

eminent historian of African-American art, David C. Driskell. Driskell described Kennedy and her art as possessed of “personal genius.”³⁴ International in her renown, Kennedy has lived and exhibited in both the U.S. and Africa. Her domestic exhibition credits include historically black colleges such as Howard and Fisk, the National Arts Club in New York, and American University. Abroad, she has not only exhibited at the National Arts Council of Ghana, but also co-founded the National Association of Ghanaian Artists. A National Endowment for the Arts Fellow, Kennedy shares with her Howard kin an ardor for teaching and has served on the faculty of the Corcoran School of Art, American University, the University of Science and Technology in Kumasi, Ghana, the Maryland College of Art and Design, and at her *Alma Mater*, Howard University, where she was also honored with an artist’s residency.³⁵

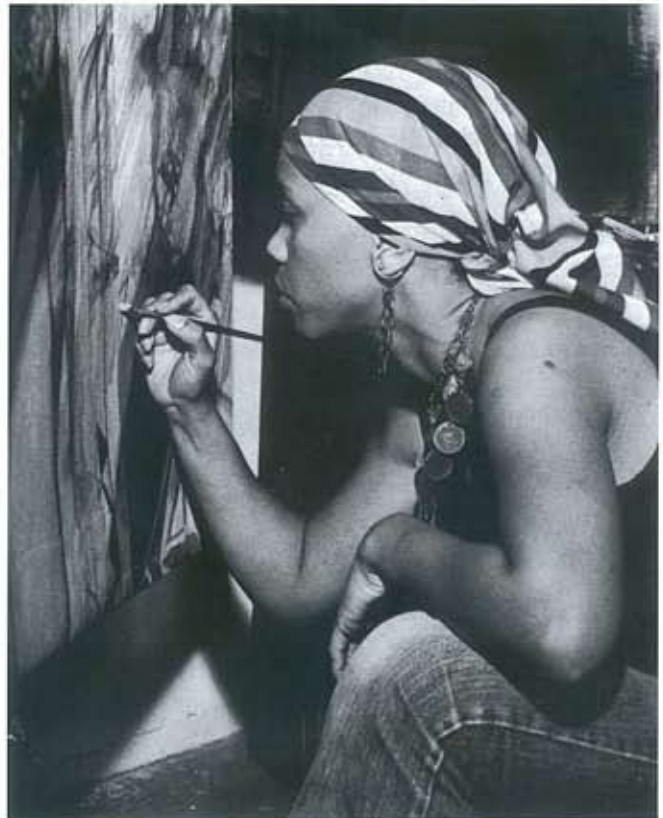
Kennedy’s oeuvre has been the subject of much critical praise, including that of Paul Richard of the Washington Post who described her creative techniques as “astonishing.”³⁶ Kennedy works in both a figurative and non-figurative modes, creating, among many themes, lush and vividly hued figures in exotic landscape settings as well as more subtly hued abstractions that are, in some instances, akin to Color Field painting in their broad areas of pigment; and in other instances indicative of Abstract Expressionism in the forcefulness of the artist’s brushwork. Included in the Alumni Exhibition, Kennedy’s *Through Time* (2004) combines both. A strong downward gestural stroke in white pigment echoes the artist’s hand passing over a calming expanse of caramels and creams—redolent of Color Field greats such as Robert Motherwell and Barnett Newman.

Born in Ethiopia, Kebedech Tekleab (b. 1958)

represents one of many Howard alumnae who were drawn to the institution from abroad by its exemplary academic reputation and its legacy as one of the oldest of the historically black universities in the United States, but the road she took to Howard was fraught with strife. While a student at the School of Fine Arts in Addis Ababa, Tekleab was an activist in the resistance movement. She was ultimately imprisoned in a labor camp for her activities for almost ten years before being released. She relocated in 1989 to the U.S. and by 1992 had completed her B.F.A. at Howard, following this achievement immediately with a Master’s in Fine Arts in 1995. Tekleab has

since become both a writer and a visual artist. She collaborated with the late Howard Art professor Skunder Boghossian on a large-scale abstract sculpture commission for the Ethiopian Embassy in Washington, entitled *Nexus*, and her work, though non-figurative, is nevertheless thematically linked to her mother country, its culture, and its politics.

