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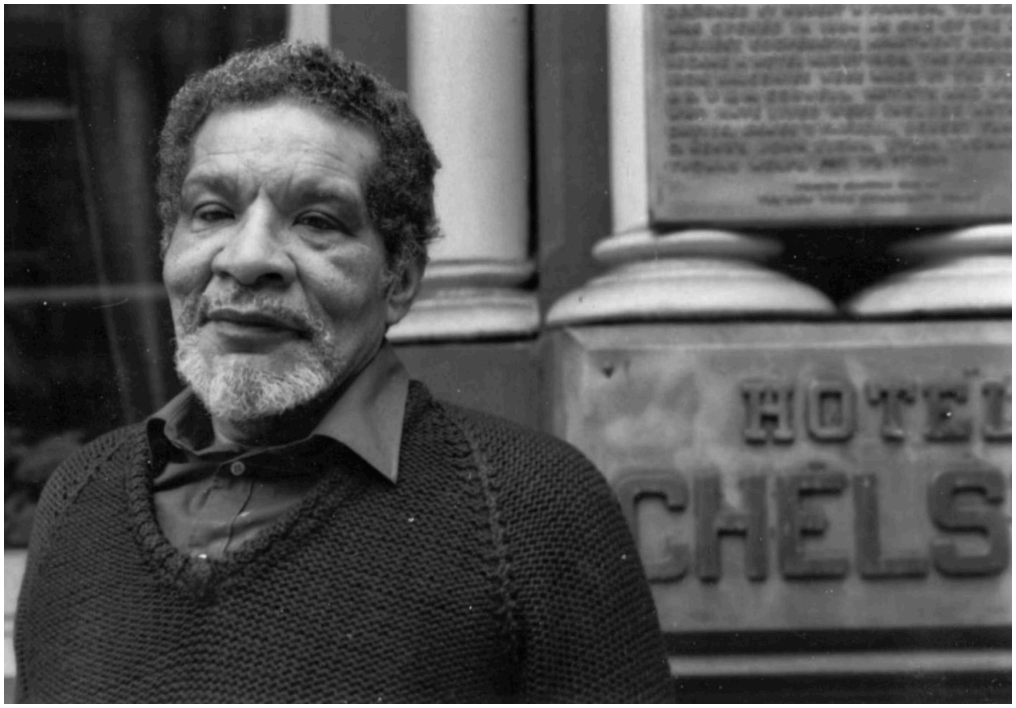
whitewall

A New Look at Herbert Gentry and The Chelsea Hotel from Ryan Lee at Independent

By Katy Donoghue | September 9, 2022



Herbert Gentry in front of the Chelsea Hotel, courtesy of Ryan Lee Gallery.

This week, at the inaugural Independent 20th Century in New York, Ryan Lee Gallery is showing "Herbert Gentry at the Chelsea Hotel." On view at the fair, open now through September 11, are works made by the artist during the time he lived and worked at the famous New York location.

Gentry's expressive, figurative paintings are full of life, emotion, joy, color, and gesture. He was a figure in the post-war European art community, going to Paris on the GI Bill in 1946, and spending time there and in Scandinavia for the next few decades. Between 1971 and the late 1990s, he kept a residence and studio at the Chelsea Hotel, finding fulfillment and enjoyment in the downtown bohemian

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scene of the New York icon. He passed away in 2003 in Sweden at the age of 84.

Herbert Gentry, "Blue Garden," 1987, oil on linen, 36 3/4 x 45 inches, courtesy of Ryan Lee Gallery.

He was affiliated with the Cobra movement and counted artists like Ed Clark and Romare Bearden as close friends. Gentry's work has often been shown in the context of his relationship and time spent in Europe. With the reopening of the Chelsea Hotel, Ryan Lee Gallery saw Independent 20th Century as the perfect chance to showcase the paintings and works on paper Gentry made while in New York. *Whitewall* spoke with the co-founder of Ryan Lee Gallery, **Jeffrey Lee**, about Gentry, his legacy, and some of the works at Independent that have never been seen before.

WHITEWALL: What made you want to bring the work of Herbert Gentry to the fair?

JEFFREY LEE: We thought Herbert Gentry would be a great presentation because he lived in the Chelsea Hotel for a long time, after spending his time between Europe and America. He has such an interesting artistic style and biography of being this bridge between the two continents. We also thought that with the reopening of the Chelsea Hotel and its incredible history with artists, it would be such a nice tie-in for New York. So, we're focusing on works

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that he predominantly made at the hotel where he had a studio and apartment.

His work really speaks to universality, as exposed to specificity. All the images and the figures he made were about trying to capture the universal. He as a person was this incredible connector of people. He was someone that guided a lot of the American artists that went over to Paris. In 1946, he was one of the first artists to go over on the GI Bill. He was inspirational to people like **Beauford Delaney**, **Larry Potter**, **Ed Clark**, and **Romare Bearden**, who were all lifelong friends afterward. The spirit of his work is interconnected with surrealism, stream of consciousness, and figures all entangled together—it really represents his life. And there's an incredible joy to them.

Herbert Gentry, "Two Together," 1999, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 36 inches, courtesy of Ryan Lee Gallery.

WW: What was the period of time when Gentry was living and working at the Chelsea Hotel?

JL: He first came to the Chelsea hotel in 1972. He always kept a studio in Paris, and since 1972 he always had a place in the Chelsea Hotel.

It was a focal point for downtown artistic activity and a bohemian gathering place with incredible artists. It's something he really enjoyed and celebrated.

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WW: What kind of work is on view at Independent?

JL: We're showing mostly paintings and a couple of works on paper. Some of the paintings are going to be exhibited for the first time, and a couple have been in major museum shows, like at The Studio Museum, P.S.1, etc.

They are very subconscious and spontaneous and you can certainly see this incredible affinity to jazz, the idea of improvising, and the spontaneity he enjoyed with his work. He never really wanted to overthink things, it was about expressing what he was both feeling and thinking through these paintings.

Herbert Gentry, "Amid the Crowd, "1990-1991, acrylic on unprimed linen, 78 x 66 inches, courtesy of Ryan Lee Gallery.

WW: What's it like to see look at his works today for you?

JL: When I first saw them, they felt so fresh. Thinking about contemporary painters, young painters, the language of figurative surrealist practice, is so there right now. And you see an artist like Herbert Gentry who was doing it a couple of generations

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before. I always think about surrealism, the aesthetic coming after the war to make sense of what the reality was, what our world was like. And Herbert Gentry went to Paris in 1946 at the end of World War II. Contemporary artists today gravitate towards that surrealist language, too, to make sense of all the chaos happening in our lives and in the world. There's something that's very apropos about his work.

Herbert Gentry, "On The Way," 1984, oil on linen canvas, 48 x 36 inches, courtesy of Ryan Lee Gallery.

Herbert Gentry, "On The Way," 1984, oil on linen canvas, 48 x 36 inches, courtesy of Ryan Lee Gallery.

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HYPERALLERGIC

The Independent Spirit of Herbert Gentry

By John Yau | January 16, 2021

Gentry was one of a number of Black artists who had to navigate the art world's demand to emphasize their racial identity in the "right" way.

Herbert Gentry, "Untitled" (1964), gouache on paper, 23 3/4 x 19 3/4 inches (all images courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery)

Herbert Gentry was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1919 and died in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2003, at the age of 84. In 2001, he moved permanently to Sweden because America lacked an adequate health care program. Otherwise, he would have likely returned to New York City.

