

Dreams and Legacies of Harlem



"Move the Blue Light," above, a painted collage by Al Loving, and "Black Angel/Golden Slippers," an oil by Ernest Crichlow.



By WILLIAM ZIMMER

THE Harlem Renaissance Remembered" is the overly grand title of a modest but satisfying exhibition of four black artists at the Brownson Art Gallery of Manhattanville College here. The title implies that the show is about the flowering of black culture that occurred in the 1920's and was known as the Harlem Renaissance. If it didn't contain a contradiction, the title should be along the lines of "The Renaissance Goes On."

A catalogue essay by the exhibition's associate curator, Lynne Kenny, outlines this renaissance as something tirelessly encouraged by black intellectuals who urged that Africa be looked to as a source of inspiration. Mrs. Kenny cites specifically W. E. B. DuBois and Alain Locke. The latter's magazine, "The New Negro," in 1925

sounded the rallying cry "racial salvation through artistic excellence," and it was heard by composers, playwrights, fiction writers and poets as well as by visual artists.

But it was programs begun in the Great Depression, like the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Arts Project, that solidified the dreams of the first visionaries.

The catalogue essay by Randy Williams, associate director in the studio art department at Manhattanville, refers to Robert Blackburn and Ernest Crichlow as "caretakers" of that renaissance because they are old enough to have been directly shaped by it. Mr. Blackburn learned printmaking with W.P.A. artists at the Harlem Arts Center and went on to the Art Students League where he learned that printmaking did not have to be an adjunct to painting and sculpture but a high art in its own right.

In 1948, Mr. Blackburn founded the highly respected Printmaking Work-

shop, first in Brooklyn and later in Manhattan. It is a near-legendary place where artists are given encouragement and Mr. Blackburn's well-honed expertise. In the catalogue, it is described as "a virtual beehive running day and night."

Mr. Blackburn's own recent works in this exhibition are woodcuts that seem unhurried and mellow, in the mode of a veteran artist who wants to sing the praises of his medium. Mr. Blackburn exploits the natural grain of wood in "Walk in the Shade" in which monolithic chunks of the grained surface occupy the center of a form that contains the ideal shapes of a circle and cross. The title of

Renaissance



"Forged in Autumn,"
from Lynch Fragments
series by Mel Edwards.

abstract painter Norman Lewis, he founded the Cinque Gallery in Manhattan's SoHo, which continues to flourish as a nonprofit space for black artists.

Included in this exhibition are two portraits of the artist's mother, who was born in Jamaica. One is a studio-type portrait, the kind that would hang in a place of honor in a living room. One notes the academic details such as how the brown stripes in the woman's dress echo the folds in the curtains; but Mrs. Kenny alerted me to the woman's gesture: she holds a bent wrist loosely with the fingers of her other hand. Mrs. Kenny says that Mr. Crichtlow told her that this was a very "Jamaican" gesture.

The other painting is a fantasy. The woman is turned slightly away from us and in the background are two children who are ever-so-subtle photographic collage elements — but they are also a bold homage to Romare Bearden.

Lynching is a hotly debated term lately, and at first one does not notice the rope around the little girl's neck in "Black Angel/Golden Slippers." We are made to understand that the little girl's wishes will never have a chance of fulfillment. On a formal level, the face of the adolescent girl in "Am I Blue" hints at the planar divisions of African sculpture.

Of the two younger artists, Mel Edwards has been exploring the ram-

ifications of lynching for more than two decades in his series of "Lynch Fragments." These menacing works are also very popular. One sees them almost ubiquitously in group sculpture shows throughout the New York, Connecticut, New Jersey area. They are now in "Discarded" at the Rockland Center for the Arts in West Nyack.

Although the works run the risk of overexposure, one understands their popularity, because they trenchantly and succinctly emblemize struggle. When a bullet is neatly paired with a large nail, we have the parameters of an imperiled life, and even a usually innocent monkey wrench takes on a dire aspect in Mr. Edwards's hard-bitten context. In a free-standing sculpture, an artist's palette is bordered by a chain.

A neat parallel to Mr. Blackburn is Al Loving. His enthusiasm is not for any material but with two elementary and opposing forms: the spiral and the grid. In several relief pieces in two-dimensional works, which at first blush owe much to Frank Stella, these forms are pushed, pulled, shrunk and enlarged — and made very colorful. With titles like "Move the Blue Light" and "Red Rider," they are free-wheeling without losing their integrity.

The exhibition continues through Nov. 15. Call 694-2200 for information.

another print, "Woodscape," gives away the artist's affection for his medium. "Kiss Shape" is memorable for a deep indigo color and the variations of angularity in it, while "Miss Unity" is all bulbous and kidney shapes again in bold, flat color.

Mr. Crichtlow, now 79, paints principally mothers and children. He has illustrated numerous children's books but this interest perhaps reached its highest embodiment in a 25-panel mural that he made for Boys and Girls High School in Brooklyn in 1976. Like Mr. Blackburn, Mr. Crichtlow has also endeavored to be something of a public servant. In 1969, along with Romare Bearden and the