

# Arts



## Support group

Mission hasn't changed for Black Dimensions in Art

BY TOM KEYSER  
STAFF WRITER



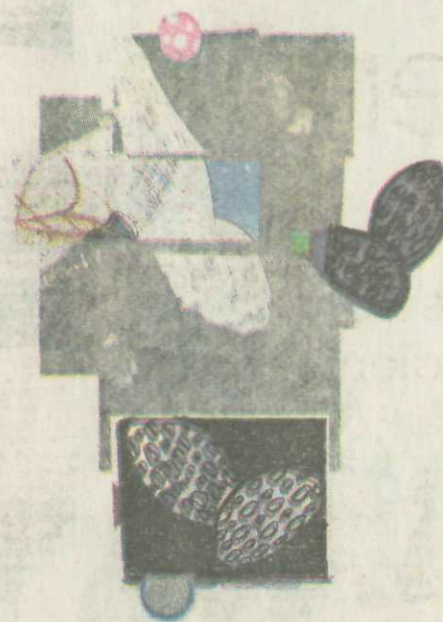
PHILIP KAMRASS/TIMES UNION

**MIKI CONN** stands in front of her painting, "A Few of My Favorite Things." At lower right is "Spirit Lark," a sculpture by Jerome Meadows of Savannah, Ga. "Ifa-Fortune Teller/Healer," a wood carving by Chief Isaac Komolafe, is on the mantle just to the right of Conn. Inset, "The Class Clown" by George Simmons.

**B**lack artists and art lovers formed Black Dimensions in Art in 1975, when a post-civil rights America had given rise to groups based on gender and ethnicity. As they asserted their separate and distinct identities in the white, male-dominated society, Black Dimensions in Art set out to end the underrepresentation of black artists in the Capital Region. "The major and minor galleries simply weren't showing art of African-American artists, not individually or in group shows," says Miki Conn, a founder of the group and member of its board who is also the former executive director of the Hamilton Hill Arts Center. "It was as if we didn't exist."

"The galleries didn't even bring up work from New York by well-known African-American artists. They would bring up work by white artists, but not African-Americans. The assumption was that only African-Americans would be interested in art by African-Americans."

Today, say Conn and others associated with BDA, as they refer to the group, opportunities for black artists have improved, especially for artists willing to promote their work with white gallery owners. Does that mean that BDA, when a mixed-race President Obama has some commentators suggesting we live in a post-racial society, is no longer necessary? No, its members



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say. Because a cultural divide still exists, the organization remains relevant, even as it struggles with dwindling funding and the dispiriting economy.

"In terms of individual artists, some are more go-getters than others," says Jacqueline Lake-Sample, co-treasurer and past president of BDA. "They're not afraid to put themselves out there."

"But for many, there's still that feeling:

### At a glance

Black Dimensions in Art

■ **Info:** 346-1027; email yourbda75@verizon.net; go to <http://www.facebook.com> and type in "Black Dimensions in Art"

■ **Membership:** Varies between 50 and 100, includes 30-40 artists

■ **Upcoming events:** "The Artist 'I'" exhibition Oct. 9-16 at New York State Museum, includes concert at 1 p.m. Oct. 15 by Empire State Youth Orchestra jazz ensemble; Summer in the City exhibition, featuring art and performances by Albany youth, including students at BDA summer camp, 5-9 p.m. Stage 1 gallery, 46-48 N. Sawm St., Albany (sponsored by Albany Barn)

► **This is the second in a series** about artists of color in the Capital Region. We're exploring issues relating to education, opportunity, gallery representation and support organizations. We welcome your suggestions. Contact Tom Keyser at 454-5448 or [tkeyser@timesunion.com](mailto:tkeyser@timesunion.com).

Am I going to be welcome? That holds people back. And therein lies what BDA does."

Based at the Hamilton Hill Arts Center in Schenectady, where its lone paid employee has been reduced from working 16 hours to four hours per week, the group mounts an annual art show and workshop,

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runs a two-week summer art camp for children in Albany and puts on an annual fundraiser and gala called the White Gardenia. At least it was annual until this year.

Scheduled July 17 at The State Room in Albany, the gala was canceled after ticket sales and donations to the silent auction lagged.

"We think that was largely due to the economy," says Trenton Graham, BDA president. "It's just tough right now, for all arts organizations, not just us."

