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Michelle Gibbs and Carmen Lozar Discuss New Art Exhibits Showcasing Black Artists

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Jon Norton: In our final story today on sound ideas revolves around two art exhibits featuring the work of Black artists. They are currently on display at the Wakely and Merwin Galleries at Illinois Wesleyan University. WGLT Arielle Jones spoke with the driving forces behind bringing these exhibits to the community, which was a collaboration between gallery director Carmen Lozar and assistant professor of Theater Arts Dr. Michelle Gibbs. Future Spaces and Community Places explore Afro-futurism while celebrating blackness. Gibbs describes that exhibit as...

Michelle Gibbs: an exhibit that really epitomizes the notion of celebrating blackness. Of blackness as not necessarily... which is not to say that this is not a terrible thing at which to talk about in terms of the tragedy of black life... the heart ache that we experience but we wanted an opportunity to really celebrate blackness in all of its variety and all of its forms. So I was really inspired by a conversation with Carmen as well as talking to a student and was really looking for spaces to be able to explore the fullness of black life and black identities.

Carmen Lozar: And the work really shows that when you walk into the room there's a glasswork, there's tapestry, there's collage, there's life drawings. It really shows that, you know, there's an interest and, and there is a celebratory quality and this idea of uplifting.

Arielle Jones: I feel like you're pulling, you're pulling so much from just all facets of art and bringing these all together. I love this fullness of blackness. It's a beautiful thing to be shared. That exhibit is in the Wakely Gallery and then you make your way to the Merwin Gallery with the theme of afro-futurism and works by Stacey Robinson and its collaborators. Carmen, can you elaborate more on that exhibit?

Lozar: I'll be careful about speaking for Stacey. It is really about what ideas of practical afro-futurism. So, meaning afro-futurism that meets the daily needs of those who part-take in. And so, the work is very futuristic. There are several pieces, which are very kind of space and related to space and kind of futuristic. But you also have comic book characters like the character night boy who is a young black dyslexic teen and you see his journey in all these comic book pages. So, Stacey is true... every time I suggested something for the show that has to do with community or outreach Stacey is like no matter how busy he is, he is like "yes! Sounds good let's do it. We'll make it happen".

Jones: Just bringing in this notion of afro-futurism seems really cool.

Gibbs: Yes, just the beauty that Robinson brings to the work is just really dynamic and when you see it on the walls it just sparks and sparkles in a way that feels like is illuminating blackness. In this way that in terms of afro-futurism does is that it imagines us as future people, as inspiring our blackness, as inspiring a lot of facets of human life and human existence.

Lozar: So there's all these kind of different levels, I think, when they're talking about afro-futurism in this particular show

Jones: Any final words you want to leave with the community at large?

Gibbs: Come see it. You'd be amazed by what it is that Carmen and I have really collaborated to accomplish and what's been accomplished by all of the folks that are part of this. We really encourage the larger Bloomington-Normal community to come in and experience the fullness of Black life and this fullness of Black art and the interpretations that these wonderful artists we have really help curate. And so I really do hope that the campus community as well as the larger Bloomington-Normal community really supports this kind of work and what it is that we're doing.

Norton: These are the final dates to check out these exhibits. The "Celebrating Blackness" exhibit at Wakely Gallery and the "Future Spaces and Community Places" in the Merwin Gallery are both on the campus of Illinois Wesleyan University through Thursday. More details are available at the gallery's website.