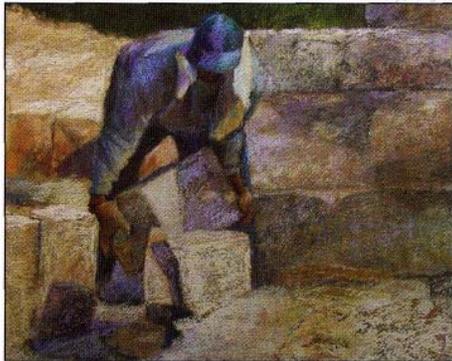


Vision, bravery, honesty and strength of conviction

by Gareth Finighan

Sharon Wilson: Ordinary Lives, Extraordinary Art. Main Gallery, Bermuda National Gallery,



The title of this show, the centrepiece of the National Gallery's Summer Exhibition, is certainly appropriate. Because of our Island's natural beauty and stunning light, Bermuda has, not surprisingly perhaps, spawned a plethora of landscape painters throughout our history — although a market consisting largely of visitors wanting a picture-postcard reminder of their stay here might be a mightier motivational factor for some contemporary artists when it comes to selecting subject matter.

From the beginning of her career Ms Wilson has had a different agenda and as a result she stands out amongst her contemporaries. Her focus has always been on people, and black people in particular. Why? Not for commercial reasons, certainly. Not because she spotted a 'gap in the market' and chose to exploit it. The reason is perfectly simple, straightforward and honest. People are important to her.

In an interview in *The Royal Gazette* last month, Ms Wilson explained why she is inspired by her countrymen and women. "I was a child of the '50s," she told reporter Jessie Moniz.

"When I went to Whitney Institute it was the year Whitney became desegregated. There weren't any black images anywhere. Hallmark didn't have any Mother's Day cards for black people. It was a different time. You were in a society where imagery was everywhere but you were never in it."

Ms Wilson's motivation from the start of her career is plain to see. Black people were invisible and she believed they shouldn't be.

Most retrospectives spanning any length of time illustrate an artist's changing interests, concerns and influences. This selection of 18 works effectively portrays Wilson's fascination — single-minded obsession — with what she saw and no doubt still sees as a social injustice.

With the exception of two still lifes and

one landscape, all of the works feature figures — two portraits and 13 narrative scenes of people going about their daily lives. Hung in chronological order, this exhibition begins in 1984 with 'Interlude' and brings us almost right up to the present with 2004's 'Man in a Punt'.

In the same *Royal Gazette* interview last month, Ms Wilson said that, once artists had mastered technique, they needed to figure out their agenda.

"When I started, the definition of what it meant to be an artist was being able to draw people in a way that looked like them and was proportionate — that is what I wanted from it," she said. "You need to know what it is that you want to say. You want to get beneath the surface to the things that are irritating you."

Clearly Ms Wilson had decided on her agenda very early on in her career, perhaps in fact before she had fully mastered technique. Although the early examples here make the same observations as her later work, they are definitely not as technically accomplished.

'Interlude' is typical of Ms Wilson's more naive style. The picture depicts a bright-eyed, inquisitive baby in the arms of his comatose, naked father. Like much of Ms Wilson's work, there is a voyeuristic quality to the scene. We are given a window into a very private, intimate and peaceful moment. The figures are not as correctly proportioned as they should be, the swathes of bed linen not totally convincing, the image as a whole not as richly textured or as confidently executed as later images, but the theme is there from the outset — a touching moment captured with great sympathy and affection.

The main body of work here follows a similar pattern. 'Institutional Life' is at once both sad and touching, portraying an elderly lady having her hair brushed by her caregiver. 'Secrets' is a charming tale of schoolgirl whispers while 'Bride' gives us a behind-the-scenes glimpse of a young woman getting ready for her big day with the help of her bridesmaids.

Clearly Ms Wilson is a great believer in that old African proverb 'It takes a village to raise a child', and that seniors, with their wisdom and experience, have an important role to play in society. 'Daddy Wilson and Paul' shows a young boy sitting with an elderly relative, the pair of them engrossed in a book, while 1994's 'The Day GoGo Went to Vote' portrays a similarly loving relationship between a grandmotherly figure passing on advice to her captivated young charge.

But Ms Wilson does more than simply capture the sentimental. She elevates the mundane and every-day to something more

significant. In 'The Fishermen' and 'Stone Cutter' (pictured left) Wilson, in the words of National Gallery director Laura Gorham, "endows her ordinary and predominantly black subjects with a power and dignity." In an age where lawyers and accountants are king, Wilson gives simple, back-breaking and often dirty craft the respect it deserves. Again, her role is to make visible the invisible.

Although there is only one landscape here, it is an absolute belter. 'Harbour Road' will be instantly recognisable to anyone who has to make the daily commute into Hamilton, and Wilson's view brilliantly evokes the twisting curl of road against a brilliant sky.

There are some gripes. Although Ms Wilson didn't become a full-time artist until the early 1980s, she graduated from the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston in the early '70s, and the pamphlet accompanying this exhibition claims that she has been "one of Bermuda's best-loved living artists for almost 30 years." This exhibition tells Ms Wilson's story from 1984 but it would have been interesting to see some of her earlier work. What has happened to the first ten years of her career?

Furthermore, with one exception, all the work on display here is executed in pastel. Of course, that's the medium for which this artist is renowned, but did she not at least start out sampling different media? Again, examples of earlier work would have told a more complete story. While Ms Wilson's early work is little known, at least to this viewer, in the last few years she has begun taking her art in a different direction. Her one-woman show at the Heritage House Gallery at the tail end of 2003 comprised a mix both of people studies and landscapes executed in muted encaustic. The show was undoubtedly one of the highlights of the art scene in 2003, yet there is only one example of her encaustic work here.

Despite these omissions, the National Gallery has done a pretty good job of highlighting the work of Bermuda's most accomplished artists. 'Accomplished', 'gifted', 'talented' — words that can describe any number of contemporary artists, Ms Wilson included. What makes her stand out from the rest, what makes her important, is her vision of the world along with her bravery, honesty and strength of conviction. The fact that she carries it off with great skill is a bonus. Long may she continue. ©