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During his lifetime, Gentry lived in Harlem and Chelsea, Manhattan (in the latter he rented an apartment in the Chelsea Hotel); Paris, France; Copenhagen, Denmark; and various cities in Sweden. He had a New York exhibition at the Andre Zarre Gallery in 1974, but he never exhibited regularly in the city.

Gentry's biography offers reasons why he does not fit into the common narratives of postwar American artists and should not be seen as working from traditions of either Abstract Expressionism or figurative expressionism, as exemplified by Lester Johnson, for instance. For all the different influences he absorbed, he is a remarkably independent artist.

I mention these facts because I recently saw the exhibition *Herbert Gentry: Paris and Beyond 1949-1978* at Ryan Lee (November 14, 2020 – January 23, 2021) and discovered an artist completely unknown to me.

Given this expansive time span, I did wish there were more works from his first years in Paris, as this is when he began to define his identity.

Herbert Gentry, "Chez Honey" (1949), oil on masonite, 18 x 15 inches

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Although the press release cites his friend Romare Bearden's characterization of Gentry as "introduc[ing] the American concept of gesture, free invention, and the vivid dissonances of color to the European sensibilities," and it connects him with Abstract Expressionism, I thought this muddied the waters, particularly as it never states who he might have influenced.

The works in the show — particularly those on paper — suggest that he developed a style of calligraphic brushwork in the 1960s, after Abstract Expressionism had been eclipsed by Pop Art, Minimalism, and Color Field painting, all of which downplayed drawing in paint.

The heads and figures populating Gentry's paintings from 1949, the date of "Chez Honey" (oil on masonite, 18 x 15 inches), as well as many works from the 1970s, hint that he was influenced also by the COBRA group, which was formed by Scandinavian and Belgian artists in Paris in 1948, including Karel Appel and Asger Jorn.

Installation view, Herbert Gentry: Paris and Beyond 1949-1978 at Ryan Lee, New York

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The COBRA artists worked spontaneously. They often used bright colors and drew animalistic or childlike figures. I think this connection helps explain why Gentry began exhibiting regularly in Denmark and Sweden in 1959.

"Chez Honey" is titled after a jazz club and gallery that Gentry opened in the Montparnasse district of Paris (1948-51). According to the catalogue essay by Gretchen Wagner, "Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Dizzie Gillespie, among other renowned names, performed there […]." Painted in gray-blues and reds, the work depicts a woman and a man, their heads close together. The woman, on the right, puts her manicured hand on the man's shoulder, while she leans in to whisper to him.

While the woman is not instantly legible, a Dan mask from the Ivory Coast inspired her companion's head, which takes up the left side of the painting. Pablo Picasso was also inspired by Dan masks, which he copied on the right side of his groundbreaking painting "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (1907). I do not see Gentry's use of the mask as a nod to Picasso, but rather as an attempt to recover African art from Picasso and other white European artists who had appropriated it.

The diminishing legibility within a compressed space evokes Chez Honey's packed house.

What is striking about this painting is that it does not look like anything coming out of New York at the time; it is not gestural, geometric, or influenced by Jackson Pollock's drip technique. I think the starting point for considering Gentry's work is to not bring in Abstract Expressionism.

Herbert Gentry, "Cityscape" (1955), oil on masonite, 37 x 24 inches

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"Cityscape" (oil on masonite, 37 x 24 inches, 1955), is divided horizontally. In the lower half, Gentry depicts a building with a peaked roof. Its facade is split into two rows of rectangles of different widths, some of which are further divided into quarters, each a different hue of brown, black, red, or dirty yellow. The upper half, in contrast to the building pressing against the picture plane, depicts a street receding until it reaches an open doorway or tunnel. On either side, the angled facades of building are visible. What compels our attention is a red rectangle in the middle of the street, about halfway between the opening and the rooftop from which it rises.

The red rectangle — at once a stopping point in the receding street and an inexplicable presence — conveys Gentry's painterly intelligence. He found ways to be fresh and hold the viewer's attention.

"Untitled" (oil on masonite, 29 ½ x 24 ¼ inches, 1961) is the first abstract painting Gentry made while living in Copenhagen, where he moved after he was invited to take part in a group exhibition. Consisting mostly of vertical and circular lines in a palette of yellow and dirty white, with red, brown, and black accents, "Untitled" utilizes marks that I would connect to Mark Tobey, rather than the heavier, thicker gestural painting associated with the New York school.

Herbert Gentry, "White Buffalo" (1963), oil on canvas, 57 x 53 inches

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In the exhibition's largest painting, "White Buffalo" (oil on canvas, 57 x 53 inches, 1963), Gentry has mastered a calligraphic approach for which he uses — counterintuitively — a dry brush on white ground. The marks and circular lines push toward figuration without crossing over, which is not like anything done by Tobey or the New York artists at the time.

Displayed in two adjacent spaces, the largely chronological layout of the exhibition suggests that Gentry's work can be divided into roughly three periods, each lasting about a decade, starting around 1949, three years after he settled in Paris and began studying at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in the Montparnasse. This is likely where he met Ed Clark.

Like Clark, who has received belated recognition in recent years, Gentry is one of a number of accomplished Black artists born in the first decades of the 20th century who existed largely independently of the New York art world — both downtown and in Harlem, where Black identity and, later, the Black Arts movement were emphasized. It is important for the legacies of both of these artists, and for ourselves, to discover all the ways these intrepid individuals navigated an uncomprehending, often unsympathetic situation in the art world, which demanded they emphasize their racial identity in the "right" way.

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culture type

An American in Paris: Herbert Gentry Said His Paintings Possess a 'Certain Spontaneity' and Reflect 'People I've Met Throughout the World'

By Victoria L. Valentine | January 16, 2021

HERBERT GENTRY, "Dance Turquoise," 1978 (acrylic on canvas, 40 x 52 inches / 101.6 x 132.1 cm).
© Estate of Herbert Gentry, Courtesy Ryan Lee Gallery

MANY BLACK AMERICAN ARTISTS, seeking a more racially receptive experience, thrived in Europe during the post-war years. A New Yorker, Herbert Gentry (1919-2003) was at the center of the milieu. In 1949, he established Chez Honey, a gallery-club in the Montparnasse area of Paris, a popular gathering place that engendered many of his friendships and artistic connections. His circle included Beauford Delaney, Romare Bearden, Ed Clark, Larry Rivers, James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Eartha Kitt, Orson Welles, Duke Ellington, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

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The venue, where art was displayed by day, jazz flowed at night, and American and European artists, musicians, and intellectuals gathered across racial lines, inspired one of Gentry's paintings. "Chez Honey" (1949) is on view at Ryan Lee Gallery in New York. He produced the moody-hued, gestural abstraction the same year he started the club.

"Herbert Gentry: Paris and Beyond 1949-1978" at Ryan Lee presents paintings and drawings surveying Gentry's European years across three decades. Bursting with expression and networks of calligraphic lines, the improvisational works channel the spirit of jazz. The presence of faces and figures suggest the artist's cultural fluidity and the spectrum of people in his orbit. The gallery is presenting works by Gentry for the first time, in cooperation with the artist's estate.

> *The works are channel the spirit of jazz, bursting with expression and networks of improvisational lines. The presence of faces and figures suggest the artist's cultural fluidity and the spectrum of people in his orbit.*

Gentry was born in Pittsburgh, Pa. His father was a printer and his mother was a dancer. When his parents separated, he moved to New York City. Gentry grew up with his mother and stepfather in the Sugar Hill section of Harlem where they regularly hosted artists and musicians in their home. She had studied ballet and modern dance and worked as a chorus girl, for a time dancing on the same line as Josephine Baker. His mother counted Baker, Ellington, Langston Hughes, and Paul Robeson, among her friends.

