

Paint it Black: Raymond Saunders

We're in luck: through December 12, the Sesnon Gallery at UCSC Porter College is showing the work of Raymond Saunders. Saunders' art — an imaginative weave of many techniques, sources and materials — has an astonishingly powerful effect.

If possible, see it more than once, to let the many internal cross-references weave their pattern in your mind's eye. After a while, you feel that Saunders is writing a kind of visual music, which he performs with the expressive verve of improvisation and the clear control of a virtuoso player.

You might begin, as I did, with Saunders' several Jack Johnsons. Lured in by the handsome poster showing his 1972 painting of the first Black heavyweight world champion, I went straight to the original. A visionary figure of great dignity, his Johnson stares off the canvas from a red background painted over black. He is surrounded by emblems of his journeys taped or scribbled onto the canvas: stamps, baggage tickets, the date of his victory, the colors of his travels. Saunders has been working inter-

mittently with Johnson as a black hero and stand-in for himself, a black artist in a different medium.

In "A Hot Sun, Jack Johnson," the delicacy of line expresses Johnson's personal elegance. The champion haunts other works as well, in the guise of a mysteriously hooded fighter or an African nobleman. Johnson's presence works like an image in an ongoing poem about the artist's personal history as well as history in general and Black history in particular. The more you look, the more deeply you enter into this rich, evocative network of associations.

Like Johnson, Saunders is a world-traveler whose journeys bring great breadth to his art. The artist once commented, "The important thing about doing art is that I also live . . . and the more I bring into myself, the more I have a desire and need to translate it into something." His travels in Africa translate in unexpected ways. "From Here to There" evokes a memory of brilliant color against a black background in the richly patterned robes of its African figures. "Page from an African Notebook" is a mental image of

Africa in the form of an almost abstract map made of torn shapes, a hauntingly beautiful drawing of an African woman and samples of the paints needed for the blue of the sky. Painterly, conceptual and tactile allusions — carefully juxtaposed and overlapped — work out their own Africa as a source book of color, line and image.

Saunders' use of black as ground and color is especially moving. Since he paints and repaints, each surface bears its own history embedded in the thickness of its layers. He achieves a time sense through the use of commercial enamel paints. Although these enamels often evoke the perfection of lacquered finish, Saunders likes to let his canvases show off their "imperfections" — the bumps, cracks and other expressive irregularities that show the gestural traces of work-in-process.

Like his use of African motifs, Saunders' borrowing from Japanese art is very much his own. His work can suggest the opacity and translucence of Japanese prints, as well as their abundance of visual information, yet a painting like "Into the Past, Into the Present" almost insists that you notice its torn edges and scribbled markings along with the elegant juxtapositions of its Japanese papers. It is particularly exhilarating to feel the vivacity that Saunders creates by allowing in such work the coexistence of great delicacy and energy — an unusual combination.

In another group of paintings, Saunders is concerned with "learning what wants to be art." "Notes to Myself" incorporate children's blocks, Disney characters, fortune cookie predictions, postcard images, bits of drawings and the artist's jottings. This complex set of relationships paradoxically creates an effect of simplicity, as if his scraps had assembled themselves.

Saunders lets ephemera into his art by a kind of conscious accident. The result is a breathtaking spontaneity. He can risk the use of corny, even racist imagery and pull it off just the same. Darkies and minstrels populate his collages along with Dick and Jane. By working with such cultural icons, he teases the viewer into realizing that a black child's Raggedy Ann is not the same as a White child's, even though we all share the imagery of popular culture.

Saunders is convinced that "any time you say white in this country, you say black, and vice versa." What his visual mythologies bring to light is the mixed heritage that we



Darkie Toothpaste (1977-78)

share even if we read it differently. Part of his work is a rescue project for things that aren't usually found in the realm of art. Just as the Pop Artists found subjects in Campbell's soup cans, Saunders has a democratic (but non-commercial) attitude toward what wants to make its way into his paintings. "Darkie Toothpaste" sets up a kind of visual pun in contrasts between a black and white toothpaste box and the bright colors of children's crayons.

In the same way, the idea of "color" is at stake in "Mythologies," a witty shoeshine kit for artists in which the lid shows a happy darkie polishing boots while the box shows off blocks in primary colors. It's as if Saunders took on these racist images to tease and play with them, to see how their visual charm might fit into his reconstruction of art history.

