

Artist's audience grows by 35 million thanks to 'Cosby'

By Hunter Drohojowska

Varnette Honeywood, a mountain of a woman dressed in a caftan of Yoruba blue batik, meets a journalist at the Museum of African American Art on the third floor of the May Co. on Crenshaw Boulevard. The artist, 34, who has four paintings and collages included in the exhibition there — "Black Women Artists of California" — blushes when one mentions the attention she has received this year. Ever since comic Bill Cosby opted to hang her art on the set of his tremendously successful TV show, she has attracted unprecedented interest.

"The first week the show came on, I got a call from the Atlanta Constitution. I didn't know how many people could recognize the art work on a set. I got telegrams and letters from friends. I've had people go into galleries and say, 'Find this girl.' It's been fantastic."

Cosby personally collects the work of many black artists and suggested Honeywood's work for the sets of the Huxtable apartment on NBC's "The Cosby Show." Like the show, Honeywood's art is typically about the family. Her colorful, stylized pictures depict intimate scenes between mother and daughter, between husband and wife, between young lovers in courtship. One shows a black family gathered under the slogan "Home Is Where the Heart Is." Even a series of paintings and prints of athletes that she created for the Olympics focused on homelife. "It was a different view of the Olympics," she says. "I wanted to show, as I do throughout my work, the support and strength of the family. Where does the athletes' support come from? From a lot of people taking an interest in them."

Honeywood, who lives at home with her parents, also gets much of her material from their recollections of black life in L.A. in the 1940s, or from the memories of her grandparents, who regularly send her family photographs. These are scenes of people worshipping at church or couples dressed up to go

dancing at the Dunbar Hotel — home to the famous black nightclub in Los Angeles of the 1940s.

Honeywood paints what she calls "black lifestyles," especially "endangered scenes." "I paint experiences that I had as a young girl, cultural rituals, like the image of a

girl getting her hair straightened. Young girls don't do that much anymore, they braid it or wear the natural styles. The family is constantly endangered in all segments of our community. I think it's important for somebody to try and show the positive aspect of the

family, if only for discussion."

Honeywood's art is frankly narrative, influenced by her early training as a historian at Spelman College in Atlanta, Ga. Although she grew up in Los Angeles, her

parents and grandparents are from Mississippi, and she is familiar with the traditions of the rural South. These influences mix with an intense interest in her African heritage and how those symbols and visual traditions are translated into contemporary black life. "That's a real challenge. I did a piece called 'Sabath' which shows a lady holding her (index) finger in the air as she walked down the aisle. Now, I always saw that in church but never knew where that tradition came from. I just learned from a lecture that in Africa you do this as a declaration, like knocking on wood.

"The colors of black, red and green that Marcus Garvey started using as a symbol and which we all remember from the 1960s — that's evolved to be used in artwork, today. What is it from contemporary African American life that could be symbolized in art? I look for all the kinds of lives of people who make up the black community, all the shades of their color."

This fascination has brought her twice to Africa, first to Nigeria in 1977 for the Second World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture, and last month to Senegal for a meeting of the National Conference of Artists. "The important thing is that we draw on Africa for inspiration in symbolism and technique. The exciting thing is that the African American artists are coming into their own. I think it's time we recognize our own visual history."

Honeywood has not been an exception to the rule that mainstream art galleries rarely exhibit the work of black artists. In Los Angeles, she shows her work at the Brockman Gallery and Gallery Tanner, both of which show black artists exclusively. But before galleries were expressing much interest, she invented her own distribution system by having some of her images reproduced as inexpensive prints and as greeting cards. The cards in particular were handy to sell at conventions, book stores or street fairs. She showed her prints as well at exhibitions in malls, or at festivals at the Watts Towers Art Center or L.A. Street Scene. But nothing could compare to being seen by 35 million viewers a week on "The Cosby Show." Curiously, another of L.A.'s well-known black artists — Ernie Barnes — also enhanced his reputation through exposure on television. His drawings were originally seen on

the 1970s series "Good Times" and last year he was the official artist for the Olympics.

Cosby's extensive art collection includes paintings by actor Anthony Quinn and Oliver Johnson, both of whom are also represented on the sets of "The Cosby Show." The decision is a collaborative one between Cosby and his production designer, Garvin Eddy.



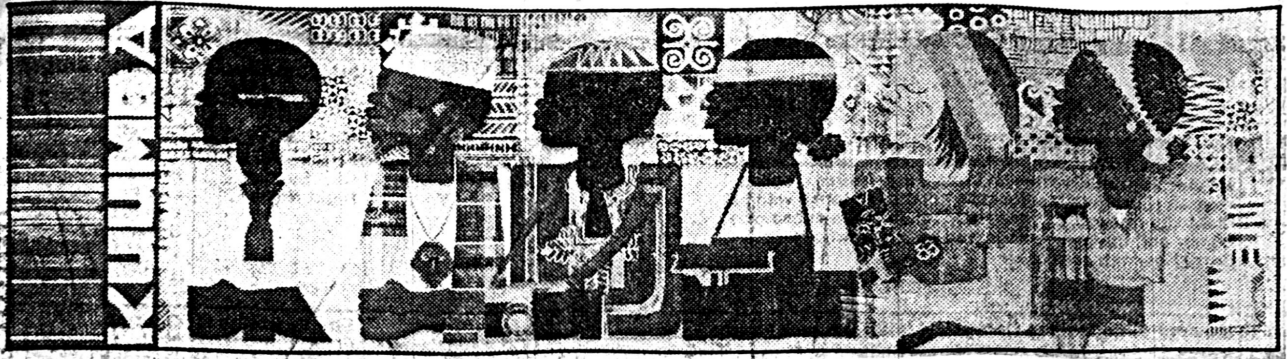
Mike Sergiott/Herald photographer

Varnette Honeywood's art has been seen by millions on the set of the top-rated NBC-TV program "The Cosby Show." Here the Los Angeles artist is seen with some of her creations, including her "Home Is Where the Heart Is" collage, at left.

"Honeywood's work comes across as American black art of a very popular nature that anybody could like," says Eddy. "You don't have to be black to understand what it's all about. The whole idea behind the Cosby show is not a black show; it's a show about an American family. People are always writing in to us about the art asking, 'What's that thing next to the grandfather clock?' I can't tell you how many letters I've received from people who ask about the pictures. And while a painting by Quinn is \$20,000, Honeywood's prints are \$80 to \$100. It's an interesting way for any artists to get to a wider public. Even though it's just a quick flash, if people like it they write in and ask where they can get one."

Honeywood says, "I believe there is great potential. I'm going to find out this year. I've had lots of invitations for exhibitions. I'm trying to plan a traveling show through a university. I would like it to be a retrospective, so people would get the idea of black lifestyles in my work."

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly about art for the Herald.



Varnette Honeywood paints 'black lifestyles'



Varnette Honeywood's work includes a mixed-media piece titled "Kuumba: Creativity," top, and a collage titled "It Is the Duty of the Children to Wait on the Elders, and Not the Elders on Children," above.