Gentry was in the U.S. Army when he first visited Paris in 1944. After he was discharged in 1945, he soon returned and studied at the Sorbonne and the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, where he later taught. He opened Chez Honey with Honey Johnson, a singer and painter who was the first of his three wives. In the late 1950s, he ventured elsewhere in Europe, establishing studios in Copenhagen, Denmark, and Stockholm, Sweden. In 1969, he moved into the famous Chelsea Hotel, splitting his between New York City and Stockholm for the rest of his career.

Gentry discussed his incredibly dynamic life during an oral history interview conducted in 1991 by the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. Reflecting on his childhood, Gentry said: "I met almost everyone that was in Harlem during that period who was famous." He said he encountered Bearden years later at his

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Paris club. Back in New York, the artists became "close friends," Gentry said, calling Bearden "a wonderful person." He also spoke about his work.

"Well, there's a certain spontaneity that exists. I work with my, my subconscious plays a great role, I don't calculate, I'm not generalistic and the form plays the great role. The figures come into it, the faces come into my work, that I don't calculate to be the types that appear, but they are the types that I've met in my life," Gentry said.

"My base is African American also it's in my paintings the people I've met throughout the world, American, African American, but I've met people throughout the world, who are my friends who actually I love and we've done things together so this appears in my work."

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ARTNEWS

ARTnews in Brief: Paul Mogensen Is Now Represented by Blum & Poe—and More from November 22, 2019

by the Editors of Artnews | November 18, 2019

Ryan Lee Gallery Adds Estate of Herbert Gentry

The New York–based Ryan Lee Gallery now represents the estate of Herbert Gentry. Gentry is best known for his vibrant abstract canvases whose style stood outside major art movements of the early 20th century, though his paintings have been associated with Art Informel and the expatriate artist group CoBRA. A major solo exhibition of his art was held at the Royal Art Academy in Stockholm in 1975, making him the first non-Scandinavian artist to receive a retrospective at the museum. Works by Gentry, who died in 2003 at the age of 84, can be found in the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and other major international institutions.

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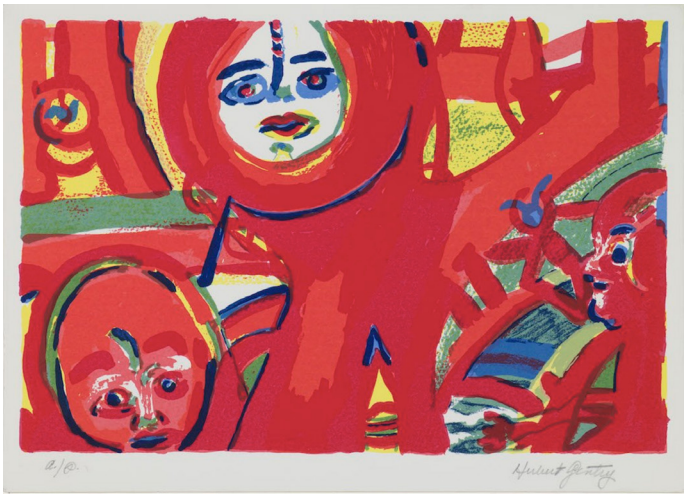
St. Louis MAGAZINE

Poetry, jazz, and abstract art come together at poet Quincy Troupe and trumpeter Keyon Harrold's homage to 'Shape of Abstraction'

'The Shape of Abstraction' is a Saint Louis Art Museum exhibit comprising gifted works from St. Louis native and art collector Ronald Ollie and his wife, Monique McRipley Ollie.

by Samantha Stevenson | October 9, 2019



Courtesy of Saint Louis Art Museum

Herbert Gentry, American, 1919–2003; "Today", 1987; screenprint; image: 8 11/16 in. × 13 inches, sheet: 9 13/16 × 13 11/16 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, The Thelma and Bert Ollie Memorial Collection, Gift of Ronald and Monique Ollie 140:2017; © Estate of Herbert Gentry

When Ron Ollie was in the sixth grade, he was intimidated by art class. "We'd have to depict something or draw it figuratively, and I can never do it. I just didn't have the talent," he says. But a classmate encouraged him to try abstraction. He didn't know what that was. But the classmate demonstrated and encouraged Ollie to give it a try. "I was using a lot of colors and gestures and everything. And it felt so free, so free," he says. This moment would begin the now art collector's love affair with abstract art. But it would be the St. Louis native's time at the Saint Louis Art Museum with his parents that would

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inspire him and his wife, Monique McRipley Ollie, to gift 81 of his collected abstract works (40 on display) by African American artists spanning five generations—16 years of abstract art—in 2017.

That gift, named the Thelma and Bert Ollie Memorial Collection to honor his parents, is being shown as an exhibit called "The Shape of Abstraction: Selections from the Ollie Collection" from now until March 22. It features 40 abstract paintings, drawings, and prints from as early as the 1940s to as recently as the early 2000s and "expands the narrative that we know about the evolution of contemporary abstraction," says Saint Louis Art Museum's Gretchen L. Wagner, who co-curated the exhibit. "It's bringing more individuals into the fold," she says. "They were side by side with individuals like Jackson Pollock and Franz Kline and others in the early abstract expressionist moment, yet their names

Courtesy of Saint Louis Art Museum

Herbert Gentry, American, 1919–2003; "Our Web", 1990; gouache; sheet: 29 1/2 × 22 1/4 inches; Saint Louis Art Museum, The Thelma and Bert Ollie Memorial Collection, Gift of Ronald and Monique Ollie 151:2017; © Mary Anne Rose and the Estate of Herbert Gentry

are lesser-known to us. So we're finally recognizing them and celebrating them." When the collection first came into the museum, Wagner says, the team looked through it with a scholarly lens, shifting focus from the works' personal significance to recognizing the works' art-historical importance. This included arranging the exhibit into four thematic sections: "Attention to Materials";

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"Influences Abroad"; "Representation's Role"; and "Taking Shape." These themes allowed the curators—and now viewers—to break down such things as how the artists' use of materials changed over time and how environments might have inspired their work.

The collection spans from paintings such as James Little's *Double Exposure* (used for much of the exhibit's promotion), Stanley Whitney's *Out into the Open*, Sam Gilliam's *Half Circle Red*, and Frank Bowling's *Fishes, Wishes and Star Apple Blue* to works on paper including Robert Blackburn's lithograph *Faux Pas*.

Ollie admits that he's an emotional buyer. "If I feel a certain way and I am turned on, then I'm interested in the piece," he says. "I remember one piece, however: I was at an art gallery in East Hampton. Arlene Bujese gallery. She was doing a solo show on Frank Wimberly. I went by and walked into the gallery. I saw this one piece. I got to thinking about it. 'Wow, this is a difficult picture.' I said, 'Well, let me sleep on it.' I thought about it, and I woke up the next day, and I bought

Courtesy of the Saint Louis Art Museum

Ollies in gallery

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it. But it had originally struck me."

Ollie's taste has been informed by years spent admiring art in museums and galleries. As a result, he says, he knows exactly what he likes and what he doesn't. But do those feelings change? "You know, I cannot think of a piece that I bought that I said I am sorry I bought it," Ollie says. Then, he reconsiders, referencing a time his feelings toward a piece did change, but he didn't necessarily have buyers' remorse. "I still have it," he says. "In fact, I still have it hanging on the wall, and I like the piece very much, but it's really not my favorite."

