

A rewarding life 'Married to Art' showcased in Espi Frazier retrospective

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You can't miss the directness and self-assurance in the art of Espi Frazier, showcased in an exhibit covering the 24 years since she made Baltimore her home.

Running through April 21 at Gallery CA in the City Arts apartment building, "Married to Art: Art: Espi Frazier" derives its palpable energy as much from the artist's clarity and depth of expression as from her subject matter.

Frazier's images, rooted in African and African-American cultures, find distinctive expression in finely honed wood pieces created using a relief carving process she devised, as well as in drawings saluting incandescent entertainer Josephine Baker.

"My life has been pretty much married to art," says Frazier, 65, who hails from Chicago's South Side. "I started when I was 5 years old, when my mom had me draw eggs and turn them into faces. Later, I copied illustrations in newspapers."

Frazier went on to earn a bachelor's degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her work was seen in several solo and group shows in her hometown before she relocated to Baltimore.

At the [Maryland Institute College of Art](#), she earned her master's degree studying with eminent painter Grace Hartigan. Frazier has taught art at the Friends School of Baltimore since 1993.

During her time at MICA, Frazier further honed a technique of hand-carving and painting on wood (her preferred type is clear pine). She copyrighted the process, which she calls "wood graphics."

A striking example is "The Mother of Us All," which Frazier made in 1995 for her thesis at MICA. It reflects how imaginatively the artist works with wood, to the point where she can replicate the effect of stained glass.

"The Mother of Us All" is a also vibrant manifestation of one of the artist's major goals — to depict "woman as goddess and life-giver," she says, "and, especially, to represent the African-American woman in a positive light."

That goal is imaginatively realized in works on paper depicting Baker, who became a sensation during the Jazz Age in Europe and stood up boldly to prejudice in her native America.

"She was a powerful woman who had the courage to be herself," Frazier says, "although she had to go to another country for people to embrace her talent. She was an authentic person. She fought for civil rights. I wanted to be like her."

Baker's aura emerges from Frazier's intricate, sensual drawings; some of them evoke the angular elegance of Art Deco.

A recurring motif in Frazier's work may raise eyebrows —

watermelon, a racially charged image she turns around.

"I use it as a life-giving symbol," Frazier says. "The seeds within create life."

Another recurring subject makes a positive statement, too. Frazier has created a richly textured series of portraits of African-American women proudly wearing their grand hats for church.

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"My mom was a church lady hat-maker," Frazier says. "When I was a kid, I wouldn't be caught wearing that silly stuff. But later I realized how important hats were for black women through history. Church hats are a tradition since slavery. It was for ladies to be themselves."

A 2015 graphite-on-paper work, aptly titled "Glorious," shows a woman sporting a huge hat rising, almost like a noble plant, from her head.

Frazier's own favorite from the hat series is another 2015 piece, "Elegant Church Lady."

A handsome woman in high-necked Victorian garb eyes the viewer from behind a veil. A brooch adorning the collar suggests an Egyptian ankh, a link to the distant past. Stately trees and puffs of clouds form

a refined background pattern.

Pride, beauty, individuality, warmth all come together in the drawing, qualities that define the rest of this impressive exhibit.

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If you go

"Married to Art: Espi Frazier" runs through April 21 at Gallery CA, 440 E. Oliver St. Hours are noon to 4 p.m. Monday through Friday. Artist talk at 6:30 p.m. Friday. Free admission. Call [410-528-9239](tel:410-528-9239), or go to facebook.com/galleryca/