

Meet Sharon Burton

BY KHADIJAH ALI-COLEMAN

I arrived at the Capital Hill Arts League art show in Results, The Gym on Capitol Hill one frigid cold January evening looking to interview and photograph Sharon Burton. Having only seen her picture online, I approached and introduced myself ... to her identical twin.

"You must be here for my sister," said Sherry Burton-Ways. She pointed across the hall to Burton, a vivacious woman in her late 30s, chatting with a trio of art patrons who appeared enthused to meet the artist behind the multi-media piece hanging above them.

A Very Busy Lady

I had met visual artist Sharon Burton online by accident earlier in the month of January. I came across the site for Authentic Arts Consulting and wrote an e-mail inquiring about the services of the DC-based art group that touted its advisory and independent curatorial service. I sensed a potential story. On that very same day, I shot an e-mail to the editor of a blog highlighting the March 2008 "Making Herstory" event taking place this year in Baltimore, Md. Last year's "Making Herstory" art show featured works by local visual artists and writers, including DC author Marquita Siler. Once again, this was a potential story. I had no idea at the time that both of my e-mails went to the same person: Sharon Burton.

We laughed later about the coincidence, but I also learned just how many things Burton has going on at once. While holding a full-time government position, Burton runs Authentic Arts Consulting and creates art work in her home studio; serves as the publicity chairperson for the DC chapter of Women's Caucus for the Arts; participates in the annual National Black Arts Festival; and takes part in art events almost monthly. She also attends all events sponsored by organizations she is a part of like the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative, CHAL and the Black Artists of DC. She is intent on making sure DC visual artists are recognized as a force to be reckoned with.

"The talent here is enormous," she says.

The Artist Within

As an arts advocate, supporting the artistic vision of her peers, Burton is a rising artist in her own right. Burton paints and creates collages and mixed media creations that have a consistent African theme. As a relatively new artist, she experiments with a variety of mediums.

"Fiber is one which I love," she shares. A fan of artists Bettye Saar and Renee Stout, she also likes working with materials such as crystals, beads, photos and other found objects. I photograph the piece above her – a figure that resembles an African fertility god with spirals circling its head, resting on a burlap backdrop.



Sharon Burton and Prudence Bonds stand below Burton's work at Results, The Gym.

**ARTISTICALLY
INCLINED**



Art by Sharon Burton.

Are all of these depictions based on experiences visiting the African continent? It's deeper than that, she surmises. It's about who she is and where we all come from. Coming from a rural area, where opportunities to learn about self were rare, she indulges in creating art that reflects her heritage.

Growing up in upstate New York, about 40 miles east of Syracuse in a town called Rome, Burton always could be found drawing as a child.

"We lived in a fairly rural area, so the countryside and the beauty of that part of the state added to my appreciation of nature's art, so to speak," she says. However, the area was not culturally diverse and was especially lacking in any special appreciation or presence of art from those of the African Diaspora. This inspired her as an adult to travel to and live in various US cities outside of her New York hometown. She lived in Atlanta for eight years before settling down in the DC area.

After taking several photo shots of Burton and her work, I stayed behind with her and a few other local artists, including visual artist Prudence Bonds. We talked about a variety of things, including the state of art in DC, the importance of art groups like the Black Artists of DC (BADC) and plans for the future. Later, Burton put our Q & A on paper, expanding on some of the things we talked about.

Burton and Bonds shared the importance of chronicling the activities of artists in the area. Historically, artists of African descent have not had working documentation of their work from a holistic reference point. The legacy of Africa has been to translate history of all kinds, even art history, through oral telling. Organizations like BADC, an organization Burton and Bonds are a part of, set a high priority on the physical cataloguing of artist work and creating authentic written documentation of the artistic process – as much as possible – from the perspective of the artist, rather than the analysis of someone else later who may not even have known the artist. Events like Burton's event "Making Herstory" [see sidebar for details on this event] promote this documentation process.

"Really, who best to tell the audience about their work than the artist themselves?" asks Burton.

Khadijah Ali-Coleman is a DC native, writer, educator and area performer. She will be performing in "The Vagina Monologues" in Baltimore, Md., March 5-6. E-mail her at Khadijah11@gmail.com for more information. ♦

An Artist in DC

BY SHARON BURTON AS TOLD TO KHADIJAH ALI-COLEMAN

Some of the art organizations I am currently active with include the Women's Caucus for Art (WCA), Ward 7 Arts Collaborative and the Capitol Hill Arts League. I became a member of the WCA in 2005 because I was attracted to their energy and their role in nurturing and encouraging new and emerging artists. The membership was very warm to me as a new artist and art professional, which at the time helped to make my transition to the DC area much easier. They offer so much for new and emerging women artists by way of exhibition opportunities and mentorship. Speaking of mentorship, I formed a relationship with Marilyn Banner, an awesome mixed media artist, who has helped me in so many ways with my art.

In February of 2006, I was fortunate to bring WCA artists and women artists of BADC together at Azizia Gibson's home (founder of the BADC) for a mini-exhibition and artist share celebrating the work of local African-American women artists. It was a huge success, and everyone really enjoyed it. I was thinking recently that it would be nice to do a joint exhibition like that again for the public.

I became involved with the Ward 7 Arts Collaborative late in 2007 after my sister, Sherry, became a board member. I loved the fact that this is a neighborhood collaborative and the only one in the city like it. Their projects are very grassroots, which you don't see as much in many art groups in this area. They have so much potential and so much talent that I think in a few years they will be placing "East of the River" as the place for artists of all kinds.

In addition to my art, I own and operate Authentic Art Consulting, which I founded in 2005 as an art advisory and independent curatorial service in the metro Washington, DC, area. Through Authentic Art, I will be partnering with Michelle Parrish, a fellow art curator and artist and owner of ThickArt Collaborative, to present the "Art with Joe's Third Annual Making Herstory Women's History Art Exhibition" at Peace and A Cup of Joe Café in Baltimore, Maryland. This exhibition will be held March 9-April 19. The opening reception for the "Making Herstory" exhibition is scheduled for March 9 from 3-6 p.m.

This is the second exhibition we have curated and implemented together, and we always have a ball doing it. We focus on exhibiting the work of the unsung woman artist in the DC and Baltimore area. Those artists may have never exhibited anywhere before, artists that have talent that was never recognized. In addition to the artwork, we will celebrate women authors in the area as well. This will be part of the campaign that the National Women's Art Fund is doing to recognize women artists. That day will be a series of creativity workshops for women and a spoken word event. Marilyn Hayes, the incoming National President of the Women's Caucus for Art will also speak.

I think the DC scene is coming along. There are some exciting movements like the formation of Black Artists of DC that is bringing the visual arts of DC on the map despite the lack of interest by local media in what's going on. Art-O-Matic has brought artists together and demanded that the public recognize their contribution in an organized and systematic way. There are other efforts that appear to be making visual art less intimidating and more "hip," especially to younger audiences and collectors.

The "Making Herstory Women's History Art Exhibition" will be held March 9-April 19. Visit www.authenticartonline.com for details.