And what is his favorite? Ollie laughs: "People ask me that all of the time. I love them all. I can tell you that I love all the Frank Wimberly, the James Little piece, Hebert Gentry—it's hard to say. I've had many of these hanging on my wall and I would come home from work, or I'd be walking through the apartment and then all of a sudden one would strike me at that moment. At that moment, that was my favorite one. Or I'd go somewhere else and come back home and boom—another one. It all depends on my mood."

The title "Shape of Abstraction" comes from a poem Ollie ask local poet Quincy Troupe to write in response to the collection of works. Next, on October 11, Troupe will read that piece among others in a performance accompanied by original compositions from jazz trumpeter Keyon Harrold (also Troupe's cousin).

Complementing the works with poetry and jazz is fitting, Wagner says, citing how many artists tell stories about spending time with musicians; both artists inspiring one another. "The whole history of making, at least later 20th-century abstraction—which is more of this gestural, expressive way of working—is about being very spontaneous," she says. "It's an automatic kind of way of working. Oftentimes it's inspired by music and by other art forms, such as poetry and literature."

"When I first read it—you know how poetry is sometimes, it's very condensed," Ollie says of the poem. "I read it again, and again, and again, and again, and again. And finally, the meaning started coming through. Ultimately, I got it. It was just exhilarating to hear the words and the meaning and the emotions that were there."

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The New York Times

Nights at the Museum: Good for Cultivating an Art Habit and Romance

By Hilarie M. Sheets | December 11, 2018

Monique and Ronald Ollie in front of Ed Clark's "Untitled" (1975). Credit Sam Gilliam/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

When Ronald Ollie was an engineering student at the Missouri University of Science and Technology in the early 1970s, he would take dates to the St. Louis Art Museum. "The other engineers would say, 'Why are you taking that woman to the art museum?'" he recalled.

He would respond devilishly to his fraternity brothers, "You just don't know!"

Today, Mr. Ollie, a retired mechanical engineer, and his wife, Monique, who has a doctorate in biomedical engineering, talked about their collection in their Newark apartment, which has a spectacular view of Manhattan and walls covered with abstract work by black artists.

The collecting compulsion was a pre-existing condition when Mr. Ollie met his future wife in 2003 at the National Black Fine Art Show. "I have picked out a few pieces, but mine are in the back," Ms. Ollie, who is a project manager at Johnson & Johnson, said

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Herbert Gentry's "Masquerade" (1986) at the Ollie home in Newark. The couple collect abstract works by black artists. Credit Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

good-naturedly.

Mr. Ollie, who was raised in St. Louis, visited the museum as a child with his mother, who also enrolled him in art classes. "I had no talent for drawing figuratively," he said. But, as a sixth grader, he took the advice of a friend in class, who leaned over and suggested he try abstract art. "I thought, 'Wow, this is free!' That's where I gravitated."

By the late 1980s, when Mr. Ollie was living in New York, a love of looking at abstract art had evolved into a passion for acquiring it. An auction dealer who sold him a Terry Adkins pastel drawing and a lithograph by Herbert Gentry suggested he visit the Chelsea Hotel, where Mr. Gentry lived, to introduce himself.

"Herb became one of my great mentors and friends, and he opened the art world up to me," said Mr. Ollie, who then met and began collecting the work of artists including Ed Clark, Al Loving, Frank Bowling, James Little and Stanley Whitney. "Word got around among black artists that I bought abstract art," Mr. Ollie said. "At that time, there were not a lot of people buying."

He would regularly meet with many black abstract artists at the Chelsea Square restaurant. "We used to say this was our Cedar Bar," he said, referring to what became the Cedar Tavern (now defunct) in Greenwich Village, made famous by the Abstract

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From left, Sam Gilliam's "Through Circles" (2001) and Ed Clark's "Untitled (Bastille Series)" (1991). Credit Sam Gilliam/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York; Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

Expressionists in the 1950s.

Last year, the Ollies gave 81 of their 225 works to the St. Louis Art Museum in honor of Mr. Ollie's parents. The Thelma and Bert Ollie Memorial Art Collection, including pieces by Norman Lewis, William T. Williams, Sam Gilliam and Jack Whitten, will go on view there next September.

These are edited excerpts from the conversation.

I imagine when you started, these artists were pretty affordable.

RONALD OLLIE Very affordable. I started buying directly from the artists, and I could negotiate with them. Ed Clark would take me to various studios, like Stanley Whitney's or Frank Bowling's. I was going to buy a piece, and Frank said, "I'm going to give you my landlord's address and I want you to pay the rent every month." I didn't have to pay the painting all right off and I was helping him pay his rent in Dumbo.

The relationships seem as important to you as the artworks.

MR. OLLIE These artists trusted that I could talk to them about the art they did in a critical way. Ed would say: "I'm working on a piece. Go take a look and tell me what you think." It did something to me in terms of my confidence in developing my eye and starting to know that this is something that is real for me. How did the gift to the museum come about?

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Ed Clark's "Untitled" above the Ollies' mantel.Credit...Daniel Dorsa for The New York Times

MR. OLLIE I was interested in making a donation. The curators came and said, "If we take anything, it may just be a few pieces." I said, "Anything you want."

MONIQUE OLLIE The one exception was a piece by Richard Mayhew. It's one of my favorites.

MR. OLLIE When they came back and said, "We want 81 pieces," it was shocking, to say the least. They did not have a representative sampling of abstract art by black artists.

MS. OLLIE When we were in St. Louis and saw the art up, I just started bawling. These are pieces that now will be available to broad audiences.

Do you have a favorite piece in the apartment?

MR. OLLIE This Ed Clark was on loan to the Newark Museum when the curators came. I told them, "You missed out on a great painting."

Are you glad it was held back?

MR. OLLIE Kind of. This is one of my favorites.

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BU Today

Celebrating a Peripatetic Painter at the BU Art Gallery

Herbert Gentry resisted trends, made his art his own

By John O'Rourke | February 18, 2014

Herbert Gentry was known for his semifigural abstract paintings, like Our Dance, acrylic on canvas (1984-85). Courtesy of G. R. N'Namdi Gallery

Mention the name Herbert Gentry and chances are you'll draw a blank. The African American abstract painter (1919–2003) never achieved the same degree of fame that friends and contemporaries like Romare Bearden (SED'34) and Kosta Alex did, in part because he spent his career on the move, shuttling between Paris, New York, Copenhagen, and Malmo, Sweden, and often working in several countries at once.

But a new show at the Boston University Art Gallery at the Stone Gallery, titled *Making Connections: The Art and Life of Herbert Gentry*, should do much to place him among his better-known peers.

"This exhibition sheds light on an artist whose artwork facilitated and inspired an international community of artists and musicians," says Kate McNamara, BUAG director and chief curator. "His lively paintings reflect an urgency of spirit and offer a narrative of the art world in the mid-century."

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Herbert Gentry's Dance Turquoise, oil on canvas (1978). Courtesy of Estate of Herbert Gentry

Known chiefly for his semifigural abstract style and for paintings of faces, heads, and masks, both animal and human—all alive with color—Gentry's signature style had a "circular, web-like look," says exhibition curator Rachel Tolano (GRS'11,'16), the Jan and Warren Adelson Curatorial Fellow in American Art.

Because he spent so much time traveling from one country to another, Gentry never stayed in one place long enough to establish a reputation, Tolano says. "He was always on the go, and it's hard to become a pillar in any one community if you're always jetting off to a different city or continent." But she offers another explanation of why Gentry is not as well known as some of his contemporaries. "He resisted trends," she says. "He didn't go the route of abstract expressionism, even though he was in Greenwich Village in New York between 1951 and 1953. He didn't go the route of narrative identity-based art when he was back in New York in the early 1970s during the Black Art Movement either."

