

# Gallery offers Memphis 'images of pride, aesthetics'

BY ED HICKS

High up on a wall of Joysmith Gallery in the South Main arts district, the words of African-American art scholar Samella Lewis ring out: "Art is not a luxury, as many people think. It is a necessity."

But for many blacks, collecting art was always a luxury — especially art by black artists, since it was rare. The works of artists such as Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden, prominent painters of the Harlem Renaissance, went largely to white collectors and later to museums.

## Robert Bain

Director, Joysmith Gallery

**Founded:** 1984

**Artists represented:** 20

**Location:** 46 Huling

**Hours:** Tuesday-Friday,

10 a.m.-6 p.m.;

Saturday and Sunday,

1 p.m.-5 p.m.

**Phone:** 543-0505

**Web site:**

[www.joysmith.com](http://www.joysmith.com)

All that changed with a television show.

"There was no commercial aspect to black art before 'The Cosby Show,'" says Joysmith director Robert Bain, of the show that premiered in 1984 and ran for eight seasons.

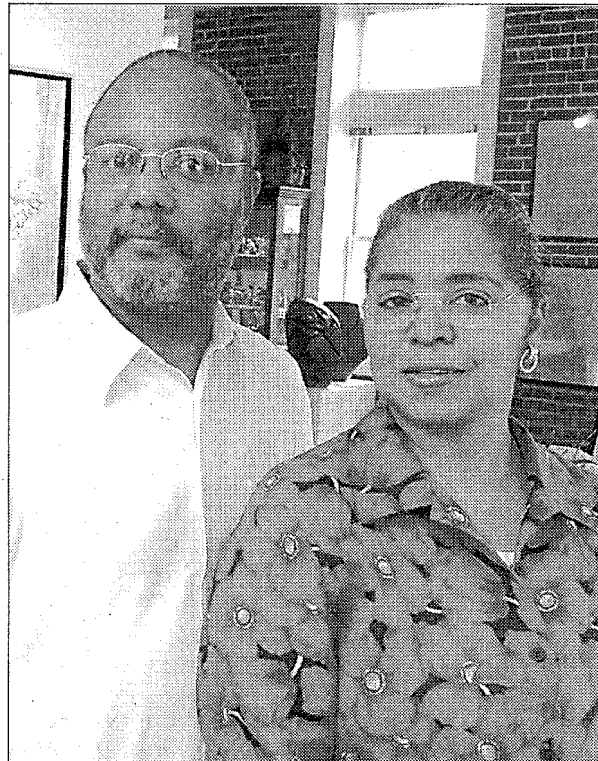
"He simply decorated his home on the show with black art. Cosby made a far greater impact than Oprah because it was subliminal," Bain says. "Cosby suggested we could grace our homes with images of ourselves, with a sense of pride and aesthetics."

The set of Cosby's show featured the works of three contemporary black artists: Ernie Barnes, Barnett Honeywood and Brenda Joysmith. Joysmith's "Madonna" hung in the living room of Cosby's Huxtable family.

One of a set of six pieces, "Madonna" was printed in a signed and numbered edition of 1,000.

"You could have bought the entire set for \$75 in 1984," Bain says. "Now 'Madonna' alone goes for \$4,000 on the secondary market."

While Cosby changed the direction of black art, basketball star Elliott Perry changed the direction of



ALAN HOWELL / MBJ

## Robert Bain and Brenda Joysmith

Joysmith Gallery.

Bain and Joysmith, who are married, moved to Memphis from Oakland, Calif., after Joysmith was diagnosed with a serious illness. Though Joysmith is from Memphis and the couple had been urged for years to move back, it was George Hunt, local artist of the blues, who got Bain — a native of New York City — to take a second look.

Bain and Joysmith bought the property at 46

Huling, and moved in upstairs. The downstairs is for art.

"We didn't start out as a gallery," Bain says. "Our intent was to be a showroom for Brenda's work."

That's how the couple operated in Oakland, where Brenda Joysmith had a 2,500-square-foot studio from which she worked, marketing to a roster of 1,000 galleries and clients.

Then, in Memphis, came Perry, who wanted to exhibit his private collection of black artists. Perry is a collector with an exceptional eye, Bain says. The exhibition opened at Joysmith Gallery on Feb. 1, 2001, coinciding with Black History Month.

"We spent a month living with a collection of artists whose work we'd come to love," Bain says. "And we came to realize the number of those artists we knew and could exhibit or offer for sale."

Besides the opportunity for showing these artists regularly, a change in direction for the gallery would take some pressure off Brenda Joysmith — who recovered from her illness — as well.

"Brenda would no longer be the sole artist responsible for filling up the walls," Bain says.

By the end of last year, the gallery was offering a retrospective of Claude Clarke, a painter of the Depression era who died earlier in the year.

Bain is already at work on the gallery's next big show, one in which literacy is the theme.

"If only youth had a clearer understanding of what struggles blacks have faced regarding literacy," Bain says. "In this society we have killed people for teaching black people to read."

"There used to be a saying that if you wanted to hide something from black people you hide it in a book," he says. "And the educational deficiencies here in Memphis are more obvious than anywhere I have lived."

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