

Sketches: portraits of the Black arts community

During the past couple years, Toronto has been home to many organizations and individuals who've consistently and actively taken risks to promote public and private support of Black artists. Sometimes they actively demonstrate against racist, sexist and classist representation and appropriation of Black culture. Listed here are only a few of the community spaces, some non-profit and some for-profit, providing solid grounding for Black artists and community.

Sister Vision Press was founded by Stephanie Martin and Mikeda Silvera in 1985 to publish works by women of colour—works that were not previously accessible to the general Canadian public.

In 1991 Sister Vision published ten books, a dramatic rise from the numbers published in previous years. Titles included celebrated actress Djanet Sears' *Africa Solo*, the first published play by a Black woman playwright in Canada; Ramabai Espinet's *Nuclear Seasons*, which was the first book by an Indian-Caribbean woman publishing where Afro-Caribbean voices usually take precedence; Lenore Teeshig-Tobias' *Bird Talk*, a children's book dealing with the experience of First Nations children in the school system (in English and Ojibway translations); dub poet Ahdri Zhina Mandiela's *Dark Diaspora in Dub*, which is also being presented during the next year as a riveting stage play; Himani Bannerji's *Doing Time*, crucial poetry reflecting the experience of a woman from India speaking about isolation and alienation within Canada, and the *Lesbian of Colour Anthology*, bringing together a diverse range of women's voices and cultures including Filipino women, Arab women, Black women, and many others.

Sister Vision's bright future is closely tied to creating access for voices that have not spoken yet or don't have access to print. The significance of 1991 for Sister Vision is that in finally having published 16 titles they are now eligible for Canada Council block funding like any other publisher.

To contact Sister Vision, write to P.O. Box 217, Stn. E, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M6H 4E2.

There are many other independent publishers supporting the work of Black women writers, writers of colour and First Nations writers including **Between The Lines**, an alternative press which distributes the writings of groundbreaking Black feminist writer bell hooks; **At The Crossroads**, a journal by women of African descent; **Williams-Wallace Publishers**, one of the longest-established presses which publishes works of people of colour; the **Metro Word**, a stylish new bi-weekly Black arts newspaper.

Canadian Artists Network-Black Artists In Action came together to organize an international Black artists' conference in conjunction with the U.S.-based National Conference of Artists. The group decided that organizing such a conference should culminate in a Canadian network of Black artists.

CANBAIA's first major organizing effort resulted in the Black Artists On Access series from 1990 to 1991. Black Artists On Access

brought an unprecedented number of African-Canadian artists, from a wide range of disciplines, together with funders and non-artist community members to examine the issues surrounding lack of funding for Black artists and to discuss possible solutions. CANBAIA will publish the results of the BAOA project within the next few months.

This year, CANBAIA is hosting the 1992 International National Conference of Artists at Harbourfront. Black artists from all disciplines from around the world will share their work and experiences with Torontonians from July 5 to July 12 at the conference, which will feature a special focus on African-Canadian artists in a show called Canadian Odyssey.

Volunteers interested in helping with the conference can contact CANBAIA at 369-9040.

Verse To Vinyl Records and Well Verse Publishing were founded by Canada's premiere dub poet and two-time Juno award winner, Lillian Allen, several years ago so she could distribute her material and the works of other independent performers and writers.

Allen, an experienced cultural strategist, is currently involved in consulting with various communities and with Ontario's Minister of Culture around the issues of access and cultural equity. She has been involved for several years, along with other Black artists, in assessing the kind of changes necessary to make government funding systems like the Ontario Arts Council more accessible to a wider range of artists.

Lillian Allen's vision of the future of local arts organizing is based on the belief that it is essential to establish cultural community development based on self-determination and community building. She sees her work with younger people interested in the arts as a major area of community building. One example is a Montreal-based dub poet named Michael Pintard, who has taken the charts of community radio stations by storm with a new cassette produced by Allen.