Instead, Gentry hewed to his semifigural abstract style, populated with striking images of entangled figures. For example, in *Dance Turquoise*, four distinct biomorphic figures seem to be tethered together, their features masked by expressive brushstrokes. Similarly, several abstract figures are joined together in Our Dance. Both display Gentry's mastery of color—shades of turquoise and white, punctuated with red and green in the former, vibrant reds, blues, and greens in the latter. They are characterized by the artist's signature curvilinear brushwork, which gives them a sense of fluid movement.

Gentry's life was as fascinating as his art. He grew up in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance. His mother was a dancer and an actress, and as a boy, he followed in her

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Herbert Gentry's *Couple and Lamp*, oil on masonite board (1955). Courtesy of Estate of Herbert Gentry

footsteps, touring with Ethel Barrymore in the play *Scarlet Sister Mary*. He studied art under the Federal Art Project of the Works Progress Administration before serving in the US Army during World War II. His stint in the service brought him at one point to Paris, and he returned there to study art on the G.I. Bill.

Like many mid-century African American artists, Gentry chose to work abroad through much of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, in part to avoid the racism then prevalent in the United States. While living in Paris, he opened the jazz club Chez Honey, named for his first wife. The club became something of a mecca for US expats and visitors—he described it as "the place in Paris for Americans." It also served as a gallery space for the work of American artists.

While none of Gentry's work is overtly biographical, it was enormously influenced by the idiom of jazz. "Gentry always insisted his work was uncalculated—that what went onto the canvas was a product of his subconscious," Tolano says. "His dynamic, seemingly unpredictable compositions mimic the improvised jazz melodies he listened to so often." One of the current show's canvases, *Couple and Lamp*, painted in 1955, could have been inspired by any of the numerous jazz clubs Gentry frequented in Europe. The abstract, nearly featureless figures of a man and a woman are cloaked in candlelight—the club's shadows and smoking ambience dancing across the canvas.

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Gentry spent much of his career working in Scandinavia—first in Copenhagen, then from 1963 until the end of his life in Sweden (although he never gave up his Paris studio). He was drawn to Scandinavia's egalitarian lifestyle and the avant-garde artists working there. "Culturally, Gentry identified closely with the social democratic ways of these cultures and their emphasis on communal endeavors, versus American individualism, and linking society and art," notes Tolano. From 1982 until his death in 2003, he lived with his second wife, the painter Mary Anne Rose, at New York's Chelsea Hotel. And everywhere he went, he made friends, hence the BUAG exhibition title—Gentry was constantly forging new connections.

Tolano has organized the exhibition into three sections—"Paris," "Scandinavia," and "New York"—and as well as showing some of the work Gentry created in each place, it includes works by the artists he befriended in each. So the "Paris" section includes Alex's sculpture *The Girl from Panama* and Harold Cousins' welded bronze *Le Musicien*. There are also wonderful abstracts by Larry Potter and Beauford Delaney on view. Similarly, paintings by Bearden and Norman Lewis appear alongside canvases painted by Gentry during his New York years. The sections place Gentry's work in context and emphasize his tacit refusal to be swayed by the stylistic camps his friends were pursuing.

"It didn't feel right to talk about Gentry's art without talking about Gentry's people," says Tolano. "He was a people person and insisted that images from his subconscious were products of his experience and the people he encountered in his life…connections seem to define his life: connecting flights and trains, social connections made with people he met in cafés, and the professional connections he made by networking."

The exhibition is divided into three sections—"Paris," "Scandinavia," and "New York"—each a place Gentry worked and lived in over the course of his prolific career. Photo courtesy of BU Art Gallery

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In putting the show together, Tolano worked closely with Gentry's widow, Mary Anne Rose. She traveled many times to Rose's home in the Chelsea Hotel and to her studio in Queens. Tolano spent "long hours," with Rose, she says, talking "about Gentry, their lives together, going through his personal archives, and a lot of emailing."

Tolano was unaware of Gentry until she took over as exhibition curator after original curator Mamie Hyatt (GRS'12), also a Jan and Warren Adelson Curatorial Fellow in American Art, died unexpectedly in Sweden, where she was researching Gentry on a Fulbright fellowship. Hyatt's advisor, Patricia Hills, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of history of art and architecture, knew Tolano was well-versed in African American art and had the necessary background knowledge and asked her to take over the project.

In putting the show together, Tolano says, she had two goals: first, to demonstrate the diversity of African American art, and second, "to bring to light a whole multicultural community of peripatetic avant-garde artists who, like Gentry, didn't really call one country home."

On both counts, she's succeeded.

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Art in America

African American Abstract Masters

Herbert Gentry resisted trends, made his art his own

By Richard Kalina | October 7, 2010

This show of 10 African-American abstract painters—Betty Blayton, Frank Bowling, Ed Clark, Herbert Gentry, Bill Hutson, Sam Middleton, Joe Overstreet, Thomas Sills, Merton Simpson and Frank Wimberley—highlights the work of a group of underknown senior practitioners, many of whom are still working today. Born in the first four decades of the 20th century, they, like so many other abstract artists of their generation, were eclipsed by the movements of the ’60s and ’70s. Race of course played a role in their neglect, but also pertinent is the fact that many of these painters (as well as a good number of black writers and musicians of the period) spent considerable time in the more welcoming atmosphere of Europe, primarily in France and Scandinavia, and missed opportunities to cement their reputations in New York. This is not to say that they labored in obscurity: their résumés include significant museum shows and collections, gallery exhibitions, prestigious grants and desirable teaching positions—in short, they had the sort of respectable professional career that is standard for (or sought by) working artists.

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The show offers much visual gratification and quite a few surprises. I was particularly impressed with the work of **Herbert Gentry** (1919-2003). Born in Pittsburgh, Gentry grew up in Harlem, served overseas in World War II and lived a good part of his professional life in Paris, Copenhagen, Göteborg and Stockholm. He actively participated in the advanced art and jazz scenes of those cities before returning to New York in 1972. *Green Twins* (1963), a relatively small painting (391⁄4 by 32 inches), sets vigorously brushed apple-green passages against a loose scaffolding of linear elements briskly rendered in blacks, browns and luminous cobalt blue. There is a good deal of white ground showing, which gives the painting an appealing sense of air and light and a feeling, abstractly rendered, of figures moving gracefully and energetically in the landscape.

Ed Clark is another strong painter, with muscular works that command their pictorial space. Born in 1926, Clark attended the Art Institute of Chicago, completed his studies in Paris and spent many years in France. He is well represented here by paintings like *Louisiana Series* (1978), whose bold horizontal brushstrokes simultaneously evoke the landscape and speak to paint's materiality, and Red, Black and Blue Movement (2009), with its two giant, nearly colliding brushstrokes separated by a triangle of luscious pink.

Frank Bowling is probably the best known of the 10. Born in Guyana in 1936, he studied in England and has had a successful career in both the U.S. and the U.K., where he was elected to the Royal Academy in 2005. Unlike the others in the show, Bowling is more closely associated with Color Field painting than with Abstract Expressionism. His *Thank You Graham Mileson* (1987), a tall, red and gold vertical rectangle, has the expansive feel, the glowing acrylic tones and thickened swipes of paint characteristic of the post-'60s work of that school of abstraction.

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CITY NEWSPAPER

ART: Herbert Gentry & Rocky Simmons exhibits: Lives of art and activism

By Rebecca Rafferty | February 13, 2008

The U of R's Rush Rhees library currently is home to two exhibits featuring the artwork of - and in-depth looks at the lives of - two inspiring African Americans. Trust librarians, ever-amazing at researching and making sense of the world, to go above and beyond the usual scope of an art show.