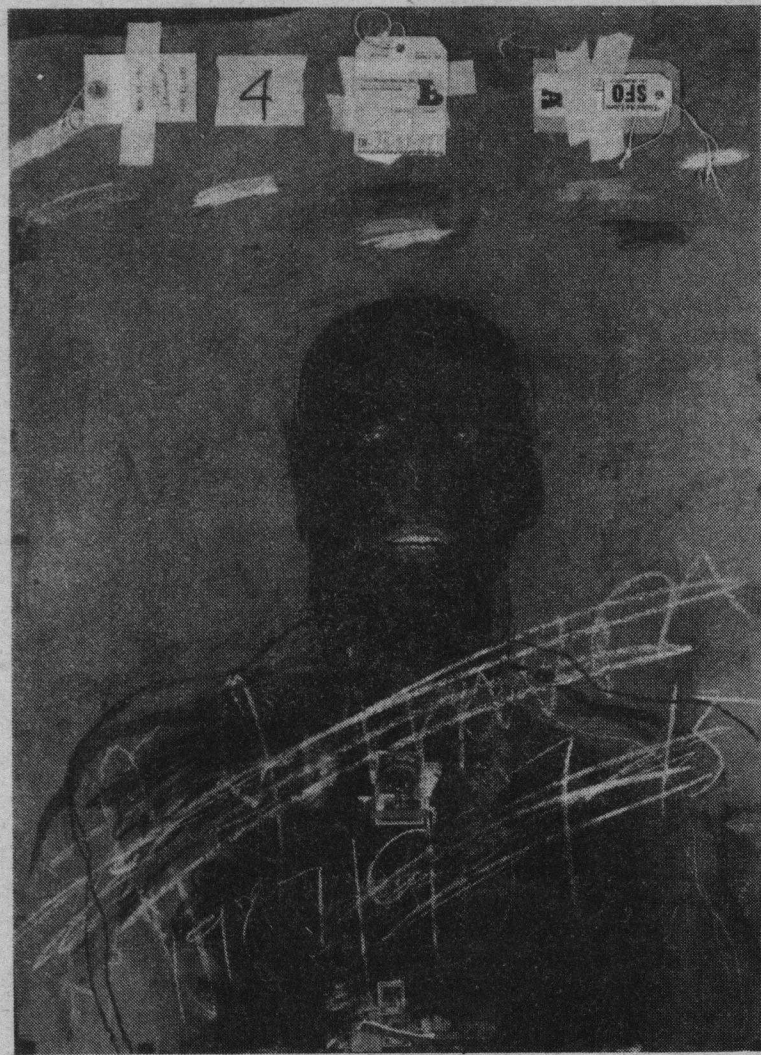
Saunders clearly likes to test the static perfection of high art by bringing it into touch with different realities. A very beautiful series of paintings dealing with the interiors of Black churches seeks "to do honor to their desire to be Chartres," according to the artist. In "I Don't Go to Church Anymore," a cross of aqua, blue and yellow floats majestically below a sort of painted canopy on an intense black background. But this splendidly serious atmosphere is vitalized by the scribbles, smudges and swipes of

paint encrusted onto the surface. The series evokes the active life of people at church as well as the colors and shapes that house them. As an act of homage, it is intensely moving and reflective.

Saunders also celebrates the sensual pleasures of life in California, where he has lived for many years. Opposite the dramatic "I Don't Go to Church Anymore," you will find the whimsical "Narsai's Spring Festival," where a sense of art as play has decided the arrangement. The freestyle printing of a 6½-year-old friend of the artist proclaims that this occasion is a celebration. To the left, "Dick and Jane and I Guess I Must Have Been a Shadow" sets forth the artist's discovery of his own absence and reappearance in the world of images. These are visual notes about the discovery of delight in spite of history, as well as a recovery of the rich presence of being Black in America.

In the process of working out Saunders' visual free-associations, the viewer is gradually drawn into a kind of participation with the artist. We respond to the energizing magic of his collages because they are at once so free and so daring. Go see this show, and you will come away invigorated by the subtle and generous intelligence at work in Saunders' jazzy "improvisations."

— Carolyn Burke



Jack Johnson (1972)