

black artists of marginal talent who will exert pressure upon them to adhere to so-called "artistic" motives that are, in truth, more political than esthetic.

The "Black Consciousness" movement of the nineteen-sixties did indeed have its virtues. Among other things, it gave large numbers of artists, and non-artists, a renewed sense of pride in both African and Afro-American social and economic progress and cultural achievement. The "Blacks: USA: 1973" exhibit abounds in works representing the Center's attempts to give visual tribute to this resurgence of black pride; nearly half of the 45 participants display at least one work that alludes to so-called "black" subjects. One certainly does not advocate overlooking the use of black subject matter; however, the chief rub is that, virtually without exception, the much-talked-about "black spirit" is presented in this exhibition in such an anemic fashion as to render it an embarrassment.

Due to the gross failings of the "all-black selection committee" to agree upon concrete purposes for this exhibition, we find remarkably few artists giving discerning treatment to those facets of black life and aspirations that blacks so honor. The majority of the exhibitors who profess to dedicate their work to this end seemed to be content to settle stylistically for an inept and scruffy realism that drew much more attention to itself than it did to the content of the work.

Marie Johnson's assemblage, "Caribbean Spice Lady," is a failure as a total work. Her attempt to blur the distinction between painting and sculpture appears to be too much of a preoccupation to allow her to effectively invest the work with the beauty and vitality of peasant life in the Caribbean. The recent works of Arthur Coppedge are so reminiscent of Edward Hopper's city-

scapes that it becomes increasingly difficult to decide whether his efforts should be criticized because they reflect his lack of original vision, or because they also expose his deficiency in basic drawing skill.

By contrast, the late Palmer Hayden's "Ballad of John Henry" series (1940-47) is the oeuvre of a naive painter whose sincere and overriding identification with the historical significance of John Henry permits him to avoid much of the sentimentality that permeates the work of younger realists. The profoundly moving affection the artist possessed for his heritage — together with the simple, heartwarming manner in which he pursued this interest—may well account for the fact that he emerges the most satisfying of the realists in the show.

Carole Byard's "Kuchagulia," a realistic portrait of a black adolescent male, is swiftly painted and is quite effective in its simple format. She succeeds most admirably in capturing the stoicism of a militant black youth. John M. Steptoe, still in his early twenties, is basically an illustrator; however, he manages to create acrylic miniatures that are endowed with notable painterly qualities and charm. Both Byard and Steptoe express themselves with consummate skill.

As for the abstractionists in the show, too many of them fail to advance our understanding of the plastic elements, and do even less to add to our awareness of the possibilities of artistic invention. Ellen Banks's "Facade," however, is a handsome oil painting that combines the virtues of economy of design and carefully orchestrated color areas.

The awe that one associates with ancient Africa, and the impenetrable mystique that still characterizes much of today's black existence, is powerfully

projected in the surreal and enigmatic work, "Face and Arm Unit, 1972," by Benjamin Jones. Having seen this young Newark artist's work prior to this exhibit, I continue to feel that he may well become a significant American artist. As one who uses black subject matter almost exclusively, Jones personifies the possibility of maintaining one's esthetic priorities without sacrificing an equal concern for Negritude.

The "Face" unit is composed of 12 different plaster masks, all cast from the same model. Yet the meticulously painted decoration on each face serves to create a subtly different facial expression. These masks are similar to blacks in real life in that they superficially appear to be so uniformly alike, but are completely different both in personality and emotional structure. The accompanying arm units, like the masks above them, are varied in decoration and in anatomical gesture. This would seem to indicate that the souls to whom they belong possess different conjury powers. Why, one asks, weren't other artists of this quality and innovative spirit represented in the show?

This brings me to the point of having to say I am still puzzled as to why—in 1973—this exhibition was offered to the public at all; the fact that it was selected by an all-black committee would hardly justify the continued institutionalization of "black art" shows. The reasons offered by the Center's director, Mario Amaya, and the jive talk advanced in the Introduction by the guest curator, Benny Andrews, do not seriously offset the tremendous harm such a poorly selected show does to the cause of those serious and thoroughly capable black artists who, in this day and time, deserve to be viewed and evaluated in an entirely different artistic complex.