In the main lobby of the Rare Books and Special Collections Library, several display cases organize and lead us through the life of the Rochesterian Steven Wynder "Rocky" Simmons. . .

The library also hosts a collection of Herbert Gentry paintings, along with several works by his contemporaries, and an abundance of material illuminating his life and influences. Raised in Harlem by his single mother - a Zeigfeld dancer who held informal art salons with friends Josephine Baker, Langston Hughes, and Louis Armstrong - Gentry was practically born to be an artist. But he found America's segregated society to be stifling, and after his service in WWII, he moved to the more accommodating Europe.

As a student, Gentry found that in Paris he could live as a free man, if not one embraced by the white-owned galleries. Undeterred by racially based rejection, he opened "Chez Honey," his own gallery-by-day, club-by-night establishment, and introduced modern jazz to European culture. The club hosted Duke Ellington and Lena Horne, and acted as a cultural hot spot, fostering the kind of magical chemistry that happens between creative minds. Richard Wright, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean Paul Sartre, and Orson Welles were regular fixtures.

The previously restricted galleries soon opened to Gentry, and by 1954 he was making his living solely by his art. Abstract Expressionism was a logical turn for Gentry, who worked closely with jazz greats, and at times penned the music to be played at his club. In a perceptive piece written specifically for this exhibition, author Clarence Major notes the important link between jazz's emphasis on improvisation and the quick, capture-the-moment way in which the painters worked. Major also philosophizes on the psychological result of war on the human mind, and declares that the "results of the juxtaposition of anxiety and playfulness [in the art] are a pleasing and sophisticated irony," an aspect also found in the "bitter-sweetness" of jazz.

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This anxious optimism is most apparent in two of Gentry's paintings included in the show. "Man's and Animal's Earth" captures complex emotions with rapid, impulsive brush work and the blending of bright, restless color with faded, haunting tones. Animal and human features seem to emerge from and recede into an imposing forest shot through with beams of sunlight. Ironically, Gentry's work explores the theme of alienation through overcrowded space, hinting at the failings of seeming "togetherness." In "Speech," the massive surface holds the features of a listening crowd, with craning necks and expressions ranging from bored to curious - but each face is relatively closed off from the rest. The caustic red of the painting provides the buzz of a crowd in a sort of backward synesthesia. This work refuses to be overlooked; it shouts from across the room.

The tension of collective space/inner isolation is repeated in much of Gentry's work, with layered faces often sharing features with each other, though still maintaining a private, desolate thought-world. The show's title work, "Facing Other Ways - E," is a drawing consisting of hasty Expressionist lines, but with the distorted, confused, and distraught expressions found in many Cubist pieces. Simmons and Gentry worked around the social forces that threatened the fullness of their lives. Neither man was daunted by limitations based on his race, and both did much to pick away at social barriers. This valuable exhibits offer a rare opportunity to enjoy artwork, and also learn about the socio-cultural context in which the artists lived and created.

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THE BALTIMORE SUN

African masks inspired the paintings of Herbert Gentry

Glenn McNatt | Frebuary 14, 2007

Herbert Gentry was an African-American expatriate painter who helped bring Abstract-Expressionism to Europe in the 1950s when he abandoned New York for Paris to escape discrimination in his native country.

He is the subject of The Magic Within, an enchanting retrospective of about 40 paintings, drawings and prints inspired by African masks at the James E. Lewis Museum of Morgan State University.

Gentry died in Stockholm, Sweden, in 2003, a few months after a major exhibition of his works appeared at the Parish Gallery in Washington. He was born in Pittsburgh in 1919, but grew up in New York City, where his family moved shortly before he entered grade school.

In the New York of the 1920s, Gentry came of age amid the cultural and literary flowering known as the Harlem Renaissance, America's first important black arts movement. Working alongside his mother, he was, for a time, a child actor in some of the era's many theatrical productions featuring black performers.

Gentry's widow, the artist Mary Anne Rose, has written that his childhood recollections "recount a series of charmed episodes, like the hours spent backstage among showgirls and dancers at Broadway theaters, his mother the 'captain,' and Josephine Baker the 'end girl' in Florenz Ziegfeld extravaganzas."

Gentry served in the military during World War II and afterward studied art in Paris, where he also opened a nightclub that introduced European audiences to modern jazz. He returned to the states briefly in the early 1950s, but a few years later he settled in Paris again, where he became an impresario of musical and theatrical entertainment for the U.S. armed forces stationed there.

In 1959, after his first one-man exhibition at a gallery in Copenhagen, Denmark, Gentry committed himself to painting full time and began to explore the motifs based on faces and masks that would occupy him for the remainder of his life.

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Hartford Courant

THE JAZZ-INFUSED ART OF HERBERT GENTRY

By OWEN McNALLY | February 5, 2006

ven if you've never heard of the undeservedly obscure but gifted African American painter Herbert Gentry (1919-2003), you can sense this kinetic colorist's presence in his visceral paintings, prints and drawings, which crackle with the spontaneity and explosive energy of jazz.

All you have to do to savor Gentry's jazz-inspired expressionism, which ranges in mood from red hot to cool, is step into his creative world, presented in "Moved by Music," a historically instructive, immediately enjoyable exhibition organized by The Amistad Center for Art & Culture.

The gallery, located in Hartford's Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, is aglow with Gentry's bold slashes and splashes of reds, greens and blues and the sensuously drawn configurations running through this compact, compelling exhibition of 39 paintings, prints and drawings that will be on display through Oct. 29.

The intensity is in the color, which leaps off the museum walls. It comes at you as hard and direct as a startling solo by the genius bebop saxophonist Charlie Parker. Bird, as Parker was known, was one of Gentry's many jazz heroes.

Thought-provoking density lurks among the otherworldly spirit that haunts a painting like "Presentation," which pulsates with vibrantly colored forms. Gentry's drawings, although as extemporaneous as his paintings, are more laid-back and lovely. They're filled with sinfully sinuous lines forming erotic shapes inspired by the curvaceous form of the female body.

"His paintings have so much energy, movement and rhythm," says Rehema C. Barber, the Amistad Center curatorial assistant who orchestrated the exhibition.

While the paintings, with their surging, polyrhythmic twists and turns and liberated lines that fly over imaginary bar lines, are analogous to one of Bird's free flights, the drawings tap into the cool style of the lyrical tenor saxophonist Lester "Prez" Young or the young, museful Miles Davis.

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And just like jazz, Barber says, Gentry's works "celebrate being alive and enjoying the moment."

"Gentry was also inspired by surrealism, so you see bits and flashes of dreams meshed and morphed together. At the same time it's quite musical," Barber says.

As a complement to the blood-tie bond between Gentry's images and his passion for jazz, Barber has put together a swinging soundtrack for the gallery. As you're looking at Gentry's improvisational pieces, the gallery is alive with the sound of classic jazz recordings ranging from Lester Young swinging with the Count Basie Orchestra to Charlie Parker ripping through a bop anthem called "Koko."

If Gentry's art, which was far-better known in Europe than in his native land, is a revelation to Americans, his equally surprising, colorful, cosmopolitan life has the makings of a Hollywood bio-pic.

Gentry was quite literally born into the world of art and entertainment, according to his widow, Mary Anne Rose.

His mother, Theresa, was a smart, gorgeous, gregarious showgirl, Rose says. A well-known Ziegfeld Follies chorine, she danced at the glitziest theaters on Broadway and had plenty of friends in the art and showbiz worlds. One of her close buddies and fellow dancers was Josephine Baker, who was later to become the toast of pre-war Paris when African American entertainers were the pop rage of all France.

