him guidance and motivation, particularly the art of Egypt, as did books, travel and music, always music.

Bearden's self-proclaimed “duality” was, in artistic fact, an understatement. He wasn't multicultural so much as omnicultural. If anything, the welcoming, inquisitive and appreciative nature of Bearden's vision shows up multiculturalism for the constrictive and self-involved political posturing that it is.

Bearden's collages are inconceivable without the examples set by Surrealism and Dadaism. (Cubism, as well, served as the integral scaffolding for his homespun imagery.) Both movements used collage for related ends: Surrealism for its ability to conjure non-rational images, Dadaism for depicting ruptures in the social fabric.

Bearden was neither a dreamer nor an ideologue (though his involvement in politics, particularly the civil-rights movement, is well documented). He applied collage to radically different ends. The bits-and-pieces variability of something like *Morning—Mood Vertigo* (1972) reveals a temperament that savors the wonders of the world without discounting its many hardships. *Departure from the Planet Earth* (1975) is a deeply humane work about how inhumane life on earth can be.

Despite his tendency toward romance and mythology, Bearden never let the minutiae of the here-and-now escape his attention. He delighted in everyday circumstance. *Childhood Memories* (also known as *Uptown Looking Downtown*) (1965) is a loving paean to city life. It displays Bearden at his inclusive and intricate best. A Hasid strides down the street next to an “organization man” cobbled together from what appears to be a Sears Roebuck catalog circa 1950. A boy of Asian descent holds (or is he selling?) a flower. A blues busker plies his trade. A sleek young hottie is chauffeured around town by her sugar daddy. Gridlock reigns. The verities of New York City are eternal.

The overly didactic title of *Mr. Blues Leaves a Calling Card—You Learned Very Early on That Either Side of the Street Could Be Sunny or Blue* (1981) doesn't diminish its horrifying tale of random violence or the tenderness with which Bearden muses on mortality. Elsewhere, he posits that good sex is an antidote to worldly woes and that home, however obscured by memory or afflicted by poverty, remains a source of emotional sustenance.

Like Max Beckmann, Jean Hélicon and Fairfield Porter, Bearden was a modernist who employed modernism's innovations in order to broaden its restrictive parameters. Unafraid of the literary, the historical or the sentimental, he honed in on them in ways that found cogent and often incredibly seductive visual expression.

Mr. Downes writes of a lesson “we ... have yet to learn” from Bruegel: “A modest sense of our place in relation to the whole.” Some artists gain that sense. Bearden was one of them. His art always conveys something larger than the artist himself. The handful of collages at Rosenfeld offer proof of how challenging, rewarding and rich modesty can be.

Romare Bearden: Fractured Tales: Intimate Collages is at Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, 24 W. 57th Street, until Oct. 28.

