

## Reflecting Dignity

Works by Sandra Bridges, David Anthony Geary,  
Juarez Hawkins and Kristy Raines Loving

The works in the exhibition Reflecting Dignity embrace the value of honoring the African American experience. Dignity is defined as “the quality of being worthy of honor and respect,” as well as “a sense of pride in oneself.” These works in various media address various aspects of African American life, while honoring them with a serious intent. Often, in popular culture, the African American experience is presented with a singular and simple sweep, centered around sports, entertainment, and music. Here, the subject matters of each work are treated with grace and inherent value, creating a sense of dignity.

Sandra Bridge’s paintings are about the dignity of family. The works are tender and loving in their depiction of people, relationships between what we assume are family members. There is a solidity to each painted figure, and a feeling of lived experience; while viewing them, one might be reminded of listening to the stories of a loved grandparent. Her work, *Grandma’s Hands*, show twins in the embrace of that strong grandparent that provides safety and loving. Each of the three is linked by hands and arms, providing a strong sense of security and bondedness.

Her work defines dignity, even evident in the disturbingly titled, “*The Only Good Nigger is a Dead Nigger*,” showing a prisoner praying, sainted, and at peace. Instead of reflecting on the wrongdoing of this man, instead we see his humanity as he gazes directly at us. What might have been a disturbing image instead is one of serenity and benevolence.

David Anthony Geary’s *Great Migration* series explores this phenomenon through portraiture. He bases his portraits on both photos of family members and donated images; each person is shown with a formal stance, confronting us with their solidity and strength. Accompanying many of these people is a crow or raven, a symbol used by many cultures to reflect freedom and journey. Geary further enhances the solidity and dignity of each person by his technique of outlining each (with solid lines on a wood surface in the case of *The Visionary*), giving a sense of permanence and memory. The figures are painted with soft monochromatic color, to lend a nostalgia to the figures, as if seen in an old photograph. Their faces are broken up into almost Cubistic planes that further add to an aura of solidity. Most figures look directly at us, but not in a confrontational manner. Instead, we want to know the story behind each

individual, and the bravery that allowed them to migrate from a limited but known life to that unknown.

The dignity of African origins is evident in the work of Juarez Hawkins, who creates ceramic masklike faces and figures. There is proud beauty in each of the female faces, and a strong solidity to the obelisk figures. These works cast references to African figurative pottery and ritual objects. Hawkins uses texture and pattern to refer to those found on some African pottery, so that her faces are not just naturalistic depictions, but stylized as powerful female images with decorative additions. Glazes range from bright and saturated to soft and subdued. These works do not seem to be individualized portraits, but instead symbolic spirits that inspire and hold power. While these are not ritual objects, they do reflect a history of ritual that strongly implies the power of the matriarch. In some African cultures, only women were allowed to create pottery, passing along the tradition through generations. The value of this tradition is inherent in Hawkins' work, which seems to celebrate the female essence.

Colored pencil portraits of well-known figures in African American history are the work of Kristy Raines Loving. She depicts each of these distinguished individuals with a dignified beauty and image of strength. Her figures range from those who are very well known, such as Bessie Coleman, and those who might be less known by the general public, such as St. Elmo Brady, the first African American to get a PhD in chemistry in the United States. Her subjects range from important political figures (not shown here is a wonderful portrait of Frederick Douglass) to poets, mathematicians, a federal judge, scientists and others. Loving researched each person and used historic photographs as a reference for these works. Each portrait is elegantly created by scribbled colored pencil lines; her knowing hand creates form of light and shadows on each face, all drawn on black paper. The use of this paper allows for her to build up light by layering of colored pencil lines. Each of her subjects looks on with an expression of quiet dignity.

Whether reflecting the dignity of character, tradition, relationships or bravery, these artists each express aspects of the African American experience in the United States. These are important reflections using the creative process to make known experiences that create character and reveal nobility.