The group operates on about \$18,000 per year, Lake-Sample says. Primary funding comes from the state Council on the Arts, and that's down to about \$6,000 per year from nearly \$20,000 several years ago, she says.

BDA can no longer afford to mount shows of prominent black artists from out of town — and bring in the artist for the opening — as it did until 2004. It can't even afford the shipping costs for the art, Lake-Sample says.

It lost its main exhibition space, also in 2004, when the Schenectady Museum changed its focus from local history to science. Since then, BDA has jumped from venue to venue — without complaint. Lake-Sample says one of its goals is to move the art around, so a larger audience can view it.

BDA's current exhibition recently hung in the Wellington's Herbs and Spices studio in Schoharie. Featuring 13 Capital Region artists and three from New York City, it will be on display Oct. 9-16 at the State Museum, as part of the inaugural MoHu Festival.

Getting the work into traditional venues helps dispel the myth that art by black artists is about only black culture, Lake-



MICHAEL P. FARRELL/TIMES UNION

Sample says. She's an abstract painter and jewelry designer.

"We are as broad and diverse as anybody else," she says. "We do landscapes. We do abstract. We do all kinds of things. It's not just ethnic art."

But a lot of it is, and that's OK, says Conn, whose mother Margaret Cunningham also helped found the group and served as its first president. Conn, a painter, print-maker, poet and writer from Schenectady, says not all black people like the same kind of art.

"I think many black patrons respond more to figurative, simple works in which they see themselves reflected, see their experiences reflected," she says. "We have seen images of ourselves as buffoons, ignorant, as slaves, in all kind of

negative ways. I think black people want to see themselves lovingly and honestly portrayed. That's really what it boils down to."

Conn's theory is that the long history of European art dating to classical antiquity of Greece and Rome, which set the standards for European beauty, allowed white people to move beyond idealizing themselves, beyond realism into modern art in the late 19th century.

"Black patrons and black artists haven't had that long an opportunity in the West, here in the United States, to experience and develop their art, to visualize themselves as they would like to be seen," Conn says. "Many blacks prefer work that appeals to the heart, like the image of a mother and child. And the contemporary

gallery owner looks at that and says, 'That won't sell.'"

George Simmons, an Albany photographer who specializes in mixed-media collages, prefers art with no strings attached. "My art is not black art," he says. "My art is George Simmons art."

"Black artists sit with a white canvas in front of them. They might say, 'Geez, I've got to do something about my blackness. I've got to do black art.' Some artists do that well, and it's perfectly valid. But my point is you can make art about anything. It doesn't have to be about one's ethnic background or one's gender. A black artist can make art about academic or aesthetic concerns — or about nothing. It can be about the visual pleasure of marks on canvas."

**GEORGE SIMMONS** and Anita Wilson, at center, discuss art history with children during a show of work and a creative workshop sponsored by Black Dimensions in Art at Wellington's Herbs and Spices studio.

He says his involvement with BDA, which began four or five years ago, is not to get his art shown because he's black. It's mainly to work with minority youth, to expose them to art and encourage them to pursue it.

He taught a dozen kids at BDA's summer art camp this summer at the Trinity Alliance of the Capital Region in Albany.

"I was talking to them about abstract art," he says. "A lot of them hadn't even heard that term. They weren't aware that they can make art with a square and a circle. They thought you had to put a face in there or make a tree or house or something."

Even though Simmons has had work in BDA shows, he doesn't hesitate to approach gallery owners about showing his art. He submits work to shows, such as the annual Artists of the Mohawk-Hudson Region, known as the Mohawk-Hudson regionals.

If you don't submit, he says, then you can't complain about not being shown.

"What we need to do is tell these black artists: 'Hey, you need to get out there and push your art,'" Simmons says. "You need to go to these galleries and say, 'Hey, look at my art.' Submit art to the regionals. Submit art whenever there's an opening — just like the white artists do."

That's not easy for every artist, Conn says.

Society hasn't eliminated the mistrust and misunderstanding that existed when BDA formed 36 years ago, she says. So it remains difficult for some black artists to approach white gallery owners.

"It still really is two separate cultures," she says. "Certainly in my lifetime, and the lifetime of my grandchildren, I can see a need for BDA."

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