

The Art of Resilience

By Kimberly Hayes Taylor

Women of the New Tribe exhibit depicts unique character of 50 women worth knowing

As Semaj Brown looked at her monochromatic portrait in the exhibit, "Women of a New Tribe" at the Flint Institute of Art she had a revelation. She is the daughter of generations of people who were enslaved, brutalized, objectified and stereotyped yet survived and thrived.

Like her, some of the 50 women included are the color of a chocolate bar, and the hues of caramel, vanilla bean and all the spectrums in between. Their hair is braided, curled and locked. Some raised children, taught school, became medical doctors or PhDs, and mentored and nursed the community. Each of them, a stunning range of diversity, represents a microcosm of black women in America.

"This speaks to a collective of African-American women, the 50 sisters who were chosen are a representation of all African-American women," says Brown, a poet, educator and playwright who for years worked as a science teacher. "You can't see the black women who are happy all the time, the hot mama, the hoochie, the big mama. They are not there because none of it is true. When you get this sampling, you ask 'What about those stereotypes?'"

They are not there. These are simply images of African-American women."

She later dreamed about her people and history, woke up and wrote a 13.5-minute dramatic poem that is now a book, "Making of a New Tribe." She performed at a gala and panel discussion celebrating the exhibit accompanied by her husband, Dr. James Brown, a physician who plays a magical instrument he created, the Arbor Lune, along with a snare, chimes, cymbal, djembe and zither. Here is an excerpt

Again, I asked, Mother Ocean,
How long, how long after Jim Crow did it take
to make your daughters whole?
Mother Ocean lifted,
waves rose and fell like flying blue tarpaulin,

floods surged dredging sand and
civilization into her amorphous body, she spoke:
"Seems like eternity, yet it is a drop.
But, in every drop there exists eternity.
They were always whole
Even with captured memory
Even with lynching
Tulsa Holocaust
Execution of their God-Men husbands
Mass incarceration
Medical Apartheid
Water boarded Psyche
They were always whole.

Among the women whose portrait hangs in the exhibit is ZsaZsa Orr who has a built a life raising seven children, singing, acting and mentoring young people. She dreamed of finishing college and becoming a school teacher. Her dream was deferred, but she settled into a role as an educator anyway, homeschooling her children and creating arts and music programs for other young ones.

Orr, who still has teens at home and often has a house filled with teens that come for Bible study, says her portrait gives her a greater appreciation of herself and her life's work.

"It's been a phenomenal experience, very exciting," she says of being included in the exhibit. "It's given me a different outlook on myself and the things I do."

Orr says she never realized people noticed her work, and being selected allowed her to share an important lesson with her children. "There are people watching me ... I tell them all the time 'People are watching you. Are you living up to what you're saying? Are you doing what you say you are going to do? You are being watched, and what you do is appreciated.'"

Kathy Jackson's image also hangs on the wall. She left her native Flint and relocated to Detroit, where she built a career as an automotive journalist.

However, she eventually returned home and purchased a building on 1st Street.

She lives there and runs the Health Dollar, where she mixes smoothies for her customers, offers Flint's younger residents a place to hang out and works to stimulate downtown Flint, once vibrant and bustling.

For her, being included in the exhibit in the main hall of the FIA is "a great honor. I was raised in Flint, and I really like the arts. There are so many women in Flint who could have been nominated; it made me feel really good."

Jackson says having Taliaferro come to Flint and capture images of the women of the city was a big boost.

"People are really proud and not just black women," she says. "White people are proud to see an exhibit of women from Flint in the main gallery. There's so much negative news about Flint. This is a burst of energy for the city."

Photographer Jerry Taliaferro had a goal to reveal the beauty and souls of black women, but he was inspired to his collection of portraits "Women of a New Tribe" shortly after hearing an interview with novelist Toni Morrison on NPR while he resided in Memphis. In it, she described African-Americans as 'New World Africans,' people who survived the Middle Passage from Africa and created a new African culture in America.

Taliaferro already had been shooting photos of models with African masks, and began capturing even more images of African-American women.

By the time he relocated to Charlotte, N.C., he had collected so many portraits he decided to approach a museum in Charlotte about curating an exhibit. That was 2002. Since then the exhibit has included hundreds of women and traveled to cities across the United States and to Europe twice.



Photos courtesy Jerry Taliaferro

The "Women of the New Tribe" exhibit featured some recognizable faces in Flint, including artists, educators, mothers and mentors.

"It's a good exhibit," says Taliaferro, who began his photography career in 1988 after being trained to photograph missions in a Special Forces unit in the U.S. Army. "It can be an uplifting exhibition if you pick the right people, the right mixes of people. You don't want the people everybody knows. You want a mix of people. The Flint Institute of Arts did a good job of that."

From a list of nominees, the 100 most nominated women were selected and half of their names were drawn from a hat and where included in the exhibit. Among them are singers, artists, a doctor, educators, mothers, wives, sisters, daughters, aunts, extraordinary women, and everyday people - each with a unique story.

"We've been doing this about 15 years. The more I do it, the more I see," Taliaferro says. "It's never boring because every woman has her own story, and every woman has her own particular beauty. Beauty is not all outward and it's not all inward. The more you get to know a person; they become more beautiful or less beautiful."

"They are picking the best women in the community to do this. You know they are going to be outstanding women, women of accomplishment, great women. I know they are great women when they walk in the door. Almost all of them become more beautiful. We're meeting this great person, but to take a great picture, they have to give themselves."

Taliaferro says his greatest pleasure comes when he hears people's reactions to the photos. That's when he sees his work differently.

"You get to see why this woman is so beautiful, and why she is loved so much by her family and friends."

"Women of the New Tribe" is on display at the Flint Institute of Art through April 15.