

Necessity, Not Luxury

The Art of Joysmith Gallery

by Dionne Chalmers
photos by
Ellis Chappell

"Art is not a luxury as many people think—it is a necessity. It documents history—it helps to educate people and stores knowledge for generations to come." —Dr. Samella Lewis

That sums up the vision of Joysmith Gallery, according to husband and wife owners Robert Bain and Brenda Joysmith, and those words are prominently displayed on the walls of the gallery located at 46 Huling in the South Main Historic District.

Like many of the storefronts in the South Main Historic District, Joysmith Gallery stands in a renovated building. The open vertical windows draw the eyes of passersby to the African and Caribbean sculptures placed throughout the airy, single-floor gallery.

The sculptures also draw attention to the side walls, with massive paintings by various African-American artists, as well as to panels in the gallery's center with original pastel paintings by Joysmith. Visitors browse through Joysmith's prints and delight in her African-American figurines symbolic of joyful people.

A lounge area located in a corner of the gallery invites guests to sit and browse through international and African-American art periodicals while basking in the positive experience presented by Joysmith Gallery.

Joysmith and Bain opened their gallery in January 2000 after running an art publishing and distribution company in Oakland. It wasn't until



Native Memphian Brenda Joysmith and husband Robert Bain own this light, airy art gallery that showcases positive portrayals of African-American daily life. Artist and friend George Hunt encouraged the couple to move from Oakland to the up-and-coming South Main Arts District. Says Joysmith about art, "I was born there."

Joysmith's recovery from a brain tumor that the couple decided to leave Oakland. As they traveled around considering new locations, Memphis, they said, kept being mentioned.

Bain recalls one trip to the National Black Fine Arts Show in New York. "The flight had stopped in Memphis, and George Hunt, an old friend, basically told me all the things that were going on in Memphis and the South Main Arts District. When I got home, I told Brenda, 'Let's think about Memphis.'"

Joysmith, a native of Memphis and graduate of Booker T. Washington High School, had no qualms about moving back home.

She sees much potential with the renovation of Downtown, and she and Bain want Joysmith Gallery to be accessible to the community. Joysmith, known for her positive portrayals of African-American daily life, says the gallery currently offers paintings, figurines, posters, periodicals, sculptures, and Joysmith's originals, limited editions, and open-ended prints.

"We like to feel that the works we offer are really strong in terms of content, as well as technical ability," says Bain, "And by virtue of our knowledge of the industry and our connections, we have the ability to bring the works of people like painters Claude Clark, Benny Andrews, and John Biggers."

Joysmith and Bain live on the second floor of the building, and Joysmith finds it interesting living among the works of other artists like Biggers and TAFE, an artist from Ghana, West Africa. "And I have just fallen in love with Benny Andrews's work all over again," she says.

The couple says the gallery's strength comes from their more than 20 years of experiences and relationships. Born and raised in New York City, Bain worked for major advertising agencies and was the national advertising director for *Black Enterprise* magazine. His academic background is in African and African-American studies, and in the early 1970s, he considered a venture in art acquisitions. He says as a child, he had an appreciation for strong visual imagery and remembers being impressed by the illustrations of Gustave Doré in *Don Quixote*. "I was someone who would close my eyes and try to visualize what I was reading. Well, Gustave Doré did it for me, and I found myself trying to find out who he was."



Robert Bain, co-owner of Joysmith Gallery, is pleased to be one of only 42 galleries selected to participate in the National Black Fine Arts Show in New York this year. "The gallery is a labor of love," he says.

Says Joysmith about art, "I was born there." Joysmith received formal training at the School of Art Institute in Chicago and received a B.A. in fine arts from the University of Chicago in 1974. She opened her first studio in 1980 and, in 1984, self-published her first print portfolio of six paintings titled *Tapestry*.

In the 1980s, her work received significant exposure on various television series, such as *The Cosby Show*, *Amen*, and *In the Heat of the Night*, as well as in films like *Philadelphia* and *Lethal Weapon III*, where her works were used on the sets. Her original pastel paintings are included among the collections of Oprah Winfrey, Maya Angelou, and the Colgate-Palmolive Company.

In February 2002, the couple returned from the National Black Fine Arts Show in New York, which limits itself to only 42 galleries. "We are very pleased to be one of the galleries selected," says Bain, "and

we carried the work of Claude Clark, [photographer] Carrie Mae Weems, and, of course, Brenda's work."

Bain says they are working on a complementary show for the Africa in April Festival. The gallery also provides space for emerging artists. Nia, a group of local, young artists, uses the gallery as a meeting space, and in October 2001, the group had a month-long exhibit. School groups visit the gallery and, says Bain, "It is wonderful to see a young kid understand that he can become an artist. We are pleased to do these types of things, and sharing is a part of who we are. The gallery is really a labor of love."

Joysmith Gallery, 46 Huling (between South Main and Front), 901-543-0505, www.joysmith.com. Hours: Tue-Fri 10am-6pm, Sat-Sun 1-5 pm, and 6-9pm the last Friday each month as part of the South Main Art Trolley Tour. Also available by appointment. ■



Joysmith Gallery's versatility includes pastel paintings, prints, and figurines symbolic of joyful people.