

STATEMENTS OF HERITAGE

variant American visions



SOUTH CAROLINA ARTS COMMISSION

INTRODUCTION

History has thus far been plural: different visions of humanity, each with a different vision of its past and future. To preserve this diversity is to preserve the plurality of futures, that is to say life itself.

Octavio Paz

Multiculturalism is an institutional response that is a part of the broad cultural realignment of late postmodern culture. Just below the surface of this movement lie longstanding issues of race and cultural identity. Should we celebrate cultural "difference" or continue to believe in the concept of an American melting pot? Should we extend the artistic canon to fully embrace polycultural aesthetics or should we abandon the concept of a canon altogether? While these questions have been debated, the rules themselves have changed—not once but many times. In a world of 5th-generation information technology, social change, staggering political developments, and the commodification of culture, the concept of a readily identifiable mainstream culture is rapidly vanishing. We no longer have the simple luxury of an aesthetic, geographic, or moral center to which we may compare and orient ourselves.

The breakdown of the narrative of the mainstream has left us with a situation where new realities have outstripped the symbolic workings of society. Baudrillard's concept of simulation and Eco's hyperreality both are exemplified by the desperate vitality of the mainstream culture of the 1980s. In a region where the "shock of the new" has remained just that, the breakdown of a mainstream narrative offers an opportunity for artists and critics to explore aesthetic and cultural issues (differences) topical to artists living outside major metropolitan art centers. While regionalism in the traditional sense of the word no longer is a viable issue, topics related to place, autobiographical detail, and exploration of heritages gradually have resurfaced in the work of many artists (both urban and non-urban) in the past 15 years. The task now remains for critics and curators to develop narratives that offer a context for the art of our time—one that now moves beyond the blanket explanations of a few broadly defined terms.

In focusing on South Carolinians of African American, Native American, Spanish American, and Asian American origins, *Statements of Heritage: Variant American Visions* is characterized by aesthetic pluralism and cultural diversity (both important "buzz words" of recent trends). Our primary goal in mounting the exhibition is to feature the polycultural art of South Carolina—letting the art speak for itself independent of any theme. In this case, the selection of works preceded the selection of an exhibition title and, accordingly, the show includes both the expected and the unexpected. Our second goal was to expand the dialogue concerning multiculturalism to include local, regional, and national perspectives. In many respects, this exhibition is a beginning. We have no pretense of offering the complete picture or of providing answers to longstanding questions; after this exhibition closes, the questions undoubtedly will remain.

As a collaborative effort between the Arts Commission and the State Museum, this exhibition is the result of the labors of many. On a fundamental level, I would like to recognize the I.P. Stanback Museum, under the direction of Dr. Leo Twiggs, the Moja Festival, and Dr. Myrtle Glascoe, Director of the Avery Research Center for African American History and Culture, for their ongoing dedication to exhibiting artists of color in South Carolina. Finally, I would like to thank the members of the curatorial committee for their guidance and commitment to this project and the generous financial and moral support provided by NCNB National Bank of South Carolina.

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