

Press Release...

September 17, 2008

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The Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center Features an Exhibition Figurative Symbolism by Nathaniel “Nate” Johnson

BALTIMORE – Nathaniel “Nate” Johnson is a critically acclaimed figurative symbolist artist who is attracting much attention for his large-scale art works. In a new exhibition, *Symbolism and Spirituality*, featured at the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center, Johnson examines the intersection of rituals and reality in his newest art works. The exhibition, which is free and open to the public, is on display at 847 North Howard Street in Baltimore from Thursday, October 2 to Saturday, November 1, 2008; with an opening reception on October 2 from 7 to 9 p.m.

In his works, Johnson paints beautiful objects of contemplation, spiritual blazes marking the path of an artist who is consumed by his search for spiritual and worldly truths amidst conditions of uncertain realities. For Johnson, a basic tenet of symbolism is searching for spiritual meaning or realities lying somewhere beyond the senses and the intellect is perilous. The greatest minds can become hopelessly lost exploring symbols, allusions and multiple layers of meanings, or pondering what existed before the creation of Heaven and Earth.

He pursues a life-long investigation into the structures of context and meaning in his works. His erudite hard-edged figurative paintings incorporate a personal lexicon of images and symbols culled and abstracted from world cultures, religions and sacred practices. Deeply mystical and intellectually challenging, the paintings function like mandalas for meditation. His work invokes a wide range of ideas – from the principles of structural anthropology espoused by Claude Levi-Strauss to the teachings of Jewish mysticism, Buddhist texts and computer theories. Johnson’s compositions and use of saturated colors reveal a preoccupation with how structured design and aesthetic media can convey the many layers of complex meanings that he constructs by his combinations of visionary and iconic imagery.

For his visionary and idiosyncratic vision, Johnson is unable to be pigeonholed conveniently into any fashionable artistic discourse, a phenomenon that excites him greatly. Still, he refuses to compromise his principles and continues to create the distinctive works that are on view in the exhibition.

A native Baltimorean, he received formal art training from both Morgan State University and the Maryland Institute College of Art.

In addition to the Johnson exhibition, the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center extends *Mammy’s, Watermelon and Coons*, one of the most popular exhibits to date, to March 1, 2009. The collection explores the construction and emancipation of a race in America using illustrations depicted by minstrel shows with black actors in blackface and parodied in stereotypical characters ranging from mammies to pickaninnies and virtually every other vile portrayal of blacks ever exhibited in the guise of accepted American entertainment. *Mammy’s, Watermelon and Coons* investigates the collective stereotypes of black images that reinforce some of the shortcuts to character and cultural assassination that are crucial elements propitiated by mass media in a multicultural society.

Many of the artifacts assembled in *Mammy’s, Watermelon and Coons* are original and replica pieces from the 19th through 21st centuries and represent formulaic and exaggerated images used by generations of Americans instilling prejudice to castigate an entire race and culture as inferior and undesirable beings. Still, much of the now highly prized and collected memorabilia was intentionally manufactured to promulgate injustice toward the basic tenets of American democracy. Many

Americans fail to realize that the experiences of people from the African Diaspora residing in this society differ from the majority of American's lived experience because intolerance and discrimination in some form has profoundly affected almost all citizens of African ancestry.

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For more than three decades, the Eubie Blake National Jazz Institute and Cultural Center has sought to bring creative expression and urban consciousness to Baltimore through visual and performing arts education and development opportunities for children, youth and adults in our community.