Review: Art exhibit “Public Displays of Privacy” raises questions about women, race and society

To understand black women, we must look beyond seeing

By Naomi Zeigler (http://www.theeagleonline.com/staff/naomi-zeigler) | 10/05/16 10:00am

Khadijah Wilson’s Untitled and Practices of Looking.

© Naomi Zeigler/ THE EAGLE (http://www.theeagleonline.com/staff/naomi-zeigler-the-eagle)
The DC Arts Center is, quite literally, a hole-in-the-wall space. Located in Adams Morgan's main strip, it is situated near restaurants and bars. After climbing a set of stairs nestled between Mellow Mushroom and Donburi, the first thing visitors will see inside the center is Danielle Smith's Death via Affluence, the first piece showcased in the exhibit. An oil painting on canvas, it depicts a lavish bed covered in pillows with ornate decorations; however, smothered under those pillows and nearly blending in with them is a young black girl. One of the pillows, covered by stripes, suffocates her so that only her hair, braided into cornrows, peeks out. We don't see her face.

"Public Displays of Privacy" is an exhibition exploring "the complexities of identity, memory and subjectivity in relation to Black Womanhood," according to the center's website. In addition to Smith, it focuses on three other local artists: Nakeya Brown, Adrienne Gaither and Khadijah Wilson. The gallery itself is a small, intimate space, enhancing the artwork's effect. With a combination of paintings, photographs and mixed media pieces, there is something for everyone to see and appreciate.

The artwork encircles the room and is, for the most part, carefully hung on the wall. Most notably, Adrienne Gaither's mixed media pieces are placed on a backdrop against the corner wall. In order to convey a snapshot of a room, a chair, pillow and shelf are placed there as well. Sticky notes adorn the backdrop, one of them proclaiming, "HOW DO I LIVE FREE IN THIS BLACK BODY?" Amidst the civil unrest we are facing, Gaither's question seems more poignant than ever. Making even bolder statements on race and the power of seeing, her three "Eyes Don't See Color" series places black and brown tiles amidst a canvas, a variety of beiges, and hues of purple, pink, white and black.

Echoing Gaither, Nakeya Brown's "The Art of Sealing Ends" photography series reinforces the chains that black women face in a culture that does not acknowledge them. One of Brown's prints depicts a woman soaking her cornrows in a pink pot. Her face is not visible. In another print, black hands, detached from a body, grip four cornrows, lighting them on fire. Hair, and the politics surrounding it, reappears in Brown's photographs, as "Self Portrait in a Shower Cap" portrays a black woman looking away from the camera. There is a vulnerability in the photo, a snapshot of one woman's morning routine.

Perhaps the most stunning display is Khadijah Wilson's series of photographs. In "Untitled," a black woman does not face the camera, and her hair constricts her mouth almost like a rope. She faces the side as well, evoking memories of black women on display, sold as slaves. Her face is not visible in "Practices of Looking," concealed by binoculars covered in hair, rows and rows of careful braids. There is something disturbing in these photographs, something abject and painful.
There is much that can be derived from art, especially art that conveys vulnerability while tackling concepts of fear and sensitivity. "Public Displays of Privacy" lays out black women at their most personal and visceral. The world in which we live is one that is more difficult than we have ever faced before. There is apprehension and fear as women like Sandra Bland and Korryn Gaines are harmed by police. These women are mothers, sisters, friends and humans. The message that curator Martina Dodd wants to send is clear: we have no time to propagate the fantasy of equality when the reality does not exist for black women -- women who are seldom given identities beyond white assumptions.

Danielle Smith's two other paintings rest on the adjacent wall. They are of two young black girls who are smiling and laughing, engaged in a pillow fight. Their faces are half visible as one hits the other with a pillow covered in lines. All of a sudden it becomes clear: the bed on which they play is the same bed from Death Via Affluence, where one of them will die, face hidden and forgotten. What good is their innocence when this is their fate?

"Public Displays of Privacy" is on display at DC Arts Center (http://www.dcartscenter.org/exhibitions2.htm) from Sept. 9 to Oct. 16.

*Naomi Zeigler is a senior in the College of Arts and Sciences and the Opinion editor for The Eagle.*

nzeigler@theeagleonline.com