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ART VIEW; Taking on the World From 125th Street

By MICHAEL BRENSON

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Kinshasha Conwill has been at the Studio Museum in Harlem 10 years now and its executive director since 1988. In that time she has become increasingly visible, and her museum has become an ever more important forum, at a time when interest in black artists continues to grow. The changes in the museum reflect the personality and dynamism of the 39-year-old director, who has been working to expand and expose it while securing the identity it has been building throughout its 23 years.

Mrs. Conwill is a former painter and teacher who came to the museum as its deputy director in 1980, the year she received a master's degree in business administration in arts management from University of California at Los Angeles. Like her predecessor, Mary Schmidt Campbell, who left the museum in 1987 to become New York City Commissioner of Cultural Affairs, she is committed to defining, documenting and protecting black culture.

"There is something called African-American culture and it is definable with traits and traditions," says Mrs. Conwill, who changed her name from Karen to Kinshasha in 1969 ("It had an African base, and I liked the sound"). Its sources "go back to African music, social practice, religion and art. There is still a dearth of literature on the art. The museum has done a lot to fill that vacuum."

The current exhibition at the museum, which is situated on West 125th Street, is "The Blues Esthetic: Black Culture and Modernism," organized by Richard J. Powell for the Washington Project for the Arts. The show, which opened last week and runs through December, is on one level an attempt to define the presence of black American culture on the visual arts. Included are 76 works by about 35 artists, white and black, among them Terry Adkins and Alison Saar (two of the artists who have come through the museum's artists-in-residence program), Sam Gilliam, Jackson Pollock, Melvin Edwards, Larry Rivers and Houston Conwill, Mrs. Conwill's husband, who exhibited in the Projects series of the Museum of Modern Art last year.

The exhibition, Mrs. Conwill says, "is a very good but somewhat problematical attempt" to convey through the visual arts a concept that the scholar Houston A. Baker Jr. calls a blues ideology, which permeates black American culture. Through the blues, says Mrs. Conwill, it is possible to define a "music and a sensibility that have dealt with some of the most horrendous kinds of physical and psychological oppression and then created a language that is very self-conscious, very self-aware, and if ironic, not cynically ironic, and incredibly expressive."

The blues "does tie directly into - to the extent that there is something like an African-American world view - a view of a people that is resilient in the face of incredible odds," she adds. "It's a retention of the core of African-American people. It's a resilience. Now the problem comes when you try to lay that matrix over art, because art is always stubborn. Art refuses to speak out like music."

Mrs. Conwill does insist upon a heroic view of black American culture: she has written that the "very essence of African American culture and practice is rooted in the survival of an enslaved people who fiercely retain their 'Africanness' in the face of brutality." But there are two sides to her that are in constant debate, one firm and fixed, the other expansive and flexible. The debate between them has a lot to say about the character and dynamism of her museum.

She does not exclude black artists, for example, whose work does not directly reflect their African heritage or confront racism. While Melvin Edwards's celebrated "Lynch Fragments" and the eloquent sculptural shackles of Beverly Buchanan refer openly to black history, the bushlike wire sculptures of Maren Hassinger,

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another artist Mrs. Conwill enthusiastically supports, do not. The museum has also presented retrospectives devoted to James Lesesne Wells and Hughie Lee-Smith, two unpolemical figurative painters working in traditional idioms.

"Our role as an institution is different from the role the artists may define for themselves," Mrs. Conwill says. "That's a fact of life, and I can live with it." If we take an artist like Mel Edwards and say he is our standard, I am not saying that when one sees his work, one sees only the terrible history of the treatment of blacks in America. There may also be references to Tony Smith and Edwards's relation to the history of postwar American sculpture. Martin Puryear has spoken a lot about Sierra Leone and the tradition of woodwork there, but he has also spoken about his relation to minimalism.

"These are artists who are open to so much that you can talk about any single aspect of their work and open an aperture, but there is a whole other set of apertures. You can talk about Bearden and the classics, or Bearden and Lorca. Our choices of what we examine may be different from what the artist may choose to be examined by. As long as there is not a chasm between our interpretation of the work and the artist's intention, I think it's healthy."

Mrs. Conwill's openness is reflected in her effort to broaden the museum's base. The museum brought to the 1990 Venice Biennale the work of the Nigerian and Zimbabwe sculptors from its show on contemporary African art held earlier this year. It was probably the first time art from sub-Saharan Africa was exhibited at the international exhibition, and it served to introduce the museum to many people abroad.

