

LIFESTYLES

COVER TO COVER

Out of Africa

By Jeri Young
THE CHARLOTTE POST

For most African Americans, Africa beckons like a siren's call. The mere mention of the word connotes images of lush green jungles, far-reaching savannas and a land where black people reign supreme.

That is until you read "Out of America," (Basic Books, 1997) harsh look at African through the eyes of Washington Post reporter Keith Richburg.

Richburg's Africa is stark, corrupt and filled with the bodies and blood of thousands of people killed in bloody tribal wars and civil unrest.

Richburg's African odyssey begins in the early '90s when he is picked to head up the Sub-Saharan Africa Bureau of the Post, which consists largely of one room in a burned-out shell of a hotel in Nairobi, Kenya, a couple of fax machines, a computer and George, his rogue assistant/secretary/guide, who robs him and every American he can find.

Richburg comes excited, hoping to reclaim a measure of his lost heritage. Three years later, he's broken, depressed and even more confused than when he came, which is saying a lot.

Richburg was born in Detroit, the son of low-middle income southern expatriates. Despite growing up in Motown during the '60s, Richburg was pretty much clueless — about life, race and his own culture.

His parents, anxious to ensure the best for their son, send him to private, all-white Catholic schools when inner city Detroit crumbles after the riots. Thus begins his confusion and the reader's. He eventually learns to be ashamed of his culture, hiding the fact that he lives in the inner city from his friends.

It gets worse when Richburg heads off to college. He chooses the predominantly white University of Michigan and follows that with study at the London School of Economics.

He trudges proudly through Europe, where he finds the culture and history that he lacks. He admits later that he purposefully avoids Africa.

He also admits that after three years of living with and writing about Africans, he feels no bond to them or "connection to the land of my ancestors."

"Talk to me about Africa and my black roots and my kinship with my African brothers and I'll throw it in your face," he writes, "and then I'll rub your nose in the images of the rotting flesh."

He goes almost as far as to say he is glad slavery happened. Richburg's Africa is so horrific that it is almost impossible to turn other page. Yet his work is so gripping that it is impossible not to.

My own thought as I read page after page was confusion. How could my homeland be this way? Where is the Africa that I hear about in the hundreds of Afrocentric meetings and programs that I have attended? Where is the Africa to which others have traveled.

Far from Richburg's reality. He talks little of the rest of Africa, paints no picture of stable African countries. Richburg's Africa is a landscape of corrupt and greedy demagogues who kill, maim and steal the resources of their people and tribal warfare that destroys what is left when the dictators finish.

If he were white, his book would be called racist. The Africans he meets are stereotypes, bumbling caricatures that kill the good whites. His whites are saints. In spite of the fact they, journalist, and government officials, tell racist jokes and see Africans as children.

Where is our author during all this. Taking notes.

"My intent is to bring art so significant that it of itself, lures people to the arts."
— B.E. Noel

By Jeri Young
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Nothing disturbs B.E. Noel more than a blank, white wall.

It has no movement, no color, she says. For her, walls are nothing more than large canvasses, just waiting to be filled with light.

So Noel surrounds herself with art — both in her home and her work. She reveres it and the people who are blessed with the talent to create it.

Art is more than just pleasing to the eye, it is a comfort to the soul. And a way of cataloging her people's history.

"Art has always been a respite," Noel says. "A place to go to find some quiet and beauty. Just think about it. How do you want to be seen 100 years from now? I don't want it to be images from the 6 o'clock news."

Owner of Noel Fine Art Acquisitions, Noel has spent eight years teaching Charlotteans about African American art. It has been an uphill struggle filled with highs, traveling to Ohio to extend a job offer to Mint Museum head Bruce Evans. There are lows, such as receptions for some of the greatest contemporary African American artists that garnered only ripples when there should have been waves.

But Noel trudges on, introducing Charlotte to some of the art world's best and brightest.

"My intent is touch as many people as I can," she says. "My intent is bring art so significant that it...lures people to the arts."

