Comparing the Black Artist in the United States and Brazil

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

INTROSPECTIONS, a show by Americans and Brazilians of African descent, comes to the Bronx Museum of the Arts from the California Afro-American Museum in Los Angeles. There, it was organized by Henry J. Drayton, a professor of art history at Cleveland State University, and David C. Driskell, director of art at the University of Maryland. The curators contributed essays to the catalogue, so Sheila S. Walker, an associate professor in the department of Afro-American studies at the University of California at Berkeley, and Lula Marsha, who is research assistant for the Department of Labor in Brazil.

The curators’ overall mission is to acquaint the black community in the United States with the existence of its counterpart in Brazil and with the similarities and differences between their cultures. This is enlightenment that Americans of all backgrounds could use but the question is whether an exhibition of contemporary art can provide it. Well, “Introspections,” with paintings and sculpture from 18 Americans and 14 Brazilians, does its best.

Among the Americans dominating the first part of the show is Sam Gilliam, with a triptych covered by red acrylic and canvas – poured, impasted, and slashed on an incandescent sea with “Botsam” of white, yellow, and blue, it is canceled, as it were, by a collage of wood shapes, one of them suggesting a large exclamation mark. Mr. Gilliam’s art was never precise, but now it gives the impression of barely contained fury.

Occasionally, the tarry surfaces of Jack Whitten’s canvases are pierced by flashes of color. But the interest is in the material embedded overall –

small pieces of white fabric; corrugated, stretched, with circular holes and similar items. The results are reminiscent of a landscape seen from the air on a moonless night.

But a cross-section of the American work would include the intriguingly Impasted figures of Sylvia Snowden; Claude Clark’s gestural Abstract Expressionism; the mythical figures and animals that Emmilo Cruz imagines, with some help from the art of pre-Columbian, Egyptian and African cultures; and Keith Morrison’s “Zombie Jamboree,” a landscape inhabited by bizarre animals and at least one skeleton. With “An American Rescued in the Desert by the Mahal and Emperor Halle Selassie,” Robert Colecott is in a class by himself, as usual. The bassoon player wears robes and a turban and the Lion of Judah a bushy jacket with what looks like an ermine collar. But the American who fains in their arms is clad, reassuringly, sweaters, slacks, and a Hawaiian shirt.

Viewers expecting excitingly from the Brazilian painters may be disappointed, for as a group they are quite subdued. Sidney Lizardo has an abstractionist who works mostly biomorphic shapes in rich flat colors; Jose Barreto fills the canvas with geometric shapes that are patterned and solidly colored and edged with thick black lines. In Siron Franca’s “How Many People Fit Into a Head,” stick figures, each with a single eye, are joined at the bands to make a geometric structure.

Another figurative painter, Maria Magalhaes, is quoted in the catalogue saying she doesn’t know how to make black people. But it would seem, from her blue-purple image of a woman standing akimbo in front of a bow-legged chair, that she has a fine idea of how to borrow mannerisms from Francis Bacon, Octavio Arajio, an artist who has spent time in Europe and has his monochromatic lithographs of Surrealist compositions incorporating classical and medieval motifs. His painting of a fantasy landscape pays homage to the properties of a Mediterranean landscape, and one of its many entertaining details is the figure in a ladybug’s carapace, scaling a broken ladder in the foreground.

If the show is a reliable guide, the Afro-Brazilian sculptors are more adventurous than the painters. Juarez with a touch of humor, contributes an installation of four pieces, two of them sublime arrangements of wood and bronze, rood, one a square, column-painted blue with a red crack running from top to bottom and the other a pair of rocks that would be on top of each other were it not for the pane of glass separating them. Working with wood and sticks, Eudoro Da Luz, calls them into the shape of a woman giving birth, making her look as if she had grown of her own accord.

Inevitably, the American sculptors look more sophisticated than the Brazilian. Martin Puryear is his esquimal self with an Egyptian-looking chair, cast in bronze, and a smooth shape in cast iron that resembles a falcon perched on a rock. Tyrone Mitchell is on hand with two of his obsessively limited wood abstractions – the one that is a triangular slab embellished with olive green, yellow and gold leaf and crowned with a bifurcated prong is especially handsomely done.

But the sculptor who gets to the heart of the matter is Mel Edwards, whose “Lynch Fragments” – the spikes, chains, horseshoes and other metal detritus that he Welds together into objects – becomes, through this display, the one thing that the artists can be sure they have in common.

Although the colonial powers might have “taught” them the living dead, each in its own African territories – Portugal’s were Angola, Mozambique and what is now known as Guinea-Bissau – a map shows that the traffic was multinational. Thus, descendants of the Yoruba, who inhabit Nigeria and Benin, are to be found throughout the Americas. Their religion, Candomble, has taken especially firm root in Brazil, with its spirits called orixas, thinly disguised as Catholic saints, and African customs and food are part of daily life for all. The show, by the way, includes photographs of street scenes in Brazilian cities and in their nearest equivalent here, New Orleans. It also features orishas dollies and figurines, along with other folk material.

In her catalogue essay, Mrs. Walker indicates that this influence, coupled with the longer duration of slavery, the traffic stopped in 1682, the custom was abolished in 1888, for the relative lack of racism in Brazil. Although the aim was to compare and contrast the African contributions of the arts of Brazil and the United States, the result is a celebration of black resilience. The show that explores both Africa and South America country by country is long overdue. Viewers are bound to be enchanted by the visual experience – its odd-looking display; still, the viewer will leave impressed by the accomplishments of the artists and not much the wiser about the black Brazilians.

On view through May 28, the show will be at the Bronx Museum, 11 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. The Museum is on the corner of Grand Concourse and 167th Street in the Bronx.