This past summer the Studio Museum also collaborated with two SoHo institutions - the New Museum of Contemporary Art and the Museum of Contemporary Hispanic Art - on "The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980's." Works of black artists were shown at the two Lower Manhattan museums; and white and Latin artists were featured in Harlem. The artists in the show were seen in broader contexts, and the museums reached new audiences.

But branching out can bring problems, and these suggest why Mrs. Conwill speaks of the increasing openness of the Studio Museum with a sense of both gain and loss. While "The Decade Show" brought new audiences, she said that the museum's basic constituency, which she describes as "overwhelmingly African-American," was not "as much in evidence at the programs."

By broadening the museum's audience, she says, "yes we gain - we gain access, we gain visibility, but we also have to be open to the possibility that we will lose some of our cohesiveness and that we will have some of our own ways of operating questioned."

"There is a very conservative core, I think, to black life in this country," she continues. "It is a very protective core that comes from having something to protect and needing to be protected against either, literally, hostile and violent forces, or forces that just were inattentive or indifferent to our needs."

Her constituency is tied to the mission and the esthetic of the museum. "There was always a very strong sense that Harlem has a history of incredible achievement," she says, "and whatever we do, somehow Langston Hughes is watching us, and Romy Bearden is watching us, so we have got to continue to meet that standard."

"Kinshasha has worked toward bringing to the museum a greater level of credibility and professionalism," says Leslie King-Hammond, the dean of graduate studies of the Maryland Institute, College of Art, in Baltimore. "She's trying to demonstrate that although the museum came from an alternative status - supporting a segment of the art world whose voice is still to be heard in most mainstream circles - it is critical to the total perception of American art today."

Mrs. Conwill's personality is considerably different from that of her predecessor, Dr. Campbell, who communicates her passion with succinctness and restraint. Mrs. Conwill is more outgoing, with a sense of mischief, a low, rolling, musical voice and an ease with words that leads her to speak in a flowing, discursive manner.

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She was born in Atlanta in 1951. Her mother, Mariella, is a former French teacher. Her father was M. Carl Holman, a poet and playwright, a professor of humanities at Clark University in Atlanta and the founder of The Atlanta Enquirer, a black newspaper. "It was really a paper of the Movement," Mrs. Conwill said. "His reporters were people like Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Julian Bond. They were my baby sitters."

Mr. Holman eventually devoted his life to the civil rights struggle. He moved the family from Atlanta to Washington to become first the information officer and then the deputy director of the United States Commission on Civil Rights. He later became president of the National Urban Coalition, a position he held until his death two years ago.

Mrs. Conwill's ambivalence about the museum's branching out is tied to these early experiences, which she sees more and more as the "touchstone of my life." The "great success of the movement was integration, but what we lost was a close-knit black community," she says. "There was one black community in Atlanta. Everyone, poor people, working-class people, middle-class people, was together and there was this common struggle for civil rights."

Mrs. Conwill is drawn to the theory of "parallel cultures," developed by Tomas Ybarra Frausto, the associate director of arts and humanities at the Rockefeller Foundation. The theory, as she interprets it, offers a view of cultures as nonhierarchical, as separate but equal, and it rejects the idea of a dominant mainstream culture against which other cultures are marginal or inferior.

"His discussion of parallel culture says that it is not Western culture against so-called non-Western cultures," Mrs. Conwill said. "This was developing in France, this was developing in Mexico, this was developing in Ghana. These were streams and they fed each other sometimes, sometimes they had nothing to do with each other."

Whether the art of black Americans can indeed be approached as independent or parallel to the rest of contemporary art is one of the questions raised by the Studio Museum. Mrs. Conwill wants to protect the art and culture she believes in, but she also wants them exposed to the often harsh spotlight of the international artistic arena.

"I don't like to see this dichotomous thinking that says there's Western culture, and Western culture is up here and everything else is down there," she says. "And I don't want to throw Western culture out, because African-American people are African and American."

"I am very Western," she adds. "And this museum is very Western, as it is very African, whatever that means." The present contentious climate in America "makes it sound like anyone who is saying, 'Let's bring in Langston Hughes and James Baldwin and Toni Morrison when we study literature, and let's bring in Bearden and Henry Tanner and Betye Saar when we study art history' is saying, 'Let's throw out Picasso and Faulkner.' No! It's not saying, 'Let's reduce it,' but 'Let's enrich it.' But this is not heard."