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In more than 50 paintings at the Creative Arts Center in Pontiac, Stewart prizes open any narrow interpretation of American history. His paintings reexamine the role of Buffalo soldiers in settling the western frontier, the unparalleled skill of the Tuskegee airmen during World War II, and the soulful renderings of blues musicians, who Stewart presents with a vivid melancholic catharsis.

In the tradition of swirling grandeur made famous by legendary painters of the wild frontier, Frederic Remington and Charles Schreyvogel, Stewart reconfigures the cavalry battles of Henry O. Flipper, the first black graduate of West Point, and he recreates the daring flights of the Tuskegee airmen amid his trademark emotionally charged sky.

Stewart's mission is not only to present an aesthetic righ-

teousness, but to recognize those African Americans whose contributions might not be well known.

"Knowledge of history is like food," said Stewart. "History gives work and meaning to people."

The soft-spoken retired Detroit public school teacher doesn't court controversy, although he hasn't been a distant observer of social change.

As a student at Southern University, Stewart protested segregation by sitting stoically at the "whites only" lunch counters at in Baton Rouge, La.

"You can never really stop educating people about the past."

Handed down

Artist Joe Dobbins, Jr. recalled his early childhood when his friends were playing as he sat with his dad and sketched them. He still carries a sketch pad,

recording ideas and initial drafts of his colorful, geometric paintings with distinctive African themes.

"I want my work to be positive," said the younger Dobbins, a design sculptor at the GM Tech Center in Warren.

From one generation to the next runs a style of deep reverence for African customs and the dramatic social changes of the last 50 years.

Joe, Sr. migrated to Detroit from Mississippi in the early 1930s. He attended what is now known as Center for Creative Studies, as did his namesake.

And like his son, Joe, Sr. earned a living working for General Motors, and found time to paint after he put in a 9-to-6.

Both Dobbins have a loose geometric style and use bright colors. Subject matter for the elder Dobbins tends to be the deep rituals of African culture, whereas

the younger Dobbins has a looser, more contemporary sensibility.

They both, however, clearly honor their ethnic heritage. "If you're selfish with your art — it's only about me — who benefits?" said Joe Jr.

Stark truths

Like her bold, sensual paintings, Gigi Bolton is a rush of energy.

Because of the diverse range of styles she employs, Bolton is worried that critics might think of her as a "fickle artist."

Her mediums include acrylic and collages of paper, glass and magazine clippings. Bolton's style ranges from highly cubist to realism to impressionistic to surrealist to dreamlike.

In tone and temperament, Bolton's subject matter reveals the many sides of her life as a single mother trying to make a

live as an artist.

In the early 1990s, Bolton accepted a buyout from Ameritech, where she worked as a graphic artist. Since then, she's led the bohemian life, making a living from the sales of her paintings.

She can present a respectful homage of her grandmother's world in the realistic and comforting painting, "Grandma's Visitor."

Yet Bolton is also starkly truthful about her desires in the sensual depictions of women, many of whom appear less than fickle about what they want.

A naked woman smiling sheepishly as she sits next to a man sprawled on a bed is one of Bolton's favorite paintings.

"People say, 'You paint naked people,'" she said. "It's not about that. I want to open people's minds."

"Yeah, certain pieces have that

"attitude" that I am who I am," she said.

Master painter

In contrast to representational painters, the late Norman Lewis' abstract paintings present a crucial link in the evolution of 20th-century painting.

Lewis' work is infused with a warm playfulness and subtle gradations of color.

Perhaps his most engaging painting, "Morning," is clearly a transitional piece that blurs boundaries among abstractionism, abstract expressionism and minimalism.

In "Morning," the abstract forms on Lewis' canvases seem to emerge and dissolve into a dark brown background.

And as the work of the five African American artists with February exhibits demonstrate, there are many different shades of brown.

Jazz from page C1

with what Stan Kenton began in the high schools and colleges and his idea of having music in the schools.

Lymperis remembers the crowds Kenton used to draw back in the mid to late 1940s when the Farmington Hills resident played hits such as "Intermission Riff," Kenton's theme song "Artistry in Motion," and Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue" with the band.

"Back then the Big Bands were hot — Ellington, Kenton, Count Basie," said Lymperis, who joined Kenton's band at age 19. "We were stars. You'd come out the stage door and they'd want your autograph."