Because of his mother's semi-celebrity status as a stylish hoofer, he grew up in Harlem's Sugar Hill in a home frequented by dancers, musicians, composers, writers and artists. Duke Ellington and the famous white orchestra leader Paul Whiteman visited the Gentry home, where the buzz among globetrotting entertainers was often about Paris as a magical city of light and enlightenment.

Going regularly to the theater with his beautiful, popular mother, Gentry got a vivid backstage view of the entertainment business. His loving, attentive mother made sure young Gentry took piano lessons to insure that her son was cultured. And the Big Apple's then robust jazz scene of the 1930s and 1940s nourished his burgeoning love for jazz.

Drafted in 1942, he served in the Army, a life-changing, eye-opening experience that took him to Corsica, Algeria, Marseilles, Morocco, Strasburg, Salzburg and, most important, to Paris.

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Discharged in 1945, he returned to New York and, pushed by family pressures, resumed his business administration studies at New York University, which had been interrupted by the war. All the while, he longed to return to Paris, then an exciting center of post-war intellectual and artistic ferment, an almost mythical symbol of self-liberation and the bohemian life.

Thanks to the GI Bill, Gentry could afford to make the giant existential leap from boring accounting classes at New York University to the stimulating cabaret scene and academic life in Paris where he studied at L'Academie de la Grande Chaumiere and Ecole des Hautes Etudes from 1946 to 1949.

Gentry went to Paris not just to escape the racism that was then endemic in America, Rose says, but because Paris had always had a magical, romantic hold on his mind since childhood. Besides, Paris was the home of modernism and artistic freedom, even an escape from his bourgeois relatives who wanted him to go into business, not throw his life away on anything as frivolous as art.

"All his mother's dancer friends had gone to Paris, but she stayed home to take care of Herb. His dream had always been to go to Paris," Rose says.

While in Paris, Gentry and the first of his three wives, the singer and painter Honey Johnson, established a bustling cabaret in Montparnasse, which was an art gallery and salon by day and a popular jazz club and saloon by night.

Chez Honey, as the Left Bank nightclub was called, became a gathering place for intellectuals, painters and musicians of every color and nationality. The club's principle rule was that racism would never be tolerated in this polyglot, multiracial melting pot of a cabaret. Gentry's only other rule was that "you had to be hip and sensitive."

Among Chez Honey's celebrated clientele were France's intellectual power couple, Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Other luminaries at the swinging salon included such famous expatriate African American writers as James Baldwin and Richard Wright; such painters as Romare Bearden (one of Gentry's closest friends), Beauford Delaney and the jazz-obsessed Larry Rivers; and such entertainers as Eartha Kitt, Orson Welles and Marcel Marceau. The club's nightly jam sessions also drew a legion of jazz greats including Ellington; Lena Horne; Louis Armstrong; Sidney Bechet; Dizzy Gillespie; Benny Goodman; the saxophonists Don Byas, James Moody and Zoot Sims; drummer Kenny Clarke; and pianist John Lewis.

A charming, eminently likable bon vivant, Gentry was pal and gracious host to virtually

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all the cultural celebrities who were then making Paris an alluring, international cultural beacon, Rose recalls.

"Herb said he only missed out on Picasso, and that modern jazz in Europe began in his club," she adds

Among other famous artist pals and associates, Gentry hung out and cafe-hopped with his good friend, the Swiss sculptor and painter Alberto Giacometti, and studied briefly with French painter Georges Braque, who, with Picasso, is credited as being the force that created Cubism.

In his prime years well into the 1990s, Gentry's figurative abstractions were shown and widely acclaimed throughout Europe. In the States, his widest exposure occurred when he was featured in the mid-1990s in "Explorations in the City of Light: African American Artists in Paris, 1945-1965." Organized by the Studio Museum in Harlem, the acclaimed exhibition played in a number of premier museums throughout the country.

Gentry's legacy today lives on in many private and public collections throughout the world, and is a particular staple in African American collections, Rose says. Rose, who teaches at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, handles the Gentry estate and has become the keeper of the flame of her husband's artistic reputation.

Rose, who is 30 years Gentry's junior, lived with the artist for 25 years, caring for him through his final years when he fought Alzheimer's disease.

Although Gentry didn't give up his U.S. citizenship and never considered himself an expatriate, Rose says he loved being a footloose citizen of the world, dividing his time among cities in France, Sweden and Scandinavia.

Periodically, he returned to New York City, living in the famous, celebrity-and-artist packed Chelsea Hotel where Rose now resides. In his later years, Gentry settled on dual residencies in Malmo, Sweden, and New York until his death at 84 on Sept. 8, 2003, in Stockholm.

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The Washington Post

An Imagination Freed in Paris

By Jessica Dawson | June 11, 2003

Herbert Gentry got to Paris late. He showed up in 1946, when the city's indubitable title of global art capital was proving dubitable after all. Had Gentry stayed in New York, which had just begun rearing up on its postwar haunches, he would have rode the cusp of a creative explosion. Instead, he headed to a city with its fame on the wane.

But Gentry didn't go to Paris to be cool. Or because Pablo Picasso, Joan Miro and Alberto Giacometti still had studios there (though that helped). The painter arrived and stayed because of what Paris could offer a black man from the United States: freedom from bias and segregation. Paris gave Gentry, Lois Mailou Jones, Beauford Delaney, Barbara Chase-Riboud, Romare Bearden and the countless other African American artists who ventured there in the 1930s, '40s and '50s a place to just be.

And did Gentry live. The Pittsburgh-born painter, surrounded by dancers and performers while growing up in Harlem in the 1920s, arrived in France courtesy of the GI Bill (he'd served in the Army). He studied art at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere and, informally, with Cubist master Georges Braque. Gentry dabbled in entertainment, too, running his own jazz club, Chez Honey, in 1949. Duke Ellington and Zoot Sims performed there. Richard Wright and Jean-Paul Sartre listened in. The club was short-lived, though. Painting was his main concern.

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The style that Gentry developed in Paris stuck with him. Abstracted figuration, I guess you'd call it. You can see it in his later canvases on view in a small survey of 13 paintings at Georgetown's Parish Gallery. Canvases painted three years ago, just before the 83-year-old Gentry was hospitalized for Alzheimer's disease, could be mistaken for the earliest ones in the show, from 1978. All are direct descendants of the Paris paintings.

In Paris, Gentry painted crude, primitive, African-inspired figures in bright colors. It was Picasso, of course, who famously mined -- some would say fetishized -- African art as early as the first decade of the 20th century. The Spaniard's canvas colonialism, shocking at first, was by Gentry's day accepted artistic fashion.

At Parish, Gentry's palette is vivid, his shapes reduced. Blue, purple, red or yellow paints dominate, often vibrating against one another. The artist distilled faces to essential geometry. Mouths are semicircles. Eyes are dots or circles. The canvases, full of figures that seem to pop in and out of view, suggest parades or ceremonies. Some, such as the rich blue "Around Centered One," remind me of Marc Chagall's earnest spirituality. But, like the surrealists before him, Gentry was interested foremost in the subconscious. He used the masks, birds, signs, symbols, totems and glyphs of African art to explore the territory of the mind.

It takes a while to decipher a Gentry painting. You may never figure one out. The artist's imagination took circuitous routes to arrive at these images. One figure's neck turns into the top of another figure's head. A bird beak looks like a man's nose, and vice versa. Gentry's pictures are a visual stream of consciousness.