The artist often works in painting media, specifically acrylic, creating mosaic-like imagery that suggests glass or stone tesserae, the individual placement of which has been designed to intimate flowing rivers, protective



Doris Colbert Kennedy, 1979.

womb spaces, chain link fences, and fettered limbs. Despite their abstraction, the titles of some of Tekleab’s works are indicative of their sociopolitical premises—*Behind the Bars*, *The River in Rwanda*, and *Shackled*, for example. She paints with a soft palette of grays and greens, incorporating circular uterine forms that are indicative of the need felt by political exiles and émigrés to “restore a sense of sanity, safety, and belonging.”³⁷ Other works include faint echoes of human carnage and imprisonment (achieved through highly textured surfaces and subtle color changes) amidst otherwise abstract designs, and denote global tragedies of genocide,

violence, and internment. Tekleab has risen superbly to an aesthetic challenge that she describes as “how to reconcile the differing dynamics of tragedy and the sublime on one picture plane.”³⁸ She is also an alumna and faculty, having served as Lecturer in the Department of Art since 1999.

The Persistence and Power of Figuration

Despite the formidable brigade of non-figurative artists who have emerged from Howard, representational art held sway within the Department for much of its illustrious history. Of the senior alumnae, **Hilda Wilkinson Brown (1894-1981)** is noteworthy for her modernist approaches to figurative imagery. Brown often directed her artist’s eye to landscapes and flora, but is perhaps best known for her cityscapes. Brown’s paintings in this mode compress space and essentialize form in a manner that parallels that of the Precisionist painters of the 1920s (the decade when Brown herself came of age as an artist). Precisionism, best represented by the artists Charles Demuth and Charles Sheeler, was a distinctly American genre of painting which paid homage, in terms of content, to urban environments and industrial landscapes. In a quintessentially modern vernacular, Brown’s works share subject matter and hard-edged, reductive forms with the Precisionist group. Her ability to capture the complex overlapping of crowded buildings, spires, smokestacks, and city streets (often of her own Washington neighborhood) with almost surgical clarity and detail was her *forté*.

Brown, who was also a respected elementary school art teacher in Washington, has been credited with introducing concepts of modernist form into the public school art curriculum in the 1930s (replacing conventional mimetic painting methods). She received the Bachelor’s and Master’s degrees from Howard and Columbia Universities, and had a long and productive career as a teacher, arts administrator, and artist. Brown served with Alma Thomas on the Board of Directors of the Barnett-Aden Gallery and exhibited with the likes of Catlett, Porter, Wells, Jones, Woodruff, and Aaron Douglas. Brown was also a successful illustrator, collaborating with E. Franklin Frazier on his book *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939).³⁹

Brown’s avant-garde approach to representation is echoed in the paintings of **Delilah Williams Pierce (1904-**



Delilah Pierce, 1976.

1992). Born in Washington, D.C., Pierce responded creatively to themes of Africa and the diaspora. Her father and uncle, who were long-time White House retainers, taught Pierce the value of honest work, and familial and community kinship. They also impressed upon her an appreciation for art and education, which ultimately led Pierce first to Howard University and then to New York’s Columbia University where, in the 1930s, she received the B.S. and M.A. degrees in art and education. As was customary with so many women artists, Pierce divided her time between teaching (as Assistant Professor of art at D.C. Teachers College) and painting. Her first exhibition opportunities came with the Atlanta Annuals in 1952 and ‘53 and she continued to exhibit consistently in the U.S. and abroad for the next four decades, including nearly two dozen solo exhibits and over a hundred group showings.⁴⁰ The recipient of an honorary doctorate degree from the University of the District of Columbia (1992), Pierce’s earliest distinguished works date to the 1960’s and center upon utopian African themes, Pan-Africanism, and other leitmotifs culled from the artist’s sojourns to Africa, Europe, and the Middle East under the



Untitled, Mixed Media (Mesh, Acrylic, Fiber), 36"x 63" (Adjustable), 2004

Kebedech Tekleab

I have always been fascinated by the duality of life, the benevolence and the cruelty, the good and the bad, the darkness and the light. My art is a reflection of life that draws from this reality. It is done rationally and emotionally, embracing the bitter taste of life while yielding an aesthetic beauty of its own.