Future plans for Allen include organizing an international dub poetry festival with Ahdri Zhina Mandiela (founder of *b current*—an organization which commissions original works from dancers and other artists) and dub poet-at-large Clifton Joseph (a member of the staff at TV Ontario on the literary program *Imprint*). Allen, a wandering troubadour familiar to Black communities and many others throughout Canada, continues her own performances appearing across North America from Calgary, Alberta to San Francisco, California.

The Black Film and Video Network (BFVN) is an organization

"The artist has always functioned in African society as the record of the mores and experiences of his society and as the voice of vision in his own time"

Wole soyinka

which has quietly and methodically organized to provide support for young and emerging film and video makers. BFVN came together to encourage the production, screening and airing of Black films and videos in Canada, spending a large part of their efforts on skills development.

The first major BFVN project was a presentation of the works of Jennifer Hodge DaSilva followed by a Paul Robeson retrospective.

These BFVN activities have helped to bring Black community and members of the wider community together in greater appreciation of Black film and video. Since inception, the BFVN has helped to make inroads in the film and video industry and to gain increased public visibility for local and visiting Black film makers at events like Toronto's prestigious Festival of Festivals.

As an organization, the BFVN's ability to clearly state its objectives, its extensive lobby efforts and painstaking attention to detail have translated into greater access to funds for the network and its individual members. In 1992 the BFVN's organizing will flower in the form of promotion and support of works produced by members like Christine Brown, who is currently directing film as part of a National Film Board series on poverty; McTair and Preito, who have just completed a film about Jennifer Hodge and are in development of a film about the Black man; Alphonse Adetuyi, who is directing *Survivors*, a new film for the Black Coalition for AIDS Prevention about Black women and AIDS; Djanet Sears, who is making her debut as a director of a half-hour film about a group of older black people whose main activity is stealing lawn boys; Glace Lawrence

and Cameron Bailey, who are developing scripts.

The BFVN meets regularly, always welcoming new members. If people want to get in touch contact the BFVN at 534-9148.

Ken Bruzual is a Toronto-based cultural activist who draws his experience from 25 years of organizing within the Caribbean arts community. Two years ago, Bruzual attended the Toronto Arts Council's Let's Talk series, part of an arts information outreach project which began in 1987. As secretary of the Calypso Association of Canada (CAC), Bruzual quickly recognized that three years after the original series took place there was still little or no participation by members of Toronto's Caribbean community and also that the percentage of funding to the Black and Caribbean community was negligible.

Bruzual then volunteered to conduct outreach sessions into these communities and received positive response from the TAC and Ontario's Ministry of Culture and Communications. With support and sponsorship from the CAC and the Ontario Mas Bands Association, a session was held a year ago at the Ralph Thornton Community Centre. Calypsonians, band leaders, folk band troupes and steel bands were joined by representatives from the TAC and Ontario Arts Council (OAC).

After the success of last year's outreach project, Bruzual organized a new series for 1992 which has received even more interest from funders and a wider range of community artists and are being held prior to funding deadlines to give applicants an opportunity to take advantage of this information ser-

vice. But with funding cutbacks this year, Bruzual's series is being done without sponsorship, so there is a small fee of \$3 to cover costs.

Bruzual hopes that this project will help artists and cultural organizations decipher the access codes to arts council funding. With the particular concern of youth in mind, Bruzual hopes to establish an arts foundation to provide the consistent support necessary to nurture and maintain a diverse Black artistic future.

For more information about Ken Bruzual's funding info series, call 469-0210.

MultiCultural Women In Concert (MWIC) is a non-profit cultural organization founded in 1983 to promote the cultural works of women of colour, lesbians and working-class women through producing concerts, audio tapes, skills workshops and festivals.

One of the problems they've faced is dealing with the capricious nature of government funding, so MWIC is working with the Political Dyke Network, Black Socialist Lesbians and other groups to establish Camp SIS (Sisters in the Struggle). Twenty acres of land have been donated by members of the Black Women's Collective (Toronto Chapter) for the establishment of a cultural centre for progressive people, located 2 hours north of Toronto. Funds towards the building of Camp SIS will be raised without government assistance so that activities developed at the camp won't be restricted or bound by government policies but will more accurately reflect the needs of the community.

For more information contact MWIC at 967-1324.