Lymperis traveled all over the country with Kenton playing theaters, dance halls, and parks such as the old Eastwood Garden at Eight Mile and Gratiot. Life on the road could be grueling. At the Paramount Theater in New York City, the band performed five to six shows a day from 11:30 a.m. to midnight. Any free time was spent in the recording studio. Lymperis was recently surprised

to find some of those old recordings at Borders in Birmingham.

"We'd do two weeks of one-nighters then do a week at a theater," said Lymperis. "We used to fly a lot especially when we did concerts for the army. One of the guys wouldn't fly so we had to wait for him to catch up."

Lymperis didn't play in the original Clarencville series but did take his daughter backstage to meet Kenton during one of his concerts. She'd heard all of Lymperis' stories about Betty Grable and Harry James watching the Kenton band playing the Hollywood Palladium. Mel Torme and Bob Hope used to sit in regularly with the band back then.

"Stan was a gentleman, easy to get along with," said Lymperis. "He was known for being generous. We were the first band with five trumpets and five trombones. His late years, he was into progressive jazz."

Jerry McKenzie joined the band after Lymperis left. Off and on between 1958 and 1972, the West Bloomfield drummer performed and recorded with Kenton, receiving back to back

Grammy Awards for "Adventures in Jazz" and Kenton's "West Side Story."

"I'm thankful, I was able to work with him and thankful I was able to have those memories," said McKenzie. "Some of the most memorable experiences were when we recorded two tracks with Nat King Cole. We also were on the same bill with King Cole. Another time, it was Johnny Mathis. We also did Dick Clark's Bandstand."

McKenzie knew from age 3 when he saw Gene Krupa on TV that he wanted to become a drummer. McKenzie was fortunate to see and hear all the great Big Band such as Dorsey, Basie and Miller all in the comfort of his living room. Those days are gone. Today's kids have few opportunities to hear live Big Band music. The Feb. 21 concert will not only allow the next generation to experience the sounds of Kenton's music but gives budding Benny Goodman's at Harrison an opportunity to perform before an audience of jazz lovers.

The 16-piece Harrison High Jazz Band, one of two in the

school's music department, has performed in the Montreaux-Detroit Jazz Festival five times, and in Europe as part of World War II commemorations on the 50th anniversary in 1995. They'll play a range of music from traditional Count Basie to jazz funk.

"It's a real honor to be asked to play," said Mark Phillips, Harrison High director of bands and orchestras. "For the kids it's nice to play to a home crowd but it's exciting to play for a real audience that has an understanding and appreciation of jazz."

Phillips' affection for Kenton's music goes back nearly 20 years to his student days at Wayne State University. At that time, Kenton's assistant director Dick Shearer was instrumental in setting up what was then the new jazz program at the Detroit University.

"Dick Shearer had just come off the road with Kenton," said Phillips. "It made me develop a love for Kenton. Stan Kenton was a real innovator in jazz and always taking a lead throughout the 50 years he was leading bands."

an art fair, they were told to look elsewhere, she said.

Nurturing the arts? Who's fooling whom?

A 5,000-seat theater may or may not be the answer. But Sugrue, among others, wonder if city officials understand that "culture" isn't merely entertainment, but an appreciation of cultural and artistic differences. A cultural center, she said, should be like a modern-day town hall.

"Is the nature of art another performance of 'Cats,'" wondered Sugrue.

On the surface, a new theater with Broadway and Off-Broadway shows could be a crown cultural jewel in Troy.

But the implication of a new theater on the broader cultural scene remains uncertain. A sure sign that a more vigorous debate is needed.

The reviews aren't in. The deal isn't done.

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You can thank Sugrue for that.

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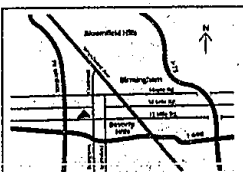
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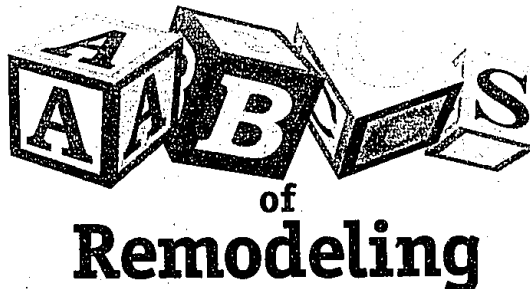
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