Although Gentry's images are steadfastly African, his palette and brush stroke seem tuned in to Europe and America. "Middle Man" has the primary color palette of Piet Mondrian -- more yellow than blue, red and white, but still something like the Dutchman's stormy cousin many times removed. Gentry's gestures, though, remind me of Willem de Kooning's wild strokes, minus the arrogance. A Gentry canvas is a bravado-free zone.

There's a heady mix of influences here. But, more often than not, the artists who influenced Gentry or worked alongside him got more attention -- sometimes rightly so. Still, questions of circumstance, and, inevitably, race, leave me wondering if Gentry didn't deserve more than he got. A Gentry canvas may have just a few notes, but they're played with gusto.

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"Gentry's allusions to faces and masks reflect an essentially human and social art, constructed from the poetry of daily activities and the dynamism of human relations," Rose writes of her husband's signature style. "Although the work can be linked to the autobiographical, it stretches to embrace life itself, to be true to humanity, to acknowledge the shared component of being human."

The Morgan show includes a fine selection of Gentry's large oil paintings from the 1960s and '70s that explore the mask motif, as well as more recent paintings and drawings from the 1980s and '90s, when the artist's previously somber color palette of dark greens and blues lightened considerably with the addition of yellows, oranges and pinks.

The change is evident in Gentry's 1998 painting Befriended, a delightful acrylic-on-canvas concoction of pale pinks, reds and pastel green that combines the charm of a Matisse lithograph with the flowing calligraphy of a Brice Marden abstraction.

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The New York Times

ART VIEW;Black Artists At Home In Postwar Paris

By Michael Kimmelman | February 18, 1996

PARIS IN THE YEARS AFTER World War II still evoked la vie de boheme for countless Americans. They cheerfully looked beyond the realities of that convalescent city, where, after liberation, Parisians were the hungriest they had been since the Prussian siege. During the late 1940's, 50's and 60's, American art students went there in droves, lured by the residual fame of the great School of Paris.

Maybe they didn't quite envision themselves in Gene Kelly's tap shoes, as Hollywood's sunny incarnation of an expatriate painter in the 1951 film "An American in Paris." But perhaps they fantasized about marching to Picasso's studio, as the writer James Lord presumptuously did in 1945, and befriending the great man himself. With Picasso and Matisse, Paris still had cause to regard itself as the center of the art world. Word was spreading only slowly to Europe that in fact New York had taken its place.

Many of the Americans who came to Paris -- hundreds, in fact -- were black. "Explorations in the City of Light: African-American Artists in Paris, 1945-1965," at the Studio Museum in Harlem, tells their story. It is about race, the city and the era. But it's also about modernism, which Paris epitomized, and the sense of opportunity it represented.

The exhibition focuses on seven artists: the sculptors Barbara Chase-Riboud and Harold Cousins and the painters Beauford Delaney, Ed Clark, Larry Potter, Lois Mailou Jones and Herbert Gentry. Jones, Chase-Riboud, Clark and Gentry are still working. All of them had their art shaped by time spent in Paris. Much of the art they did was abstract. Some of it is beautiful.

Delaney, probably the best known of the seven, is represented by vivid portraits of James Baldwin and Marian Anderson, abstractions and landscapes like "Can Fire in the Park." Chase-Riboud has several strong works on view, surreal hybrids like "Plant Woman," a skeletal figure with a sprouting aloe for its head. Organized by Valerie Mercer, curator of collections at the museum, the exhibition includes 70 works, made when the artists were in Paris but also before and after their stays there.

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WHY PARIS? FOR MANY reasons, not all of them esthetic. African-American artists started going there in the 19th century. They found they could work without feeling discounted, as they did in America, just because they were black. "France gave me my first feeling of absolute freedom," Jones is quoted as saying in the show's catalogue. Back home, even middle-class blacks could be indifferent if a black artist wasn't turning out the sort of conservative genre painting that they preferred. Paris, by contrast, was more open to different kinds of work.

After World War II, a new wave of African-American artists moved to the city. Many were veterans on the G.I. Bill, studying at the Academie de la Grande Chaumiere, the Academie Julian or the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. There were not many galleries in which to show their work, but, along with white artists, they formed their own, like Galerie Huit. An informal black community joined white Americans and the French in the cafes along St.-Germain-des-Pres. There were black musicians like Gordon Heath, who started his own club on the rue l'Abbaye, and great black writers like Baldwin and Richard Wright.

In the show's catalogue, Catherine Bernard, an art historian, cites the importance of African art in Paris for many black artists working there. African art had had a big impact on Picasso. It was at the root of the modernist tradition. Beginning in the 1920's, the influential black philosopher Alain Locke advised African-American artists to embrace both African art and modernism.

Jones was one artist who, for a while at least, took Locke's advice. In Paris, she recalled, "all the galleries, the museums were featuring African sculptures, African designs." She remembers showing some of her own African-influenced work to professors at the Academie Julian. They were skeptical about her abandoning the landscapes she had been painting (she did street scenes like "Le Moulin Rouge"), until she reminded them that Picasso and Modigliani had been inspired by African art, too. "If anybody had the right to use it," she told them, "I had it. It was my heritage, and so they had to give in."

But African art was only one reason that African-American artists in Paris felt a kinship with Eupopean modernism. Another was a belief that modernism was ecumenical, all-embracing. Nowadays blacks are often in a bind: they're called derivative if they paint abstractions and pigeonholed by race if their work deals explicitly with black subjects. For African-American artists in postwar Paris,

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though, painting abstractions didn't mean mimicking an alien style. It reflected their faith in abstract art as an instrument of cultural assimilation.

You can see this faith expressed in the exhibition (which runs through June 2, then travels to Chicago, New Orleans, Fort Worth and Milwaukee), in the works by Potter, Clark and Cousins. Potter's earliest pictures in Paris, from the 1950's, were in the style of proto-Cubist landscapes; their blocks of colored forms lock together. Increasingly his work loosened and got more abstract, the shapes becoming aqueous, the colors burnished. Clark started with abstract cityscapes, influenced by the Russian-born painter Nicolas de Stael, and moved on to pure, gestural abstractions and irregularly shaped pictures in which he splattered and pushed paint around with big brushes.

Cousins was affected by the welded sculptures of the Spanish modernist Julio Gonzalez. The least-known artist in the show, Cousins left New York for Paris in 1949, moved to Brussels in 1967 and died there in 1992. He made delicate open-form abstractions and handsome welded-steel ones in the shapes of Cubist grids, patinated to resemble polished leather.

For her part, Barbara Chase-Riboud has described the impact of seeing sculptures by the French artist Germaine Richier. Herbert Gentry looked at Asger Jorn and Karel Appel, the Cobra group, with their high-key, freewheeling abstractions. In other words, the show describes not only what African-American artists in Paris were doing during the postwar decades, it also indirectly tells us who else was working there then: namely Jorn, Richier, de Stael and the slew of other Europeans now poorly remembered in America, but prominent once.

The artists in the show turned the influences of these Europeans to their own designs. It's possible to overstate the significance of the Europeans: some had actually been influenced in the first place by Americans, others were unexceptional academics. Baldwin, in "Notes of a Native Son," writes sardonically about what American art students in Paris actually learned from them. "They are studying with teachers of the same caliber as those they would have found in the States," Baldwin wrote. "They are treated by these teachers with the same highhandedness. Nor can it be said that they produce canvases of any greater interest than those found along Washington Square." Which led Baldwin to suppose that it was "the legend of Paris, not infrequently at its most vulgar and superficial level" that attracted young American artists to the city.

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Maybe so, but for African-American artists just being treated the same as whites was better treatment than they got in America. At least in Paris they could think of themselves as artists, first and last, without the discrimination that burdened them here.