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## Review | JMU 'Exuberance' exhibition brings African American abstractionism to the forefront

Alexander Weisman | contributing writer  
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"Exuberance" features 11 artists, including Susan Zurbrigg, who said her favorite part of the show was seeing all different "voices" come together in one room.

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*Editor's Note: A previous version of this article stated that Zurbrigg's favorite part of the exhibit was getting to share her work with the public and inspire people. Zurbrigg's favorite part of "Exuberance" was seeing different voices come together in the exhibit. The article has been changed to reflect this.*

The definition of exuberance is “the quality of being full of energy, excitement, and cheerfulness” according to [Oxford Languages](#). Living up to such a joyful word might seem difficult, but JMU’s Duke Hall Gallery of Fine Art’s most recent exhibition, “Exuberance: Dialogues in African American Abstract Painting,” does so with flying colors.

Open Oct. 26-Dec. 10 and co-curated by JMU faculty members Beth Hinderliter and Susan Zurbrigg, the exhibition “celebrates African American painters and challenges commonly held mindsets,” [according to its webpage](#).

## A powerful goal

Featuring multiple generations of African American painters ranging from the mid-20th century to now, celebrating these artists who are often overlooked in traditional art history is central to the gallery's message, Hinderliter, the gallery director, said.

“We wanted to think about how that has been a struggle for many African American artists who felt pressure in relation to how the African American experience could be depicted,” Hinderliter said.

Hinderliter also noted that although more scholarship around African American artists has emerged, the exhibition represents a race against time. Referencing the death of Benjamin Wigfall (1930-2017) — an artist the exhibit features — as an example, she said documenting their contributions and legacies is crucial.

“[The exhibit isn’t meant to] foreground the many obstacles that these artists faced but instead to celebrate their successes and to create new moments of exchange and recognition for these artists,” Hinderliter said.

With 11 different artists and more than double that number in paintings, the gallery adheres to its message, skilfully showcasing a variety of styles and genres within African American abstractionism. One highlight is “Corrosion and Blue,” completed in 1957 by Benjamin Wigfall, which has different shades of brown with layered streaks of vivid cobalt blue that seem to reach toward the viewer.

# Abstractionism

As well as being a co-curator of the exhibit, Zurbrigg, assistant dean of the College of Visual and Performing Arts, is a featured artist. Reflecting on her upbringing in the South Side of Chicago, Zurbrigg said, "I knew that I wanted to study painting."

With the city at her fingertips, Zurbrigg explained how she was invested in exploring the city's different art scenes.

One of her paintings, "South Side in Mood Boots," completed in 2021, was inspired by "how much pride I had in the way that the moon boots that I grew up wearing would have this colorful, sort of graphic quality," Zurbrigg said. Done with oil on canvas, a bright magnetic pink serves as a backdrop while swirls of lighter colors grace the canvas, only to be interrupted by a dark-black mark.

Zurbrigg explained the importance of prominent style techniques such as layering, depth and liminal space to let her pieces resonate with connotations of time — like past, present and future.

"As a biracial African American artist, there's often these kinds of liminal spaces, these places that are sort of in between what society wants to create, fixed boxes and my own kind of navigation through them," Zurbrigg said.

Speaking about the breadth of abstraction, Zurbrigg explained how it can have some aspects of representations imagery distilled through factors like color arrangement or rhythmic movement. There can also be referential elements within abstraction, which move between different artists and movements of art.

# Generational Exchange

Although the exhibit ends Dec. 10, Zurbrigg said she's thrilled with how the exhibition's been received in the community. Last week, she said, a group of approximately 400 eighth graders from the Harrisonburg City and Rockingham County schools attended the gallery through a collaboration between the Any Given Child program, an "arts education" initiative according to [The Kennedy Center's](#) website, and the JMU Art Education program.

The exhibit also featured talks by its artists, including one by Lisa Corrinne Davis. Senior gallery intern Emma Seely said she admires Davis's work.

"It's interesting to see how she puts identity in abstract work because it can be taken in so many different lights, but the way she does it was very interesting," Seely said. "I think it's very important that this is exclusively for [African American painters]."

Zurbrigg said her favorite part of the show was seeing "all the voices come together."

"You almost create this other new art installation itself," Zurbrigg said. "[It] kind of generates energy and conversation and interaction throughout the room."

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