"Everyone must have a profession they have a particular awe of. It might be a pilot or a race car driver. To be a true artist is a gift. I think they should be elevated in society."

"I am not an artist."

The atmosphere at Hodges Taylor Gallery, the uptown gallery where Noel, 45, shares space with two other art dealers is warm, almost surreal.

Opaque glass vases with handles made of tiny glass people reflect light from several large windows. A large metal sculpture, aptly titled "Shards," stands as a sentry near the door.

It is Noel's world, the place where she feels most comfortable.

Visitors are made to feel welcome, plied with cups of herbal tea and good conversation. Her current exhibit, a group of abstract works by artist Nanette Carter, look like quilts and tapestries. They add to the warmth.

Noel proudly shows one of Charles Alston's masterpieces.

A local artist, Alston was the son of St. Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church's first black rector, the Rev. Primus Alston. His works are sought after across the country, she says proudly.

Although Noel lacks formal training — her background is in biology and medicine — art is a large part of Noel, who is an identical twin. The experience of growing up mistaken for another, made her realize the value of looking at everything closely.

"It is instinctive to me," she says. "One day it occurred to me



Art dealer B. E. Noel poses before "All That's Jazz," an exhibit that melded black art and music. Her current exhibit features the "windows" of artist Nanette Carter.

Dealer sells, lives art

— I am an identical twin. As a child I didn't understand why people didn't take the time to learn to discern one from another. I guess I have always just been impatient with people who won't take a moment just to take a look and see the difference. For me, I see everything. Eyesight tends to a little more acute. I guess it is just one of those childhood side effects of wondering why people couldn't see that I am not her."

But it was when Noel worked as the director of New York oncology outpatient clinic, she really realized the value of art.

"When you're dealing with death and dying, daily, constantly, intently, you learn not to take little things for granted," she says.

Noel's first act when she took over was to paint the walls and add art works to the halls and rooms — without permission. She had to change the look of the space. "It was too medicinal and sterile," she said. "This was way before hospitals looked like hotels, in the '70s. When you walked into this unit, it was my intention that people knew someone cared

about them and how they felt beyond the medical. I could make that space help them feel emotionally healthy, if not well. Art has that power."

The search for adventure

Noel left New York in 1988, looking for adventure and a forum for her venture, a gallery that would serve up-and-coming African American artists and where buyers would make an investment in works that would appreciate over the years.

Charlotte seemed like the perfect place, a growing city with a large cadre of educated African Americans.

"I had two prayers," she says. "To open an art gallery and to recognize an opportunity to teach."

She immediately immersed herself in the art community — serving on the board of trustees from the Mint Museum and the Arts and Sciences Council. But it was a slow process. She expected people to flock to see artists like Jonathan Green, Verna Hart, Juan Logan and John Biggers. Instead, they just trickled in. Noel rethought her

strategy and began taking art to the masses, teaching classes at the Afro-American Cultural Center and Mint Museum, as well as talking to school children about the value of their work.

She has been successful. The past 10 years have seen change in the ways Charlotteans see the arts. Black is en vogue, but Noel cautions about the source of some works.

"We're sponges for mass marketing," she says. "Very few of us own businesses that do prints or framing. We need to be mindful of who is making that money."

But Noel continues, taking artists and their works to the masses as well as teaching the value of art.

"In the African American community if we don't come to understand the art, we will be in deep trouble," she says. "We will only be portrayed by others. The reason we know as much about ourselves as we do is because of what the ancestors left behind. One hundred years from now, I don't want what people know about us to come from clips on the 6 o'clock news."

Roses: 0 Lions: 25

By Rachel Beck
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — Tired of buying roses and chocolates for a valentine? How about an African lion or two nights in a swanky hotel for \$16,000?

While it's easy to cling to Valentine's Day standards, those willing to explore gifts beyond the Godiva counter are sure to find some offbeat offerings to please that special someone.

"She doesn't eat chocolate and I'm not buying her a diamond ring," said Peter Klein, a 30-something New Yorker. "Now I'm looking for something fun, and of course, kind of romantic."

