Newsday

PHOTOGRAPHY REVIEW

Out of a Harlem tradition, a striking body of work

BY STEVE DOULAR

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given an immaculately stylish send-off.

NEWSDAY Out of a Harlem Tradition, A Striking Body of Work Edwynn Houk Gallery, 9 June - 23 July 2005

Meticulously garbed in finer than their Sunday finest, the subjects of photographer Elizabeth Heyert's "The Travelers" project rare grace and elegance. It is tempting to say that these mostly middle-aged and elderly Harlemites, many who ventured up from the South to escape bigotry and chase opportunity, have never looked better.

That may be true, but they are also dead.

Heyert's show of 30 near-life-size color portraits at the Edwynn Houk Gallery in Manhattan is a deeply affecting project. It illuminates a particular Harlem mortuary tradition, rooted in black Southern Baptist culture, in which the newly deceased are

Heyert, a white nonbeliever, learned that such was the specialty of Harlem funeral director Isaiah Owens. Whatever trials they had suffered in life, the dead would soon be "going to the party," as Owens put it. And in a celebratory fashion that recalls the pomp of New Orleans funeral parades and the ancient Egyptian habit of entombing the pharaohs with their riches.

Working quickly in the interim between preparation and burial, and with the families' permission, Heyert had the bodies positioned against a luxurious black background. She used long exposures and lighting that created vibrant colors and contrasts.

The subjects possess an uncanny pizzazz, whether a fez-wearing Masonic matron in a billowy white lace gown or a regal patriarch in his bold blue blazer with wide "Mr. B" lapels. They appear to be taking naps. (Heyert's last project, "The Sleepers," was a collection of dormant nudes.) They almost invite a tap on the shoulder.

There are even touches of humor, as in a portrait of Preston Washington Sr. in which the old gentleman reclines with his tie askew, as if windblown, and hands placed at deliberately haphazard angles. There's personality here, though its animating spirit is gone.

For all the aesthetic beauty Heyert captures, there's an undertow of sadness, especially if you pause to read the cards that identify the subjects and cite their life spans. "Jay Moe" Jones was not yet 22 when he died last spring. His attire, a creamy white-and-gray Sean John track suit with a matching New York Yankees cap and a clutch of dollar bills stuffed in one pocket, underscores shifting fashions in the Harlem community. But his premature death suggests a different, grim trend. His story resonates all the more tragically once you glimpse the photograph of his mother, Daphne Jones, who died a year earlier in her 40s. She appears dainty as a bird, her head tilted gently to one side, hands sheathed in white lace gloves. Such sweet relief invites questions that carry far beyond these poignant images.