Perhaps the Detroit Zoological Society has the answer. For \$25, participants can "adopt" a number of animals, including trumpeter swans, African lions and bald eagles.

Packages include an adoption certificate, a photograph of the animal, a fact sheet and a newsletter. For \$50, chocolates and a plush animal are included.

And if your honey happens to be named Bow, Arrow, Cupid, Sweetheart or Honey, submit the name for a free flight on any of the routes Air South flies.

"People now look for things that are out of the ordinary and fun, and this fits both of these," said Tom Volz, vice president of marketing at Columbia, S.C.-based Air South, which runs similar name promotions for Christmas, Easter, St. Patrick's Day, Thanksgiving and July 4.

The more self-indulgent may enjoy Hyatt Hotel's "Ultimate Romance" package at the Park Hyatt Hotel in Washington. For \$16,000, the four-star presidential suite is all yours for two nights, complete with fireplace, candle-light hot tub and "unobtrusive butler."

Club Med also has a Valentine's deal that lets one person go half-price for a seven-night stay at some of its resorts when two people book together. Inns and spas from Oregon to Maine are also offering special Valentine's weekend getaway packages.

For those who prefer simpler gifts, Williams Sonoma has heart-shaped muffin pans for \$36 or chocolate molds for \$12, an easy way to bake a romantic treat.

Looking to add a little spice to the holiday? Try Brookstone's mechanical massagers. For \$2,595, there's the Panasonic Urban Massage Recliner that soothes the whole body, and for the less wealthy, the No Hands neck massager for \$99.

But bucking tradition isn't for everyone and retailers are betting that lots of heart-shaped merchandise is bought for Valentine's Day.

A survey by the International Mass Retail Association found consumers will spend an average of \$30 on Valentine's gifts and 50 percent of its 1,000 respondents ranked candy and cards as the top gift items.

"A box of candy, he's doing good," said Lisa Schwartz, who eyed some lingerie at Victoria's Secret in New York.

"A dozer .oses, he's doing a lot better."

Internet Cyrano offers saving grace to the Romeo impaired

By Elizabeth Weise
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Speak to me, love, in words poetic. With passionate phrases edged in desperation, intellect tinged with regret. On this day of romance, let your tender, written words find their way into my heart.

And if you can't, let the Internet do it for you.

For the romantically impaired, the appearance of red boxes of chocolates and an abrupt rise in the price of roses signal not the approach of the day of love, but

the day of dread. It's Valentine's Day, when misses so moving as to melt the hardest heart are called for.

But dread not, oh ye for whom words of love do not leap eagerly from pen to paper. Are computers not meant to aid mankind, free us from labor, allow us to expand our reach?

If the thought of writing an epistle of love brings terror to your heart and tremors to your hand, if you know you'll say the wrong thing or you can't think of anything to say at all, the Internet has the answers.

Hie thee over to the Cyrano Server, where Fraser Van Asch has created a site in honor of that most persuasive writer of love letters, Cyrano de Bergerac.

What do you feel for that obscure object of your desire? Desperate longing, intellectual connection, misty-eyed regret? Perhaps steamy passion, poetic ardor or even surreal concern?

Whichever it is, simply click on one of the options listed above, supply a few bits of information about your beloved — a descriptive adjective, a name, a

favorite food, the most attractive physical feature — and voila! A Valentine to woo the hardest of hearts is written, expressly for you.

Not only that, but you can arrange it so that the e-mail is sent on the big day itself.

"My wife and I sat around with the original programmer and her husband one night, had a few beers and went at it," said Van Asch, the art director for Nando net, the site's sponsor.

Lest you think that's not a proper qualification, Van Asch hastens to add that his wife was

an English major in college.

"She was always great with words," he said from his Raleigh, N.C., office.

But is it cheating? Shouldn't one write one's own love letters? Does it really count if you don't do it yourself?

In a word ... no. Pre-written letters turn out to have a long history.

And if you find yourself the recipient of a Valentine's missive that seems a wee too polished?

Best let romance be your guide.